

Middle East Report by Judith Wyer

Is Intrabank returning?

The defunct institution may be reconstituted as part of a power play against the Lebanese Falange.

Amid the turmoil in Lebanon, the appointment of up-and-coming Arab financier Roger Tamraz as president of the powerful Beirut-based Intra Investment Company was generally overlooked. A Lebanese source (who worked for Intrabank, Intra Investment's notorious mother company before its early-1970s bankruptcy) warns that Tamraz's appointment is a sign that the Lebanese Orthodox mafia who ran Intrabank are moving to oust U.S. ally, President Amin Gemayel, and take control of greater Beirut away from the Falange as Lebanon is partitioned.

The Lebanese ethnic hierarchy is led by "Brahmin" orthodox clans, such as the Sursocks, the Trads, and the Bustros. They are reportedly using their many agents of influence spanning Lebanon's ethnics against President Gemayel and his Falangist Party. The mysterious entrepreneur Tamraz is considered to be one such agent.

Historically this Orthodox elite has had ties to Moscow through the links between the Russian Patriarchate and Antiochan Patriarchate in Syria. So close are these links that Moscow has a representative to the Antiochan Patriarchate in Damascus which serves as a channel of influence.

The London-Moscow Narodny Bank, which predates the 1917 revolution, and today is often used for such purposes as gun trafficking, held 5 per cent of Intrabank.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, Intrabank was a leading channel for or-

ganized crime internationally. It was so notorious that, through early 1983, Washington's policy was to keep all Lebanese banks out of the United States. Intrabank was rumored to have run guns to every anti-American ethnic group in the Mideast. Through the pro-U.S. Maronite Edde family and the Lebanese central bank, Intrabank was dismembered into a number of separate entities such as Intra Investments and the Beirut-based Bank al Meshraq, using Morgan Guaranty to facilitate its "reorganization."

Today, Intra Investment has substantial interests in institutions which oversee not only the freewheeling Beirut banking system, but also the lucrative gun and drug smuggling which now permeates war-torn Lebanon. Intra holds interests in the Port of Beirut, the Casino du Liban, Metra Insurance, Middle East Airlines, and Air Liban.

Until now the Falange's power has, in part, rested on its military control of the port of Beirut and the Casino du Liban. Tamraz's appointment is probably part of an effort to seize control of the port and casino.

Within three years of Intrabank's bankruptcy, the Lebanese civil war erupted under Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The invading Assad regime of Syria, which maintains quiet but close ties with Kissinger, drove the Eddes from Lebanon. Raymond Edde, the only candidate for the presidency of Lebanon who could have unified the country is still in exile.

Of the 1,800-plus Intrabank employees, only a handful were Falangists. The bank was pure Orthodox, as was its titular head, Yusuf Beidas, a Palestinian who feigned being a Muslim. Intrabank supported the Syrian National Socialist Party, the neo-Nazi Party founded by Orthodox Antoine Saade, a fanatic pursuer of a "Greater Syria" in the Levant.

In the late 1960s, Tamraz, then with Kidder Peabody, attempted to bail out Intrabank. Later he reportedly set up a major illegal arms trafficker to Iran, Cyrus Hashemi. One of the conduits for illegal arms to Iran is Hossein Mousavi, who has claimed responsibility for blowing up the U.S. embassy in Beirut this spring. Based in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley, Mousavi has had numerous recent meetings with Lebanese warlord Camille Chamoun, a nominal Maronite. Chamoun's closest political associate is Cyril Bustros, a leading Orthodox oligarch, who penetrated the Falange.

In August 1982, the Chamouns held a secret meeting at their family retreat with former Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon and others to discuss the permanent Israel-Syria partition of Lebanon and plan to share the spoils of the growing Lebanese black-market economy, with Beirut, the financial hub, coming under Orthodox control.

The Soviets have multiple channels in Beirut including the Bulgarian link through the Litex bank, a partially owned entity of the Bulgarian Foreign Trade Bank, which Chamoun controls. Moscow's recent move to trim the staff of Bank Narodny in Beirut is seen as a cover.

Should the mafia succeed, it will be a death blow to the American influence in Beirut, the intelligence hub of the Middle East, and will strengthen Moscow's bid for control of the region.