
Investigative Leads

International terror and Lebanese drugs

by Thierry Lalevée

Is it a coincidence that the most extreme international terrorist groups such as the Islamic Jihad of Hussein Moussavi, Palestinian radicals like the Damascus-backed Abu Musa, and others are primarily based in Lebanon's Bekaa valley around the city of Baalbeck? On a military level, the answer seems to lie in the fact that this is the stronghold of Syrian occupation forces in Lebanon. However, of what military significance to Syria can Baalbeck really be? The real answer to both the Syrian military concentration and the presence of the terrorist groups is the Baalbeck region's role as a capital of international drug-running.

Never has the connection between international terrorism and international drug trafficking been so clear as in Lebanon today. In Baalbeck and the immediately surrounding valleys of the Bekaa, close to 90% of Lebanese hashish is produced. It is also in this region that hashish producers have begun growing Indian cannabis called chanvre. Even more recently, according to AFP dispatches of May 30, hashish producers have begun opium cultivation. As one grower said bluntly, "In 1982 and 1983, we could not export a good part of our production. With the same volume of opium, we could get 10 times more income. But the government does not officially acknowledge it. Otherwise, under international pressure, it would have to stop it."

But the Lebanese government matters little; its powers do not extend to Baalbeck and the Bekaa, nor does it share in the profits, which go primarily to the Syrian army and the personal coffers of Syrian President Assad's brother Rifaat. How else could Rifaat have opened so many Swiss bank accounts in recent years?

But more important, the Baalbeck-based drug trade provides financing for international terrorism. Profits from drug production in the Bekaa financed the Oct. 23, 1983 kamikaze operations against the French and U.S. garrisons in Beirut, and more recently, the Sept. 20 kamikaze operation against the U.S. embassy there.

Even before the civil war in 1975, Lebanon ranked as one of the world's main producers of hashish. On Oct. 17, Israeli policemen seized a haul of 164 kilos, not as big as the 2 tons seized in Mainz, West Germany at the beginning of October, but nothing to be coughed at either. This has become an

immediate national security threat to Israel, and not simply because of drug income's relationship to terrorism. Israeli soldiers buy the drugs, and military convoys carry them back into Israel—the Middle East version of the tactic adopted by the Chinese toward American GIs during the Vietnam war. The Syrians, one may be sure, keep the drugs cheap and readily available to Israelis—just as the Soviet intelligence services have refined such quiet forms of warfare toward the West as a whole, e.g., the "Bulgarian connection."

What has changed in Lebanon since 1975 is that, while the farmers are still Lebanese, they harvest under the military watch of terrorist commandos, themselves watched from the hills by Syrian armored units. Many a battle between the Syrians and various Lebanese militias has had no purpose but to safeguard shares in the region's rich drug harvest. Similarly, Lebanese authorities have observed that an extraordinarily high proportion of bombardments of Beirut are directed at buildings which house clandestine drug laboratories. Under cover of religious and political differences, the equivalent of gangland warfare is being fought out.

One thinks of the blowing up of many a boobytrapped car with Corsicans inside—as the Sicilian and American mafia fought off the French mafia with the backing of Bekaa-based terrorists.

According to a U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency officer interviewed by the French weekly *Vendredi-Samedi-Dimanche*, "There are suspicions that terrorist actions of the Islamic Jihad have been warnings against any attempt to interfere in their drug business. Growing drugs, their treatment and sale are organized by terrorists while traditional mafias like the American or Sicilian are in charge of distribution, in exchange for payments and weapon deliveries."

Hence, Lebanon has also assumed the role of a transshipment point. Even heroin and cocaine grown in Latin America are first exported to the Middle East before re-export to Europe and the United States—escaping the more direct but closely monitored routes.

At the top is a group of Lebanese-Syrian families associated with the pro-Nazi Syrian Popular Party (PPS), or the Syrian National Socialist Party (SSNP), whose Damascus-based leader is Anisa Makhlof, wife of President Hafez al Assad. These include families based in Latin America and the Caribbean around the Abu-Mourad banking family, or the Banco del Caribe in Caracas, with which "liberal" Lebanese leader Camille Chamoun is associated.

There is the Bulgarian shipping route, of course, but new routes have been discovered. According to the same DEA officer, the Syrian government sends its share across the southern Soviet republics into Afghanistan, then Pakistan and India: "We have witnessed that, for example, in Afghanistan, such convoys are stopped neither by the Soviet troops nor by the anti-Soviet guerrillas. Sometimes the fighting is even stopped to allow a convoy to go through to Pakistan, and we know that a good part of the Lebanese drugs travels through the Soviet Union into Pakistan directly."