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Captagon, Conflict and the Sudan-Libya Border Triangle

Abstract

The article discusses how the synthetic stimulant Captagon has become integrated into the war and shadow economies of the Sudan–Libya–Sahel borderlands, turning a historically marginal drug into a crucial revenue source for armed groups and political-military entrepreneurs. Using a case-study design, the study triangulates open-source reporting, international datasets, and grey literature to map production nodes, trafficking corridors, and the institutional and territorial vacuums that enable them. It argues that the Sudan–Libya border triangle – anchored in western Sudan, Fezzan in southern Libya, and adjoining Sahelian interfaces – operates as a logistical hinge connecting Levantine industrial production with Gulf consumer markets and emerging European transit points. Captagon's political economy sustains militias through taxation and direct participation in smuggling, inances arms procurement, and consolidates parallel governance, thereby entrenching conflict fragmentation and undermining stabilisation efforts. The article further shows how Captagon functions as a tool of hybrid warfare: revenues fuel coercive capacity while battlefield consumption exacerbates fviolence, erodes community resilience, and burdens already fragile health systems. Building on debates about illicit economies and conflict, the analysis cautions against mono-causal explanations: Captagon profits amplify violence primarily where they intersect with state failure, fragmented sovereignty, and cross-border criminality. Policy implications include a shift from

enforcement-only approaches toward integrated strategies that combine precursor control, targeted financial disruption, maritime and desert interdiction, and border-area development with demand-reduction and treatment services. Regionally, enhanced intelligence-sharing across the Red Sea and Sahara corridors, along with calibrated engagement with de facto authorities, is necessary to address operational realities without legitimising predation. For Europe, including Poland, the growing use of North African and Eastern Mediterranean routes underscores Captagon as a convergent security, governance, and public health challenge. The article contributes an empirically grounded framework for analysing narcotics-driven conflicts in fragile borderlands and offers a multi-level agenda for mitigation.

Key words Captagon, Sudan–Libya border triangle, Fezzan, RSF, war economy, hybrid warfare, illicit economies, transnational organised crime, smuggling routes, precursor control, border governance, MENA security, Sahel, public health and addiction, European security

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has long grappled with deep-seated political instability, protracted armed conflicts, and structural socio-economic crises. Over the past decade, scholarly and policy attention has increasingly shifted toward the role of illicit economies in exacerbating these dynamics. Among them, the rise of the synthetic stimulant Captagon has emerged as a particularly concerning phenomenon. Once a marginal drug, Captagon evolved into both a widely consumed narcotic and a strategic financial resource for armed groups, militias, and political actors across several states in the region. A particularly alarming nexus has developed in the border triangle linking Sudan, Libya, and the Sahel, where weak state structures, porous borders, and fragmented authority have created fertile ground for the production, trafficking, and militarization of Captagon[1]. This fragile zone – already destabilized by ethnic tensions, militia rivalries, and foreign interventions – has become a strategic corridor for smuggling operations that connect local conflicts to wider regional and transnational criminal networks.

1 *Two Years On, Sudan's War is Spreading*, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/two-years-sudans-war-spreading [access: 29.08.2025].

Captagon, chemically a combination of amphetamine and theophylline, has gained traction not only as a recreational or performance-enhancing substance within local populations but also, and more critically, as a trade commodity embedded in war economies. Its production and smuggling networks generate substantial revenues that sustain militia operations, finance arms procurement, and perpetuate cycles of violence. In particular, clandestine narcotics factories operating in parts of Sudan and Libya have been identified as central nodes in this illicit economy, with revenues directly linked to the prolongation and intensification of ongoing conflicts[2].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the impact of Captagon production and trade on conflicts and political crises in the Sudan–Libya border triangle, while situating the phenomenon within the broader geopolitical and security context of the MENA region. Through a case study approach, the article seeks to capture the multidimensional nature of the Captagon economy, illustrating how narcotics trafficking serves both as a mechanism of conflict financing and as a driver of social degradation. Particular attention is given to the intersection of illicit markets, governance vacuums, and hybrid warfare strategies, as well as the consequences for local communities who bear the brunt of addiction, violence, and institutional erosion. Against this backdrop, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the main mechanisms of Captagon production and trafficking in the Sudan–Libya border triangle?
2. How does the Captagon trade sustain armed conflicts and exacerbate political and social instability in the MENA region?
3. What strategies – at the national, regional, and international levels – offer the greatest potential for mitigating the Captagon trade and its destabilizing effects?

By linking empirical evidence with theoretical debates on illicit economies and conflict, this study contributes to wider discussions on the role of transnational criminal markets in sustaining insecurity. It underscores the urgent need for interdisciplinary research and international cooperation in

2 *Syria has become a narco-state*, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/07/19/syria-has-become-a-narco-state?utm_campaign=shared_article [access: 29.08.2025].

addressing narcotics-driven conflicts, highlighting the Sudan–Libya–Sahel borderlands as a microcosm of broader destabilizing dynamics that continue to shape the MENA region.

The Geopolitical and Socio-Economic Context of the Sudan–Libya Border Triangle

The border triangle linking Sudan, Libya, and parts of the Sahel represents one of the most volatile and insecure zones in North Africa and the broader Middle East. Weak state presence, porous borders, and the proliferation of armed groups, militias, and transnational criminal networks characterise it. The geopolitical complexity of the region stems from the convergence of multiple dynamics: fragile governance, unresolved civil wars, ethnic tensions, and economic collapse. These conditions foster a permissive environment for illicit activities ranging from arms trafficking and human smuggling to the production and circulation of narcotics, notably Captagon.

Sudan has been experiencing a decade of compounded crises, marked by the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the fragility of subsequent transitional arrangements, and the eruption of a new civil war in April 2023. These developments have fostered state fragmentation and deepened the country's economic implosion[3]. Rival factions – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – control vast territories, often outsourcing governance to local militias or tribal coalitions. This power vacuum has transformed Sudan's western peripheries into lawless corridors where trafficking networks intersect with political violence[4].

Libya's trajectory in the aftermath of the 2011 collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's regime has been marked by profound and persistent destabilisation, reflecting both the internal disintegration of state institutions and the entrenchment of competing centers of power supported by shifting coalitions

3 H. Abazid, *Drug Abuse in the Middle East: A Focus on Syria*, [in:] *Handbook of Substance Misuse and Addictions: From Biology to Public Health*, ed. V. Preedy, Cham 2021, p. 1–20.

4 *Two Years On, Sudan's War is Spreading*, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/two-years-sudans-war-spreading [access: 29.08.2025].

of militias and external actors. Since 2011, the country has been fractured between competing governments in Tripoli and Benghazi, each relying on a constellation of militias and foreign sponsors. The collapse of centralised authority enabled Libya to become a critical hub for smuggling routes across the Sahara. The southern region of Fezzan, bordering Niger, Chad, and Sudan, is particularly significant: it functions as a gateway for trans-Saharan flows of migrants, arms, and narcotics[5]. The Libya–Sudan border triangle, largely unmonitored, thus serves both as a staging point for smuggling operations and as a refuge for militias who tax or directly manage these illicit flows.

Any comprehensive analysis must also account for Syria, which has emerged as the pivotal hub of industrial-scale Captagon production, shaping both regional illicit economies and transnational trafficking networks[6]. Over the past decade, the Syrian conflict has transformed the country into the epicentre of the global Captagon trade. Production facilities – allegedly linked to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah – have industrialised the process, flooding the Middle Eastern market with billions of pills annually[7]. While much of the trade is directed toward Gulf states, trafficking routes increasingly extend through North Africa, with Libya and Sudan serving as secondary transit corridors toward Europe and the Sahel. The logistical infrastructure developed for weapons and human smuggling is now exploited to move narcotics, reinforcing hybrid economies of war.

The emergence of clandestine Captagon factories within the Sudan–Libya borderlands illustrate how local instability connects to broader geopolitical economies of conflict. Revenues from narcotics trafficking provide vital financial streams to militias, insurgent groups, and political entrepreneurs, thereby fueling protracted wars and undermining peace efforts. The phenomenon exemplifies how narcotics have been weaponised in hybrid conflicts: they not only generate income but also produce social devastation

5 W. Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*, London–New York 2020.

6 C. Rose, *Border Traffic: How Syria Uses Captagon to Gain Leverage over Saudi Arabia*, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/07/border-traffic-how-syria-uses-captagon-to-gain-leverage-over-saudi-arabia?lang=en [access: 29.08.2025].

7 J. Ababsa, *The al-Assad Regime's Captagon Trade*, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/10/the-al-assad-regimes-captagon-trade?lang=en [access: 29.08.2025].

through addiction, violence, and the erosion of community resilience. In this light, the Sudan–Libya border triangle operates as a microcosm of broader MENA security dynamics. It demonstrates how narcotics economies, insurgency, and geopolitical rivalries intersect in fragile borderlands. A comprehensive understanding of Captagon's role in these contexts is therefore indispensable for analysing the hybrid warfare strategies employed across the region and developing effective counter-narcotics, counterterrorism, and stabilisation policies.

Discussion

The role of Captagon in fueling conflicts and destabilizing the MENA region, particularly in the Sudan-Libya border triangle, invites critical engagement with existing scholarship and reports. Several authors, such as Al-Imam et al.[8] and Steenkamp[9], emphasize Captagon as both a cause and consequence of regional instability, highlighting how its trade finances armed groups and prolongs conflicts. This view aligns with journalistic investigations documenting clandestine factories in Sudan and Libya actively supporting militia operations. However, it is important to critically assess the extent to which Captagon production itself drives conflict dynamics versus serving as one element within a broader constellation of economic and political factors. Abazid underlines that state failure and weak governance underpin many regional crises, suggesting that drug trafficking may be more symptomatic of deeper institutional collapse than an independent conflict driver. Thus, the causal link between Captagon and conflict may be intertwined with structural governance failures, limiting simplistic attributions of conflict causality to the drug trade.

Moreover, while numerous authors acknowledge the health and social harms caused by Captagon consumption, such as addiction and societal disruption, there remains debate over how effectively these issues are prioritized

8 A. Al-Imam et al., *Captagon: use and trade in the Middle East*, „Human Psychopharmacology: Clinical and Experimental" 2017, no. 3, p. 2548.

9 C. Steenkamp, *Captagon and conflict: Drugs and war on the border between Jordan and Syria*, „Mediterranean Politics" 2025, no. 3, p. 478–502.

compared to the overarching security concerns. The predominance of security-focused responses risks overshadowing public health strategies necessary for sustainable resolution. As noted in health system analyses, integrating drug prevention and treatment programs alongside security measures is crucial, yet often insufficiently implemented.

International interventions, documented in reports by bodies like the UNODC and Interpol, advocate stronger border controls and international cooperation. Yet, critiques exist regarding the practical effectiveness of such approaches amid entrenched local militias and porous borders. Interventionist strategies may, at times, exacerbate local grievances or fail when disconnected from conflict resolution and political stabilization efforts. This tension is well articulated by authors[10] who argue that no regime or force alone can address these complex dynamics without holistic political solutions.

In summary, while literature broadly agrees on Captagon's significance in destabilizing the region, there is a need for more nuanced understanding that situates drug trafficking within wider governance, political, and socio-economic contexts. Addressing Captagon's impact necessitates multidisciplinary approaches that balance security imperatives with public health, social development, and political stability. Future research should thus focus on these intersections to identify more effective and sustainable strategies.

Mechanisms of Captagon Production and Trafficking in the Sudan–Libya Border Triangle

The production and trafficking of Captagon in the Sudan–Libya borderlands represent one of the most pressing security and governance challenges in the broader MENA region. Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine derivative, has transformed from a marginal psychostimulant into a strategic commodity that fuels both the black-market economy and the war economies of multiple armed groups. Its significance is twofold: on the one hand, it functions as a performance-enhancing substance widely consumed by combatants and

10 A. Al-Imam et al., *Risk Factors of Suicidal Ideation in Iraqi Crystal Methamphetamine Users*, „Brain Sciences" 2023, vol. 13, no. 9, p. 1279.

youth populations; on the other, it has become a principal source of revenue for militias, insurgent movements, and hybrid political-military actors.

The Sudan–Libya–Sahel border triangle has emerged as a critical logistical node for Captagon production and redistribution. Semi-legal and clandestine laboratories, often concealed in remote desert areas or within territories controlled by militias, constitute the backbone of local production. These facilities benefit from ineffective state control, fragmented sovereignty, and limited law-enforcement capacity. Tribal networks and transnational criminal syndicates provide protection and facilitate access to precursor chemicals. These chemicals are often diverted from legitimate pharmaceutical markets or trafficked through existing smuggling routes used for arms, gold, and fuel.

The technical process of Captagon production is relatively straightforward, requiring rudimentary laboratory equipment and access to chemical precursors such as amphetamine base and theophylline. However, the scalability of production depends on steady supplies of these precursors, which are smuggled across borders through the same clandestine networks that historically managed weapons trafficking during the Libyan civil war and the Darfur conflict in Sudan. These overlapping flows highlight the structural entanglement between narcotics production and broader illicit economies in fragile borderlands.

Once produced, Captagon tablets are transported along complex, multi-layered trafficking routes. The Sudan–Libya corridor acts as a staging ground from which shipments are routed north toward the Mediterranean coast for onward transport to Southern Europe, eastward through Egypt into the Levant, and westward into the Sahel and West Africa. Smugglers employ diverse methods: desert convoys across Fezzan, clandestine crossings along poorly monitored border points, and maritime shipments via Libyan ports such as Misrata or Benghazi. Increasingly, traffickers rely on containerised cargo to conceal narcotics shipments, complicating interdiction efforts through European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction[11].

Syrian and Lebanese networks also intersect with these routes. Syria has become the epicentre of industrial-scale Captagon production, while

11 *Captagon Trafficking and Consumption in the Middle East*, file:///C:/Users/melghamari/Downloads/captagon-report_7september2023_final.pdf [access: 29.08.2025].

Hezbollah and regime-linked actors are reported to play central roles in global distribution[12]. The Sudan–Libya triangle is thus not an isolated production site but part of a transnational web linking Levantine producers, Gulf consumer markets, and European transit points.

The revenues from Captagon trafficking constitute a vital financial stream for militias and insurgent groups operating across Sudan, Libya, and beyond. These profits are channeled into arms procurement, payment of fighters, and the consolidation of parallel governance structures. In Sudan, both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and smaller tribal militias have been accused of taxing smuggling routes and benefiting from narcotics flows. In Libya, factions within Fezzan leverage drug revenues to maintain autonomy from the central authorities in Tripoli and Benghazi[13]. This dynamic entrenches fragmentation and undermines international stabilisation initiatives. Moreover, Captagon has become a weapon of war. Combatants in Libya, Syria, and Sudan reportedly consume the drug on the battlefield, as its stimulant properties enhance endurance, suppress fatigue, and increase aggression. While this temporarily boosts combat effectiveness, it also intensifies the brutality of armed clashes and exacerbates patterns of violence against civilians. Captagon consumption among fighters reinforces cycles of addiction, dependency, and militarized violence, further eroding prospects for conflict resolution.

The spread of Captagon extends beyond the military domain, exerting devastating effects on local societies. Communities in the Sudan–Libya–Sahel borderlands face rising addiction rates, health crises, and the collapse of traditional social structures. Families experience disintegration as addiction spreads among youth, while public health systems –already weakened by conflict – cannot provide adequate treatment. The growth of narco-economies has also entrenched corruption within fragile governance systems, as state officials often collude with traffickers in exchange for revenue. This dynamic deepens the crisis of legitimacy facing central governments in both Sudan and Libya. The interplay of narcotics trafficking, militia financing, and social collapse creates a reinforcing feedback loop: illicit revenues empower armed

12 *The Assad Regime's Narco-State*, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2022/10/the-al-assad-regimes-captagon-trade?lang=en [access: 29.08.2025].

13 W. Lacher, op. cit.

groups, which in turn destabilase governance, enabling further expansion of criminal markets. The resulting spiral of violence, corruption, and humanitarian deterioration threatens not only border communities but also regional stability.

Addressing Captagon production and trafficking requires comprehensive, multi-level interventions. Traditional supply-side approaches – such as border enforcement or interdiction – are insufficient in fragmented sovereignty and ongoing war contexts. Instead, effective strategies must combine legal, military, economic, and public health dimensions. At the local level, investment in community resilience, alternative livelihoods, and social services can reduce dependency on illicit economies. Regionally, coordinated frameworks for intelligence sharing and precursor chemical monitoring are critical. At the global level, cooperation between MENA states, the EU, and international organisations such as UNODC is essential to disrupt trafficking networks that span continents.

Captagon is no longer merely a narcotics problem; it has evolved into a strategic driver of hybrid warfare and state fragmentation in the MENA region. The Sudan–Libya border triangle illustrates how illicit economies intertwine with armed conflict, shaping the trajectories of local wars and the geopolitical security environment of the wider region.

Reactions of States and the International Community to the Captagon Problem in the MENA Region

The growing impact of Captagon on the security and stability of the Middle East and North Africa has prompted a wide range of responses from national governments and international organisations. Captagon is no longer perceived solely as a narcotics issue but as a multidimensional threat that cuts across the domains of security, governance, public health, and regional stability. However, efforts to curb its production, trafficking, and consumption face formidable obstacles stemming from political instability, fragile institutions, fragmented sovereignty, and the complexity of armed conflicts in the region.

In the border triangle of Sudan and Libya, state-led counternarcotics measures are severely constrained by weak or absent central authority. In Sudan, the collapse of governance following successive political crises and

the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has left large areas beyond effective state control. Attempts to dismantle Captagon production networks have been piecemeal and largely ineffective, as armed groups continue to dominate territories where clandestine factories operate. These groups protect production and integrate trade into broader war economies, making enforcement efforts highly risky and often counterproductive.

Libya faces a similar, though distinct, challenge. Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, the country has been fragmented between rival governments and a multiplicity of militias that control different parts of the territory. In this environment, counter-narcotics operations suffer from a lack of coordination, contested jurisdiction, and widespread corruption. Smuggling networks have exploited the power vacuum in the southern region of Fezzan, turning the area into a hub for the transit of Captagon and other illicit commodities. The inability of Libyan authorities to secure borders or establish unified command structures has allowed trafficking networks to flourish, linking domestic militias with transnational organised crime groups.

Recognising the transnational nature of the Captagon trade, the international community has taken steps to support affected states. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[14], Interpol, and regional security organisations such as the Arab Interior Ministers Council have launched initiatives to strengthen border management, enhance intelligence-sharing, and provide technical assistance. Programs include training customs and law-enforcement personnel, deploying advanced scanning technologies at border points, and building regional platforms for exchanging information on trafficking patterns. Interpol has also coordinated international operations targeting Captagon shipments, some resulting in record seizures in the Mediterranean and the Gulf[15]. Nevertheless, enforcement alone is insufficient

14 *World Drug Report 2023*, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html [access: 29.08.2025]; *World Drug Report 2024*, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2024.html [access: 29.08.2025].

15 D. Hilton, M. Amin, *Inside the Drugs Factory: How Captagon is Fuelling the War in Sudan*, „Middle East Eye", https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/inside-drugs-factory-how-captagon-fuelling-war-sudan [access: 29.08.2025].

to address the problem. Scholars and practitioners emphasise that sustainable counter-Captagon strategies must go beyond repression to incorporate legal, social, and economic dimensions. Legal reforms are needed to harmonise anti-narcotics laws across MENA states and close loopholes that traffickers exploit. Socially, public health initiatives are essential to reduce demand, particularly among youth populations vulnerable to addiction and exploitation by armed groups. Economic interventions, including alternative livelihood programs, are necessary in border communities where smuggling has become a survival strategy without state investment and employment opportunities.

The responses of Gulf states also highlight the broader regional dimension of the Captagon trade. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which are major consumer markets, have intensified customs inspections, invested in rehabilitation facilities, and tightened penalties for trafficking. Their concerns have also led to diplomatic pressure on Syria and Lebanon, accused of being the primary sources of Captagon production and export. This illustrates how the Captagon problem, while rooted in fragile states like Sudan and Libya, reverberates across the MENA region and beyond, shaping security agendas and diplomatic relations.

At the same time, international cooperation remains uneven and constrained by geopolitical rivalry. Disagreements between external actors over approaches to Syria, Libya, and Sudan often undermine collective action. For instance, while some international partners advocate engagement with de facto authorities to enable pragmatic cooperation against trafficking, others oppose such moves for fear of legitimising militias or authoritarian regimes. These tensions reflect the difficulty of mounting coordinated responses to transnational challenges in conflict-affected environments.

In sum, despite multiple national, regional, and global initiatives, the Captagon problem continues to pose a formidable challenge. The persistence of armed conflict, weak governance, and high demand ensures the trade remains lucrative and resilient. Effective responses will therefore require not only the reinforcement of law enforcement but also integrated, interdisciplinary strategies that combine security, governance, public health, and socio-economic measures. Only through such comprehensive approaches, grounded in both local realities and international cooperation, can the destructive impact of Captagon on the MENA region be mitigated.

Conclusion

Captagon has evolved into one of the central destabilising forces in contemporary Middle East and North Africa, reshaping both the dynamics of armed conflicts and the illicit political economy of fragile states. Syria and Lebanon were considered the epicentres of Captagon production and export for many years, but recent political and military transformations have altered this geography. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the dismantling of large-scale laboratories in Syria created a vacuum in the narcotics economy. As the new authorities in Damascus initiated counternarcotics measures, criminal networks were forced to search for alternative production hubs. Within this shifting landscape, Sudan has rapidly emerged as a key center of the evolving Captagon economy.

Investigations by international institutes and journalists confirm that Sudan, once primarily a transit corridor, has transformed into a locus of industrial-scale production. Since the outbreak of Sudan's civil war in April 2023, authorities have discovered several major laboratories, marking a sharp escalation in scale and sophistication. One site in the Blue Nile region could produce 7,200 pills per hour; another in Khartoum held approximately 10 million pills in stock; and the most striking discovery came in February 2025 in al-Jaili, where machinery was uncovered with the capacity to produce 100,000 pills per hour, the country's largest seizure to date. This rapid progression from small-scale operations to mechanised mass production underscores the growing attractiveness of Sudan as a manufacturing hub and the increasing sophistication of local networks.

The rise of Sudan as a Captagon center is not accidental but rather the outcome of structural conditions that echo those once observed in Syria. Protracted conflict, fragmented sovereignty, weak law enforcement, endemic corruption, and proximity to lucrative Gulf markets together create an environment conducive to narcotics economies. The confrontation between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has fractured state authority and opened zones of impunity. The RSF appears to play a central role: both major laboratory seizures in Khartoum took place in areas under their control, strongly suggesting complicity or direct involvement. Given the RSF's record of exploiting illicit economies—from gold smuggling

and livestock trade to looting, Captagon production seems to be a logical extension of its wartime financing strategies. With the SAF regaining parts of Khartoum, production will likely relocate westward into Darfur, where RSF strongholds overlap with established trafficking routes leading into Libya and Chad.

The ramifications of this transformation are considerable, as revenues derived from the Captagon trade constitute a stable and renewable financial base for armed actors, thereby institutionalising the war economy and contributing to the protraction of Sudan's civil conflict. The presence of industrial-scale facilities tied to transnational networks further demonstrates that trafficking increasingly connects Northeast Africa with the Gulf and Europe, primarily through the Red Sea and Mediterranean corridors. Port Sudan has already become a focal point for seizures, highlighting the vulnerability of maritime routes and the potential for systemic corruption among customs and security services. At the same time, the domestic spread of Captagon compounds Sudan's humanitarian crisis. Local authorities report a surge in consumption since the outbreak of war, as the drug is used to suppress hunger, dull trauma, and sustain productivity. In this way, addiction is embedding itself in fragile communities, aggravating social breakdowns alongside political and military instability.

Although geographically distant, these developments directly affect Poland and the wider European Union. As an EU member, Poland is exposed to the spillover of illicit narcotics flows into European markets. Smuggling routes increasingly link North Africa and the Middle East to Europe. Shipments cross the Mediterranean via Libyan ports such as Benghazi and Misrata toward Southern Italy and Malta; others are routed from Syria and Lebanon through Turkey into Greece and the Balkans; while new corridors have opened through the Red Sea, with consignments leaving Port Sudan and moving via the Suez Canal into European ports under the cover of commercial cargo. The Syrian route remains one of the most established, with shipments directed to Greece, Cyprus, or major Mediterranean ports before being distributed through the Balkans into Central Europe. At the same time, Sudan has become an emerging departure point, with overland consignments moving across Darfur into Libya and re-exported across the Mediterranean.

The reality of these routes has been confirmed by European law enforcement agencies, which have intercepted massive shipments in Italy (Naples and Salerno), Greece (Piraeus), and Germany in recent years. These cases illustrate that Captagon is no longer confined to the Middle Eastern market but has already entered Europe. Such trafficking channels overlap with existing migration and arms smuggling routes, creating the risk that narcotics flows converge with irregular migration corridors. For Poland, this convergence is particularly significant: it represents not only a law enforcement and public health challenge but also a strategic concern, as narcotics-driven conflicts in MENA can exacerbate migration pressures, heighten terrorism risks, and undermine wider European security.

These dynamics demand a recalibration of international responses. Counter-Captagon strategies that historically concentrated on Syria and Lebanon are now outdated. The emergence of Sudan – alongside secondary hubs in Iraq, Türkiye, and Kuwait – demonstrates the need for a geographically broader approach. The United States and its partners must expand their interagency strategies to include Sudan, with careful monitoring of RSF-controlled territories and scrutiny of vulnerabilities within SAF-controlled ports and border posts. At the same time, cooperation across the Red Sea corridor – particularly with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Horn of Africa – will be essential to addressing maritime smuggling and the flow of precursor chemicals. However, enforcement measures alone will not be sufficient. A holistic strategy is required, combining interdiction with political stabilisation, peacebuilding, and creating economic alternatives for vulnerable communities. As long as Sudan's civil war continues and Libya remains fragmented, Captagon production and trafficking will remain highly attractive to militias in search of financial autonomy. Equally pressing are public health responses: addiction among Sudanese youth and combatants highlights the urgent need for prevention and treatment programmes, which are currently absent in most of the region. Ultimately, Captagon exemplifies how synthetic drug economies migrate, adapt, and entrench themselves in fragile states where conflict and impunity provide fertile ground. The Sudanese case demonstrates that the collapse of one hub – in this instance, Syria – does not eliminate the threat but redistributes it into new environments shaped by similar vulnerabilities. This shift underscores the need to understand

Captagon as a transnational and adaptive phenomenon requiring equally adaptive and cooperative strategies. For policymakers and researchers alike, Sudan's emergence as a Captagon hub highlights the necessity of placing narcotics economies at the center of analyses of conflict financing, hybrid warfare, and regional security. Without sustained international attention, the drug's entrenchment in Sudan threatens not only to prolong the civil war and erode governance but also to export instability far beyond the region's borders.

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