

From Azerbaijan region to New York: how the Mideast drug crop is moved

by Marilyn James

On Nov. 29 in Palermo, Sicily, 76 mafiosi—including members of the Gambino, Spatola, and Inzerrillo “families”—began their long-awaited trial on charges of drug trafficking and tax evasion. This is the largest trial of mafiosi in decades, made possible in large part by the valiant efforts of Italian Carabinieri General Dalla Chiesa, who was gunned down by his quarry last September in Palermo. Ironically, it was the General’s death which prompted Rome to grant to Dalla Chiesa’s successor, Special Magistrate Emmanuele De Francesco, permission to access financial and banking-transaction records that resulted in many of the indictments against the mafiosi. In this regard, in the Dec. 13 *New York* magazine, De Francesco commented, “Our mafiosi have learned from their American cousins how to launder and hide money, something which they never knew before.”

The trial in Sicily—one of several in the making—in conjunction with the ongoing investigation headed by Rome Magistrate Ilario Martella into what has been described as the largest gun-running apparatus apprehended to date, may result in the breaking of the so-called “Sicilian Connection.”

The Sicilian Connection under the control of the Gambino, Spatola, and Inzerrillo families is largely responsible for the refining and more importantly the distribution of high-purity heroin made from the opium grown in the Golden Crescent of the Middle East. According to the *New York* article, U.S. Customs officials are expecting an estimated 8,800 pounds of heroin to be smuggled into the United States this year; half will enter through New York’s waterfront and Kennedy International Airport.

The Golden Crescent

The opium that feeds the Sicilian Connection comes from the opium poppy fields of Southwest Asia’s Golden Crescent—Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (see map)—and pri-

marily from the tribal-dominated Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan. The Crescent shot into prominence when its 1978-79 harvest yielded more than 1,600 metric tons of opium; if totally converted, this one harvest had the potential to make 160 metric tons of pure heroin.

According to the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), smuggling operations among the Crescent countries are conducted by the nomadic Baluchi tribesmen. The poppy cultivation itself and limited clandestine opiate refining is carried out by the Pathan tribesmen of the Northwest Frontier Province, and in western Iran by ethnic Kurds and Azerbaijanis. Smuggling of the opiates between Iran and Turkey is carried out by the Kurds and Jazerbaijanis.

Two age-old smuggling routes are utilized by the traffickers: the northern route that skirts the northern border of Iran, along the Caspian Sea coast, west to Tabriz-Rezayieh and then onward to Turkey’s eastern provinces which are also populated by Kurds, as well as Armenians; and, the southern route which follows the major overland vehicle and train routes from the tri-border area of southeastern Iran through Teheran, where it then links up with the northern route. In either case, the primary destination is Turkey.

Although reports of tribal-run morphine base and heroin laboratories, particularly in the Northwest Frontier Province, are proliferating, the refineries in Turkey and Europe continue to dominate the scene. It was here that the refining process was developed to perfection during the heyday of the French Connection. In fact, once the poppy-cultivation potential of the Crescent was put to work, European chemists were reportedly deployed into the Northwest Frontier Province and Karachi, Pakistan to establish refineries capable of producing high-purity morphine base, a smaller-bulk version of the drug which facilitates its clandestine transit west. Final processing of the drug for the European and American addict populations

is left largely for the Turkish and Sicilian-controlled underground laboratories.

The Italians run the show

Although the French Connection was broken in 1973, remnants survived, and were picked up and incorporated into the Sicilian-dominated organization. Evidence of this incorporation came after a number of very large and modern refineries were busted by Italian authorities in 1979 and 1980. Leading chemists of the French Connection, including the "granddaddy" of them all, Jean Jehan, were found to be running refineries in Milan, San Remo, Palermo, and Cereseto, leading European authorities to conclude that the French-Corsicans were back in business, but the Italians were running the show.

It is the French Connection-pioneered routes that are being used today to take the opiates out of Turkey, laying the groundwork as well for the renaissance of the Turkish "patrons" who were severely crippled by the 1972 Turkish opium ban.

The routes from Turkey

Cars and trucks—many of them commercially registered to Transporte Internationale Routier (TIR)—leave the major staging area based in Istanbul, Turkey, making their way north to Sofia, Bulgaria, then into Yugoslavia on the main trans-Europe highway. At this juncture, they may cut over to Trieste, Italy or go directly to the refineries in southern France that stretch from Nice to Marseilles. But most continue across the Austrian border at Spielfeld, just north of Maribon, Yugoslavia and then split north again to Vienna to pick up the cross-Austrian autobahn; or diagonally crosscountry along Routes 112 and 113 to Salzburg. From here, it is straight to Munich, West Germany.

The other widely used route runs southwest over the southern Turkish border, through Syria and into Lebanon. However, political instabilities have led to this route being used to a lesser extent. Beirut continues to be a crossroads, with its ports and Swiss-modeled banking system, which is used by the traffickers for money-laundering and investment purposes.

West Germany is a major market for the Turkish traffickers, and Munich plays an important role. The smugglers use the route that traverses the Balkans, but they also smuggle in the drugs by way of regularly scheduled commercial aircraft operating between Istanbul and Munich. The West German city has a very large Turkish gastarbieter (guestworker) population, thus facilitating the "human wave" or "mule system" for smuggling drugs into the Federal Republic and consumer goods back into Turkey.

It should be noted that the Turks are also moving into the Chinese secret-society-controlled base in Amsterdam, where there is now a burgeoning Turkish Gastarbeiter population as well. The Turks have not displaced the Southeast Asian

Golden Triangle traffickers yet, but the former are said to be gaining fast.

The Bulgarian connection

Bulgaria plays a crucial role in both the drug and weapons trafficking. At the center of such operations in Bulgaria is a spooky agency known as Kintex, first brought to U.S. attention when a team of investigative reporters from the Long Island daily *Newsday* wrote its prize-winning series, "The Heroin Trail," in 1974. Kintex has been described as a semi-official agency of the Bulgarian government designed to promote trade and regulate imports. Since the 1970s, however, Bulgarian officials have alternately confirmed and denied its existence. Kintex has been the subject of several investigations and congressional inquiries in the United States, each ending in a dead end, since Bulgarian officials have refused to cooperate, substituting protests and righteous indignation for answers to hard questions about Kintex.

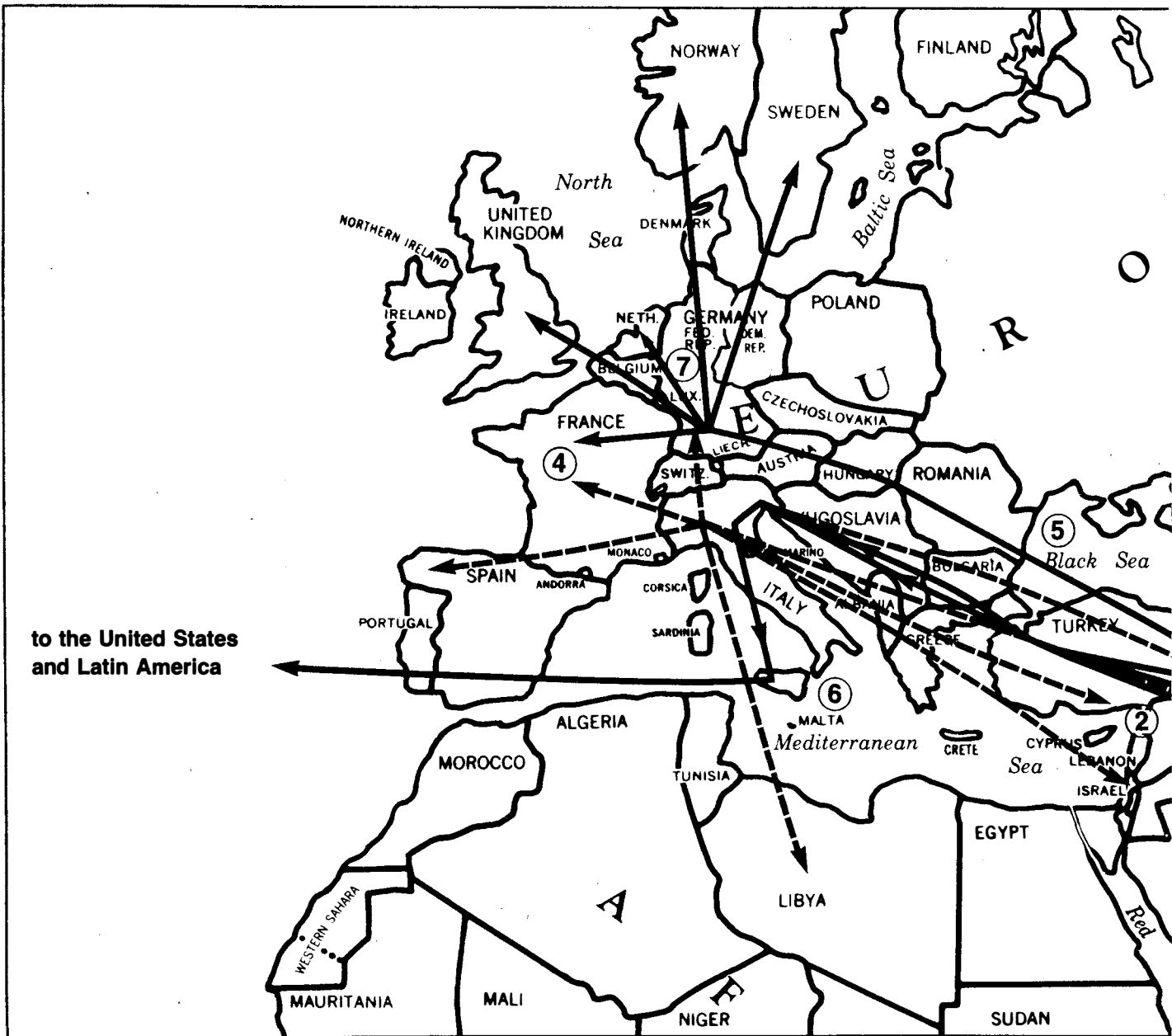
Based in Sofia, the Kintex operation appears to include warehousing facilities, and, with official sanction from the Bulgarian government, functions as the primary point of mediation between the Turkish drug and gun runners and related black-market traffickers and the Bulgarian government. Kintex is also believed to have storage facilities in the Bulgarian port areas along the Black Sea.

TIR vehicles, commercially registered vehicles covered by an international treaty among the Common Market nation members, also figure in the drug trade networks. The agreement establishing uses of Triangle Internationale Routier vehicles was designed to facilitate trade and to protect perishable goods. It has, however, become a cover for contraband smuggling, as the TIRs are sealed by customs officials in the country of origin and proceed across border crossings uninspected. Unless customs or border police have advance knowledge of a drug shipment, the traffic volume is so heavy as to not allow for a search of every possibly suspect TIR vehicle.

Contraband transport by air and sea

What has been described here are the primary land routes used by the drug and gun traffickers. It should be noted that commercial air and sea transportation also play an important role. Ships from Lebanon, Turkey, and Greece bring Crescent opiates to the refineries in Sicily and southern Italy as well as France. They may also carry finished products straight to the United States. Favorite entry points are the New York, New Jersey, and Baltimore ports. International airports, whether in the United States or Europe, are also likely points of entry.

These routes are well worn, having been allowed to function with impunity for decades as a result of political protection from "citizens above suspicion" in high places. Now, with the host of indictments, arrests, and trials in Italy, the "Connection" may finally be dealt a death blow.



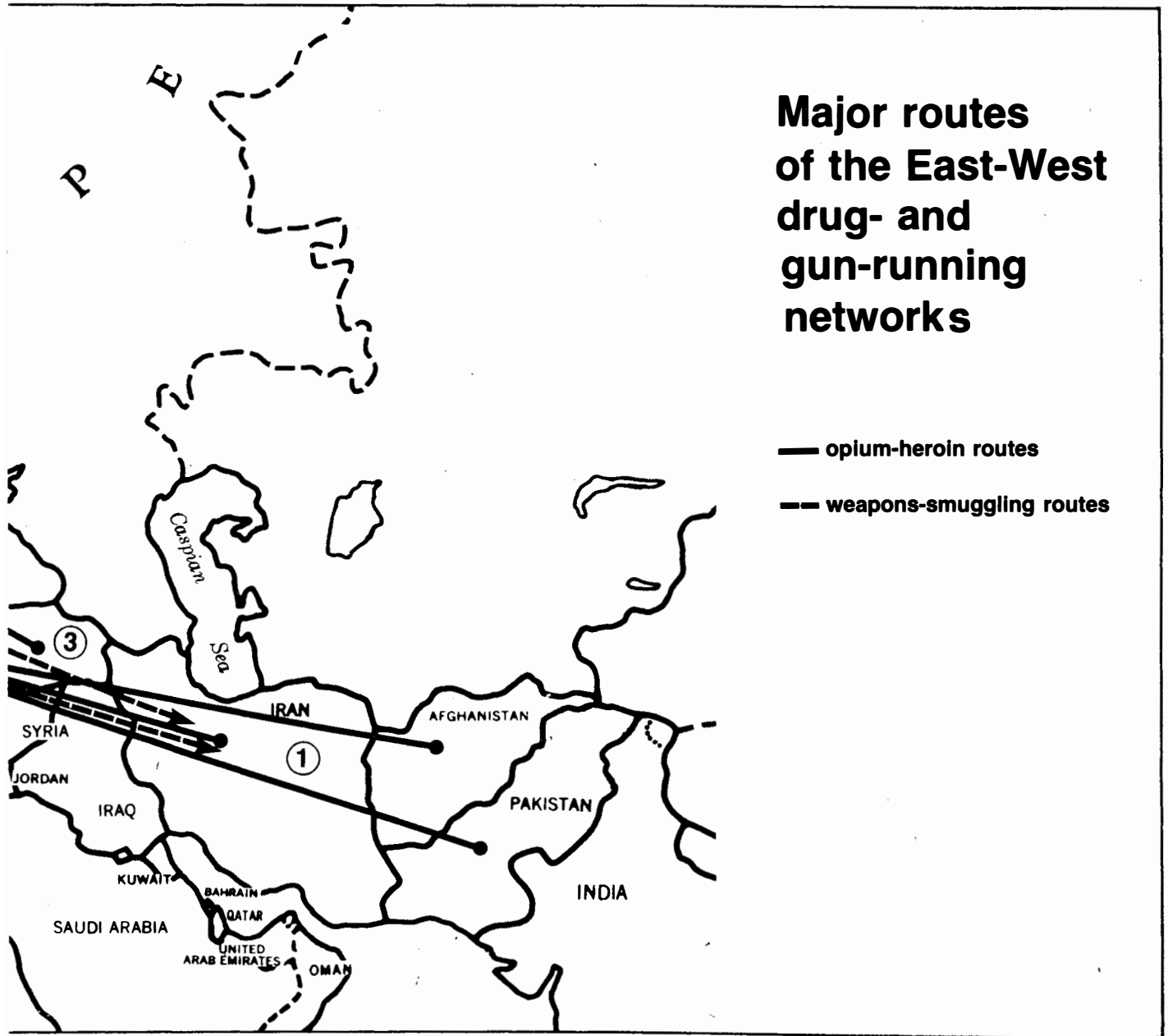
1. Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan make up the Golden Crescent, the world's leading opium-producing area. Since 1979 when Pakistani dictator Gen. Zia ul-Haq took power, Pakistan alone has become the world's leading source of raw opium. 55 percent of U.S. opium comes from Pakistan. Opium output has also greatly increased in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran.

2. Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria are principal refining and transshipment centers for raw opium exported from the Golden Crescent. Major refineries for transforming opium into morphine base are found in eastern Turkey, a desolate region populated largely by the Kurdish minority group. Other major refining areas are located in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley of southern Lebanon, from which refined heroin is shipped to Europe. The ports of Lebanon are prime sites for importing of black market guns, ammunition, and other military wares.

3. Eastern Turkey manufactures morphine base which is shipped into Italy, via Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, much of it making its way into the Trento-Bolzano-Verona triangle in northern Italy. Sofia, Bulgaria is a center of the illegal drug and gun mafia's activities and a transshipment point along this route. Trieste, Italy, a city on the Yugoslavian border, is a transshipment point for illegal weapons to the Mideast Golden Crescent via Turkey.

4. Milan, Italy was the base of Stipam International Transports, the center of "the biggest arms dealing network in the world," according to Judge Carlo Palermo, the Trento magistrate who ordered arrests of eight Stipam-linked individuals on Nov. 23. Stipam served as the channel through which huge quantities of arms were shipped to "left" and "right" terrorists within Italy, terrorist groupings throughout the rest of Europe, and to Muammar Qaddafi's Libya. Another large portion of these illegal arms ship-

Major routes of the East-West drug- and gun-running networks



ments made its way to the Middle East. These deliveries were paid for in consignments of hard drugs into Italy, which were shipped through Sicily to markets in the United States.

5. Arms imported via Turkey into the Mideast and Golden Crescent move through northern Italy to the Bulgarian Black Sea ports of Varna and Borqaz, down to Istanbul then along the Black Sea coast via Trabzond and Samson into eastern Turkey with some arms passing into Iran through Turkish Kurdistan. Another entry point for illegal weapons into Turkey is Istanbul. The arms move through the straits to Ayvalik, and north to Izmir, a large illegal arms depot. A third route is out of Beirut to Iskanderun and then to Marseilles, France.

6. Sicily, particularly the city of Palermo and environs, is the site where liquefied morphine is made into heroin. It is also a trans-

shipment point for heroin refined in Lebanon. From Sicily, the drugs are moved into North America, where they are further diluted and packaged for street-level sales, and into South America, where Bolivia was the major point of entry before the recent crackdown by the new Bolivian government.

7. Munich is a central distribution point of eastern Turkey-supplied morphine base for northern Europe and Scandinavia, serving the heroin refineries which in turn serve such centers of retail drug traffic as Copenhagen's Christiania. Christiania, a youth counter-culture experiment in "alternative life styles," located in the center of Copenhagen, is off-limits to Danish police. Yet, it is known to be the central distribution point for drugs in Scandinavia, and much else falling under the category of "organized crime."