

POLICY BRIEF

Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan: The Evolution and Delegation of a Practice

Abstract

In 2018, the Syrian regime expanded its control in the country's western and southern regions. This shift in territorial control, however, did not lead to an interruption of illicit activities. The regime has fostered the creation of a favourable environment for smuggling networks to continue functioning, exploiting the post-war fragile environment in Syria and economic decay in Lebanon and Jordan. Based on rare access to state-affiliated and non-state actors involved in smuggling activities in Syria, all of which took place between December 2021 and April 2022, this paper investigates the dynamics and actors involved in smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan.

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Introduction

Smuggling has existed as a profitable practice in Syria since the creation of the state. The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has come to define new patterns of smuggling activity across the entire country.¹ In 2018, the conflict reached an inflection point. Backed by its Russian and Iranian allies, the regime turned the tide in the war and recaptured vast swathes of territory in Syria's western and southern regions. This shift in territorial control, however, did not lead to an interruption of illicit activities. Instead, the Syrian regime has fostered the creation of a favourable environment for smuggling networks to continue functioning, exploiting the post-war fragile environment in Syria and economic decay in neighbouring countries to continue bidirectional trafficking activities with Lebanon and unidirectional ones into Jordan. Since 2018, the Syrian regime has found in the trafficking of licit and illicit goods, and also people smuggling, a revenue stream to secure weapons, recruit and pay fighters, consolidate supporting networks and accumulate wealth.

Drawing on rare access to state-affiliated and non-state actors involved in smuggling activities in Syria, all of which took place between December 2021 and April 2022, this paper investigates the patterns of smuggling and the actors involved since the beginning of 2019 between Syria and Lebanon, and from Syria to Jordan in terms of three main factors: first, the different situations on the borders between Syria and its two neighbouring countries (e.g. porous or secured); second, the level of Syrian regime security control in the border regions (e.g. high or limited); and third, the responses of state

and non-state actors in Lebanon and Jordan to smuggling operations (e.g. active cooperation or violent confrontation).

1. Bidirectional Smuggling between Syria and Lebanon

Owing to the loosely controlled and porous border between Syria and Lebanon, smuggling between the two countries occurs across 120-150 illegal crossing points on the 394 km border.² In Syria, inward and outward smuggling operations pass through regions where the regime exercises a high degree of security control. This is mainly in the southern countryside around Homs, western Qalamoun and in Rural Damascus, where the Syrian army's Fourth Division led by Maher al-Assad is strongly present and is directly involved in trafficking activity. These areas serve as hubs for smuggling products which are then distributed throughout the regime-held areas.³ In the region of Baalbek-Hermel in Lebanon, Hezbollah and to a lesser extent its ally the Amal Movement have exploited the state's tenuous control and its inability to enforce border control to enable and take part in smuggling activity.⁴ The Wadi Khaled region is also renowned for smuggling to Syria, with various local actors involved including large families, tribes and traders who have been operating in collaboration with the Syrian intelligence services for decades (Map 1).⁵

Since 2019, the Lebanese economic crisis and the subsequent multiple foreign exchange rates have resulted in a significant increase in smuggling from Lebanon to Syria, especially of fuel oil. The price of fuel oil has become much cheaper in Lebanon than in Syria.⁶

1 In this paper, 'smuggling' is defined broadly as the illegal movement of goods and persons across national borders.

2 The porous state of the Syrian-Lebanese border dates back to the pre-war era. In 2008, an independent UN assessment team reported that the border was "penetrable" and that the smuggling of arms and other products across the border between the two countries remained more or less unabated. Royce Hutson and Taylor Long, 'Features of Smuggling in Wadi Khaled, Lebanon,' *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11:4, (2011), p. 386-413.

3 Skype interview with a person involved in the oil smuggling business in the Qalamoun area, April 2022.

4 In April 2021, a Hezbollah official stated that smuggling from Lebanon to Syria "is part of the resistance's action as it helps the Syrian regime to face the economic war that targets it." France 24, 'Lebanese Pro-Hizbullah Academic Sheikh Sadek Al-Naboulsi: Smuggling Across Lebanon-Syria Border – A Legitimate Act of Resistance,' *MEMRI TV*, 16 April 2021, <https://bit.ly/3DGFxsr>

5 For decades the local population in Wadi Khaled has also been depending on illegal cross-border traffic to meet basic needs, including the purchase of foodstuffs, building materials, medicine and fuel.

6 In 2020, a litre of fuel oil was sold at less than USD 0.2 in Lebanon (according to the value of the LBP at the black-market exchange rate in this period) and between USD 1.2 and 2 (equivalent to SYP 3,000 and 5,000 according to the official exchange rate of 2,512 SYP/USD) on the black market in Syria. Purchases of smuggled fuel oil from Lebanon are made in USD (or in LBP at the black-market exchange rate value) by Syrian smugglers.

Map 1: The Syria-Lebanon Borderline



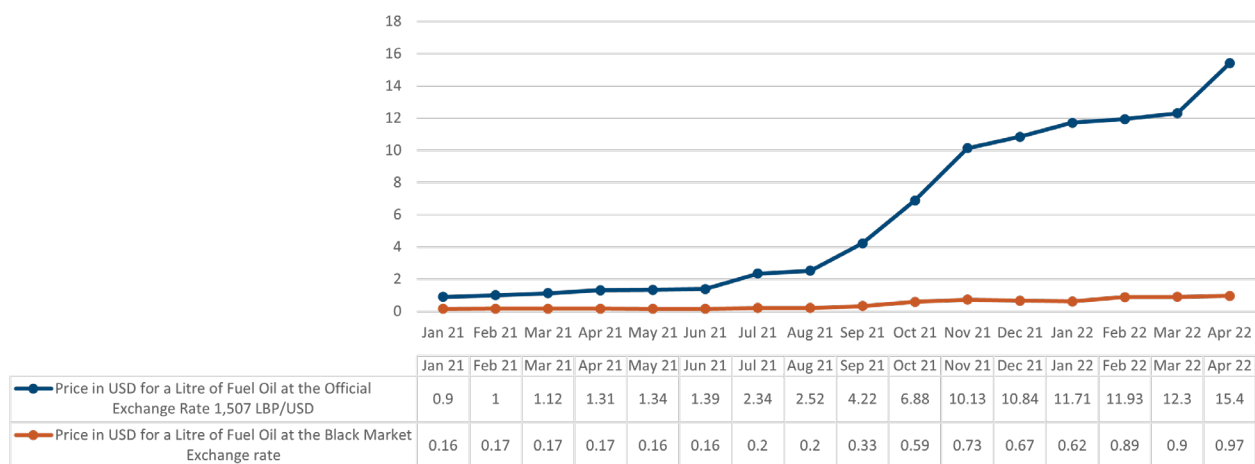
Source: The authors

This is because fuel importers were able to trade their Lebanese pounds (LBP) for USD at the Banque du Liban at a preferential rate (between October 2019 and October 2021). Meanwhile, in Syria government cuts to oil subsidies have led to the price increase, while the country suffers from frequent shortages of oil derivatives. This situation created an opportunity for smugglers on both sides of the border to accumulate a large amount of wealth. Lebanese (formal) gasoline imports increased by 13% in one year, from 2,472 million litres in 2019 to 2,798 million litres in 2020, a large proportion of which was smuggled to Syria.⁷ According to a respondent involved in the oil smuggling business, in 2020 and until summer 2021 “More than 100 tankers⁸ entered Syria on a daily basis, mostly through the illegal passages close to Qusayr and Western Qalamoun.”⁹ In December 2021, a member of the Lebanese Syndicate of Petrol Station Owners estimated that up to a billion litres of fuel were smuggled into Syria during the year. The revenue from this illegal trade was estimated at USD 235 million.¹⁰ However, oil smuggling from Lebanon to Syria has declined since the end of the fuel oil subsidies in Lebanon in October

2021, which made its price significantly higher (Table 1) and therefore significantly decreased the smugglers’ profit margins. This was also reflected in the official volume of oil imported to Lebanon in 2021, which underwent a reduction of 17% in comparison to the previous year.¹¹

In coordination with the Fourth Division, Hezbollah has been dominating the fuel smuggling market from Lebanon to Syria, allowing both to accumulate a large amount of capital. The multiple illegal border crossings in Baalbek-Hermel are controlled by Hezbollah, which allows fuel oil to be transferred to warehouses on the other side of the border controlled directly by the Fourth Division or by businessmen connected with it. Networks and businessmen not directly connected with the Fourth Division can also use these illegal crossing points to smuggle fuel oil to Syria by paying a fee estimated at around 500 to 600 SYP (equivalent to USD 0.2 to 0.24 at the official exchange rate of 2,512 SYP/USD) a litre to the Fourth Division, which controls them.¹³ In northern Lebanon, politicians and businessmen from Akkar have also been involved in smuggling fuel, although not at similar levels to Hezbollah.

Table 1: Prices of Fuel Oil in Lebanon



Source: The authors, based on a compilation of aggregates from the Lira Rate website¹²

7 Al-Akhbar, ‘Who Gave the Governor \$ 3.6 billion?’ (in Arabic), 24 May 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nMzkVp>

8 The majority of these tankers are 8-wheel trucks which have a volume capacity of between 20,000 and 25,000 litres. This represents between 2,000,000 and 2,500,000 litres of fuel oil smuggled on a daily basis.

9 Skype interview with a person involved in the oil smuggling business based in Rural Damascus, March 2022.

10 Ahmad Abid, Alia Ibrahim and Mohammad Bsiki, ‘Smuggling from Lebanon to Syria: What, Why, Where To?’ *Daraj*, 2 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/339yeMb>

11 Fouad Gemayel, (2022), ‘Lebanese Imports Increase by More than 20% in 2021 Despite the Crisis,’ *Orient le Jour*, <https://bit.ly/3xea0gq>

12 Lira Rate, <https://bit.ly/3u4V6XI>, consulted 3 April 2022.

13 Skype interview with a person involved in the oil smuggling business in Rural Damascus, March 2022.

The August 2021 explosion in the village of Tleil in Akkar which killed about thirty people demonstrated the involvement of three MPs from the region, who were accused by the local population of being accomplices in smuggling activities, or even masterminds.¹⁴

Flour and wheat have also been among the main products smuggled from Lebanon to Syria. This is mainly because their prices in Lebanon are cheaper than in Syria, which has a massive lack of these products. In mid-2020, the cost of a metric ton of flour reached USD 320 in Syria, while the subsidised price in Lebanon was only USD 150 (at the official exchange rate of 1,507 LBP/USD).¹⁵ The eruption of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 might, however, complicate the flow of smuggled flour to Syria, as Lebanon on average imported around 95% of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine from 2012 until the cessation of these imports due to the war.¹⁶ Furthermore, since the implementation of a Saudi embargo on Lebanese products in April 2021, some Lebanese farmers have increasingly resorted to smuggling their products into Syria. They are then resold by Syrian traders to Saudi Arabia.¹⁷ Other items smuggled to Syria are the remaining medicines still subsidised by the Lebanese government.

On the other hand, smuggling operations from Syria to Lebanon deal in both licit and illicit goods. The licit products smuggled from Syria to Lebanon include subsidised foodstuffs (e.g. poultry, meat, milk and other agricultural commodities), household appliances and

cleaning products. The relatively low prices of these products in Syria and the heavy decrease in the purchasing power of large sectors of the Lebanese population have encouraged this trend. Regarding illicit goods, trafficking of Captagon has increased significantly.¹⁸ Most of this Captagon is produced in Syria and only a small amount in Lebanon, which mostly operates as a transit country.¹⁹ Some of the Captagon produced in Syria is therefore transported to Lebanon and the narcotic pills are then smuggled by land, sea and air to the Gulf monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and also to neighbouring Jordan. Between 2016 and 2022, the Saudi authorities foiled attempts to smuggle more than 600 million amphetamine pills from Lebanon, according to Major Mohammed al-Nujaidi, spokesman for Saudi Arabia's General Directorate of Narcotics Control.²⁰ Much of the Captagon production and distribution is controlled by the Fourth Division and affiliated Syrian businessmen who emerged during the war, including Amer Kheiti and Khodr Ali Taher, alongside other actors such as Hezbollah and businessmen connected with it. Narco-trafficking has been developing massively in the past few years as sanctions against the Syrian regime and Hezbollah and their political isolation on the regional and international scenes have increased their needs for new sources of revenue.²¹

In the past few years, the Lebanese government has announced its willingness to intensify the fight against smuggling activities between Lebanon

14 These MPs are Tarek al-Merhebi and Walid Baarini from Saad Hariri's Future Movement and Assaad Dergham from the Free Patriotic Movement affiliated with President Aoun.

15 Imported and domestic wheat is also milled into flour locally in Lebanon's dozen mills. 50,000 metric tons of wheat is enough to produce just under 40,000 tons of flour. The volume of wheat imported rose from 600,000 tons in 2020 to 630,000 in 2021, a 5% increase. Richard Salamé, 'The Last Subsidy Standing: Lebanon's Wheat Subsidy is Still in Place, but is it Working?' *L'Orient Today*, 19 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3rGj1KE>

16 Julien Ricour Brasseur, 'Wheat Imports to Lebanon: An Update on the Impact of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict,' (in French), *Orient le Jour*, <https://bit.ly/3N4IWpg>

17 Abby Sewell, 'Debts and Stocks Pile Up as Saudi Produce Ban Strangles Lebanon's Gulf Exports,' *L'Orient Today*, 14 September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3Fzn3tu>

18 In the 2000s the manufacturing of Captagon progressively shifted from south-eastern Europe and Turkey to Syria. Seizures of Captagon in Syria doubled between 2007 and 2009 to 22 million tablets, while a Captagon lab was discovered in the country in 2006. The rise was driven by a massive development of the demand for drugs in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies. See Matt Herbert, 'Partisans, Profiteers, and Criminals: Syria's Illicit Economy,' *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 2014, Vol. 38, no. 1: 73-74.

19 Captagon pills are manufactured in factories mostly in the western Qalamoun region, western Rural Damascus and in the countryside around Homs and Latakia.

20 In April 2021, Saudi authorities seized more than 5 million Captagon pills in a shipment of pomegranates coming from Lebanon. *France 24*, 'Saudi Arabia Says Cracking Down on Illegal Captagon Drug,' 2 March 2022 <https://bit.ly/364EjdS>

21 Captagon has most probably become Syria's most important source of foreign currency.

and Syria, which is one of the conditions imposed on Beirut by the International Monetary Fund for it to receive financial assistance. However, major obstacles need to be considered before there can be an actual change in the current border dynamics. The first one is Hezbollah's need, both military and economic, to use the border without any form of restrictions, especially given its military involvement and presence in Syria. Moreover, other actors covered by various Lebanese political parties and involved in smuggling with Syria have no interest in stopping the business. Finally, the socio-economic crisis in Lebanon, which saw the rate of poverty rise from 25% in 2019 to 74% in 2022, is an additional driver of smuggling and illicit activities. The border areas of Akkar, Baalbeck-Hermel and Bekaa are particularly affected by the socio-economic crisis. These governorates have the highest poverty rates, all above 90%,²² and the highest unemployment rates, 35%, 49% and 46% respectively.²³ Owners of petrol stations and private generators in these areas have, for instance, been involved in the smuggling of fuel across the Syrian border, as it has brought them significant profits.²⁴ Some people have worked for particular smuggling networks as truck drivers transporting fuel oil into Syria. Smuggling activities are therefore often a way for the local populations in these border areas, who have long been neglected by the state, to alleviate their worsening living conditions both by purchasing cheaper smuggled goods or getting involved in these networks.

2. Unidirectional Smuggling from Syria to Jordan

Smuggling from Syria into Jordan takes place on the shared border stretching 362 km. Different factors define the direction of smuggling, the types of goods and the actors involved. Unlike smuggling between Syria and Lebanon, unidirectionality and major investments in illegal drugs are the two main defining characteristics of smuggling from Syria to Jordan. This is for two main interrelated reasons. First, smuggling licit goods from Jordan to Syria is generally not a profitable business. Jordan is not a hub of agricultural production or manufacturing, and Jordanian goods are generally too expensive for the vast majority of Syrians.²⁵ Jordan is therefore mostly a transit country for imports of foreign products to Syria. This is illustrated by official statistics on legal trade from Jordan to Syria, which registered USD 98 and USD 69 million in 2019 and 2020 respectively.²⁶ Second, for smugglers seeking to maximise their profits, Jordan is a mere transit country for illicit drugs in the direction of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies. The fact that a Captagon pill costs on average less than USD 1 in Syria but more than USD 20 in some Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) makes illicit drug trafficking through Jordan a very profitable business.²⁷

On the ground, smuggling operations from Syria to Jordan are launched using various and rapidly changing routes from Sweida and Daraa governorates, where the regime has only tenuous control and where lawlessness, chaos, and rampant criminal and political violence have all taken root. In Daraa governorate, the Russian-orchestrated model of regime return in 2018 has led to security and territorial fragmentation, and in Sweida governorate, local armed groups and

22 UN-ESCWA, 'Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon (2019-2021), 'Painful Reality and Uncertain Prospects,' September 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nAPukE>

23 Inter-Agency Coordination in Lebanon, UNHCR, World Food Programme, UNICEF 'Livelihoods and Income,' 2021, <https://bit.ly/3K7uAm5>. A report published in January 2022 found that more than half the Lebanese families surveyed in Akkar and Baalbek-Hermel governorates were struggling to support their children as living conditions continued to deteriorate. Save The Children, 'Rising Numbers of Lebanese Families Unable to afford Food, Education for Their Children' 26 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3K3qlTj>

24 Charbel Khoury, 'Lebanon: Akkar Explosion Highlights Fuel Smuggling,' *Daraj*, 15 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3twb8tR>

25 Jordan has one of the highest food basket costs in USD in the Middle East, alongside Turkey. World Food Programme, 'Regional Market Analysis, Economic Trends across RBC Region H2 2021 Update' 10 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3KkkmPi>

26 UN Comtrade, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3jkjFtr>

27 Skype interview with a local activist from Daraa, March 2022.

criminal gangs continue to contest the regime's authority. Far from being porous, the Syrian-Jordan border is better demarcated and more effectively secured by the Jordanian authorities than the Lebanese one.²⁸ While Syrian border posts exist, their equipment and logistics are largely ineffective, and therefore they opt to rely on their Jordanian counterparts to confront organised well-armed drug trafficking smugglers.

In southern Syria, the Fourth Division and Hezbollah limit their illicit activities to supply chain dynamics and rely on local collaborators, whose duty is to execute smuggling operations into Jordan. Striving to secure much-needed revenue streams, delegating smuggling activities to local actors serves two main objectives. First, relying on local agents is one way to operate in hostile communities. Because Hezbollah and the Fourth Division's collaborators are often locals who hail from clan- and family-based communities in Daraa and Sweida governorates, they are well able to operate freely and hide their illegal activities. Even if local agents are singled out, they are the ones to be punished. In Daraa governorate, for instance, many individuals identified as collaborators and drug dealers who ignored appeals to terminate their illegal activities have been selectively assassinated or wounded in the place of Hezbollah members. Second, local agents give the Syrian regime the benefit of plausible deniability, especially vis-à-vis the Jordanian authorities. What seems to complement this strategy is the regime's frequent reports of having thwarted smuggling operations from Syria to Jordan.²⁹ According to a former rebel leader from Daraa, this approach, "is a silly play to show Jordan that Syria suffers from a proliferation of drugs and smuggling

activities too."³⁰ Indeed, even when the Kingdom has bluntly confirmed the involvement of state-affiliated actors in smuggling activities, it has been Syrian police stations that were accused of cooperating with smugglers³¹ but not the principal actors.

Economic and protection incentives offered by the Fourth Division and Hezbollah serve to attract and embed several types of local actors in smuggling networks. Bedouin groups in Sweida and rebels turned regime collaborators in Daraa are two main actors involved in the illegal cross-border trade from southern Syria into Jordan. In Sweida governorate, by far the most illegal trafficking is conducted by Bedouin smugglers.³² Bedouins are independent actors renowned for their smuggling experience, knowledge of routes in the remote desert and extreme readiness to engage in combat against border guards in the desert. For Bedouins, a successful smuggling operation requires tactics and planning. In the words of a Bedouin from the al-Lajat area, "Often, Bedouins distract Jordanian border patrols with small shipments of hashish. The aim is to provide bigger shipments of Captagon elsewhere with a smooth passage. Forget about statements made by the Jordanian army on thwarting smuggling activities. I can assure you that the successful trafficking operations by Bedouins in the last three years are countless."³³ Trafficking secures Bedouins a critical profit, especially with the decrease in herding activity. According to a local source monitoring the southern borders, each smuggler receives about USD 5,000 if he succeeds in delivering his cargo of drugs into Jordan.³⁴

28 Jordan's strict control of the border after its re-opening at the end of 2018 has, for instance, reduced petty trade from Syria to Jordan particularly affecting Jordanian border areas such as Irbid, Ramtha and Mafraq, which benefited from both formal and informal economic exchanges between the two countries prior to the war.

29 SANA, 'The Competent Authorities in Daraa Thwart the Smuggling of Large Quantities of Drugs Out of the Country' (in Arabic), 29 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3sPLOGj>; SANA, 'Thwarting the smuggling of quantities of the drug Captagon which were destined for the Jordanian border' (in Arabic), 20 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3tG1F1w>

30 Skype interview with a former rebel leader from Daraa, March 2022.

31 Al-Watan, 'The Jordanian Army Confirms the Cooperation of 'Syrian Outposts' with Smugglers' (in Arabic), 17 February 2022, <https://bit.ly/3pHQ9li>

32 Residing in al-Shaab village near the border, Merie al-Ramthan, a tribal leader renowned for his close ties with Hezbollah, is a prominent example of a Bedouin figure who has organised smuggling groups and has a record of successful drug trafficking operations into Jordan.

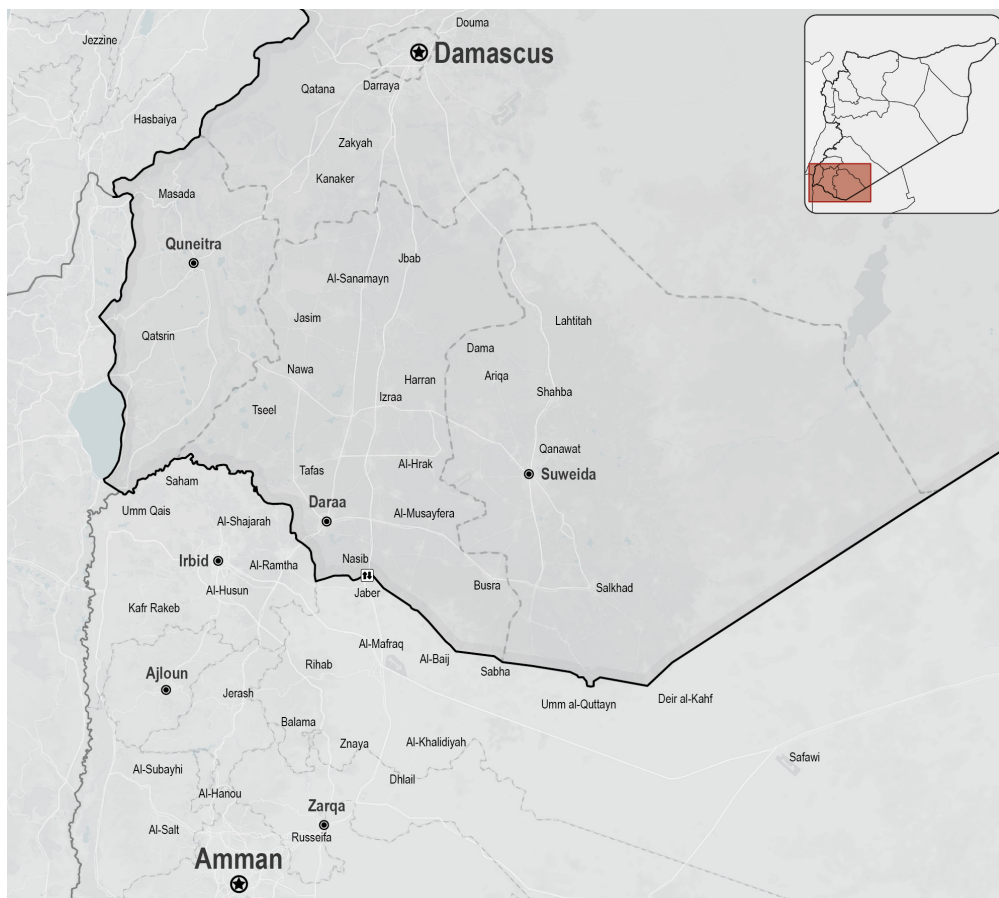
33 Skype interview with a Bedouin from the al-Lajat area, February 2022.

34 Skype interview with a local activist from Sweida, February 2022.

In Daraa, on the other hand, the presence of the Russian-backed Eighth Brigade in the eastern part of the governorate and its operations against organised crime have made trafficking illicit goods concentrate in two main locations. The first is the Nasib-Jabir border crossing, which was officially re-opened in October 2018. Former rebels who embarked on reconciliation processes and joined the regime’s security and military apparatuses are the main actors that facilitate narcotics trafficking at the official crossing. Emad Abu Zureq, a former rebel commander in the dissolved Jaysh al-Thawra rebel organisation, is a prominent example of a reconciled rebel commander who joined the Military Security Branch in Daraa. Leading a group of 60-70 militants, Abu Zureq was granted extensive power by the Military Security Branch to facilitate and assist drug trafficking into Jordan. While the Kingdom has frequently declared it has thwarted smuggling operations through the official border post, “the number of successful drug smuggling

operations planned by Abu Zureq through Nasib are uncountable,” according to a figure close to Abu Zureq.³⁵ Abu Zureq and other Daraa-based former rebel leaders enjoy robust ties with collaborators in Jordan. Collaborators of Syrian and Jordanian nationality are responsible for receiving shipments and delivering them to the Arab Gulf via Saudi Arabia. The second group of locations from which smuggling operations are launched are five assembly points near the border in western Daraa. In localities such as Tal Shihab, al-Zami and Koya, collaborators cross the borders alone or use drones carrying bags of Captagon. According to some accounts, agreements between local smugglers and individual Jordanian border guards concluded through third parties have allowed uninterrupted smuggling into Jordan. According to a former rebel who joined the Military Security Intelligence, “in return for cash payments, individual Jordanian border guards turn a blind eye to drug trafficking operations during previously agreed hours.”³⁶

Map 2: The Syria-Jordan Border



Source: The authors

35 Skype interview with a former rebel from Daraa, February 2022.

36 Skype interview with a former rebel from Tal Shihab, February 2022.

Table 2: Illegal drugs confiscated by Jordanian armed forces in 2021

Drug	Quantity Confiscated
Hashish	16,286 bags (760 kgs)
Drug pills (e.g. Captagon, Tramadol)	15,443,707 pills
Powdered drugs (Crystal meth)	1998 grams
Other types of drugs	10,369 (kgs)

Source: Al-Mamlaka TV³⁷

On balance, violence has been the main response of the Jordanian authorities to deter and curb smuggling activities across its northern borders. In 2020, for example, the Jordanian armed forces declared they had thwarted 361 smuggling and infiltration operations.³⁸ In January 2022, there was a dramatic escalation in violence in northern Jordan when fierce clashes erupted between Jordanian border security forces and about five groups, each composed of ten drug smugglers. On 27 January 2022, the Jordanian military announced that it had thwarted drug trafficking operations near the border with Syria killing 27 smugglers and injuring others.³⁹ Besides eight missing smugglers, local sources in Sweida indicated that the death toll exceeded 40 and that some survivors managed to drag some of the dead bodies back into Syrian territory.⁴⁰ This large number is significant given that only seven smugglers were killed on the Jordanian border in 2021. “Such incidents will not deter smuggling into Jordan. Bedouins do not surrender. On the contrary, such clashes will encourage the smugglers to be better organised, be better equipped and increase their readiness to engage in combat with border guards. If Jordanian officers saw the weapons that Bedouin smugglers obtained in the incident [January 2022] they would quickly realise that the worst is yet to come.”⁴¹

Conclusion

New smuggling activity dynamics have increasingly appeared in the past few years, especially since the beginning of 2019. Most prominent among them in terms of profit have been smuggling fuel oil from Lebanon to Syria between October 2019 and October 2021, and illegal products such as Captagon to both Lebanon and Jordan. The Fourth Division and its affiliated businessmen together with Hezbollah have dominated smuggling operations to and from Jordan and Lebanon, although with different types of domination. Both actors have direct control over illegal crossing points on the Syrian-Lebanese border allowing them to manage the flow of goods, while they depend on local actors on the Syrian-Jordanian border for their smuggling activities. The expanding involvement of the Fourth Division and Hezbollah in smuggling operations has first served to increase new forms of capital accumulation in a war-torn situation, destruction of national production and the context of economic crisis (in both Lebanon and Syria), while, second, seeking to establish and develop new networks of influence in collaboration with particular local actors.

To counter the rise of activities smuggling both licit and illicit goods, the most prevailing policy to fight these dynamics of the Lebanese and Jordanian authorities and international actors such as the IMF and states has been to call for more security measures and to reinforce border security. This is essentially a recipe for failure if not accompanied by policies promoting social and economic development at the national level and in impoverished and neglected areas in order to provide alternative forms of employment and improve the living condition of local populations. Particular emphasis should be put on encouraging investment in the productive sectors of the economy in Syria and neighbouring countries in order to decrease the population’s needs and dependence on smuggled (and exported) goods.

37 Al-Mamlaka TV, ‘Armed Forces: Thwarted 361 Infiltration and Smuggling Operations Last Year’ (in Arabic), 2 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3udS7MK>

38 Ibid.

39 Petra, ‘Armed Forces: Several Infiltration and Smuggling Attempts Thwarted, 27 Smugglers Killed,’ (in Arabic), 27 January 2022, <https://bit.ly/3wtfBz9>

40 Skype interview with a local activist from Daraa, February 2022.

41 Skype interview with a Bedouin from al-Lajat, February 2022.

This would create job opportunities for local communities and deter them, or at least wide sectors of them, from directly and indirectly participating in smuggling activities. The vast majority of people involved in smuggling activities or in purchasing smuggled goods and commodities do it out of necessity, especially in the worsening economic crisis with a lack of other available options. Such solutions and expected improvements are, however, only possible in a context in which the country enters a process towards a form of political and economic stability, which is far from the case in Syria.

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