Saudi Arabia brings Captagon to Yemen - Looks to Bring New Plague to the Nation

Just as Saudi Arabia has hardened its tone towards Lebanon over the smuggling into its territories of the drug Captagon - ISIS and other radical groups’ drug of choice as it is said to instill courage to its practitioners, Yemen could soon be flooded with the product, yet another plague the war-torn nation will have to weather.

Earlier this month Saudi Arabia decided to issue a blanket ban on all Lebanese imports of fruits and vegetables after crates of pomegranates were found to hide Captagon pills.

Although Lebanon remains a major player in the trade of the narcotic, countries such as Syria, Iraq and Jordan have long fallen prey to this new shadow economy, which trade has been dominated by less than savoury characters, as Islamic radicals and their various affiliates account for the majority of its traders.

A highly addictive drug Captagon has long fuelled conflicts in the Middle East. Captagon or other of its derivatives induce a sense of well-being, euphoria and invincibility to its users, as well as allow ‘soldiers’ to endure pain, all the while increasing aggression towards their opponents. Dubbed the drug of Jihad - it has often been found in militant hideouts, including in one used by the terrorists behind the 2015 Bataclan theatre attack that killed 90 people in Paris, the use of Captagon has nevertheless made its way to civilian populations as it offers a reprieve from hunger and the only too overwhelming sense of hopelessness countless communities have felt under the burden of war.

This is where Saudi Arabia’ smuggling troubles and the Kingdom’s recent ire with Lebanon gets interesting - not only for Yemen, but possibly for the new narrative Riyadh is looking to weave against its appointed nemeses.

Officials in Riyadh have already linked the recent seizure of Captagon with allegations that Hezbollah is looking to
profit from the trade to finance not only its operations within Lebanon but its regional allies - including the Houthis in Yemen.

First mention of such ties were raised in June after 14 million Captagon amphetamine tablets hidden inside a shipment of iron plates coming from Lebanon were stopped by the Saudi authorities.

Days after the news broke that Saudi Arabia had stopped the drug from being smuggled from Lebanon, Arab News mentioned that a source had confirmed Hezbollah was working in collaboration with the Houthis in Yemen to break the drug further into the region in view of financing their common goals.

To drive the message home Arab News writes: “US and European drugs agencies are convinced that Hezbollah profits from the drug trade. Europol, a European law enforcement agency, issued a report in 2020 cautioning that Hezbollah members were using European cities as a base for trading in “drugs and diamonds” and to launder the profits.”

While there’s been no concrete proof to offer credence to such allegations, the narrative is nevertheless gaining momentum.

So what you may argue? Saudi Arabia has always accused its various enemies of a litany of crimes, regardless of the truth, so that it could better justify its politics.

How does this drug trafficking compute into the Kingdom’s war against Yemen.

Well, for a start the current geopolitical context.

Riyadh is losing traction among its most fervent and loyal supporters - namely the United States of America. A joint resolution of disapproval to block a proposed $650 million in US arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was introduced earlier this month by Republicans Rand Paul and Mike Lee, as well as Bernie Sanders who caucuses with Democrats.

For all its lobbying Riyadh is losing ground in Washington, so much so that US President Joe Biden confirmed he would only authorise the sale of defensive weapons so as to promote peace efforts in Yemen. A spokesman for the Biden Administration said the sale “is fully consistent with the administration's pledge to lead with diplomacy to end the conflict in Yemen.” The air-to-air missiles ensure “Saudi Arabia has the means to defend itself from Iranian-backed Houthi air attacks,” he added.

Washington’s gradual move away from supporting the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen was caused by two main factors -- intense advocacy campaigns and lobbying efforts by humanitarian and human rights groups in reaction to increased civilian deaths and worsened humanitarian conditions in Yemen and growing levels of political partisanship and institutional polarization in Washington.

A new threat, or at least a looming one - such as let’s say a drug crisis and claims of a new financial axis of evil could prove ‘beneficial’ to Saudi Arabia’s war efforts, if not long term at least immediately.

More to the point the arrival of Captagon in Yemen proper could also be part of yet another destabilising campaign fomented by the Kingdom against a country it has spent so much energy destroying since late March 2015.

Should Captagon spread in Yemen, repercussions would be devastating - not only socially but from an institutional standpoint. Ravaged by war, famine and an explosion of its state institutions by way of competing political agendas, Yemen has no means to defend itself against a drug epidemic.

Worse still would be the real possibility of Yemen becoming the drug’s new regional hub. Let’s not forget that for all its woes Yemen sits still a gateway to Africa and Asia - its very geography could prove too attractive to refuse, even more so by groups such as Al Qaeda for whom a new revenue stream would offer new opportunities.

Catherine Shakdam is a research fellow at the Al Bayan Centre for Planning & Studies and a political analyst specializing in radical movements. She is the author of A Tale of Grand Resistance: Yemen, the Wahhabi and the House of Saud. She writes exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.