



**Increasing links between drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism:
the case of captagon**

**G7 - Roma-Lyon Group
Heads of Delegation Meeting**

18 April 2024 12:00 - 13:00

**Topic 6: Synthetic drugs
Synthetic drugs, from methamphetamines to fentanyl: an ever-changing scenario**

Honourable President, Distinguished Delegates, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to attend this important debate here today on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and to share UNICRI's experience in relation to old and emerging trends related to synthetic drugs.

As a UN entity, UNICRI enjoys a global platform and authority to develop, test, and pilot new and innovative approaches and tools in criminal justice and crime prevention. We support Member States, civil society, international and academic institutions through action-oriented research, policy guidance, professional and academic training and capacity-building adapted to regional, national, and local contexts.

(Slide 2) In line with our mandate and strategic priorities, UNICRI approaches the topic of drugs, including synthetic ones, from a crime prevention and criminal justice perspective and in relation to organized crime and terrorism.

Looking at this intersection between terrorism and organized crime through the lens of drug trafficking provides a unique perspective on the links that different groups may develop and highlights the complexities of the threat. As a matter of fact, the involvement of terrorist or armed groups into drug trafficking offers these groups a source of revenue as well as an opportunity to gain expertise in illicit transfer and laundering of proceeds from illicit transactions. At the same time, drug traffickers can benefit from the terrorist organizations' tactic skills and weapons supply. [In this regard, let me take this opportunity to thank Mr. Roberto Arbitrio, Chief of the Terrorism Prevention Branch at UNODC, for the fruitful partnership our respective institutes have established to prevent and counter the nexus between terrorism and organized crime in West Africa.](#)

The topic of today's panel is extremely actual. Synthetic drugs represent a growing threat as there are cheap and easy to manufacture anywhere in the world. Synthetic drugs offer criminals several advantages, such as lower operational costs, fewer production impediments, and reduced risk of detection as chemicals used in the production may fall outside of existing controls, there is no fixed geography and production times are much shorter.

(Slide 3) Recently, we have been looking into the production and illegal trade of captagon. Captagon derives its name from a psychoactive medicine produced in the 1960s by a German pharmaceutical company. While the original medicine contained fenetylline, a synthetic drug, the production of fenetylline stopped after it was scheduled under the UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances in 1981 and major stocks have been depleted to counter the diversion of the substance into illicit markets.

The tablets seized on illegal markets, presenting the same logo of the original medicine (two half-moons), thus represent a counterfeit version of the original captagon and can be considered as amphetamine type stimulants (ATS). While most often these pills contain amphetamine, methamphetamine has also been identified in the tablets. Tablets may vary widely in terms of composition, also in relation to the chemical precursors used for its production and manufacturing, which includes phenylacetic acid, ephedrine, pseudoephedrine, alpha-phenylacetoacetonitrile, and benzyl methyl ketone (BMK). This, of course, adds to the complexity of monitoring the production, trafficking and use of captagon.

The production of captagon tablets consists of two main phases: the chemical synthesis and the manufacture of the tablets. Once synthesized, amphetamine can be shipped for tableting, with the addition of cutting agents and excipients. Tableting is less technically demanding and separating the two phases can reduce detection. Evidence suggests that the production of captagon, especially tableting, is also taking place in the Middle East and, in particular, in Lebanon and Syria.

Since the civil war started in 2011, Syria has become an international hub for captagon production. From smaller, fragmented operations in rebel-held areas its production has transformed into industrial, containerized operations in territories held by the regime, empowering local Syrian organized crime groups and allowing violent actors to accumulate wealth and power. It is suggested that ISIS and Al Nusra have been extensively involved in facilitating the smuggling of chemical precursors for captagon production. Moreover, there are also strong indications that Hezbollah has a role in the production and smuggling of captagon.

Captagon is particularly popular in the Arabian Peninsula, where it is trafficked from Syria passing through Jordan and where it is used as a stimulant and appetite suppressant. The profit margin is quite remarkable as the production of a tablet costs few cents and it is sold between 10\$ and 25\$.

Captagon is trafficked with increasingly sophisticated methods, and new overland and maritime operations are being developed, posing a severe challenge to law enforcement agencies in the region and internationally. This includes, for example, simultaneous operations at different spots of the border to distract guards, the use of drones to drop shipments and the exploitation of tunnels.

In other words, the war in Syria created the conditions which enabled captagon trafficking and, in turn, captagon has sustained the presence of armed non-state, state and international actors during and after the war.

While the main destination region remains the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, in particular Saudi Arabia, and Jordan usually was described as a transit country, this may have changed as the flow of captagon became linked to the establishment of new, sophisticated crime networks. It is now clear that domestic consumption also remains high in Jordan.

So in addition to the security concern as a result of the production and trafficking of captagon, including of course its linkage with organized crime and terrorism, widespread drug consumption is potentially also a serious health threat in the region due to lack of adequate public health and drug treatment services.

Moreover, it may not be unlikely that captagon could become an amphetamine known and used outside of the Middle East, in particular in Europe.

(Slide 4) To counter the production and trafficking of captagon, which are not only illegal but – as explained - are also often connected to violence, conflict and severe human rights violations, it is necessary to assist the region's countries in strengthening information gathering, border control and regional law enforcement cooperation. In particular, UNICRI believes that the following elements are essential for an effective and comprehensive approach and a long-term impact:

- First, engaging both producing and destination countries. As the production of captagon tablets can occur in different geographical areas, increased efforts should be put forward to detect and counter the illegal production and diversion of precursors and amphetamine, in addition to tableting operations.
- Second, developing coordinated responses at national and regional levels with the involvement of law enforcement agencies, analysts and relevant stakeholders in the framework of inter-agency cooperation.
- Finally, enhancing systematic data and information sharing as, despite several interceptions of illicit drug shipments, reliable data on their seizure and demand in destination markets remain limited.

To address the threat posed by captagon, UNICRI has elaborated an intervention that envisages three different components:

1. The first component will focus on research activities to collect up-to-date and evidence-based information, informing best policies and practices to counter the illegal manufacturing and trade of captagon. This research will focus on the identification of existing and emerging production and manufacturing sites, on the diversion of chemicals used for the production of captagon, on the trafficking routes of captagon from production sites to destination countries, and related links to organized crime and terrorism in the immediate region and beyond.
2. The second component will focus on capacity-building actions tailored to the needs and priorities identified through the research and will include procedures, skills and specialized criminal investigation techniques to prevent diversion of chemicals, interdict trafficking of captagon and prosecute detected cases.
3. The third component will promote new policies, practices and mechanisms for regional cooperation and coordination to counter regional and cross-border trafficking.

In conclusion, captagon's impact on peace, stability and peace in the region is becoming clear as it continues to provide lucrative economic opportunities for armed actors and civilians in a challenging complex environment, which intersects a broad variety of factors, including cross-border criminality, regional instability, socio-economic development and human rights violations.

Improved knowledge and strong partnership at the local, national, regional and international levels are key to tackling these illegitimate networks and stopping their harmful effect while – in parallel - there is a need for more thorough analysis and understanding of the drivers, patterns and consequences of captagon use, production, and trafficking.

Thank you for your attention,