

Dethroning Lebanon's "King of Captagon"

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 Brief Analysis

A major international drug smuggler with close ties to Hezbollah has continued threatening Lebanese residents and helping the Assad regime next door, giving Washington ample cause to intervene.

On April 6, the Beirut Criminal Court convened to issue a verdict in the case of Hassan Muhammad Daqou, widely known as Lebanon's "[King of Captagon \(https://newlinesinstitute.org/terrorism/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/\)](https://newlinesinstitute.org/terrorism/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/)." Notable for his close ties to Hezbollah and smuggling efforts to Greece, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia, he was arrested in Beirut in 2021. Yet instead of issuing a verdict last month, Judge Sami Sidqi [suspended \(https://janoubia.com/2022/04/06/%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84/\)](https://janoubia.com/2022/04/06/%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%85-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%82-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84/) the decision indefinitely, raising concerns that Lebanon's kleptocracy will allow Daqou to slip through the cracks and back into the underworld of the country's illicit economy.

This would not be the first time he has escaped justice. For example, the Syrian national was first [arrested \(https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%C2%AB%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4%C2%BB-%D9%88%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9\)](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/ar/content/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A4%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%8A%D9%85-%C2%AB%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4%C2%BB-%D9%88%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9) after relocating to Lebanon in September 2015—specifically, in Hezbollah's de facto capital of Baalbek. Although a military patrol found drugs in Daqou's residence, he was released shortly afterward, and with Hezbollah's help, he soon began reshaping and exploiting Lebanese communities along the border with Syria.

Amassing an Empire

The son of a major smuggler, Daqou opened a car showroom and several front companies in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon before he began [importing \(https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/304958/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AF-%D9%82-%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7\)](https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/304958/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AF-%D9%82-%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7) the raw materials needed to produce Captagon. By 2018, he had sought and obtained dual citizenship and was buying up wide swaths of agricultural land—apple, cherry, and olive orchards—stretching from the Lebanese village of Tfail to the Syrian village of Asal al-Ward. Following Syria's partial collapse during the civil war, this area—centered just thirty-six miles from Damascus—came under Hezbollah's [direct control \(https://daraj.com/71336/\)](https://daraj.com/71336/), essentially cutting Tfail off from the Lebanese state.

Beginning in mid-2020, Daqou's company Caesar Construction purchased 13 million square meters of land surrounding Tfail under the guise of job creation and local investment. Yet instead of fulfilling his promise to ["employ the town's youths \(https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/478647/\)"](https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/478647/) and provide jobs in new factories and cement plants, he razed crops (including some

450,000 fruit trees) and bulldozed numerous houses. Contractors overseeing these operations were accompanied (<https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/478647>) by armed Hezbollah affiliates, and many residents were forced (<https://daraj.com/71336/>) to choose between paying a bribe or being forcibly removed from their ancestral homes.

When one resident, Mansour Shahin, filed a complaint against Caesar, a judge ruled (<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7/>) in his favor, and Baalbek's governor ordered the company to halt construction. Yet the demolitions proceeded, and in July 2020, Shahin was beaten by Hezbollah operatives, taken from his home, and handed over to the Syrian Army's 4th Division, according (<https://www.al-akhbar.com/Politics/304958/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AF-%D9%82-%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7/>) to four witnesses. Upon his release three months later, he quickly accused Daqou and various associates of kidnapping him in an attempt to intimidate Tfail's residents. This prompted Daqou's second arrest, but once again he was released a few days later, and he continued to oversee the construction of suspicious new factories on the cleared land.

Given the available evidence, the purpose of these factories seems clear: Lebanon's Captagon King has built a Captagon Kingdom. Daqou has acquired grand palaces (<https://alkhaleejtoday.co/saudi-arabia/5625636/Hezbollah-seeks-to-release-a-suspect-of-drug-smuggling-from-Lebanon.html>) in Tfail and west Syria, each worth millions of dollars, from which he is transported by a fleet of twelve cars with armed men to various residences in Zahleh and Beirut. And behind the scenes, Lebanese officials have helped him forge this empire. While serving as interior minister, Hezbollah ally Mohammed Fahmi granted him permission to construct five massive hangars in Tfail, all of them now tightly guarded and shrouded in secrecy (<https://www.innlebanon.com/news/article/932288/>). Daqou also bought (<https://daraj.com/71336/>) an armored car from former interior minister Nohad Machnouk, and his Facebook page features (<https://al-ain.com/article/lebanon-kptagon-hezbollah>) photos with Hezbollah parliamentarian Ibrahim al-Moussawi.

Crimes Continue, Even Behind Bars

According to independent pan-Arab news site Daraj (<https://daraj.com/71336/>), Daqou's newly acquired territories contain smuggling tunnels that reach into Syria. These provide easy access to one of his main partners in crime, the Syrian Army's 4th Division. Led by President Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher, this division is nominally tasked with overseeing housing security, but it has also interfered in local administrations and become deeply involved (<https://newlinesinstitute.org/terrorism/the-captagon-threat-a-profile-of-illicit-trade-consumption-and-regional-realities/>) in the regime's Captagon trade against the backdrop of war. It works closely with Hezbollah, which reportedly provides security for Syrian Captagon laboratories and oversees "key transit points" such as Tfail to ensure the drug's easy movement into Lebanon, from which it is smuggled to Persian Gulf countries and beyond.

Daqou's aggression in Tfail and the corresponding loss of Lebanese Armed Forces control there may indicate an uptick in Lebanese domestic Captagon production, or at the very least further consolidation of the Hezbollah-4th Division alliance. This trend was underscored (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5476>) by a string of massive Captagon busts against shipments originating from Lebanon or the Hezbollah-controlled Syrian port of Latakia. In April 2021, for example, Saudi Arabia thwarted an attempt to smuggle in 5.3 million Captagon pills hidden in pomegranates, prompting the kingdom to ban (<https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-middle-east-smuggling-a4ebc47a425e7a51b4151e7225872bdd>) the import of Lebanese fruits and vegetables. One month prior, with assistance from the Saudi Interior Ministry, Malaysia intercepted 800,000 Captagon tablets worth \$94 million originating from Latakia. A photo of the bill from this bust was reportedly (<https://al-ain.com/article/lebanon-kptagon-hezbollah>) found on Daqou's phone, leading to his most recent arrest. On April 6, 2021, Lebanese security forces took him and four associates into custody in the wealthy seaside Beirut neighborhood of Ramlet al-Baida.

Nevertheless, local reporting suggests that Hezbollah arranged for Daqou to stay in a " comfortable (<https://www.aldadpress.com/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%82%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B4/>)" room with internet access even while imprisoned, so that he could "continue managing drug manufacturing operations." From this well-furnished cell, he has persisted in menacing the people of Tfail and solidifying his grip in the area. Last October, armed men affiliated with Daqou and Hezbollah fired at homes and residents (https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/193240), sending a twelve-year-old child to the hospital. And just last month, militants likely connected to him stormed Tfail and fired at houses for eight hours. According to residents, the goal of the assault (<https://www.archyde.com/a-lebanese>

[town-witnessed-a-shooting-for-8-hours-and-fear-of-a-displacement-plan/](#)) was to expel them from town.

Still, Daqou has occasionally used carrots alongside such sticks in a bid to mollify the population and prove his continued control. In

March, for example, he [arranged](#)

<https://www.aldadpress.com/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%82%D9%88-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B4/>

for the distribution of approximately one thousand food rations to Lebanese families in Beirut and the Beqaa Valley for Ramadan.

Given Daqou’s pattern of evading justice, the open-ended suspension of his verdict is troubling. In April 2021, a Lebanese journalist

[leaked \(https://www.grandlb.com/news/22618/\)](https://www.grandlb.com/news/22618/) an audio recording of Daqou’s wife, lawyer Sahar Mohsen, encouraging his legal counsel to bribe the judge who preceded Sidqi on the case. Later, she retained the services of Moin Ghazi, the assistant secretary-general of the Arab Lawyers Union, paying him \$5 million to help secure Daqou’s release. According to [local reporting](#)

[\(https://www.grandlb.com/highlights/23093/\)](https://www.grandlb.com/highlights/23093/), Judge Sidqi was “subjected to great pressure” prior to suspending the verdict.

Residents of Tfail [assert \(https://daraj.com/71336/\)](https://daraj.com/71336/) that Mohsen is a relative of Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah’s head of security. The U.S.

Treasury Department has [documented \(https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm724\)](https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm724) Safa’s smuggling of drugs and

weapons in and out of the country, and this relationship may explain both Daqou’s success in the narcotics trade and his close

coordination with Hezbollah. Mohsen is also the technical owner of Caesar Construction, further enabling the firm to operate unimpeded despite Daqou’s arrest.

Policy Recommendations

The U.S. government should communicate its interest in seeing Daqou’s trial reach a verdict. Directing international attention toward the case could help upset his efforts to quietly bribe his way to freedom. In addition, U.S. officials should investigate the ties between him and Safa, who was designated by the Treasury Department in 2019 for supporting terrorism. One potential outcome could be sanctioning the King of Captagon himself. Given Daqou’s connections to international narcotics trafficking, the Assad regime, and one of the world’s foremost terrorist organizations, the opportunity is ripe to end his reign.

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RECOMMENDED



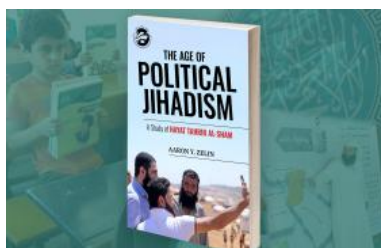
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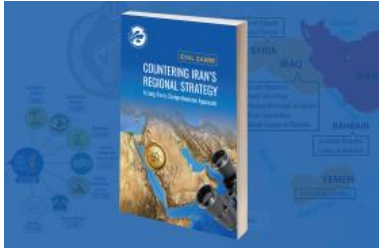
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