

The New Syrian Government's Fight Against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and Captagon

By Aaron Y. Zelin

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's background as a former branch of the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida has created a perception that it is untrustworthy when it comes to security concerns of the United States and its allies. This has come to the fore even more acutely with the fall of the Assad regime. Some of the largest threats to outside countries in Syria remain the Islamic State, remnant Hezbollah networks, and the criminal captagon trade. Although few paid attention when Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was controlling territory in northwest Syria for seven years prior to the fall of the regime, it actually took those challenges on, and has continued to do so since it took over most of Syria on December 8, 2024. Of course, dealing with security challenges should not be the only lens through which to view the new rulers in Damascus; it should also take into account the nature of its governance and who is involved in it beyond its core supporters. Yet, if strictly judging the new rulers of Syria by its actions against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and the captagon trade, they appear to be committed to these tasks, even if continued challenges will likely remain for the foreseeable future.

Ever since Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) overthrew the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, there have been a number of security concerns related to Syria. In particular, the future of the Islamic State threat, remnants of the Iranian proxy network, especially Hezbollah and weapons smuggling, and what happens to the former regime-linked captagon drug trade now that it is gone. On all fronts, there have been sustained and serious efforts by the new government in Damascus to address all of these challenges. This is a welcome dynamic and one that not only benefits Syria locally, but also the interests of the United States and other Western countries,

*Dr. Aaron Y. Zelin is the Gloria and Ken Levy Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where he also directs the Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map project. He is also a Visiting Research Scholar in the Department of Politics at Brandeis University and founder of Jihadology. Dr. Zelin is the author of the books *Your Sons Are At Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (Columbia University Press, 2020), *The Age of Political Jihadism: A Study of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), and is currently working on another titled *Heartland of the Believers: A History of Syrian Jihadism*. X: @azelin*

© 2025 Aaron Zelin

especially relating to the threat posed by the Islamic State, but also helpful to Israel vis-a-vis Hezbollah, and Syria's neighboring states including Jordan and Saudi Arabia when it comes to the captagon criminal enterprise.

While many might not realize it, prior to HTS taking over Syria, the group had already been dealing with these threats when it was a "non-state actor" controlling northwest Syria through its civilian and technocratic Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Likewise, since 2013, beyond the lawfare approach that came to dominate how it dealt with these issues after late 2017 when the SSG was formed, HTS also previously fought directly on the battlefield against Hezbollah in 2013 and the Islamic State in 2014. HTS has a long track record of confronting these groups, so it is no surprise that since the fall of the Assad regime, those currently in the Syrian government have continued what they had already been doing for years.

After providing some context about the HTS security agency that had been charged with addressing such challenges, this article will outline—in turn—how those now in control in Damascus have confronted the security threats posed by the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and captagon. For each security threat, the article will first provide background on how HTS was dealing with the issue prior to the fall of the regime and then explore the current status over the past three-plus months since the group took over the government.¹

Broadly speaking, HTS can be described as having taken a lawfare approach to confronting the security threats posed by the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and the captagon trade. This has been done via HTS' General Security Service (GSS). The GSS was HTS' law enforcement/intelligence body and had not officially been a part of the SSG. However, this changed in March 2024 when it was officially folded into the SSG's Ministry of Interior and was renamed the Public Security Department (PSD) after a protest movement began against abuses by HTS in what many locally called the "security cell" issue. This happened in the aftermath of HTS admitting in February 2024 that it had mistakenly arrested many individuals in its own security services in August 2023 for allegedly being in contact with Western intelligence based on poor interrogation tactics (i.e., torture).² These individuals were exonerated, and it led to a series of reforms by HTS and the SSG, including the transition from the GSS to the PSD. This came as no surprise to many since in the years prior to the fall of the regime, especially as it related to activists, many residents in HTS territory had criticized the judicial processes for lacking transparency, failing to provide reasons for arrests, holding alleged "kangaroo" trials, and treating prisoners badly (including torture).³

The GSS was formally founded in June 2020, though an embryonic version of it had been operating since HTS had begun acting as more of a proto-state under the SSG umbrella in 2017.⁴ When the GSS was established in 2020, it released a video

providing details on its writ within HTS-controlled areas as well as a breakdown of its structure. The purpose of the GSS, according to the video, was to protect the people of the “liberated” areas (how HTS described its territory) and to prevent any type of crime.⁵ To do this, the GSS asserted in the video that it would arrest any person who was “working to destroy life and sow chaos” and then use any intelligence garnered from that arrest to go after others in a broader criminal network.⁶

Five key components of the GSS were the regional information office, the internal security division, the organized crime portfolio, the regime portfolio, and the “Khawarij” (“Kharijites”/“extremists”) portfolio.⁷ With regard to the extremists’ portfolio, the Islamic State is not named specifically, but it is undoubtedly included under this portfolio. Issues such as Hezbollah or captagon would likely have fallen under the regime and organized crime portfolios, respectively. According to the GSS video, the process for the system started with an investigating officer providing detailed reasons for why someone should be arrested.⁸ Once the investigation was completed, GSS security officials would arrest the individuals and then that individual would supposedly be brought in front of a public prosecutor to face a trial.⁹ Details about the latter aspect within the judicial system have not been shared publicly by HTS, including since it disbanded in forming the new transitional government. To this day, this process seems to be very opaque. Nevertheless, the PSD as a successor institution to the GSS after it was created in March 2024, had the same agenda and writ; however, it reverted back to the GSS after the fall of the regime. It continues to be housed in the new transitional government’s Ministry of Interior and acts in the same manner as previously.

The Fight Against the Islamic State

Prior to the fall of the regime, over a seven-and-a-half-year period, HTS publicly claimed 62 discreet operations to arrest members of Islamic State cells in 39 towns and villages throughout the greater Idlib region.¹⁰ Of the 62 discreet raids, five occurred in 2017, 22 in 2018, eight in 2019, eight in 2020, 10 in 2021, six in 2022, zero in 2023, and four in 2024.¹¹ The data for 2017 only represents the second half of the year when the proto-GSS began publishing information on its operations.

The Islamic State only conducted a single successful attack in HTS territory from July 2018 until the fall of the regime, when HTS senior leader Abu Mariyah al-Qahtani was assassinated in early April 2024.¹² This means that in the years leading up to the fall of the regime, the Islamic State threat had only a very limited effect on daily life in the area that HTS controlled. In other words, HTS was strikingly successful in its counterterrorism fight against the Islamic State.

The uptick in HTS thwarting Islamic State plots in 2024 compared with the previous year is to a significant degree explained by the growth of Islamic State activity in eastern and central parts of Syria in 2024. However, several of the key drivers that led to the Islamic State’s bounce-back in 2024 have diminished now that the Assad regime has fallen.¹³ A first factor that helped Islamic State activity tick up was the fact that during the summers of 2023 and 2024, the Assad regime and Iran-backed Arab tribal forces in Deir ez-Zor governorate had instigated uprisings against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in an effort to undermine the SDF and U.S. positions in eastern Syria.¹⁴ This undermined intelligence efforts by the United States and the Global Coalition and SDF in

their fight against local Islamic State networks in eastern Syria. These obstacles to confronting the Islamic State were largely removed as a result of the regime falling and the huge weakening of Iran’s proxy network in Syria alongside the fact that the new government in Damascus has taken over Deir ez-Zor city and the western part of the governorate. Furthermore, the environment for the Islamic State has also been made less fertile because of the agreement signed on March 11, 2025, between the president of the Syrian transitional government, Ahmad al-Sharaa (previously known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani) and the commander of the SDF, Mazloum Abdi, to integrate the SDF forces into the central government’s institutions.¹⁵ Since then, the new government and the SDF have set up a central committee to implement the agreement with specialized military and economic subcommittees.¹⁶ There is also expected to be a prisoner exchange between the government and the SDF after the end of Ramadan in early April.¹⁷ Not only is it hoped the deal between Damascus and the SDF will unify the country, but the hope is that it will also create a more sustainable framework to confront the Islamic State.

A second key factor that had contributed to the Islamic State’s bounce-back in 2024 was the decision by Assad and his Russian allies to de-emphasize the fight against the Islamic State. HTS’ drone attack against a graduation ceremony for one of the Assad regime’s military colleges in Homs in early October 2023¹⁸ led the Assad regime and its Russian allies to draw their forces away from the western side of Deir ez-Zor governorate to focus on attacking HTS’ base in Idlib in northwest Syria.¹⁹ This gave the Islamic State more space for attacks and movement of fighters across the frontlines between the Assad regime and SDF-controlled territories. Fast forward to the period after December 8, 2024, and this is no longer a factor.

A third key factor that had helped the Islamic State bounce back was that in the wake of the war in Gaza, U.S. assets and bases in eastern Syria were targeted by Iranian-backed Shi’a proxy groups in Iraq and Syria.²⁰ These attacks resulted in U.S. forces and the coalition, as a force protection response, limiting their actions against the Islamic State—either independently or alongside the SDF—providing the Islamic State with more breathing room.²¹ However, fast forward to the present day and the Iran threat network has been significantly weakened in the region as a result of the serious blows Israel inflicted on Hezbollah in Lebanon in the latter part of 2024.

All in all, the coalition of forces arrayed against the Islamic State, including the new Syrian government, have a much freer hand to combat the Islamic State than they did a year ago. The United States and the Global Coalition alongside the SDF continue to conduct raids against Islamic State cells in northeast and eastern Syria. Based on the author’s Islamic State Worldwide Activity map, since the fall of the regime, the SDF has arrested 13 Islamic State cells in al-Raqqah, Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor governorates as of March 26, 2025.²² The United States has also conducted two airstrikes and one arrest with the SDF against Islamic State operatives in SDF-controlled territories since the fall of the regime.²³ This continued pace has kept Islamic State operations at a relatively low level in recent months.

To make up for the disappearance of Assad regime forces from central Syria after the collapse of the regime, another U.S. partner force on the ground, the Syrian Free Army (SFA), moved from the Tanf Garrison that hugs the triangle border between Syria, Iraq, and

Jordan into the central city of Palmyra to cover the broader desert terrain in Homs governorate.²⁴ In the author's assessment, the United States has been able to use intelligence against Islamic State cells and camps in central Syria in a much freer way now since it no longer has to deconflict with Russia. In September and October 2024, before the fall of the regime, the United States carried out three airstrikes against the Islamic State in central Syria.²⁵ Then, the day the regime fell, the United States struck 75 Islamic State targets in central Syria and carried out another series of airstrikes there eight and 14 days later²⁶ to try to ensure the Islamic State did not take advantage of any chaos following the fall of the Assad regime. One development that augurs well for the fight against the Islamic State is that the SFA joined the new Syrian Ministry of Defense in late January 2025, creating a potentially useful vehicle for counterterrorism cooperation between Washington and Damascus.²⁷



This image released by the new Syrian government's Ministry of Interior shows alleged members of an Islamic State cell who were detained in January 2025 for allegedly trying to blow up the Sayyida Zainab shrine.

In its new guise as the Syrian government, HTS has continued to fight Islamic State cells. So far, they have announced four key actions against the Islamic State. Firstly, on January 11, the new government in Damascus thwarted an Islamic State plot to bomb the Shi'a Sayyida Zainab shrine in the Damascus suburbs designed to incite sectarian tensions.²⁸ There are media reports that the United States provided the intelligence that led to this plot being broken up.²⁹ In subsequent interrogation that the Ministry of Interior released from these plotters, those involved in planning this attack also disclosed that they attempted to attack a church in the Christian town of Maaloula on New Year's Day with a car bomb, which was never actualized, and also had a plan to assassinate Ahmad al-Sharaa if he decided to visit the Sayyida Zainab shrine after a successful attack occurred.³⁰

Secondly, on February 15, 2025, the GSS arrested Abu al-Harith al-Iraqi, a senior leader in the Islamic State's Iraq Province, who had been involved in the aforementioned assassination of former senior HTS leader Abu Mariyah al-Qahtani in April 2024 and assisting the Sayyida Zainab plot.³¹ The arrests relating to the latter plot appear to have led to information that allowed Damascus to find Abu al-Harith, which the Ministry of Interior recently disclosed.³²

Interestingly, it seems that intelligence garnered from Abu al-Harith then led to the airstrike that killed Abdallah Makki Muslih

al-Rufay'i (Abu Khadijah), Abu al-Harith's superior, in Iraq on March 14.³³ Abu Khadijah allegedly was the deputy caliph of the Islamic State, and also served as the *wali* (governor) of Iraq and Syria and head of the Delegated Committee. As part of his remit, he oversaw external operations plots;³⁴ in 2024, the Islamic State in Iraq was responsible for five failed external operations plots.³⁵ This all shows that intelligence-sharing between the United States, Syria, and Iraq related to the Islamic State has become mutually beneficial, which led to a state-to-state visit between Damascus and Baghdad on March 14.³⁶

Most recently, on February 18 and March 6, the GSS arrested Islamic State cells in the towns of al-Naima and al-Sanamayn, respectively, in Syria's Dara'a governorate.³⁷

The Fight Against Hezbollah

Since Hezbollah entered the war in Syria at the behest of Iran to back up the Assad regime, Hezbollah and HTS have been pitted on opposite sides.³⁸ Due to this factor, it is unsurprising that following the fall of the regime, the new government in Damascus is also interested in taking on remnant Hezbollah networks that are either backing up regime remnant insurgent networks or attempting to continue to smuggle weapons from Iran into Lebanon. Due to the fall of the regime, Iran's position in Syria has been greatly weakened, especially in light of Israel's campaign against Hezbollah in the post-October 7th era.

The first indication that Hezbollah entered Syria to assist the Assad regime in its fight against the burgeoning insurgency against its rule was in the summer of 2012.³⁹ This was through the conduit of an Iranian-created proxy group called Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas. It brought together Shi'a foreign fighters from various Iranian proxy groups (Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Kata'ib Sayyid al Shuhada) to obscure their direct involvement in the conflict initially.⁴⁰ As early as January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra was reporting that it was directly fighting Hezbollah in the Damascus region.⁴¹ However, the then Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah only publicly admitted in May 2013 that his group was officially involved in the fighting, stating "this battle is ours, and I promise you victory."⁴² Part of this was to legitimize the group's overt involvement in the battle for Qusayr that occurred in May-June 2013 and led effectively to the northern and southern fronts of the anti-regime insurgency being cut off from one another.⁴³

The nasty nature of that battle led the late Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a highly influential Egyptian Islamist theologian, to call on Sunni Muslims worldwide to fight against the regime and Hezbollah in Syria: "Anyone who has the ability, who is trained to fight ... has to go; I call on Muslims to go and support their brothers in Syria," he stated.⁴⁴ And while many attribute the large-scale foreign fighter mobilization in Syria to the Islamic State, in some ways, this helped paved the way for one on a more mainstream level. It also further legitimized the kind of sectarian language that became a key part of the fight between Jabhat al-Nusra and Hezbollah.⁴⁵ In particular, al-Qaradawi called Hezbollah "Hizb al-Shaytan" (the party of Satan) in his speech, while Jabhat al-Nusra usually preferred 'Hizb al-Lat' (the party of Lat). The latter is in reference to the pre-Islamic Arabian goddess al-Lat, who was believed to be a daughter of God, thus branding Hezbollah as a group of polytheists and not true believers, who must be smashed similar to the idols during the time of the Prophet Mohammad.

In response to all of this, Jabhat al-Nusra created a Lebanese

branch and began to conduct attacks against Hezbollah across the border into Lebanon from December 2013 to as late as July 2015.⁴⁶ Many of these were cross-border rocket attacks.⁴⁷ However, Jabhat al-Nusra's Lebanon branch also conducted suicide bombings in Hezbollah strongholds in the Hermel region.⁴⁸ While the fighting within Lebanon abated, fighting between the two groups would continue for years within Syria itself prior to the fall of the regime. For example, as late as mid-October 2024, six weeks before the offensive to overthrow the Assad regime began, an HTS-run joint operations room called al-Fatah al-Mubin put out a statement condemning Iranian-backed proxies, including Hezbollah, for attacking HTS' positions in northwest Syria.⁴⁹

Prior to HTS' GSS/PSD adoption of a lawfare approach once they had solidified control in northwest Syria in late 2017, HTS' predecessor group Jabhat al-Nusra arrested Hezbollah fighters from the battlefield and held prisoners of war. For example, in late August 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra put out a video highlighting the fourth Hezbollah cell it had arrested in the western Ghouta region outside of Damascus.⁵⁰ Likewise, they also promoted imprisoning Hezbollah fighters in mid-November 2015 in the southern Aleppo countryside.⁵¹ During the brutal battle to retake Aleppo in mid-June 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra captured a Hezbollah fighter on the Khalasa front in the southern Aleppo countryside.⁵² In July 2017, HTS captured Hezbollah fighters right after they crossed the border from Arsal, Lebanon, into Syrian territory.⁵³

In addition to taking Hezbollah fighters off the battlefield, these kind of capture operations were also a way for Jabhat al-Nusra and later HTS to exchange Hezbollah fighters for Nusra/HTS fighters who Hezbollah had previously also taken as prisoners of war. As late as early August 2017, HTS released video appeals from captured Hezbollah fighters to their families to try and pursue an exchange of prisoners.⁵⁴ An example of these types of exchanges occurred in late July 2017 in the western Qalamoun region when a Syrian female prisoner from Lebanese prisons and the bodies of eight killed HTS fighters were exchanged for the bodies of five killed Hezbollah fighters.⁵⁵ HTS' news agency at the time, called Iba', reported in late April 2018 that an unspecified number of HTS fighters were swapped with an unspecified number of Hezbollah fighters.⁵⁶

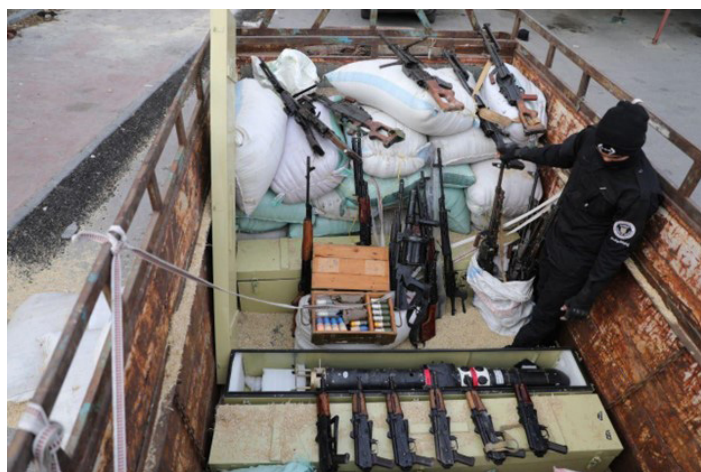


Image released by HTS' GSS of an HTS takedown of a Hezbollah cell in June 2023 by the GSS in northwest Syria

As the conflict lines began to freeze in Syria, especially in light of the March 2020 Turkey-Russia ceasefire agreement, direct interaction between HTS and Hezbollah became less frequent. While the GSS/SPD would break up a number of cells related to

former regime activity in HTS territory in the period prior to the fall of the Assad regime,⁵⁷ there is only one known case of the GSS taking down a Hezbollah cell.⁵⁸ This occurred in late June 2023 when the GSS claimed that a Hezbollah cell was monitoring locations of HTS fighters, government buildings, and humanitarian organizations as well as allegedly planning assassinations and placing mines in HTS territory.⁵⁹

Now that the regime is gone and the new Syrian government controls most of the country, HTS in its new guise as the government of Syria is confronting remnant Hezbollah cells in Syria. There have been a significant number of clashes with Hezbollah on the border with Lebanon and arrests of Hezbollah cells involved in weapons smuggling.



An image released by the Syrian Ministry of Interior showing the seizure of Hezbollah-bound weapons being smuggled on a truck in mid-January 2025

Thus far, the new government has arrested six Hezbollah cells since the fall of the regime. Most of them were located in the areas around the Syria-Lebanon border in Tartus, Homs, and Rif Dimashq governorates.⁶⁰ All of these cells were attempting to illegally smuggle weapons from Syria into Lebanon to provide them to Hezbollah. This has included Kalashnikovs, automatic rifles, rockets, drone parts, and ammunition. The most recent bust happened in Sayyida Zainab, where Hezbollah's network has a long history.⁶¹ Individuals that were part of the affiliated Saudi Hizballah group that used a truck bomb in their 1996 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia did some of their operational meeting in Sayyida Zainab.⁶² In that attack, 19 U.S. service personnel were killed and almost 500 more people from at least seven countries were injured.⁶³ Interestingly, the new government also arrested in late February 2025 a member of the Iraqi Hashd al-Sha'abi in western Homs for weapons smuggling as well.⁶⁴

Unlike under the Assad regime, there is now a government in charge that is willing to interdict this activity. During a combing campaign to try and stop smuggling operations near the Syria-Lebanon border in early February 2025, Syria's new security forces seized a large number of farms, warehouses, and factories for manufacturing and packaging hashish and captagon pills, in addition to printing presses specializing in printing counterfeit currency, which Hezbollah was also involved in.⁶⁵ In response, gangs affiliated with Hezbollah kidnapped two Syrian military members, who Syrian forces later managed to free.⁶⁶ The incident generated cross-border clashes that lasted two days,⁶⁷ with a Syrian

refugee dying and two others injured in the vicinity of Qusayr.⁶⁸ Eventually, the new Syrian state and Lebanese army coordinated to calm the situation.⁶⁹

In mid-March 2025, there was another flare-up in fighting between the new Syrian government forces and Hezbollah. This time, Hezbollah members crossed the border, ambushed and kidnapped three Syrian army personnel, brought them back into Lebanon, and executed them, with at least one of them being stoned to death.⁷⁰ It is possible this was triggered by Damascus' continued cracking down on smuggling networks or a reprisal for the massacre of Alawites on the Syrian coast on March 6.⁷¹ In response, the forces of the new Syrian government fired rockets into Lebanon from Syrian territory toward Hezbollah. Hezbollah returned fire with anti-tank missiles, injuring a group of journalists, including an al-Arabiya reporter.⁷² Similar to the February events, after a couple of days the situation simmered down once the Lebanese Armed Forces arrived, who have since also dismantled three illegal border crossings between Lebanon and Syria.⁷³ On March 28, 2025, Lebanese and Syrian defense ministers signed an agreement in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to demarcate the Lebanese-Syrian border, which will likely further secure both borders.⁷⁴

This all illustrates that Hezbollah poses a challenge to the new Syria not only because of its remnant networks inside Syria that had previously been assisting the Assad regime, but also because of its continued attempts to smuggle weapons via Syria back into Lebanon.

The Campaign Against Captagon

Captagon is an amphetamine-like stimulant in pill form. As far back as 2006, in the aftermath of that year's Israel-Hezbollah war, Hezbollah began to produce, smuggle, and sell counterfeit versions of captagon.⁷⁵ This helped supplement Hezbollah's budget from Iran.⁷⁶ Due to similar budget shortfalls as a consequence of the Syrian civil war, and the Assad regime's inability to access significant capital outside of help from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah because of U.S. sanctions, the Assad regime increasingly became a captagon-producing narco-state in the latter part of its rule. In one of many examples, in 2018, the regime took over a factory for potato chips and turned it into a captagon-producing factory.⁷⁷

The Assad regime began to produce the narcotic on an industrial scale to continue to feed its war machine and the corruption in its system. This was primarily the purview of Maher al-Assad and his 4th Division in the Republican Guard. Hezbollah also provided



A captagon bust in February 2022 by HTS' GSS that released this image

assistance based on its own experience.⁷⁸ According to the U.K. government in late March 2023, the former regime's captagon trade was "worth approximately 3 times the combined trade of the Mexican cartels."⁷⁹ By the time the regime fell, according to one estimate, the annual global trade of captagon was estimated at \$10 billion, while the Assad regime took in around \$1.8 billion annually, which was twice the revenue generated from all legal Syrian exports in 2023.⁸⁰

What can we ascertain about the new government's war on captagon? It is actually a continuation of HTS' policies when it was only in control of northwest Syria. It is worth noting that HTS through the GSS/SPD worked to counter all illegal drugs prior to the fall of the regime, efforts which have continued since.

The first publicized drug bust by the GSS was related to hashish in early 2018.⁸¹ It is also possible that the first captagon-related bust occurred in late May 2019 when HTS security services seized what was referred to as narcotic pills, making it possible this was their first seizure of captagon.⁸² Demonstrating its attentiveness to counter-narcotics, in the years prior to the first official captagon-related bust in northwest Syria, HTS bodies carried out briefings and lectures related to the dangers of drugs in general within its territory for the Police Command, the Ministry of Interior, Idlib University, and regional administrations.⁸³

The first *publicized* captagon seizure by the GSS was carried out in mid-February 2022.⁸⁴ The fact that the baggies the captagon were in had a Lexus logo sticker on them attempted to signify it was related to the regime's industrial manufacturing of it, as that was one of the ways it was promoted to those buying it.⁸⁵ Subsequently, the regime began using a Lamborghini sticker to try and obfuscate the captagon's origin. Between that arrest in February 2022 and the collapse of the Assad regime, HTS' GSS conducted six captagon-related drug busts in northwest Syria,⁸⁶ including a manufacturing site in mid-January 2023.⁸⁷



An image posted by the Syrian Ministry of Interior showing the discovery by the new Syrian government of captagon hidden in children's toys in mid-January 2025

The biggest busts by the new Syrian government since the fall of the Assad regime have continued to show some of the captagon in bags with the Lexus and Lamborghini stickers, among other variations.⁸⁸ This highlights that although remnants of the regime can no longer produce captagon at scale, they are still attempting

“Unlike the Assad regime—which did little to fight the Islamic State, was closely aligned with Hezbollah, and produced captagon on an industrial scale—HTS in its guise as the new government of Syria is taking on these challenges assertively, and has a significant track record in doing so previously. Not only are these efforts a benefit to Syrian society and the security and stability of the country, but they also align with the interests of the United States and U.S. regional allies.”

to trade it illicitly.

Over the years in HTS territory, captagon pills have been hidden in piping.⁸⁹ Since the fall of the regime, the pills have also been found hidden in industrial equipment, furniture, children’s toys, and Styrofoam.⁹⁰ In total, the new Syrian government has made 20 seizures of captagon since it took power as of March 27, 2025.⁹¹ These cases have spanned many Syrian governorates including Aleppo, Damascus, Dara’a, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Latakia, and Rif Dimashq, illustrating both the continued scope of the challenge and the commitment of the new rulers of Damascus to now confront it.⁹² Some of these interddictions occurred in border towns close to Lebanon and Jordan, just before the captagon pills were due to enter the illicit market.⁹³ In carrying out these interddictions, Syria’s new authorities discovered manufacturing sites and warehouses that the former regime had used to create and store captagon, in particular ones related to Maher al-Assad’s network.⁹⁴ On March 21, 2025, the new Syrian government carried out what it said was the largest captagon seizure thus far when it

seized three million captagon pills in Aleppo.⁹⁵

Continuing Challenges

Unlike the Assad regime—which did little to fight the Islamic State, was closely aligned with Hezbollah, and produced captagon on an industrial scale—HTS in its guise as the new government of Syria is taking on these challenges assertively, and has a significant track record in doing so previously. Not only are these efforts a benefit to Syrian society and the security and stability of the country, but they also align with the interests of the United States and U.S. regional allies such as Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. In recent years, the captagon trade has been a huge concern to the Sunni Arab states in particular.

However, the security challenges posed by the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and the captagon trade are likely to endure for some time. One concern is the ticking time bomb of the 9,000 male Islamic State prisoners held in northeast Syria and the threat that the Islamic State could break them out.⁹⁶

There also remain lingering questions about how the agreement between al-Sharaa and the SDF leader Abdi plays out and the fact that Turkey’s proxies in Syria continue to fight the SDF.⁹⁷ These outcomes will shape the degree to which the Syrian state can be effective in combating the Islamic State. Another challenge facing the Syrian government is a lack of financial resources. With Syria in dire economic straits and sectarian tensions recently spiraling in its coastal region, the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and operators in the captagon black market may eye opportunities. It would be foolish to count Iran and Hezbollah out. The Lebanese group is likely to continue to confront the new Syrian government in the border region with Lebanon, especially as Damascus tries to dismantle the infrastructure Hezbollah built up in western Syria when it was backing up the Assad regime.

In addition to the importance of continuing to push Damascus for an inclusive, open, and transparent government, the stakes are also high for the future security of Syria, the region, and far beyond. For these reasons, it would be wise for Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, Brussels, Amman, Ankara, Jerusalem, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Baghdad, Beirut, and others to coordinate and support the new rulers in Damascus in their fight against the Islamic State, Hezbollah, and captagon. **CTC**

Citations

- 1 The author explored in extensive detail HTS’ counterterrorism fight against the Islamic State in the February 2023 issue of CTC Sentinel. This article updates this assessment but does not include as much detail about the pre-2023 period. For more, see Aaron Y. Zelin, “Jihadi ‘Counterterrorism:’ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Versus the Islamic State,” *CTC Sentinel* 16:2 (2023).
- 2 “The Liberated Leadership Met With Members of the Shūrā Council and the Salvation Government To Talk About the Latest Security Issue,” Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Amjad Media, February 1, 2024, via Aaron Y. Zelin, “New video message from Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham: ‘The Liberated Leadership Met With Members of the Shura Council and the Salvation Government To Talk About the Latest Security Issue,’” *Jihadology*, February 1, 2024.
- 3 Khaled al-Khateb, “Jihadi Group in Syria’s Idlib Faces Criticism over Unfair Trials, Death Sentences,” *al-Monitor*, August 25, 2021.
- 4 GSS releases can be found on GSS’ Telegram channel.
- 5 “The Security Files,” Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, General Security Service (available via Jihadology), June 12, 2020.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 “HTS Arrests of IS Database,” created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated February 18, 2025.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Last Days of Abu Maryyah al-Qahtani,” *Syrian Jihadism*, April 20, 2024.
- 13 Aaron Y. Zelin, “Remaining, Waiting for Expansion (Again): The Islamic State’s Operations in Iraq and Syria,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 35 (2024).
- 14 Hassan Hassan and Omar Abu Layla, “Assad’s Hidden Hand in the Uprising Against the Kurds in Eastern Syria,” *New Lines Magazine*, September 4, 2023.
- 15 “Signing an agreement stipulating the integration of the Syrian Democratic Forces into the institutions of the Syrian Arab Republic, emphasizing the unity of Syrian territory and rejecting division,” March 11, 2025, via Aaron Y. Zelin,

- "Diary of the Syrian Transition - March 10-11, 2025," *Jihadology+*, March 11, 2025.
- 16 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - March 13, 2025," *Jihadology+*, March 13, 2025.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Sarah Dadouch, "At least 80 killed in drone attack on Syrian military academy in Homs," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2023.
- 19 Haid Haid, "Smoke and Mirrors: Assad's Exploitation of Israel's War on Gaza to Escalate Atrocities in Idlib," *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, February 6, 2024.
- 20 Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. and Anti-Israel Strikes From Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 14, 2024.
- 21 "Operation Inherent Resolve Lead Inspector General Quarterly Report to Congress, April 1, 2024—June 30, 2024," *Inspector General for Department of Defense, State, and USAID*, July 31, 2024.
- 22 See "The Islamic State, Select Worldwide Activity," *Washington Institute*, n.d.
- 23 "CENTCOM Forces Kill ISIS Operatives, Destroy Truckload of Weapons in Syria Airstrike," *U.S. Central Command*, December 23, 2024; "CENTCOM and Partner Forces Conduct Operations in Iraq and Syria to Defeat ISIS," *U.S. Central Command*, January 6, 2025; "Syrian Democratic Forces, Enabled by CENTCOM Forces, Capture ISIS Cell Leader," *U.S. Central Command*, March 8, 2025.
- 24 "'Syrian Free Army' take control of Palmyra as regime forces fall back," *New Arab*, December 7, 2024.
- 25 "U.S. Central Command Conducts Targeted Strikes Against Terrorist Groups in Syria," *U.S. Central Command*, September 29, 2024; "U.S. Central Command conducts airstrikes against multiple ISIS camps in Syria," *U.S. Central Command*, October 12, 2024; "U.S. Central Command Conducts Airstrikes Against Several ISIS Camps in Syria," *U.S. Central Command*, October 30, 2024.
- 26 "U.S. Central Command conducts dozens of airstrikes to eliminate ISIS camps in central Syria," *U.S. Central Command*, December 8, 2024; "U.S. Central Command Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIS Operatives," *U.S. Central Command*, December 16, 2024; "CENTCOM Forces Kill ISIS Leader During Precision Strike in Syria," *U.S. Central Command*, December 20, 2024.
- 27 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - January 29, 2025," *Jihadology+*, January 29, 2025.
- 28 See "The Islamic State, Select Worldwide Activity."
- 29 Warren P. Strobel, Ellen Nakashima, and Missy Ryan, "U.S. shared secret intelligence with Syria's new leaders," *Washington Post*, January 24, 2025.
- 30 "In the Grip of Security: An Inevitable Fate," *Ministry of Interior (Syria)*, March 18, 2025.
- 31 Zelin, "The Last Days of Abu Mariyah al-Qahtani." See also Aaron Y. Zelin, "A History of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Publicly Announced Counterterrorism Actions Against Islamic State Leaders and Members," *Jihadology+*, January 11, 2025.
- 32 "In the Grip of Security."
- 33 See Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, "[The Iraqis continue their impressive victories over the forces of darkness and terrorism . . .]," *X*, March 14, 2025. It is likely the case that intelligence garnered from interrogations of Abu al-Harith provided great details on Abu Khadijah's whereabouts since he was working for Abu Khadijah.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 "Non-ISKP External Ops Database," created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated March 7, 2025.
- 36 See "Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs receives Syrian Foreign Minister to discuss regional security and joint coordination," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Iraq)*, March 14, 2025.
- 37 See "The Syrian government announces the arrest of an ISIS cell in a Syrian province," *Al-Mubdi'un News Platform*, February 19, 2025.
- 38 Phillip Smyth, "The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects," *Policy Focus* 138, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 2015.
- 39 Phillip Smyth, "Hizballah Cavalcade: What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFa): Assessing Syria's Shia 'International Brigade' Through Their Social Media Presence," *Jihadology*, May 15, 2013.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 See "Hezbollah fighters withdraw from Damascus after Al-Nusra Front intervenes," *Al Rai News*, January 14, 2013.
- 42 Hassan Nasrallah, "Words on Eid al-Muqawama and the Liberation," *al-Manar*, May 25, 2013.
- 43 Matthew Levitt and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Hizb Allah's Gambit in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 6:8 (2013).
- 44 Thomas Hegghammer and Aaron Y. Zelin, "How Syria's Civil War Became a Holy Crusade," *Foreign Affairs*, July 3, 2013.
- 45 Aaron Y. Zelin and Phillip Smyth, "The Vocabulary of Sectarianism," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014.
- 46 An archive of the activity of Jabhat al-Nusra's Lebanon branch can be found here: <https://jihadology.net/category/jabhat-al-nu%e1%b9%a3rah-in-lebanon>.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 "Regarding the Escalation By Iranian Militias Against the Liberated Areas," *Al-Fatah al-Mubin*, October 12, 2024, via Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from al-Fatah al-Mubin: 'Regarding the Escalation By Iranian Militias Against the Liberated Areas,'" *Jihadology*, October 12, 2024.
- 50 "Arrest of the Fourth Cell of the Syrian Hizb Allah in Western Ghutah," *Jabhat al-Nusrah, al-Manarah al-Bayda Media*, August 20, 2015, via Aaron Y. Zelin, "New video message from Jabhat al-Nusrah: 'Arrest of the Fourth Cell of the Syrian Hizb Allah in Western Ghutah,'" *Jihadology*, August 20, 2015.
- 51 "Three Lebanese Hizb Allah Fighters Imprisoned in Rural Southern Aleppo," *Jabhat al-Nusrah, al-Manarah al-Bayda Media*, November 14, 2015, via Aaron Y. Zelin, "New video message from Jabhat al-Nusrah: 'Three Lebanese Hizb Allah Fighters Imprisoned in Rural Southern Aleppo,'" *Jihadology*, November 14, 2015.
- 52 "A member of Lebanese Hizballah was captured while thwarting an attempt by the rejectionist militias to advance on the town of Khalasa," *Jaysh al-Fatah/Jabhat al-Nusrah*, June 17, 2016. Author retains a copy of the photo in his archive.
- 53 "3 Hizballah prisoners in the outskirts of Aarsal after they attempted to advance towards the mujahidin areas a few days ago," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iba News Agency*, July 31, 2017. Author retains a copy of the photo in his archive.
- 54 "Appeal of One of the Hizb Allah Prisoners to His Family in Lebanon," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, July 25, 2017, via Aaron Y. Zelin, "New video message from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham: 'Appeal of One of the Hizb Allah Prisoners to His Family in Lebanon,'" *Jihadology*, July 25, 2017; "The Last Moments of the Hizb Allah Prisoners," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, August 2, 2017.
- 55 "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Western Qalamoun exchanges a female prisoner from Lebanese prisons and the bodies of 8 martyred rebels, in exchange for 5 bodies of the 'Hezbollah' militia," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iba News Agency*, July 31, 2017. The author retains a copy of the photo in his archive.
- 56 "The fighters of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham after being freed from the rejectionists in a swap deal with the Lebanese Hizballah," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iba News Agency*, April 28, 2018. Author retains a copy of the photo in his archive.
- 57 "HTS arrests of regime cells in northwest Syria Database," created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated November 27, 2024.
- 58 "The General Security Service arrested a security cell affiliated with Hezbollah militias that was active in the liberated areas," *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*, June 24, 2023. Author retains a copy of the photo in his archive.
- 59 Dhiya' al-Umar, "Regarding the Arrest of a Security Cell Affiliated With the Lebanese Hizb Allah Militia," June 25, 2023, via Aaron Y. Zelin, "New statement from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Diya al-Umar: 'Regarding the Arrest of a Security Cell Affiliated With the Lebanese Hizb Allah Militia,'" *Jihadology*, June 25, 2023.
- 60 "New Syrian Government versus Hizballah database," created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated March 17, 2025.
- 61 Syrian Ministry of Interior Telegram channel, March 27, 2025.
- 62 Matthew Levitt, "Anatomy of a Bombing," *Foreign Affairs*, September 1, 2015.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 This can be found on the Homs Governorate Telegram channel.
- 65 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - February 10, 2025," *Jihadology+*, February 10, 2025.
- 66 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - February 6, 2025," *Jihadology+*, February 6, 2025.
- 67 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - February 9, 2025," *Jihadology+*, February 9, 2025.
- 68 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - February 12, 2025," *Jihadology+*, February 12, 2025.
- 69 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - February 10, 2025," *Jihadology+*, February 10, 2025.
- 70 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - March 16, 2025," *Jihadology+*, March 16, 2025.
- 71 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Syria's Transitional Honeymoon Is Over After Massacres and Disinformation," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch* 4012, March 10, 2025.
- 72 See Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - March 17, 2025," *Jihadology+*, March 17, 2025.
- 73 "Syria and Lebanon reach ceasefire agreement after two days of clashes," *Enab Baladi*, March 18, 2025.
- 74 "Politics / Under the generous directives of the Custodian of the Two Holy

- Mosques and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, the Kingdom hosts a meeting between the Syrian and Lebanese defense ministers to coordinate and enhance cooperation on security and military issues between their two countries," Saudi Press Agency, March 28, 2025.
- 75 Boaz Ganor and Miri Halperin Wernli, "The Infiltration of Terrorist Organizations Into the Pharmaceutical Industry: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36:9 (2013).
- 76 Jon Henley, "Captagon: the amphetamine fuelling Syria's civil war," *Guardian*, January 13, 2014.
- 77 Sally Abou AlJoud, "What Assad's fall has revealed about Syria's trade in the stimulant drug Captagon," Associated Press, December 18, 2024.
- 78 "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," U.S. Department of State, June 29, 2023.
- 79 "Tackling the illicit drug trade fuelling Assad's war machine," Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon KCMG, March 28, 2023.
- 80 Ibid.; Karam Shaar, Caroline Rose, and Roaa Obaid, "Captagon in 2024: Implications After the Fall of the Syrian Regime," New Lines Institute, February 25, 2025.
- 81 "The security office of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham arrests a drug dealer," Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iba News Agency, September 4, 2018. Author retains a copy in his archive.
- 82 "Police arrest a drug trafficking cell in rural Idlib," Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Iba News Agency, May 28, 2019. Author retains a copy in his archive.
- 83 "Sarmada Region: Police Command 'Your Safety is our Responsibility' Drugs and Their Causes," Sarmada Region Media Office, October 14, 2020; "Minister of Interior, Mr. Ahmed Lattouf, delivers a lecture entitled 'Drugs and Their Danger to Society' in the presence of a number of police officers from the Ministry of Interior," Syrian Salvation Government, December 22, 2020;
- "Sponsored by Idlib University and in cooperation with the Adwaa team and Sharm Warehouse, we invite you to attend a medical conference entitled: 'The Scourge of Drugs: Between Addiction and Treatment Methods,'" Idlib University, February 2, 2021; "Under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior and the Central Region Administration, a symposium was held in the city of Maarat Misrin on the dangers of drugs and their effects on the liberated areas," al-Sham News Agency, November 7, 2021. Author retains a copy of these in his archive.
- 84 "A car attempting to smuggle a shipment of narcotic pills into the Idlib region was seized," Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, General Security Service, February 12, 2022. Author retains a copy in his archive.
- 85 Ed Caesar, "How Syria Became the Middle East's Drug Dealer," *New Yorker*, November 4, 2024.
- 86 "HTS/New Syrian government Fight Against Captagon Database," created by Aaron Y. Zelin, last updated March 16, 2025.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 Caroline Rose, "How Assad's Trade in Captagon Fueled His Downfall," New Lines Magazine, January 23, 2025.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 Ibid.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Ibid.
- 94 Ibid.
- 95 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Diary of the Syrian Transition - March 21, 2025," *Jihadology+*, March 21, 2025.
- 96 Devorah Margolin, "Syria Crisis Leaves Islamic State Prisons and Detention Camps Vulnerable," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 9, 2024.
- 97 See statements from the SNA and SDF about their continued fighting on the Syrian National Army's official Telegram channel and the Syrian Democratic Forces official website.