

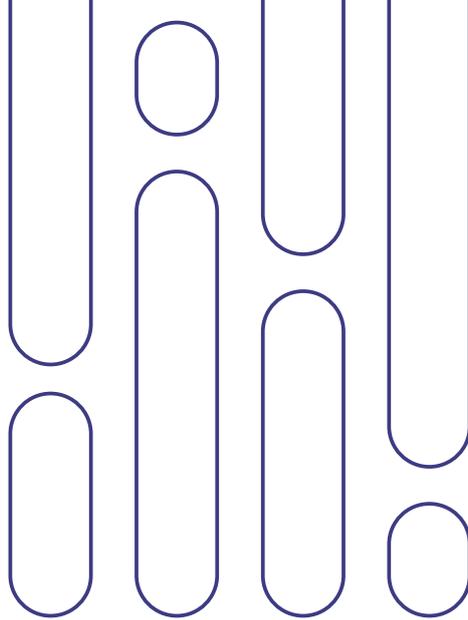
POSITION PAPER

Jordanian-Syrian Border Clashes: Organized Smuggling Networks or a New Proxy War Front?

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Contents

The Dimensions of the Recent Clashes.....	3
Jordan and the Dilemma of a Joint Border With Syria	4
Drugs and Syrian-Iranian Collaboration.....	9
Jordanian-Syrian Border Clashes: A New Front for Militia Warfare Using Drugs as Weapons	12
Conclusion	17

In a gradual but escalating and striking manner, the Jordanian authority recently announced the breakout of regular mutual armed clashes with smugglers who attempt to smuggle drugs into the country from Syria. The most serious clashes on [January 27, 2022](#), prompted Jordan to change its rules of engagement with Syria in order to send a warning message to Damascus. The Jordanian authority has also described the increasing levels of smuggling activities as a significant [security and political threat that targets](#) the country. Smugglers have adopted more sophisticated ways to meet their objectives. Moreover, drug smuggling is backed by armed groups. This threat, therefore, requires in-depth analysis to shed light on the aforementioned illegal activities; the nature of the threat (for example, ascertaining whether it is limited to routine drug smuggling or also includes a hidden agenda); the reasons behind the recent upsurge; and whether the smuggling threat is confined to Jordan or has the potential of spilling over into neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia.

The Dimensions of the Recent Clashes

On January 27, 2022, the Jordanian military said that it had thwarted several suspected attempts to smuggle large quantities of narcotics into Jordan from Syrian territory. The aforementioned attempts were preceded by a series of similar attempts to smuggle drugs from Syria that resulted in intensified armed clashes and casualties on both sides. Amman noted that the increase in drug smuggling attempts amid strict security measures reflected a signifi-

cant organizational ability that excludes the possibility that these attempts were planned by individual smugglers. The frequency of the armed clashes and the ensuing tensions forced Jordan to [change](#) its rules of engagement with Syria and to pursue those involved in drug smuggling activities into Syrian territories and to target them through preemptive strikes. The new Jordanian approach was embraced in light of new realities on the ground. Facing the threat of [armed](#) groups rather than non-violent cross-border smuggling attempts, Jordan has allocated significant resources to its military and intelligence services in order to tackle this threat. Jordan has avoided to clearly reference the source of the threats faced along the borders with Syria. However, several analytical and press reports noted that [Jordanian officials](#) accused the Syrian government of cooperating with Iran-backed militias including Hezbollah to smuggle drugs into Jordan. In any case, the nature of the recent armed clashes in addition to the frequent occurrence of similar incidents reflect the seriousness of the threat and the path it will take in the future. The visit of the [Jordanian King](#) Abdullah II to the northern Jordanian borders indicated the significance of the matter to the country.

Jordan and the Dilemma of a Joint Border With Syria

Several statements issued by Jordan's security officials and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with the prompt military response on January 27 that took place along the line of contact with Syria, reflected the growing Jordanian concerns about the threat escalating. These concerns can

be attributed to the following reasons:

The Increase and Diversification of Tactics Employed by Drugs and Weapons Smugglers

Jordan has recently faced frequent attempts to traffic drugs and weapons in different quantities. Situated geographically in the south of Syria – an area plagued by weak security – Jordan has seen an increasing wave of illicit drug trafficking. In 2021, the Jordanian government announced that the quantities of seized smuggled drugs had doubled since the previous year. According to some [statistics](#), Jordan foiled attempts to smuggle more than 16 million Captagon pills in 2022, compared to 15.5 million pills during the past year and 1.4 million pills in 2020. During the past two years, smugglers [attempted](#) to bring 167 weapons into Jordan. In 2020, 340 types of ammunition were seized, rising to 3,236 in 2021.

Moreover, the recent smuggling activities have been somewhat remarkable in terms of their expansion. The Jordanian government announced the presence of about 160 networks operating within Syria. These smuggling networks are supported by armed groups that accompany smugglers in the field with highly-equipped armed vehicles and advanced technologies including drones, which until early 2022 were only used for reconnaissance activities.

Iran-affiliated Militias Targeting Jordan's Border Security and Internal Stability

Southern Syria has always been characterized by secu-

rity weaknesses and border tensions, forcing the Jordanian government to be continuously in a state of permanent alertness. This 375 kilometer border area with Syria is constantly monitored as Jordanian concerns and fears have risen in light of the [recent](#) alarming developments in Syria, particularly the 2021 Daraa offensive. Additionally, the energy supply project from Jordan to Lebanon through Syrian territories has turned the border area into a theatre for a hidden struggle for further control and influence in southern Syria among many parties.

The primary security concern for Jordan is Iran's positioning near its northern border and the strain of the refugee influx on the joint border. This displacement means that southern Syria is experiencing a demographic change, which will reshape the Syrian-Jordanian border equation in the future. In fact, the continuous increase in the smuggling of weapons and drugs, in addition to the growing use of drones capable of penetrating Jordanian airspace are some of the most prominent repercussions of Iran's positioning near Jordan's northern border.

These fears and concerns were explicitly reflected in the statement of the Jordanian king when he noted that [Iranian-made](#) drones had targeted his country and there were regional concerns over Iran's activities on the Syrian-Jordanian border. Jordanian concerns were also further deepened after [news](#) broke out about cooperation between Syrian and Iranian military formations with the smuggling networks to support smuggling activities along the Jorda-

nian-Syrian border.

Based on these fears and concerns, Jordan undertook active political and diplomatic moves in 2021, most notably King Abdullah II's visit to Washington on July 20 and to Moscow on August 23. These moves reflect Amman's desire to play a new role in the Syrian file which was also evident in its security and political roadmap proposal for a settlement in southern Syria. In addition, Jordan has undertaken other steps including enhancing mutual contact and visits to Syria. The aim was to control the joint border and enhance bilateral security and political cooperation, as well as to reopen the joint border crossings to improve economic and social cooperation between both sides.

Despite the warm relations between Amman and Damascus during recent months, the most prominent thorny issue between the two countries – significantly smuggling and infiltration attempts from Syrian territory into Jordanian territories– remains unaddressed. This issue seems to be worsening in light of Iran's tendency to flood the whole region with drugs. The recent [winter](#) clashes in Jordan aim to deplete the country's border forces so that they do not have the capability to combat daily smuggling attempts, with their dimensions exceeding the routine attempts witnessed in the past. Rather, repetitive smuggling attempts have resulted in the creation of pockets of security loopholes on the Jordanian border. Recently, there has been talk of the Jordanian government's desire to secure a buffer zone on its northern and northeastern border with Syria

to protect its security in light of the aforementioned smuggling attempts. This requires strengthening Jordanian military capabilities and enhancing its border security systems. Recently, the US State Department approved a military [sale](#) to Jordan, including \$4.2 billion worth of 12 F-16 C/D fighter jets, enabling Amman to improve its capacity to tackle current and future challenges.

The Possibility of Threats From Terrorist Groups Returning

The tense events in southern Syria and the tensions accompanying the recent ISIS attack in the Syrian city of Hasakah may revive fears in the collective memory of Jordanians of the significant security threat posed to their country by armed groups. These groups may strengthen their capabilities or create sub-groups, an example of which is the Guardians of Religion Organization in Syria. Although this group is stationed in areas geographically far from the Jordanian border, it serves as a red flag for the countries neighboring Syria. Experience has proven that these groups are able to smoothly move from local to regional arenas in accordance with certain motives that are subject to multiple regional or international considerations. This is an additional indication of the ongoing security threat related to cross-border terrorism and the potential strategic challenge it poses to Jordan. Amman's recent [active](#) political moves, in light of the attacks launched by the Houthi militia against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, indicate more

than just a diplomatic posture of solidarity. Amman is interested in taking further moves at the regional level in regard to combating cross-border security threats, especially confronting Iran and its proxies in the region. This desire results from the fact that Jordan has been impacted in one way or another by the aforementioned growing threats.

Drugs and Syrian-Iranian Collaboration

The Rise of the Syrian Drug State

The Syrian conflict's dynamics have fueled the illegal activities of the war economy in Syria — most notably the expansion of drug smuggling and its implications on neighboring countries. In the past decade, Syria, through Iranian collaboration with the Syrian government, has become a hub for producing drugs and a platform for their exportation. This was reported by global magazines and newspapers such as [The Economist](#) and [The New York Times](#) as well as various think tanks such as the [Center for Operational Analysis and Research](#), [Alma Research and Education Center](#) and the [Jusoor Center for Studies and Development](#). Several aides of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are in charge of this illicit operation, especially the 4th Armored Division, led by Maher al-Assad, and it is in charge of manufacturing and exporting Captagon pills. Moreover, this operation is spearheaded by businessmen who have close ties with Hezbollah. The 4th Division's security office protects factories and facilitates the flow of raw materials to Syrian borders and ports in collaboration with Iran's

proxy militias at several Syrian border crossings. The drug trade in Syria has gained momentum over the past years, mainly because of regional shifts inside and outside Syria, which have impacted the situation on the border.

Iranian Proxy Groups and Their Control Over Civilian and Military Installations in Southern Syria

Southern Syria is considered a strategic region for both the Iranian and Syrian leadership in general. Since 2011, Iran started to establish its military and civilian presence in the region as part of its expansionist plan and objectives. The plan included the operation of several drug factories that ceased activities due to the Syrian crisis. In addition, Iran took advantage of its military and security presence to protect its production facilities, and support smuggling attempts as well as to provide access to Lebanese and Syrian ports. The [map](#) featuring Iran's presence in southern Syria points to a huge spike in the number of military checkpoints controlled by its proxy groups in southern Syria from 40 outposts in August 2018 to 88 outposts in August 2021. Tehran now possesses nearly [36](#) local militias in southern Syria scattered through the three southern provinces: Quneitra (six militias), Deraa (28 militias) and As Suwayda (two militias).

Economic Motives and Multiple Political Agendas

To escape the choking economic crises resulting from the sanctions imposed on both Iran and Syria, the two sides resorted to illegally producing and exporting drugs to neigh-

boring countries. The Assad government seeks to create a financial artery to fill its empty treasuries, especially as the drug trade can generate massive amounts of revenues. A single drug shipment is estimated to be worth millions of dollars. Tehran also seeks, in light of the sanctions it is facing, to create an essential source to finance its activities and militias deployed throughout the region through carrying out all sorts of illicit trade — from the smuggling of oil and weapons to drug dealing. In addition, Iran has taken advantage of the security chaos and the borderless areas where its proxies exist. Tallies suggest that the overall portion of Syria's shadow economy in 2010 accounted for 20 percent of GDP. In 2020, the portion was said to be 200 percent of the official Syrian economy. Other estimates suggest that Syria's Captagon [exports](#) reached \$3.46 billion in 2020. Such figures undoubtedly show that the drug trade in Syria is a parallel economic activity, the revenues of which match regular economic activities. Besides the economic dimensions, drug dealing also enables those involved in it to make political gains through using it as a lever and allowing them to totally control the border through anonymous smuggling groups. Despite the announced talks between Jordan and Syria in regard to monitoring the joint border and thwarting groups engaged in smuggling operations, there has been a steady increase in violent clashes and the seizure of narcotics along the Syrian-Jordanian border. This is an indication of the poor Syrian government control over smugglers or perhaps a

deliberate attempt by it to establish its own clout in view of future talks with the Jordanians in order to push forward strategic gains for itself and Tehran as both sides seek to move from regional marginalization to partnership and cooperation. Today, drugs are considered to be an important pillar of Iran's "resistance axis," as drug production and trafficking have been a tool to impose pressure and influence in the region and to undermine the security of Arab countries.

Jordanian-Syrian Border Clashes: A New Front for Militia Warfare Using Drugs as Weapons

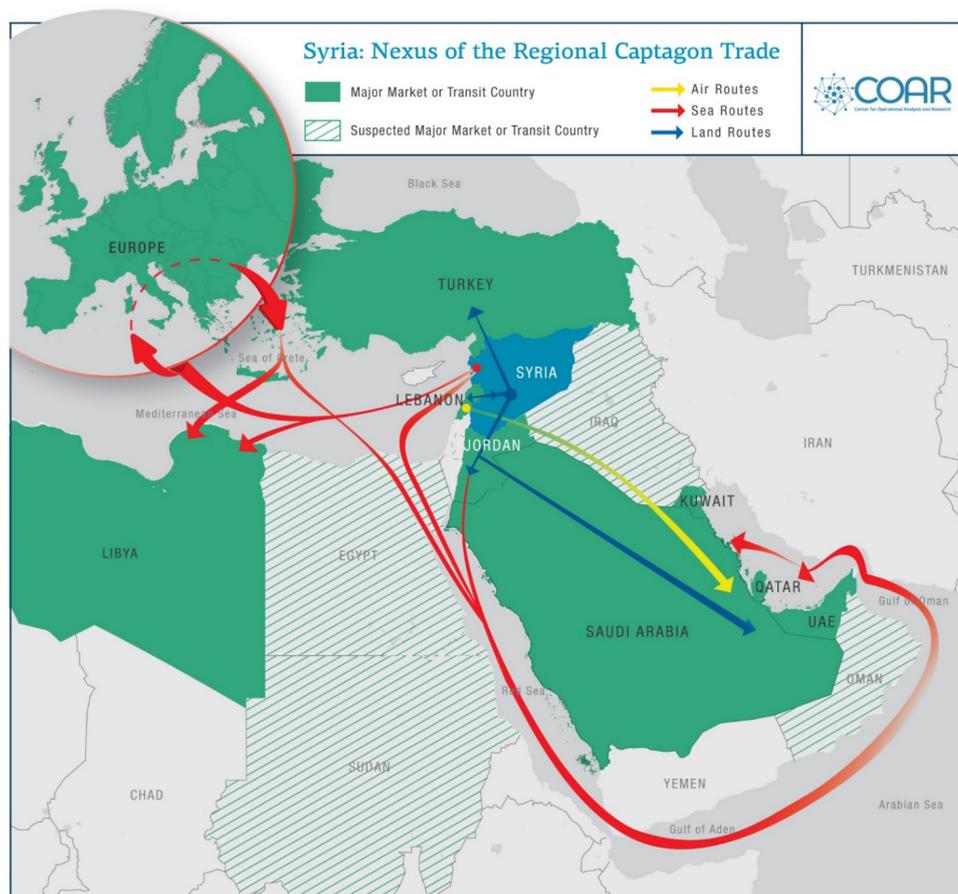
The border area between Jordan and Syria is home to the regional entanglements given the [central](#) and pivotal location of Jordan in the region geographically and politically. Jordan's common borders with the region's countries are 1,393 kilometers long (744 kilometers with Saudi Arabia, 375 kilometers with Syria, 181 kilometers with Iraq, 26 kilometers of maritime borders with several countries in the region). Hence, any potential security, political or social imbalance on the Jordanian borders will have consequences and bring about threats that go far beyond this tiny geographic area.

Undermining Regional Stability and Security

In recent years, there have been growing drug seizures in parallel with a massive uptick in smuggling operations into several regional countries. The networks target several Arab and Gulf states as they are the main destina-

tions for smuggling Captagon pills, whether through directly shipping them from Syria and Lebanon, the original countries where the pills are made, or sending them to other countries in Europe and Africa. These countries act as transit routes for smuggled drugs heading essentially to several Middle East and North Africa markets. This is backed up by confirmations from the Jordanian Interior Ministry that 85 percent of the seized drugs are prepared to be smuggled outside Jordan.

Map 1: The Main Destinations for Syrian Drug Exports



Source: “The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State,” Center for Operational Analysis and Research (COAR), April 27, 2021, accessed February 27, 2022 <https://bit.ly/3JKuuR4>.

Drug dealing is a source of dispute between Iran and its proxies on the one hand and some Arab countries on the

other. Official statements from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states point to a spike in the seizure of drugs smuggled through the use of several methods. There is a systematic targeting by Iran's allies in the region of Arab countries to dump drugs in their [societies](#). This comes despite the intensification of seizures and the implementation of several restrictions and measures. Both moves have failed to prevent drug smuggling. Several Arab countries share similar concerns about the possibility of being pushed towards combating Captagon and drug shipments in the same way they have been pushed to fend off Iranian drones and ballistic missiles fired by Tehran's militia groups in the region. In this context, we can explain the [meetings](#) between security and intelligence officials from the Gulf states and Syria over the past few months, including the meeting of the Syrian president's adviser for security affairs Ali Mamluk with the UAE chairman of the Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Ports Security late last year. In addition to being a corridor for smuggling drugs, countries like Jordan and Iraq have become consumer markets for them. Drugs have turned into a social threat, setting off the alarm bell for the whole region. Iranian proxy groups, through drug dealing, managed to win the loyalty of a considerable number of young people in societies where they actively operate. This openness makes it extremely difficult to counter the scourge of drug trafficking, posing a genuine challenge and a grave danger in the future as drug dealing, and smuggling contribute to

fomenting social chaos in those counties ravaged by conflicts and political and security turmoil.

The aforementioned pose a threat to several upcoming regional cooperation projects — especially when it comes to the future of providing Lebanon with gas and electricity from Jordan and Syria and its linkage to the New Levant Project. These projects aim to reshape the intra-Arab bonds of cooperation and the joint action marks the start of a new era designed to defy the state of regional instability as reflected in the ongoing dispute in Syria and Arab concerns about expanding Iranian clout. Therefore, it is not ruled out that the uptick in threats to the Jordanian border with Syria and the related suspicious activities can be construed as attempts to hinder this new era of Arab cooperation and regional joint action. Along with undermining regional cooperation, such threats also dent relations between Syria and Lebanon with their neighbors. Lebanon is now considered an incubator for making and dealing in drugs. Lebanon's involvement in Captagon smuggling throughout the region prompted several Gulf states to ban commercial and economic dealings with Beirut, which pushed its battered economy to the brink of disaster, throwing the domestic situation further into political and social chaos.

Common Global Crisis

In addition to being one of the key factors undermining regional stability – a central aim of Iran's strategy – drug dealing impacts global peace and security. [In recent years,](#)

authorities in Greece, Italy, Egypt, and other countries confiscated more than 250 million Captagon pills throughout the world in 2021, eighteen-fold the amount seized over the past years alone. Most of the seized quantities came from a port on the Syrian coast, with their value exceeding billions of dollars. This value reveals the enormity of the danger [threatening](#) global and regional peace and security.

Inadequate Strategies to Combat Drug Smuggling and the Lack of Tangible Solutions

Global indicators suggest a steady surge in the smuggling of drugs and new methods of smuggling despite the blanket bans to curb this illicit activity. The bans imposed by countries have not reduced the dangers posed by increased levels of drug smuggling. This suggests that there is a flaw in the regional and international handling of this drug threat and the lack of any clear and watertight global strategy to counter the growing drug threat coming from Syria since 2018. In October 2021, a number of US lawmakers introduced a [bill](#) that called upon the US administration to develop a strategy to disrupt and dismantle the production and smuggling of drugs in Syria and prevent the Assad regime from pushing these activities forward, which have provided an artery for the affiliated groups and networks related to this trade. The lawmakers said drugs and their networks have become a threat more than ever before to US interests in the region. For this bill to turn into an enforceable law, it needs approval from the US Senate.

In light of the US administration's desire to sign a nuclear deal with Iran and stave off any hindrances or impediments that could obstruct the conclusion of the deal, it is possible that it would turn a [blind eye](#) to this new regional crisis — analogous to past experiences. This could delay or obstruct the actual enactment of the aforesaid law.

Conclusion

The recent developments on the northern and eastern borders of Jordan have brought to light the re-emergence of crises on some border areas where there is security contagion. The drugs crisis is still present and could escalate further in the future. This crisis also sheds light on the new reality that is taking shape. Both figures and realities suggest that the drug trade in the region is no longer the mission of seasoned smugglers. Rather, it has become a proxy warfare bringing together the trilogy of drugs, militias, and drones. The objective could be to generate massive profits. However, the chief objective is the attrition of the borders of some Arab countries and destroying their human capital through drug smuggling, dealing, and militias. Therefore, and in the context of the security situation in light of this drug escalation, there is an urgent need to step up coordination between the region's countries — especially on the northern border of Saudi Arabia. This necessitates enhancing joint Arab and international security cooperation in a way that curbs the mounting dangers facing these countries.

