Syria

I. Summary

In 2009, the government of the Syrian Arab Republic (SARG) continued to publicize its efforts to interdict and punish drug smugglers, while downplaying domestic narcotics consumption. Syria remains primarily a transit country for narcotics en route to more affluent markets in Europe and the Persian Gulf. Continuing uncertainty about the direction of Lebanon and Iraq, porous borders, and endemic police corruption make Syria an attractive overland smuggling route in both directions between Europe/Turkey and the Persian Gulf. Domestic Syrian consumption of illicit drugs is not widespread, largely due to harsh penalties and cultural norms stigmatizing substance abuse. However, recent reports indicate an increasing prevalence of local prescription drug abuse, particularly in Aleppo. Syria continues to have a very cooperative counternarcotics relationship with Saudi Arabia and Jordan, but counternarcotics cooperation with Lebanon has diminished since Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2005. Syria is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention.

II. Status of Country

Syria is not a major producer of narcotics or precursor chemicals. Due to political uncertainty in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, Syria remains an increasingly important transit country for narcotics between Europe and the Persian Gulf. Syria is a trafficking route for hashish, heroin, and Captagon (fenethylline), a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant. Captagon is not produced in Syria but is increasingly trafficked through Syria from Turkey and Lebanon to the Gulf States.

III. Country Actions Against Drugs in 2009

Policy Initiatives. Syrian drug policy is based on Law No. 2 of 1993, which authorizes harsh punishment—including capital punishment—for those convicted of narcotics manufacturing, trafficking, or sales. The same law requires treatment at state-operated rehabilitation facilities for drug addicts who surrender to the police. Provided addicts have no other serious criminal offenses, and make a good-faith effort during treatment programs, Law No. 2 exempts them from punishment. Authorities admit that some drug dealers have exploited this aspect of the law to avoid incarceration. Some even used their time getting “treatment” to locate additional customers.

In 2002, Syria upgraded its Counternarcotics Unit from a branch to a directorate of the Ministry of Interior. The government also opened regional counternarcotics offices in Aleppo province (covering the Turkish border) and in Homs province (to monitor the Lebanese border) with eventual plans to open offices in the remaining provinces. Since 2002, five additional counternarcotics offices have opened in Damascus, Zabadani (near Damascus), Dar’a, Latakia, and Dayr Az Zawr. In 2005, Syrian officials implemented a 2002 draft decree providing financial incentives of up to several million Syrian pounds ($1 = 46 SYP) to anyone providing information about drug trafficking and/or illicit drug crop cultivation in Syria. A new police facility for the Syrian Anti-Narcotics Department was opened in Damascus.
during the early part of 2006. With the opening of the new facility came the arrival of new and updated equipment that enhanced Syria's drug investigation capabilities. This facility also houses the country's newest drug lab. In parallel, the (SARG) created the National Committee for Narcotic Affairs, which was tasked with setting up general drug-related polices and coordinating efforts with relevant local and international agencies to formulate prevention and treatment plans. The National Committee for Drug Affairs convened in June 2008 and recommended the establishment of a drug database, the funding of expanded awareness campaigns and treatment programs, and preparation of a national counternarcotics strategy (including rehabilitation). Headed by the Minister of Interior, the committee included representatives from a broad range of concerned Ministries, civic organizations and labor unions.

Syria also contributes to combating the spread and trafficking in narcotics through the Arab Bureau of Narcotic Affairs, which is affiliated with the Arab League. Through this organization, Syria exchanges narcotics trafficking information with other Arab countries.

Law Enforcement Efforts. The number of successful drug apprehensions during the period January-June 2009 stood at 2,480 cases and the number of persons standing trial on drug-related offenses was 3,826. During the same period, the Syrian government confiscated 822 kilograms of hashish, 26 kilograms of heroin, 9.7 million Captagon tablets, 321 kilograms of hashish oil, 196 liters of precursor materials and 61,138 assorted narcotic tablets. Minimal quantities of other narcotics were also confiscated. In a bid to combat narcotics smuggling and drug dealing, Syrian law enforcement personnel cracked down on drug dealers and continually reported their successful raids in the local media. For example, in April 2009, Syrian authorities in Hama dismantled a network of drug addicts and traffickers; Zabadani police officers apprehended 25 persons smuggling 10 kilograms of hashish, heroin, and cocaine; and security squads in Aleppo arrested a doctor and a nurse at a mental facility for selling licit drugs containing narcotic ingredients to addicts. In May, counternarcotics agents in Latakia apprehended a couple trafficking and dealing drugs which had entered Syria from Lebanon; and counternarcotics agents in Homs confiscated one million Captagon tablets from a Turkish national. In June, police in Hama dismantled and arrested a network of drug dealers and addicts. In July, a drug dealer was arrested in Homs with over 1 kilogram of narcotics in his possession. In September, the police apprehended a number of drug dealers in Homs attempting to smuggle 800 Captagon tablets, security forces confiscated 24,000 Captagon tablets at Damascus Airport destined for the Gulf Region, and authorities unveiled a network of 15 persons from Syria and Turkey smuggling narcotic tablets through Latakia and Tartus ports. The tablets were hidden in electrical appliances for reshipment through Yemen and Egypt to their final destination in Saudi Arabia. Nine pharmacies were closed in Dayr Az Zawr in 2009 due to the illegal sale of medicines. Multiple media reports continue to highlight the drug enforcement issues in Aleppo. In September 2009, Aleppo security forces cracked down on drug dealers and addicts—the second campaign of this type in the city in three months.

In 2009, the Syrian Minister of Interior announced that his Ministry would train officers and specialized staff to combat the trafficking of narcotics. The Minister claimed that Syria's national strategy to reduce demand for narcotics and stimulant drugs was a success, and he hailed the national committee for drugs affairs established to meet that goal. In January 2009, the Yemeni Ambassador to Syria handed over to the Syrian Minister of Industry a list of Syrian companies suspected of involvement in the trafficking of drugs to Yemen. The Ambassador told the Minister that these companies facilitate the smuggling of drugs hidden in goods exported to Yemen. The Ambassador demanded Syria take deterrent measures against them and blacklist them from doing business in Yemen. To date, neither side has indicated follow-up action on this issue.
Corruption. Corruption is a daily fact of life in Syria. Cultural acceptance of corruption, in addition to below-average compensation for police and customs officials, creates an environment ripe for smuggling. The Syrian government does not publish detailed information on corruption investigations. In January 2009, state-controlled newspapers reported on a customs scandal which took place two years ago at the Tal Abyad border crossing with Turkey. A car carrying 4,550 stimulant tablets in a secret compartment was allowed to cross the border without inspection. The car was later stopped by Turkish customs officers. The Syrian customs officer who allowed the car to proceed across the border was later acquitted in court, but the authorities are still investigating the matter and have started building a case against the former Director General of Tal Abyad Crossing, who is suspected of being involved in the drug smuggling operation. The Syrian government has an Investigations Administration (Internal Affairs Division) responsible for weeding out corrupt officers in the counternarcotics unit and the national police force. The Investigations Administration is independent of both the counternarcotics unit and the national police and reports directly to the Minister of Interior. The government of Syria does not officially encourage or facilitate illicit production or distribution of narcotic or psychotropic drugs or other controlled substances, or the laundering of proceeds from illegal transactions.

Agreements and Treaties. Syria is a party to the 1988 UN Drug Convention, the 1961 UN Single Convention as amended by the 1972 Protocol, and the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances. On April 8, 2009 Syria ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocols against trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling, but has not yet ratified the UN Convention against Corruption. Syria and the United States do not have a counternarcotics agreement, nor is there an extradition treaty between the two countries.

Cultivation/Production. Traditional drug cultivation and production remain at negligible levels in Syria. However, Syria does have a sizable, legitimate pharmaceutical industry that produces inexpensive prescription pain medication, among other drugs. Currently, the trafficking of prescription pain medicine is not legally categorized in Syria as the equivalent offense of trafficking in illicit drugs, despite the addictive nature of most prescription painkillers. Syrian law previously allowed the practice of “leasing” a licensed pharmacist’s credentials. In this practice, investors would “lease” a pharmacist’s credentials in order to open and operate a licensed pharmacy in Syria. A pharmacist received payment for allowing his/her name to appear on the business registration, but the pharmacist may have had nothing further to do with the operation of the pharmacy. Although the practice of “leasing” pharmacist’s credentials is now illegal, it is still occurring in Syria. In an effort to combat this problem the SARG is now issuing identification badges to all pharmacists and requiring they be worn when working in a pharmacy.

Production of narcotics is a minor problem in Syria and incidents are rarely reported. In October 2009, the Criminal Security Branch in Aleppo received a tip on money counterfeiting which led to the discovery of a secret factory for the production of narcotics in one of Aleppo’s more affluent neighborhoods. The products were seized and sent to Damascus for analysis. Of the eight people arrested, none had a prior criminal record.

Drug Flow/Transit. Syrian officials estimate that, since 2007, the overall flow of illegal narcotics transiting Syria and destined for other countries has increased. As mentioned above, one likely reason for this increased traffic is that the continuing political problems in Lebanon and Iraq have made Syria a more attractive overland smuggling route between Europe/Turkey and the Gulf. Transshipment of narcotics from Turkey continues to represent a major challenge to Syria’s counternarcotics efforts, as the porous Turkish/Syrian border provides easy entry points for drug smuggling into Syria. Narcotics coming from Iraq are transported into Syria both directly and via Jordan. The SARG’s
reported seizure statistics suggest that Syria’s counternarcotics efforts have either been more effective in 2009, or, more likely, the overall flow of narcotics has increased. Main shipment routes include the transit of hashish and heroin through Syria to Europe and other countries in the region; opium from Pakistan and Afghanistan transiting Syria to Turkey; and Captagon pills from Bulgaria transiting Turkey and then transiting Syria to Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

**Domestic Programs/Demand Reduction.** The Syrian government’s counternarcotics strategy, which is coordinated by the Ministry of Interior, uses the media to educate the public on the dangers of drug use. Drug awareness training is a part of the national curriculum for schoolchildren. The Ministry also conducts awareness campaigns through university student unions and trade associations. The Syrian government regularly publishes accounts of successful law enforcement efforts to combat narcotics in the various government-controlled media outlets.

Counternarcotics campaigns were noticeably on the rise during 2008 and this trend continued in 2009, particularly with programs marking the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking. For example, a seminar was held in the Arabic Cultural Center in Damascus on this day to raise awareness against the dangers of drug use. The seminar, organized by the National Committee for Drug Affairs, included speeches by the Minister of Interior and representatives from the Union of Al Thawra Youth Organization and the Ministry of Health. Another seminar was held in Aleppo by the Society Mobilization Team, a Syrian organization established with assistance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) that focuses on drug, environment and population issues. An officer from the Counternarcotics Directorate gave a presentation on various narcotics, production methods, and the effect of these narcotics on drug abusers. This speech was followed by two additional presentations, one from a sociology professor and another from a clergyman, both of whom warned against the use of drugs. Local official media outlets dedicated a full page to the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, addressing the dangers of narcotics use, the steps taken by the Syrian government to combat drug use, and new drug-related legislation.

Due to the social stigma attached to drug use and stiff penalties under Syria’s strict antitrafficking law, domestic consumption of illicit drugs remains relatively low. In 2009, an officer from the Counternarcotics office in Aleppo estimated the number of drug addicts in Syria at 3 per 10,000. Although there are no independent statistics available to verify the accuracy of this claim, anecdotal evidence suggests the SARG is significantly underestimating the prevalence of illicit drug use in Syria. Furthermore, the government’s estimate likely does not include prescription drug abusers, as mentioned above. Unless the government increases the penalties for trading prescription medication, and raises public awareness of this problem, the number of drug users in Syria will likely grow.

**IV. U.S. Policy Initiatives and Programs**

**Policy Initiatives.** In discussions with Syrian officials, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) officials continue to stress the need for diligence in preventing narcotics and precursor chemicals from transiting Syrian territory and the necessity of terminating any involvement, active or passive, of individual Syrian officials in the drug trade.

**Bilateral Cooperation.** DEA officials based in Nicosia, Cyprus maintain an ongoing dialogue with Syrian authorities in the Counternarcotics Directorate.
The Road Ahead. The United States will continue to encourage the Syrian government to maintain its commitment to combating narcotics smuggling and production in the region; to strengthen anti-money laundering legislation; and to continue to encourage Syria to improve its counternarcotics cooperation with neighboring countries.