Ed Byrne explores the history of illegal drug Captagon, which is described as fuelling Syria's war, and discovers if it really has the power to transform fighters into super soldiers

THE DRUGS DON'T WORK

Captagon was formulated in 1961 by German company Degussa AG – the same organisation that manufactured the Zyklon B gas that was used in German concentration camps. It is the generic trade name for fenetylline and was originally formulated to treat Attention Deficiency Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children and narcolepsy and depression in adults. Captagon is a combination of two substances: theophylline, a xanthine-class chemical like caffeine, and amphetamine. Professor Richard Rawson of UCLA regards Captagon as a mild amphetamine that decreases the need for sleep, food and increases user confidence. High doses can result in aggressive behaviour, psychosis and violence with long-term abuse possibly leading to confusion, agitation, paranoia and hallucinations. The traditional ingredients of Captagon do not lend themselves to creating a super soldier, though it is possible that some other ingredients that it is cut with at the production stage have played their part in the creation of this myth.

A 2005 study undertaken by Alabdalla MA for Forensic Science International analysed 124 batches of confiscated Captagon and found that as well as containing amphetamine and theophylline it also had traces of methamphetamine, ephedrine, metronidazole, caffeine, chlorphenamine, procaine, trimethoprim, chloroquine and quinine. It is not uncommon for those involved in the illicit drug trade to include whatever ingredients are readily available, especially in a conflict zone where specific ingredients are unavailable or to increase the strength of the product by adding more potent ingredients. Richard Rawson believes that the experience of the drug user may also be a factor; if the user's experience of taking drugs is nonexistent or limited, an amphetamine-type substance such as Captagon may have a stronger effect than it would on more experienced drug users. This may impact ISIS or Syrian fighters who due to Islamic Sharia law may not have experience of consuming intoxicants. This may also go some way towards explaining the erratic behaviour of combatants.

Captagon was eventually banned by most countries, but by 2006 according to *Time* magazine it began to gain popularity in the Middle East as the drug of choice for many Arabs. Since then it has become a multi-million dollar industry with individual tablets selling for up to $20. Middle Eastern law enforcement officials have seized millions of tablets in their efforts to stem the flow across borders, but even they admit that they only intercept as little as 10 percent. Syria has become a prominent producer and transit hub for Captagon eclipsing Lebanon, which was once the largest producer of the drug, and it transits through these countries on its way to its primary markets in Saudi Arabia which according to the UNODC World Drug Report accounts for one third of the world's annual amphetamine seizures and many of the United Arab Emirates. There is also a high demand among the Syrian population who seek refuge in addiction to escape their lives in a war zone.

There are many advantages in manufacturing and dealing in Captagon. It can be manufactured clandestinely in both urban and rural environments in any region, production sites can vary from kitchens – which are difficult to detect – to factories capable of producing thousands of tablets a day. The direct profits and quick turnover give Captagon an advantage over cultivated drug crops such as opium and cocaine, which are limited to certain geographical cultivation locations, require harvesting, are seasonal, have easily detectable grow sites and are more difficult to transport to market. Captagon provides a perfect income stream for transnational criminal terrorist gangs. According to Paul Rexton Kan in *Drugs And Contemporary Warfare*, it can compensate in the event of funding being withdrawn or reduced by states that support terror groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and their Iranian sponsors. It is believed that machinery for manufacturing Captagon tablets was provided to Hezbollah in the Bekaa Valley by Iranian supporters to aid in fund raising when state funds were reduced.

Much has been made in the media of the supposed impact and effects of Captagon in combat, allegedly changing an individual's behaviour and further complicating the battlefield, although drug use better suits the needs of groups that participate in asymmetric warfare and attack civilian targets. The accounts of its effects are varied, subject to media hype, anecdotal evidence and battlefield myth. The objective of drug use among fighters is to increase their willingness to engage in combat, create courage, remove or dull the possibility of injury or death and make it easier to take part in atrocities. It also serves as a reward and recruiting tool. If fighters are not professionally trained and engage in intense close-quarter combat like has been seen in Syria and Iraq, they can provide a means of dealing with the stress as well as buoying up their aggression for battle. Paul Rexton Kan believes that drug use in conflict

A soldier stands guard as 4.6 million tablets of Captagon are incinerated

THE DRUGS DON'T WORK

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An employee of the public prosecutor's office, the Department of Criminal Evidence, prepares illegal drugs, including Captagon, to be incinerated

causes unpredictability, breakdown of social control and the commission of atrocities especially among irregular fighters. Captagon can be employed strategically by commanders to enable fighters or terrorist cells to undertake arduous assaults or commit atrocities against 'soft' civilian targets. It can allow poorly trained individuals to commit atrocities against civilians such as the Paris attacks – something that Peter Rexton Kan describes as "drug-stimulated attacks". However, it can also be problematic for commanders when their fighters abuse drugs, while in some circumstances they may be tolerated or strategically encouraged in order to achieve objectives, what Peter Rexton Kan calls "generating addiction". Once introduced, allowed and tolerated by the command structure, the consumption of drugs among irregular forces is difficult to control and monitor and can get out of control if attempts are made to restrict or prevent use among fighters, possibly resulting in mutiny or withdrawal symptoms making them even more unpredictable. Drug use can also have a psychological effect and instil fear in local populations ahead of advancing forces, making them in some cases flee. John Mueller in *Remnants Of War*, refers to a phenonomen called "carnival" where drugs are given as a reward after a demanding battle or operations against civilians and when territory is captured it will be followed by a "carnival" of looting, torturing and raping the local population as often demonstrated by ISIS. Another effect of drug use on the battlefield is the necessary modification of tactics in combating a possibly drugged enemy. In a US Department of State document entitled *Source Countries and Drug Transit Zones*, the United States Marine Corps (USMC) while engaged in combat in Fallujah, Iraq received intelligence reports that insurgents were probably under the influence of drugs and accordingly issued orders for marines engaged in close-quarter combat not to rely on shots to centre body mass to neutralise targets.

The strict ideology of radical Islam does not seem to prevent groups from using or trading in drugs to fuel their fighters or make a profit. They defend and rationalise the contradictions of their ideology in the belief that they are damaging the fabric of their enemies' society and their youth. Paul Rexton Kan states that radical Islam's justification for drug use and dealing lies in the belief that "what is bad for the enemy is good for the community of faith" with certain groups possessing only a "thin veneer of Islam". Radical Islamist doctrine portrays a strict adherence to Sharia law and the practice of *Haram* (sinful or forbidden) in relation to intoxicants including alcohol, drugs and tobacco which are brutally enforced by ISIS. In spite of ideology, exceptions are made in relation to drug dealing, trafficking and consumption if there are long-term financial goals involved or perhaps short-term strategic objectives such as capturing territory or mounting attacks on civilian targets. If the ideology of a group is very strict, involvement with drugs is purely financial and use by its followers is not tolerated. Yet some of these groups accept into their ranks individuals who are already drug addicts who possibly seek a means of gaining religious salvation or redemption, or maybe just to further their drug journey. According to Tara Katha in *Controlling The Black Gray Markets In Small Arms In South Asia*, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – the AQI leader, himself a drug dealer – recruited drug addicts and dealers while imprisoned in Jordan. Radical Islamist ideology has not prevented these groups from involvement with criminals when necessary or convenient, with a diminishing separation and blurring of the lines between the drug trade and terror groups.

Drugs are a factor in almost every conflict, especially those involving irregular forces providing funding or when used by combatants. In the Syrian conflict it is probably fair to say that both pro-Assad and anti-Assad forces are involved in some capacity with the trade in Captagon – whether manufacturing, selling, providing security or simply consumption. Captagon in its original form cannot be held responsible for the brutal acts committed by ISIS, and it is most certainly not a purveyor of 'superpowers' to fighters. In both cases the drug cannot be held responsible for fuelling the conflicts or the atrocities committed.

Ed Byrne has worked in the criminal justice system for 28 years. He has gained qualifications in criminology, security training and is currently studying security and risk management at Portsmouth University.