



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction



Bundeskriminalamt

TECHNICAL REPORT

Captagon trafficking and the role of Europe

September 2023

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PDF

ISBN 978-92-9497-889-9

doi: 10.2810/449755

TD-07-23-310-EN-N

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

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About this report



This report is the culmination of operational action 1.2 of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Synthetic Drugs and NPS operational action plan of 2022, 'Improve and analyse the criminal intelligence picture on the production and trafficking of captagon tablets and the role of Europe'. The action was led by Germany (Bundeskriminalamt, BKA) and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

About the EMCDDA

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) is the central source and confirmed authority on drug-related issues in Europe. For over 25 years, it has been collecting, analysing and disseminating scientifically sound information on drugs and drug addiction and their consequences, providing its audiences with an evidence-based picture of the drug phenomenon at European level.

The EMCDDA's publications are a prime source of information for a wide range of audiences including: policymakers and their advisors; professionals and researchers working in the drugs field; and, more broadly, the media and general public. Based in Lisbon, the EMCDDA is one of the decentralised agencies of the European Union.



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Funding

The expert meeting ‘Improve and analyse the criminal intelligence picture on the production and trafficking of captagon tablets and the role of Europe’, held in Lisbon on 10-11 October 2022, was funded by the European Commission under EMPACT (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats). EMPACT is a security initiative driven by EU Member States to identify, prioritise and address threats posed by organised and serious international crime.

Acknowledgements

The EMCDDA and the German Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) would like to extend their sincere thanks and appreciation to the national experts of EMPACT Synthetic Drugs who provided information for this report and in particular those who attended the meeting ‘Improve and analyse the criminal intelligence picture on the production and trafficking of captagon tablets and the role of Europe’, held in Lisbon on 10-11 October 2022. The meeting was attended by participants from Europol, as well as the following countries:

- Austria (Bundeskriminalamt)
- Germany (Bundeskriminalamt)
- Greece (Ελληνική Αστυνομία, Hellenic Police)
- Italy (Guardia di Finanza)
- Romania (Poliția Română)
- The Netherlands (Politie)

The authors would also like to thank the French National Police and the US Drug Enforcement Administration for their valuable contributions.

We also wish to thank BKA colleagues Julia Fuhlbrueck and Wolfgang Schreiber and EMCDDA colleagues Tim Surmont and Alexander Soderholm for reviewing the report, and the EMCDDA Communication unit for their work in producing this publication.

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Introduction

This report is the result of operational action 1.2 of the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Synthetic Drugs and NPS operational action plan of 2022, 'Improve and analyse the criminal intelligence picture on the production and trafficking of captagon tablets and the role of Europe'. The action was led by Germany (Bundeskriminalamt, BKA) and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA).

The report is based on a compilation of information collected from Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Romania in response to a questionnaire. Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom (as participants in EMPACT) declared that they had no material information on captagon. The positive responses were supplemented and elaborated by contributions provided by those countries (apart from France) at an expert meeting held at the EMCDDA in Lisbon in October 2022. The historical background is based on work already published by the EMCDDA. France provided a written submission containing supplementary information collected from the network of French Internal Security Attachés.

Key findings

- There is no suggestion that there are any significant user markets for captagon tablets in the European Union (EU).
- There is evidence of the production of captagon tablets in the EU, mainly in the Netherlands, where large quantities can be produced on demand.
- A captagon tablet typically contains about 32 milligrams of amphetamine sulfate, meaning that approximately 32 kilograms of pure amphetamine sulfate is used to manufacture 1 million captagon tablets.
- EU Member States are involved mainly as transshipment points between captagon-producing countries outside the EU and destination markets in and around the Arabian Peninsula. This process may involve a direct rerouting of the consignment, or sending the load after it has been unloaded and repacked in the EU.
- Syrian and Lebanese individuals (by nationality or birth) have been noted to be involved in many of the large cases and investigations. Some of these organisers reside in the EU, while others make frequent visits to the region.
- Apart from organising captagon shipments, such criminal groups have also been involved in trafficking cannabis resin and, less frequently, herbal cannabis and cocaine.
- Aside from the 'on demand' production of captagon in the Netherlands, drug-related criminal networks in the EU do not appear to get involved in the captagon trade.

UPDATE

On 24 April 2023 the Council of the European Union decided to list 25 individuals and eight entities in the framework of EU restrictive measures (EU sanctions) in view of the situation in Syria. In a press release, the Council noted that many of those designated were individuals and entities responsible for the production and trafficking of drugs, notably captagon. It went on to say that the trade in amphetamine has become a 'regime-led business model, enriching the inner circle of the regime and providing it with revenue that contributes to its ability to maintain its policies of repression against the civilian population'. The Council placed restrictions on various members of the Assad family, including cousins of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, leaders and members of regime-affiliated militias, businesspeople with close ties to the Assad family, and persons associated with the Syrian army and Syrian military intelligence (Council of the European Union, 2023).

The sanctions announced by the EU followed a similar move by the US Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control in March 2023, taking coordinated action with the United Kingdom, designating key individuals supporting both the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the production or export of captagon (US Department of the Treasury, 2023).

A degree of overlap can be noted between the individuals on the US and EU sanctions lists.

Historical background

A review of the history of the medicinal product Captagon® and its former use and misuse in some countries provides a backdrop against which to consider the current situation.

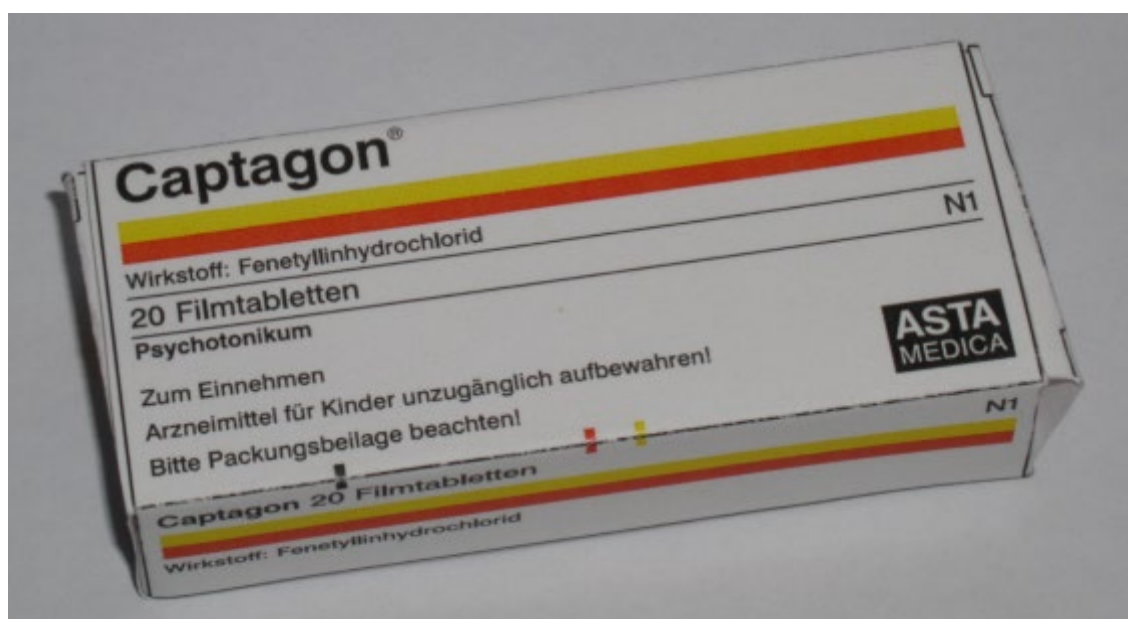
Captagon® the medicinal product

Captagon® was the brand name of a psychoactive medicine produced in the 1960s by the German company Degussa Pharma Gruppe. It was sold as round, whitish tablets embossed with a characteristic logo comprising two half-moons (see Figures 1 and 2). It was prescribed mainly as a treatment for attention deficit disorder and narcolepsy, and as a central nervous system stimulant. Its two main markets were Europe and the Middle East.

Captagon® tablets contained 50 milligrams of fenetylline, a synthetic drug of the phenethylamine chemical family to which amphetamine also belongs. Fenetylline is synthesised from amphetamine and theophylline, a natural alkaloid, bronchodilator and mild stimulant from the same family as caffeine ⁽¹⁾.

Following ingestion, fenetylline is metabolised into amphetamine and theophylline. Thus, it is very difficult to determine by forensic investigation whether fenetylline or a combination of amphetamine and theophylline has been consumed.

FIGURE 1
The original Captagon® pharmaceutical product



Source: BKA Forensic Science Institute

⁽¹⁾ Theophylline occurs naturally in coffee, tea and cocoa, among other substances. It is not controlled under United Nations drug control conventions.

FIGURE 2
Examples of illicit captagon tablets



Source: Department of Identification and Forensic Science, Israel Police



Source: BKA Forensic Science Institute



Source: BKA Forensic Science Institute



Source: BKA Forensic Science Institute

In 1986 fenetylline was included in Schedule II of the United Nations (UN) Convention on Psychotropic Substances 1971 ⁽²⁾ and signatory countries moved to control its production and use. However, in some countries a few specific medical uses continued to be allowed for some time. For example, until 2013 the French National Agency for Medicines and Health Products Safety still allowed small quantities of Captagon® to be administered to patients suffering from narcolepsy, making France one of the five countries in the world (with Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) reporting the use of fenetylline for medical purposes at that time.

With respect to production, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has reported that no country has manufactured fenetylline since 2009 and 'by the end of 2009, stocks of fenetylline had been virtually depleted' (INCB, 2011, p. 38).

Although some countries held stocks of fenetylline at the time it was placed under international control, most of these were reportedly destroyed in the early 1990s (INCB, 2011, 2016). The destruction of stocks was intended to put an end to 'sporadic' attempts to divert fenetylline to illicit markets using false import authorisations (see below). By the mid-2000s, the Netherlands was the only country known to still hold large stocks of fenetylline (reported to be 212 kilograms at the end of 2005). Following this, there were only sporadic

⁽²⁾ In the 1971 UN Convention, the chemical name of fenetylline is 7-[2-[(α -methylphenethyl)amino]ethyl]theophylline.

reports of movements on the global fenetylline market, with the last reported by the INCB occurring in 2009 and involving Belgium, France and Germany ⁽³⁾.

Medicine diversion to illicit production

It is likely that until the end of the 1990s, the diversion of fenetylline stocks allowed traffickers from Eastern Europe to supply markets in the Arabian Peninsula with tablets containing fenetylline (INCB, 1991; Al-Gharably and Al-Obaid, 1993; Courier International, 2015). However, it appears that as stocks of the medicine became exhausted and controls intensified, other substances, particularly amphetamine, were introduced into tablets sold as captagon ('fake captagon'). This appears to have occurred initially in Bulgaria and Turkey (EMCDDA and Europol, 2011), the two countries which, until the early to mid-2000s, had the biggest illegal production of captagon tablets sold on drug markets in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. The main source of information to support this comes from the analysis of drug seizures. In only a few early reports is fenetylline reported to be present in seized illicit captagon tablets (Al-Gharably and Al-Obaid, 1993).

Virtually all the contemporary information available suggests that the tablets seized on illicit drug markets in recent years are not diverted Captagon® tablets containing fenetylline, but clandestinely manufactured tablets containing amphetamine that are embossed with a logo similar to the original medicine (see Figures 2 and 3).

On a note of caution, the information available, including recent information from analyses of captagon tablets seized in Europe, suggests that amphetamine and often caffeine are the psychoactive substances most likely to be present, although it should also be noted that tablet content can vary (for instance, some tablets also contain theophylline). In a limited number of cases, methamphetamine has been found instead of amphetamine (EMCDDA, 2018b).

FIGURE 3

Tablet punches with the characteristic Captagon® logo comprising two half-moons, found in dismantled illicit laboratories



Source: OCRTIS/DEASRI/Hellenic Police

⁽³⁾ Some of the stocks in the Netherlands were reportedly exported to Belgium (68 kilograms in 2005), which subsequently re-exported 7.6 kilograms of this to Germany and France (INCB, 2006). In 2009 Belgium noted that it had exported 6 kilograms and Germany reported that it had imported 5 kilograms (INCB, 2015).

Production and trafficking of captagon

Captagon tablets seized in the Middle East ⁽⁴⁾ appear to contain mainly amphetamine, and it follows that captagon may be described as amphetamine in tablet form. Most of the information available on the approaches to the production of amphetamine relates to the methods used by European synthetic drug producers, for which there is relatively solid evidence (EMCDDA and Europol, 2011, 2016; EMCDDA, 2018a). Although the extent to which this applies elsewhere is less well documented, the information available from the Middle East indicates that there are many similarities with European production methods and that some European organised crime groups are involved in amphetamine production in that region (EMCDDA, 2018b).

The production of captagon tablets requires the chemical synthesis of the amphetamine, followed by the manufacture of the tablets (tableting). These two phases may take place in the same facility but may also be carried out in different locations, or even different countries, and sometimes by separate groups (EMCDDA and Europol, 2011, 2016). Organised crime groups specialising in synthetic drug production in Europe may manufacture the tablets themselves; however, it also appears common for amphetamine to be supplied in bulk to third parties who will assume the responsibility for tableting, adding the necessary cutting agents and excipients. Some evidence suggests that this may also be occurring in the Middle East, and especially in Lebanon (Madlena, 2015; ISF, 2016; BKA, 2016, 2017).

Geographical separation of the different phases may be used to reduce the risk of detection. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that the two production phases require different chemicals, equipment and skills. Compared to the synthesis of amphetamine, tableting is a less technically demanding activity and the necessary equipment and chemicals are easier to access. When it occurs, this separation in roles also appears to have a number of important consequences. In particular, it may help to explain the diversity seen in the content of seized captagon tablets (BKA, 2016, 2017), and implies that a range of criminal groups may be involved in production and trafficking. This decentralisation also makes it more challenging for law enforcement authorities to target the production and supply of captagon.

Consumer markets for captagon

Europe is not a significant consumer market for captagon. Although amphetamine is consumed in Europe, it is rarely in the form of captagon tablets (EMCDDA, 2022), but is usually powder or paste. During the data collection conducted for this analysis in the framework of EMPACT, no significant use of captagon was reported by any respondents from EU Member States; however, it is reasonable to assume that in countries with diasporas from the Arabian Peninsula, some pockets of use may be observed. The large shipments of captagon tablets seized in the EU recently were destined to be rerouted towards countries of the Arabian Peninsula ⁽⁵⁾, particularly Saudi Arabia, where the main captagon consumer markets are concentrated.

⁽⁴⁾ The term 'Middle East' is used in this report to collectively refer to the following countries: Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine (this designation shall not be construed as recognition of a State of Palestine and is without prejudice to the individual positions of the Member States on this issue), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Yemen.

⁽⁵⁾ The countries of the Arabian Peninsula are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Yemen.

Reports of widespread use of captagon as the stimulant of choice emanate from countries in the Arabian Peninsula and sometimes from neighbouring countries in the Middle East. However, there is little contemporary information available on the consumer markets for captagon in this region, making it difficult to describe their dynamics. Nevertheless, anecdotal and expert reports, as well as inference from seizure information, suggest that in many countries the use of captagon may be significant.

In the absence of data on use, seizure data may provide some indication of the size of Arabian Peninsula consumer markets for captagon. Altogether, extremely large quantities of amphetamine and captagon tablets ⁽⁶⁾ have been seized every year in and near the Arabian Peninsula in the past decade, and seizures continue to increase. For instance, Saudi Arabia reported seizing about 18 tonnes of amphetamine in 2016, 16 tonnes in 2017, 25 tonnes in 2019, 29 tonnes in 2020 and 73 tonnes in 2021 (UNODC, n.d.).

Seizures of captagon in the European Union

Since 2018, large numbers of captagon tablets have been seized in Europe. The total amount of captagon reported during the data collection for this report was 127 million tablets and 1 773 kilograms (equivalent to a further 10.6 million tablets, based on a tablet weight of 0.167 grams, or six tablets per gram). These significant cases (more than 10 kilograms or 60 000 tablets) were individually reported by EU Member States; they are summarised below and tabulated in Annex 1, Seizures of captagon in the European Union (> 60 000 tablets or > 10 kilograms), November 2018-February 2022.

The overall quantity of amphetamine seized in the EU was relatively stable, estimated at between 4 and 6 tonnes per year, until 2019 and 2020 when large amounts of captagon tablets were seized in the EU in transit to the Arabian Peninsula. It is interesting that Turkey seized more amphetamine than the entire EU in 2017 and 2018 due to large seizures of captagon tablets (6.6 tonnes and 5.7 tonnes, respectively). It is possible that there is a connection between the reduction in seizures in Turkey and the increase in seizures in the EU, probably due to a change in trafficking routes.

From the information known about large cases in the EU, there are two prevailing situations: cases linked to the production of captagon tablets (mainly in the Netherlands), and cases where tablets produced outside the EU (mainly in Syria or Lebanon) are trafficked to the EU with the intention of being rerouted, either directly or after repacking, to consumer markets in and around the Arabian Peninsula. The reason for this circuitous route is not known, but it is probably intended to avoid controls by authorities in the destination markets, who are unlikely to suspect that captagon tablets would be shipped from the EU.

Germany

Germany reported four cases, the first of which was in November 2018 when more than 1 million tablets were imported to Hamburg hidden in a shipment of furniture in a container from Syria (see Figure 4). A Syrian refugee living in Germany organised the shipment and would have been responsible for the re-export of the tablets, probably to Saudi Arabia. The suspect even made a purchase of furniture in Germany to establish a paper trail showing

⁽⁶⁾ In the data reported at country level, in only some cases are the seizures explicitly referred to as 'captagon'. However, as the information from forensic analysis of seized captagon tablets suggests that in most cases the active ingredient is amphetamine, it is probable that a significant proportion of seizures reported as amphetamine are in the form of captagon tablets.

that the load originated in Germany, when in fact it came from Syria. Forensic analysis of the tablets in this case showed that they matched tablets that had been seized in Lebanon in 2018 or before (samples provided in March 2018 by the Lebanese authorities).

FIGURE 4

Captagon tablets concealed within furniture, Germany, 2018



Source: German Police, Lübeck

The second case, from May 2021, was a seizure of 234 kilograms of captagon tablets in Bavaria, concealed in bags of small marble stones from Austria (see Figure 5). A suspect in this case, and the person believed to be behind the scheme, was a Lebanese national, who also featured in cases investigated by Austrian police. Some of the tablets in this case were subsequently linked by forensic examination to the third German seizure in August 2021, also in Bavaria, when 170 kilograms of captagon tablets was seized on the road network during a random traffic control. The suspects in this case were two Turks, a Greek and a Romanian.

FIGURE 5

Packages of marble stones used to conceal captagon tablets, Germany, 2021



Source: Bavarian Police

The fourth German case was from November 2021, when 60 kilograms of captagon tablets was seized after a witness notified the police that he was holding something suspicious for a relative (both were Syrian nationals). During the investigation, links to both Lebanon and Iraq were identified via telephone numbers and contacts.

In addition to these four cases, Germany also reported several cases of international parcels from Germany going mainly to Saudi Arabia. Each shipment contained fewer than 100 000 tablets and typically the senders were from Arabian countries (mainly Syrian nationals) staying in Germany permanently or as refugees.

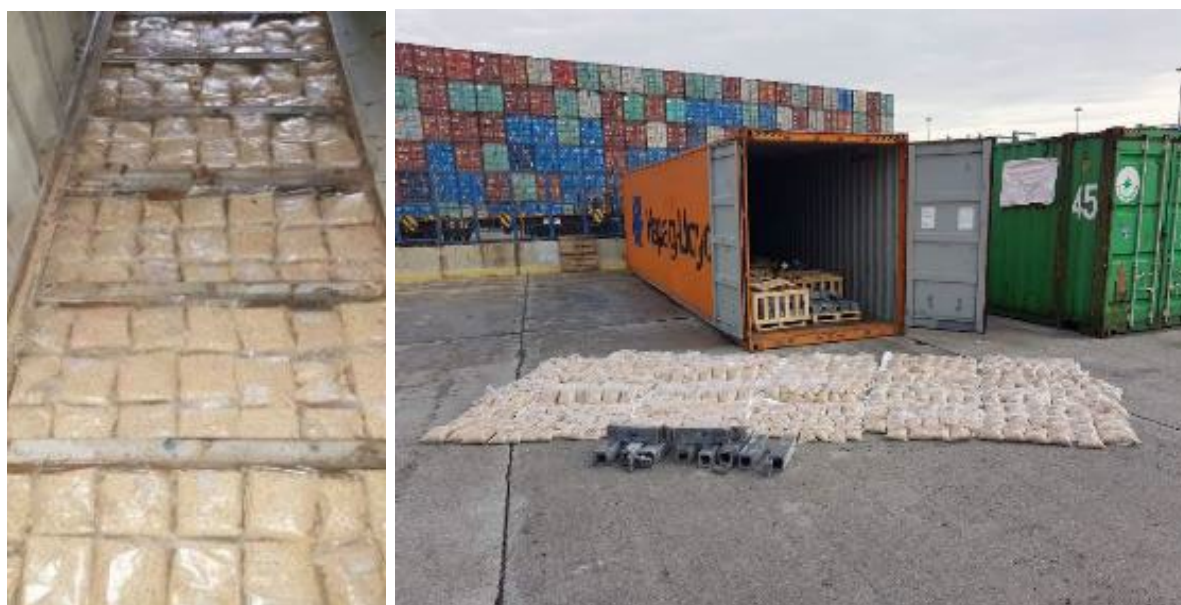
Greece

Greece reported six large cases, three of which were seized in transit from Syria with final destinations reported as Libya, Croatia and China. Another case comprised three separate incidents in early 2022 when large amounts of captagon tablets were washed up on Greek shores. Greece also reported that some migrants coming from Turkey may have carried captagon tablets with them, typically around 1 000 tablets at a time.

The first significant case was in December 2018, when 3.1 million captagon tablets and 6 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized from a cargo ship on its way from Syria to Libya. Then, in January 2019 in the port of Piraeus, in cooperation with Turkish colleagues, the Greek authorities seized 4.8 million captagon tablets concealed within 544 lead ingots. The shipment was discovered on a container coming from Syria, bound for Croatia. Also in January 2019, 258 000 captagon tablets and 6.5 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized from a cargo vessel near Crete.

FIGURE 6

Captagon tablets found in a shipping container, Greece, 2018



Source: Hellenic Police

In March 2019, in Igoumenitsa Port, three Bulgarian citizens were arrested in possession of 370 000 captagon tablets. The suspects had travelled from Bulgaria in two cars and were heading to Italy.

In cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration, in June 2019, again in Piraeus Port, 33 million captagon tablets were concealed inside medium-density fibreboard (MDF) planks (see Figure 7). The planks were found in three shipping containers from Syria, with the final destination listed as China.

FIGURE 7

Captagon tablets concealed within packs of MDF flooring planks, Greece, 2019



Source: *Hellenic Police*

Finally, in January 2022 over 180 000 captagon tablets were found washed up on the shores of the island of Rhodes. On the same day over 80 000 captagon tablets were found on the shores of the island of Kastellorizo. Shortly afterwards, in February 2022, a further 88 880 captagon tablets were again washed up on the shores of Rhodes. In these cases, the packaging had labels displaying an inverted swastika (the only instance of this detail found in all the cases reported) (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8

Captagon tablets in packaging bearing inverted Swastika, Greece, 2022



Source: *Hellenic Police*

Italy

Italy reported two linked cases. The first, in June 2020, involved 187 kilograms of captagon tablets and 2.8 tonnes of cannabis resin from a shipping container that had come from Syria. This case led to the search of a further three containers in July 2020, one of which contained 84 million captagon tablets concealed within large rolls of paper (200 cm x 140 cm) and the gears of an industrial gearbox (see Figure 9). This was the single largest shipment of captagon tablets ever to be seized in the EU.

FIGURE 9

Parts of an industrial gearbox used to conceal captagon tablets, Italy, 2020



Source: Italian Ministry of the Interior

Romania

In April 2020, in the port of Constanta, 372 kilograms of captagon tablets was found in a container that had arrived from Syria, in transit to Saudi Arabia. The tablets were well hidden within sealed refrigeration units (see Figure 10). The two suspects in the case were Syrian and one of them was residing in Germany. Another Syrian living in Damascus had assisted them by setting up a false company in Germany.

An investigation conducted in Germany against the Syrian national who was living in Germany revealed the involvement of one further Syrian and one Algerian national. One was also a permanent resident in Germany and the other travelled regularly between Lebanon and Germany, although his wife and adult children were permanent residents in Germany. These three (subsequently convicted) persons were organising shipments of captagon and other drugs such as cannabis resin and cocaine. In the framework of the investigation, another seizure was conducted in August 2020: 750 kilograms of captagon tablets and 1.4 tonnes of cannabis resin were seized, again in Constanta from a container from Syria. The tablets were concealed within boxes of olive oil soap from Aleppo. It was reported that the final destination of the captagon was Saudi Arabia, while the resin was due to go to Germany.

Other seizures of captagon and cannabis outside the EU — for instance, cases in Egypt and Ukraine, and a shipment of cocaine from South America to Europe — could also be linked to this group, but its involvement could not be proven. Meanwhile, the perpetrators have been sentenced to long prison terms.

FIGURE 10

Captagon tablets concealed in refrigeration units, Romania, 2020



Source: Romanian Police

France

France reported that the last major seizures of captagon tablets date back to 2017. Two cases were recorded in that year, one of 70 kilograms and another of 67 kilograms. Both were found in air freight from Lebanon. The first had Saudi Arabia as its final destination, while the second was in transit to Nairobi airport, though it was noted that its final destination may have been in the Arabian Peninsula. In both cases the goods were declared as 'industrial moulds' and the captagon tablets were concealed in pieces of metal.

Austria

The Austrian authorities conducted a long-running, complex, international operation that started as a cannabis investigation and evolved to include captagon tablets and cocaine. The case was initiated in 2017, when 50 kilograms of cannabis was seized in Germany, delivered from a Danish company owned by a Lebanese citizen living in Denmark. Enquiries showed that there were four previous deliveries with similar circumstances, in the Netherlands and Belgium in 2015, in Austria in 2016 and another in the Netherlands in 2017. The Belgian case in 2015 involved a seizure of 1.35 tonnes of herbal cannabis; information about the other cases was inconclusive, although the Austrian case in 2016 was subsequently believed to relate to a 13.6-tonne shipment of captagon tablets.

During the investigation, information emerged about deliveries of captagon tablets from Lebanon to Austria via Belgium amounting to as much as 10 tonnes of tablets. The tablets were not for European markets but were repacked in Austria into pizza ovens and washing machines, which were then shipped to Saudi Arabia.

It was also discovered that the same organised crime network was active in the importation of cocaine via a Dutch connection. This came to light in August 2018, when 1.9 tonnes of cocaine imported from Santos, Brazil, was seized in Ghent, Belgium. It would transpire that in all, the cocaine trafficking side of the group imported at least 8 tonnes of cocaine into Belgium and the Netherlands. The Dutch head of the cocaine trafficking side of the network was arrested in Spain in August 2020 and was awaiting extradition to Brazil when he was released on a technicality.

In March 2021, 15 arrest warrants were executed simultaneously in various locations in Austria and Germany and 20 house searches were carried out. Then in May 2021, 234 kilograms of captagon tablets were seized in Germany, packed in marble stones from

Austria; this shipment was found to have been organised by the same network (see above).

In April 2022 the Lebanese head of the network was arrested in Turkey, along with two Syrian accomplices in possession of 145 kilograms of captagon tablets.

In Denmark a member of the crime network was convicted for trafficking 1 tonne of captagon tablets and 10 tonnes of herbal cannabis and received a sentence of 16 years.

Seizures of captagon tablets overseas with links to the European Union

As well as the large consignments of captagon tablets found in Europe, in transit to consumer markets in and around the Arabian Peninsula, there have been several seizures outside the EU where the circumstances indicate some European involvement. These include two seizures in Saudi Arabia, one in January 2019 of 348 000 captagon tablets concealed in a shipment of artificial grass from the Netherlands; and another in January 2022, when 2 060 000 captagon tablets were found hidden in a shipment with medical gloves, shipped from the Netherlands.

In October 2021, 1.6 million captagon tablets were seized in the harbour at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The tablets were concealed in a caravan originating from Germany that was shipped from Antwerp, Belgium, by a Dutch company in the business of exporting vehicles to Saudi Arabia.

Production of captagon tablets in the European Union

It has been reported that captagon tablets have occasionally been produced in the Netherlands, a key location for amphetamine production. According to the Dutch police, large captagon production sites (tableting facilities) have been found in the Netherlands at the rate of one or two per year. In three instances, in 2018, 2019 and 2020, these sites were linked to amphetamine production and tableting operations. It is believed that captagon tablet production is not a mainstream activity of synthetic drug producers in the Netherlands, but rather an opportunistic way to make money when there is a specific request or demand.

In 2019, in the largest case reported by the Netherlands, an estimated 3 million captagon tablets (534 kilograms) were found concealed within a concrete counterweight designed for use with heavy machinery such as cranes or excavators. The tablets were packed in bags with a Lexus logo, which is typical of tablets found to originate in Lebanon or Syria (see Figure 11). The counterweight was ready to be shipped to Saudi Arabia. Then, in 2021 a large consignment of approximately 2 million captagon tablets was found packed in sealed Quaker brand oatmeal cans. The labels on the cans bore Arabic text, so the presumption was that these were destined for Arabic-speaking countries, perhaps in the Arabian Peninsula. Also in 2021, an amphetamine production location was dismantled in the Netherlands; 63 kilograms of amphetamine and 37 kilograms of caffeine were found, as well as tablet punches used in the equipment for making captagon tablets (see Figure 3 above). Although no tableting machine or captagon tablets were found on site, the combination of amphetamine, caffeine and equipment indicated the intent to produce captagon tablets. In the Dutch cases, it was observed that suspects often had a connection with Middle Eastern countries, either by nationality or by birth.

FIGURE 11
Captagon tablets packaged in bags with a Lexus logo



Source: Romanian Police

Greek authorities have also provided information about captagon tablet production. However, this relates to a single case of a tableting site detected in 2017, connected with an organised crime group comprising Greek, Albanian and Turkish nationals. During the investigation, a captagon production site was found in a country house near the city of Athens and shipments were expected to be sent to Turkey by speedboat. Some 630 000 captagon tablets were seized at the location, as well as 120 kilograms of chemicals and small quantities of adulterants, including caffeine and theophylline.

It is also possible that captagon tablets continue to be produced in Bulgaria from locally manufactured amphetamine or from amphetamine sourced elsewhere, for instance in the Netherlands. However, the information available does not allow definite conclusions to be drawn here.

Despite the detection of these production activities, there are no indications that captagon tablets produced in the EU are intended for European drug markets.

Forensic analysis of captagon tablets

The results of forensic examinations were provided for some of the captagon cases. From this information, it was confirmed that the captagon tablets seized in the EU contained amphetamine sulfate as the main ingredient; fenetylline was not found in any of the cases. In the majority of cases, the tablets were found to weigh about 0.17 grams and contain less than 20 % amphetamine. The tablets typically also contained caffeine, either with or without other substances such as theophylline, paracetamol, lidocaine and diphenhydramine (and by-products of amphetamine synthesis such as *N*-formylamphetamine).

Captagon tablets seized in Austria and Denmark had a purity of around 19 % amphetamine. The tablet weight and other substances found were not reported.

Germany reported that the average amount of amphetamine sulfate found in captagon tablets was 19-19.5 % and that the other substance most commonly found was caffeine. Lidocaine, paracetamol, theophylline and diphenhydramine have also been found occasionally. From the 2018 seizure of 1 050 000 tablets weighing 175 kilograms, the

average weight of a tablet can be calculated as 0.17 grams. This would mean that each tablet contained about 32 milligrams of amphetamine sulfate and that roughly 32 kilograms of pure amphetamine sulfate was used to manufacture the 1 million tablets seized.

In the Dutch case from 2018, the captagon tablets each contained an average of 70 milligrams of amphetamine and 60-70 milligrams of caffeine. Theophylline was also present, but was not quantified. The amount of amphetamine present in this case was around double that usually reported; however, the tablet weight was not reported.

The Netherlands also reported results from captagon tablets seized in 2021, and these showed some variability in tablet content. Tablets from the Quaker oatmeal cans weighed 0.17-0.18 grams and contained an average 19 % amphetamine base (33.3 milligrams per tablet). These tablets also contained caffeine and low concentrations of piracetam and theophylline. Detailed forensic results for four unrelated captagon samples (also from 2021) were reported. In three of these, the tablets each weighed 0.17 grams and contained 10 % (17.0 milligrams), 18 % (30.6 milligrams) and 19 % (32.3 milligrams) amphetamine base, with caffeine alone, with caffeine and theophylline, or with caffeine, piracetam and theophylline. The fourth sample was heavier, weighing 0.24 grams, and contained just 2 % amphetamine (4.8 milligrams) and caffeine. The Netherlands was the only country to specify that the amount of amphetamine present was calculated as amphetamine base.

In the Romanian case from 2020, the captagon tablets contained about 12 % amphetamine, together with *N*-formylamphetamine, paracetamol, caffeine, theophylline and diphenhydramine, although the proportions of these were not reported.

In the Italian case from the port of Salerno, the captagon tablets were reported to weigh an average of 0.17 grams and contain 16 % amphetamine and unquantified amounts of caffeine.

The German BKA runs a forensic profiling system known as CAPE (Central Analysis Program Ecstasy) that has the ability to identify the origin of synthetic drugs, for example production in the same laboratory or in the same synthesis batch; identify the synthetic route and the precursors used; compare tablets against a database; and correlate seized drugs with illicit drug laboratories. This system has proved useful in providing strategic and tactical intelligence to investigators. It made it possible to discover that tablets from 23 different seizures carried out in Lebanon in 2013 originated from five different amphetamine synthesis laboratories and at least 10 different tableting sites. This illustrates the multiplicity of illicit captagon production sources mentioned earlier (see section on the production and trafficking of captagon).

No evidence of links to the Islamic State terrorist organisation

Following the attacks perpetrated by Islamic State ('Daesh') terrorists in Paris, France, on 13 November 2015 and in Sousse, Tunisia, on 26 June 2015, some allegations were made that the perpetrators had used captagon before carrying out the attacks. In the media following the Paris attacks, captagon was associated with the Islamic State organisation under names such as 'the terrorist drug', 'jihadi magic potion', 'the Daesh drug' and 'the Jihadi drug'. However, it was later shown that this association was not based on fact, as no connections were found between either captagon use or captagon trafficking and the attack. In particular, autopsy reports on the bodies of the Paris terrorists stated that they had taken no 'illicit drugs or alcohol' before carrying out the attack (Pelletier, 2016). There have been no suggestions of captagon use by the terrorists who carried out the Brussels airport and metro attacks on

22 March 2016, nor has captagon use been directly implicated in attacks in other European countries. The evidence supporting the use of captagon by the terrorist in Tunisia was insufficient at best (EMCDDA, 2018b). Consequently, claims that captagon is ‘the terrorist drug’ have not been substantiated, at least not in relation to the Islamic State.

Links to the Syrian regime

Germany reported that captagon is produced in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Lebanon with the involvement of or links to the government of Syria and armed political organisations located in these countries. This has been widely reported in the media (Diehl, et al, 2022) and by the Washington-based think tank the New Lines Institute (Rose and Soderholm, 2022). According to the German authorities, there is also supporting information for this within operational case files, including, for example, testimonies from witnesses in Germany and reports from Germany embassy staff and the German intelligence service. Furthermore, German law enforcement investigations also reached this conclusion.

German law enforcement authorities offered additional information indicating that the trade in captagon from Syria is under the patronage of the Assad regime, which benefits financially from the shipments. According to a statement by a Syrian national in one of the German investigations, organised crime groups have to pay for each container of captagon shipped from Syria. The payment is requested by the Syrian 4th Army Division and the choice is to pay for each container that leaves a Syrian port or to pay a monthly fee. The 4th Army Division is commanded by President Assad’s younger brother, Maher al-Assad.

Conclusions and recommendations

The information in this report is intended to describe the situation in relation to captagon production and trafficking in order to inform EU-level responses, in the context of EMPACT.

There is evidence of the production of captagon tablets in the EU, mainly in the Netherlands, where large quantities of captagon tablets can be produced on demand. Amphetamine is, almost exclusively, the drug found when captagon tablets are seized and analysed in the EU. It appears that EU countries are used mainly as transshipment points (mainly via sea-container transports) between non-EU captagon-producing countries (mainly Syria and Lebanon) and destination markets in and around the Arabian Peninsula. This process may involve a direct rerouting of the consignment or sending the load after it has been unloaded and repacked in the EU. Despite the large consignments arriving in the EU, there appear to be no significant user markets for captagon tablets in the European Union.

Syrian and Lebanese nationals (by nationality or birth) have frequently been noted to be involved in many of the large cases and investigations. Some of those involved are resident in EU countries. Apart from being responsible for organising captagon shipments, the criminal groups involved have also been involved in trafficking cannabis resin and, less frequently, herbal cannabis and cocaine.

Captagon tablets can be produced in the European Union on demand, typically in the Netherlands, where the majority of the amphetamine for the European market is made. Apart from this situation, the organised crime groups typically involved in drug production, trafficking and supply in the European Union do not appear to be frequently involved in the captagon trade.

The information gathered and presented here suggests that concerted EU actions are required and that these should focus on two distinct areas:

1. Tackling the production of captagon tablets within the EU, with a focus on precursors, production of amphetamine and tableting operations.
2. Preventing the EU being used as a transshipment zone for captagon produced in Syria and Lebanon for markets in and around the Arabian Peninsula.

The exceptional scale of captagon shipments and the geopolitically important nature of the trade in this drug provide a compelling argument for a coordinated EU security response and EMPACT provides an appropriate mechanism to achieve this.

Supplementary information

France provided information collected from its network of French Internal Security Attachés, which are active in a number of countries. This information is summarised below.

Egypt

According to the French Internal Security Attaché in Egypt, in August 2021 the official website of the Egyptian Ministry of Interior announced a seizure of captagon tablets in the cargo of a ship in the port of Alexandria. The investigations were carried out within the framework of police cooperation between ANGA (Anti-Narcotics General Administration, the Egyptian drug squad) and the Saudi Arabian Department of Counter Narcotics. The investigation determined the arrival of a vessel under the Comorian flag, from the island of Arwad (near the port of Tartous in Syria) in the port of Alexandria, on a stopover for repairs. The search of the vessel by ANGA officials led to the discovery of over 5 million captagon tablets concealed in 36 oxygen cylinders. The intervention led to the arrest of the crew, one Egyptian national and 14 Syrians. During their hearings, the crew members admitted the acquisition and possession of the drugs and the fact that they were to be transported to Saudi Arabia on behalf of Syrian partners.

Jordan

Information was provided about a review of the activities of Jordan in the fight against drug traffickers based in southern Syria in 2021. The Jordanian military intelligence service held a press briefing to present this review. According to this service, 160 groups operate in southern Syria transporting captagon shipments.

The modus operandi used by these traffickers is becoming more sophisticated, in particular with the use of drones to carry out reconnaissance missions and to transport drugs. Some of these groups apparently have a close connection with members of the Syrian political regime. From the point of view of the Jordanian authorities — and contrary to pledges made by the Syrian authorities to the Jordanians to deal with this phenomenon — on the ground, the Syrian units at the Syrian–Jordanian border are either passive or complicit in the actions of these criminal groups.

Between 1 January 2022 and mid-February 2022, 30 traffickers were killed by the Jordanian army and more than 16 million captagon tablets were seized. The Jordanian military intelligence service indicated that the issue of drug trafficking was a major security challenge and would lead to a change in the rules of engagement for border surveillance. Indeed, these rules of engagement were modified in January 2022 after the death of a Jordanian army officer during an operation against traffickers. Since then, military means were authorised to counter attempts at trafficking along the border with Syria. Ground troops now have air support to carry out their mission. In this regard, the spokesperson for the Jordanian armed forces reported that during the night of 26-27 January 2022, operations took place at the north-eastern border of Jordan: Jordanian armed forces engaged traffickers, resulting in 27 of them being killed. More than 5 million captagon tablets were seized.

Kuwait

Interpol notified the French authorities of a seizure of captagon tablets in Kuwait. The Kuwait Customs Investigation Service had received information that a container with prohibited

goods was being transported to the port of Shuwaikh. Upon arrival at the control area, 4.8 million captagon tablets weighing 744.5 kilograms were found concealed in a shipment of plastic bathroom mats. The container had taken the following route: port of Latakia, Syria — Damietta, Egypt — Jebel Ali, Dubai, UAE — port of Shuwaikh, Kuwait (its final destination).

Lebanon

In January 2022 the French Internal Security Attaché in Lebanon was informed about the seizure of 12 tonnes of captagon tablets in the port of Beirut. The drug was concealed in a shipment of boxes of powdered fruit juice. The shipment was initially destined for Sudan before being rerouted to its final destination, which had not been identified. A very short time before this, Lebanese law enforcement agencies had foiled an export of the same drug to Saudi Arabia, where it was found to be concealed in a shipment of tea. That shipment amounted to 7 tonnes. Investigators have been working to determine the origin of the drugs and the location of production sites, sometimes in Lebanon or, more often, in Syria.

The Lebanese Minister of the Interior reaffirmed that the fight against captagon trafficking is a national priority. During the last six months of 2021, Lebanese law enforcement agencies seized 30 million tablets. Captagon is considered to be the most significant threat in the field of drugs trafficking in Lebanon, although it is not widely consumed in the country and seizures are mainly made at the port of Beirut and at the international airport. According to the analysis of the French Internal Security Attaché in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and neighbouring emirates have denounced this smuggling to put pressure on the Lebanese government, but the demand for captagon comes mainly from their territories. Captagon is probably produced industrially in Syria, but many illicit laboratories have been dismantled in Lebanon, particularly near its borders with Syria.

The Lebanese Customs Anti-Narcotics Brigade informed the French Internal Security Attaché in Lebanon of a seizure of a large quantity of captagon tablets in the port of Beirut on 18 June 2021. Some 4.5 million tablets of the drug were discovered hidden in lead blocks inside two containers. Each of the 800 lead blocks contained 1 kilogram of captagon tablets (1 kilogram of captagon represents approximately 5 500 tablets). It took customs officers three days to break up all the lead blocks and extract the drug. The intercepted goods originated from the Bekaa region of Lebanon, which borders Syria, and the destination was Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Two Lebanese nationals were arrested as part of the operation. This seizure is part of a political effort since mid-2021 to detect captagon trafficking in the port of Beirut. Indeed, strong tensions have arisen with the Saudi authorities, who suspended imports of fruit and vegetables from Lebanon following a large seizure of captagon concealed in pomegranates from Lebanon in April 2021.

The French Internal Security Attaché in Lebanon informed the French Anti-Narcotics Agency of a further captagon seizure in May 2020. Lebanese security forces arrested two Lebanese men and an undocumented individual, who were caught in a van in the city of Tripoli with 300 000 captagon tablets packed in Lexus and Apple bags hidden under the floor of the vehicle. It emerged that the illicit goods were destined for Saudi Arabia.

Turkey

In March 2021 the Anti-Narcotics Directorate made a record seizure of 3 800 kilograms of herbal cannabis and almost 100 000 captagon tablets on a ship calling at the Turkish port of Kocaeli in the Marmara region. According to the information obtained by the French Internal

Security Attaché in Turkey, the ship arrived from Lebanon and was destined for Libya after a stopover in Turkey. The Turkish authorities did not provide any information on the number of people arrested in this case, nor on the circumstances of the discovery.

Ukraine

According to the French Internal Security Attaché in Ukraine, in October 2020 the Ukrainian security service seized 750 kilograms of captagon tablets. During this operation it was discovered that two residents of Odessa and Lviv had organised the transfer of the drugs ordered from one of the Mediterranean countries ⁽⁷⁾. Ukrainian officers discovered that the goods, concealed in two containers of sweets, had arrived at the port of Pivdenny (Odessa) in early September. While under surveillance, the shipment was transported to a warehouse to be repackaged as part of a batch of maize for shipment to a country in the Arabian Peninsula. (This case could be linked to the case in Germany mentioned earlier, but the involvement of the suspects could not be proved.)

⁽⁷⁾ 'Mediterranean countries' means countries with a shore on the Mediterranean Sea.

Annex 1

Seizures of captagon tablets in the European Union (> 60 000 tablets or > 10 kilograms), November 2018-February 2022

Date	Country	Location	Weight (kg)	Number of tablets	Other drugs seized
Nov 18	Germany	Hamburg port	167*	1 000 000	
Dec 18	Greece		518*	3 100 000	6 tonnes cannabis resin
Jan 19	Greece	Pireus port	802*	4 800 000	
Jan 19	Greece	near Crete	43*	258 000	6.5 tonnes cannabis resin
Mar 19	Greece	Igoumenitsa port	62*	370 000	
Jun 19	Greece	Pireus	5 511*	33 000 000	
Apr 20	Romania	Constanta port	372	2 232 000*	
Jun 20	Italy	Salerno port	187	1 122 000*	2.8 tonnes cannabis resin
Jul 20	Italy	Salerno port	14 028*	84 000 000	
Aug 20	Romania	Constanta port	750	4 500 000*	1.4 tonnes cannabis resin
May 21	Germany	Bavaria	234	1 404 000*	
Aug 21	Germany	Bavaria	170	1 020 000*	
Nov 21	Germany		60	360 000*	
Jan 22	Greece	Rhodes	30*	180 000	
Jan 22	Greece	Kastellorizo	13*	80 000	
Feb 22	Greece	Rhodes	15*	88 880	
Totals			22 962	137 514 880	16.7 tonnes cannabis resin

* Values marked with an asterisk (*) have been converted based on a tablet weight of 0.167 grams or six tablets per gram.

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