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Report to Congress on A Written Strategy to Disrupt and Dismantle Narcotics Production and Trafficking and Affiliated Networks Linked to the Regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263

OTHER RELEASE

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Report to Congress on A Written Strategy to Disrupt and Dismantle Narcotics Production and Trafficking and Affiliated Networks Linked to the Regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria Sec. 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, P.L. 117-263

Consistent with section 1238(c) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (P.L. 117-263), the U.S. Department of State, in consultation with the Department of Defense,

Department of the Treasury, Drug Enforcement Administration, Homeland Security Investigations, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy, has developed an interagency strategy for targeting, disrupting, and degrading networks that support the narcotics infrastructure of the Assad regime and building counter-narcotics capacity of partner countries through foreign assistance and training to law enforcement services in countries (other than Syria) that are receiving or transiting large quantities of Syria-origin captagon.

U.S. efforts focus primarily on disrupting the criminal networks involved in captagon trafficking and, where possible, addressing the drivers of its trafficking. A classified annex accompanies this strategy to provide additional details on how U.S. efforts impact captagon destinations and transit countries, an assessment of these countries' counter-narcotics capacity, and other U.S. counter-narcotics programming in the region.

This strategy synchronizes U.S. interagency efforts to disrupt, degrade, and dismantle the illicit captagon networks linked to the Assad regime through four lines of effort: (1) diplomatic and intelligence support to law enforcement investigations; (2) use of economic sanctions and other financial tools to target Assad regime-affiliated trafficking networks; (3) foreign assistance and training to partner countries and cooperation within multilateral institutions to build counter-narcotics capacity and disrupt the illicit synthetic drug supply chain and the precursors used to make captagon or other illicit synthetic drugs; and (4) diplomatic engagements and public messaging to exert pressure on the Assad regime.

Captagon Destination and Transit Countries

Captagon was the brand name for a drug containing the amphetamine-type stimulant fenethylamine. Fenethylamine is controlled in the United States under Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, meaning it has no currently accepted medical use. Official production of the drug ceased after fenethylamine was listed by the World Health Organization in 1986 for international scheduling under the Convention of Psychotropic Substances. Though the official brand name Captagon no longer exists, the term captagon is widely used to refer to tablets pressed with the Captagon logo, which may contain a wide range of substances including fenethylamine, amphetamine, caffeine, and more.

The captagon trafficking network operates across 17 countries, ranging from Italy to Malaysia, including those involved in supplying precursors, production, transit, and end-user distribution. Entities with known or suspected links to officials in Syria's Assad regime, such as

Hizballah, are producing captagon and counterfeit tablets purporting to be captagon, in Syria and Lebanon. According to open source reporting, the vast majority of captagon is produced by local Syrian factions linked to the Assad regime and Hizballah. From there, large quantities of these captagon pills are shipped from Syrian ports such as Latakia or smuggled across the Jordanian and Iraqi borders by drug traffickers who are backed by armed groups and local tribal networks. Additionally, captagon produced in Lebanon is shipped to consumer countries from Lebanon's ports of entry, including the Port of Beirut. Consumer markets in the Arabian Peninsula are the primary destination for captagon pills, although increasing amounts are now consumed in what were once purely transit countries, such as Jordan and Iraq. Captagon is not produced or widely available in the United States. Please see the classified annex to this report for more information on identified destination and transit countries.

Lines of Effort

The Administration, including U.S. military forces, has limited ability to affect drug production linked to the Assad regime from within Syria. The U.S. military's operations in Syria, authorized by the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force, are solely focused on the enduring defeat of ISIS. Therefore, this strategy does not examine using U.S. military forces to disrupt captagon production or distribution inside Syria.

The U.S. government is focusing its counter-captagon efforts on addressing the illicit drug supply chain, including production, trafficking, and money laundering, to dismantle the narcotics distribution infrastructure outside of Syria that benefits the Assad regime.

1. Diplomatic and intelligence support to law enforcement investigations

As part of law enforcement investigations of drug trafficking in the Middle East, U.S. law enforcement agencies are working to identify key actors and distribution networks in the illicit captagon trade, as well as financial flows. To disrupt and degrade captagon trafficking networks, the United States continues to bolster regional law enforcement cooperation and information sharing to increase interdiction efforts. The Department of State's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau (INL), in collaboration with the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) and other U.S. interagency partners, are also exploring ways to facilitate regional coordination among affected countries, which will help identify solutions to this shared regional issue.

In addition, INL manages the Narcotics Rewards Program, which can offer financial incentives for individuals to provide information leading to the arrest and conviction of captagon traffickers identified for reward offers.

2. Use of economic sanctions and other financial tools to target the Assad regime-affiliated trafficking network

The United States has numerous tools available, including economic sanctions, to disrupt the captagon trade and prevent elements of the Assad regime and designated terrorist organizations such as Hizballah from using the U.S. financial system to launder drug proceeds. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 – which targets foreign persons who provide technological, financial, and material support to the Assad regime – and other domestic sanctions authorities offer mechanisms to hold elements of the Assad regime accountable for their involvement in captagon trafficking.

On March 28, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with counterparts in the United Kingdom, designated six key individuals and two associated entities owned by one of these individuals for their roles in facilitating the production or exportation of captagon. These included Caesar Act designations of Syrian nationals Samer Kamal al-Assad and Khalid Qaddour, a key drug producer and facilitator, respectively, of captagon production in Syria. As part of our strategy going forward, the Department of State is continuing to work with OFAC and other interagency partners to identify key persons connected with the captagon trade who could be sanctioned under our various authorities, including the Caesar Act. The United States will work to coordinate these efforts with like-minded countries.

3. Foreign assistance and training to partner countries and cooperation within multilateral institutions to build counter-narcotics capacity

Security and law enforcement assistance to Jordan and Lebanon

The United States has provided foreign assistance and training to the Jordanian and Lebanese military and law enforcement services performing counter-narcotics functions and to public health authorities. Since 2012, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) has provided assistance and training to Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) on border security – building JAF's capability to stem narcotics trafficking, counter terrorism, and execute other mission sets. USCENTCOM also provides analytical support to DEA and HSI efforts to disrupt captagon production and

distribution. In 2022, INL established counter-narcotics programming in Jordan to help the Public Security Directorate (PSD) and its Anti-Narcotics Department (AND) reduce the impact of illegal narcotics and increase the capacity of its security sector. In Lebanon, the Department of State's INL and NEA bureaus are providing short-term livelihood support assistance to ensure the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF) are able to continue operating to guarantee Lebanon's internal security and safeguard its territorial integrity, including threats posed by narcotics trafficking.

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit (TCIU) Jordan coordinates with the JAF and PSD to combat transnational criminal organizations. HSI and USCENTCOM are working to enhance collaboration to conduct transnational investigations, develop common priorities, and establish a dedicated space for capacity-building initiatives.

Please see the classified annex to this report for more information on U.S. government support to countries receiving or transiting captagon.

Complementary to these efforts, the Department of State implements drug demand reduction (DDR) programs in relevant countries as part of a comprehensive and balanced approach to counter-narcotics – integrating substance use prevention, treatment, and recovery with supply reduction measures. INL's DDR programs are designed to support the development and adoption of international standards for prevention, treatment, and recovery; develop technical assistance, quality assurance, and programmatic tools; partner with affected countries to enable implementation of these standards and tools; and develop self-sustaining regional professional bodies and networks to foster enduring change.

U.S. counter-narcotics assistance and training programs are designed to provide recipient countries with the tools and capabilities needed to stem regional drug trafficking and improve their national security and public health sectors. The Administration is working to build a common regional approach to these efforts by encouraging partner nations to increase regional information sharing and investigative and prosecutorial actions against transnational groups that are trafficking captagon.

Cooperation with multilateral institutions and international partners to disrupt the supply chain for synthetic drugs

The United States will continue to leverage multilateral institutions and cooperate with international partners to build global tools and share information to disrupt the production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, including captagon. INL funds programs through

multilateral organizations such as the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), international bodies such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), and other organizations to share best practices, develop and implement information sharing platforms, and deliver technical assistance.

For example, INL funded the UN Toolkit on Synthetic Drugs, a dedicated platform that provides practical guidance on a range of topics including preventing chemical diversion; identifying and interdicting synthetic drugs, such as captagon, and their precursors; safe handling; forensic analysis; and partnering with private sector entities, including chemical manufacturers, shipping companies, and financial networks, to facilitate cooperation to combat the production, sale, and movement of synthetic drugs in the region and elsewhere. These resources are available to all UN member states. Additionally, INL funds targeted technical assistance to key countries to help partner governments implement Toolkit resources.

INL also supports the INCB Global Rapid Interdiction of Dangerous Substances (GRIDS) Program and the Databank on Precursor Chemicals. These programs support real-time international law enforcement cooperation to prevent the diversion and illicit manufacturing of precursor chemicals and to disrupt the illicit supply chain for synthetic drugs. Further, INL funds the Colombo Plan, an intergovernmental organization, to support Jordan's PSD forensic lab to analyze seized captagon. The Department of State is also leading a global effort to accelerate and strengthen international action on synthetic drugs by forming a Global Coalition against Synthetic Drugs — inviting all countries to join. Our goal is for the international community to prioritize combatting synthetic drugs, such as captagon, as a top public health and security threat and drive action toward solutions.

4. Diplomatic engagements and public messaging to exert pressure on the Assad regime.

The Department of State is coordinating with UK and European partners, as well as the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria and partners in the region, to press the Assad regime to curtail the production and trafficking of captagon, as part of efforts to advance regional stability and security and a political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

The United States is committed to promoting accountability for the Assad regime's illicit activities in Syria, including drug trafficking and its destabilizing impact on the region. The

United States is already actively engaged in targeted communications campaigns within the region. The Department of State is working with the Department of Defense, the U.S. Mission to the UN, and like-minded partners to identify more ways to use public messaging on captagon to exert pressure on the Assad regime.

The United States continues to use international fora and diplomatic engagements, including at the UN, to highlight the regime's complicity in human rights abuses, chemical weapons attacks, and efforts to impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need. The Department of State has and will continue to use these same fora to highlight the regime's involvement in the captagon trade and reiterate the United States' belief that the Assad regime has not done anything to deserve normalization or reconstruction in regime-held areas of Syria.

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