

Spotlight

SAUDI ARABIA

THE ICE MENACE

Rehabilitation efforts in the Kingdom form a key part of the response to the rise in the use of crystal meth and other narcotic substances regionwide

Rawan Radwan Jeddah

Flames spewed from the wreckage of a vehicle on the outskirts of Saudi Arabia's coastal city of Jeddah one evening in late December. Nearby lay the charred remains of Bandar Al-Qarhadi — a lifeless embodiment of the city's drug problem.

Footage emerged on social media later that evening showing Al-Qarhadi's final moments as he was engulfed in flames, having escaped from the back of the burning vehicle, doused in gasoline, his hands bound.

Al-Qarhadi was killed by his best friend, a crystal methamphetamine addict, who was handed the death penalty for his crime. The tragedy highlighted the nature of the problem facing law enforcement agencies and health professionals.

In Saudi Arabia, the street name for crystal meth is shabu. It is also variously known as ice, LA glass, stove top, quartz, crank, hiropon, and poor man's cocaine, owing to its relatively low production cost.

The ease with which it can be produced, at relatively low cost, high profit, and without detection by law enforcement, was memorably depicted in the hit US television series "Breaking Bad." But so too were its devastating consequences.

For drug traffickers, Saudi Arabia is a target market for amphetamines, particularly Captagon. Between 2019 and 2020, the Kingdom seized some 30 tons of illicit drugs, 99 percent of which were Captagon pills.

However, authorities and health professionals are increasingly concerned by the growing number of people becoming hooked on crystal meth, a derivative of amphetamines, which has

reached epidemic proportions in many countries.

In recent months, the Kingdom's General Directorate of Narcotics Control has made numerous major drug busts and arrests to try and curb the trafficking of meth.

A captivating new documentary by Arab News, titled "Abu Hilalain: Inside the Kingdom's crackdown on Captagon," sheds light on Saudi Arabia's efforts to combat the spread of the drug.

The Arab News team behind the film traveled across three countries, uncovering the extensive operations of Captagon trafficking and its effects on the region.

Premiered at an exclusive screening at the BFI in London, the documentary, produced in collaboration with Lambda, was presented on June 26, the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

Based on a Deep Dive investigation published by Arab News in February 2023, "Abu Hilalain: Inside the Kingdom's crackdown on Captagon" provides an in-depth and gripping exploration of the drug's impact on society.

Across the Arab region, rates of addiction, debilitating psychiatric disorders, and violent crime have continued to rise, with the war on drugs seemingly no closer to halting the production, trafficking, selling, and use of meth and other illicit substances.

"The problem is growing across

GLOBAL SEIZURES OF AMPHETAMINE-TYPE STIMULANTS IN 2020 (TONS)

375

Methamphetamine

75

Amphetamine

55

Amphetamine-type stimulants

20

"Ecstasy"

525

All ATS

Source: UNODC World Drug Report 2022

the world and Saudi Arabia's not immune to this problem," Dr. Sultan Alwajeeh, a public health and addiction specialist, told Arab News. "Shabu's effects are severe."

"Each case is different, but that depends on your precognitive situation, genetics, the frequency of use and dosage, including how predisposed you are to mental health illnesses," said Alwajeeh.

Meth contains pseudoephedrine, a chemical usually found in cold and allergy medications. However, it is often cut with other hazardous substances, such as battery acid, drain cleaner, and even crushed glass.

It can be ingested in pill form, injected in a fluid state intravenously, or more commonly smoked in its crystal form — a method known in Saudi Arabia as "gargoor," referring to the gurgling sound it makes with each puff.

With time and chronic use, Alwajeeh said meth can lead to psychological dependence, hallucinations, aggression, and memory loss.

Long-term use often causes persistent feelings of paranoia and suspicion and meth-induced psychosis is often indistinguishable from paranoid schizophrenia.

Soon, the user's brain starts to rely on the drug to get the desired dopamine rush that is no longer sufficiently provided by normal life.

"What starts off as a good

feeling from a hug, for example, or an intimate encounter with a partner ... (or) finishing a complicated task ... all dissipates with time because the brain tricks the user into believing 'it's not good enough, I want more,' because it's so euphoric, but not euphoric enough," said Alwajeeh.

The results can be catastrophic for the user and those around them.

"We see more drug users today than a couple of years ago and every six months we hear of a horrible crime committed." And yet, he says, the issue has received scant attention. "In my opinion, it shouldn't receive less attention than war or terrorism."



Scan this QR code with your smartphone to watch the Arab News documentary **Abu Hilalain: Inside the Kingdom's crackdown on Captagon** arabnews.com/AbuHilalain

Although the war on drugs is typically seen as a matter for law enforcement agencies, focused on tackling the trade at its source, it is only half the battle. Helping addicts break their habit and rebuild their lives is arguably just as important.

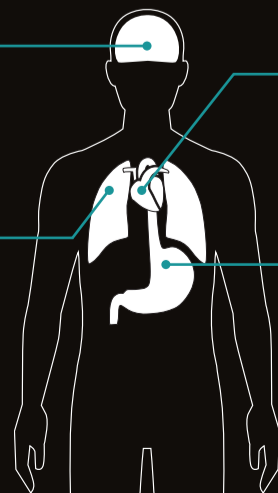
"One of the most difficult stages of treatment is the stage of detoxification, which lasts from a week to one month, during which he suffers," Khalid Al-Mashari, CEO of Qaweem, a drug rehabilitation center with facilities in Riyadh and Jeddah, told Arab News.

"The longer the recovery period, the closer he will be to a life worth living as an acceptable person in society."

EFFECTS OF METH ON THE BODY

Brain
Meth quickly passes through the blood-brain barrier, increasing dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine levels.

Lungs
37.4 percent of meth smoked is absorbed into the bloodstream, 79 percent when snorted.



Heart
Meth reaches the bloodstream fairly intact while damaging the heart at the molecular level.

Stomach
Consuming meth pills produces effects in 20-45 minutes.