

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

The Syrian connection

A three-year-long investigation by police officials in Spain has unveiled what many suspected.

Syria, as we have long known, is the center of international terrorism. But Syrian diplomatic bags, often used to smuggle weapons, also frequently contain large shipments of heroin to Europe. Police in Spain have now proven it.

Syria's involvement in running drugs is nothing new; Damascus has decades of experiences in controlling the Lebanese drug trade. However, the Syrian annexation of large parts of Lebanon has now brought under the sole control of Damascus all of Lebanon's drug production. Moreover, under Syrian military control, regions which used to produce hashish have been converted to the production of large quantities of opium. In recent years, Syrian intelligence, under the personal control of Hafez al Assad's brother, Rifaat, has created some 600 laboratories within Lebanon to refine opium into heroin.

According to the Dec. 6 issue of the London weekly *Ad Dastour*, Spanish police began their investigation in early 1982, after 40 kilograms of heroin were found in the Madrid flat of a Syrian national. By May 1985, investigators were able to prove that the Syrian drug connection in Spain was run directly by the ambassador, Riad Siadj, through his security officer, Mohammed Rowalha, and his general consul, Hajj Ibrahim.

Along the way, Spanish police arrested scores of Syrian couriers, some with diplomatic immunity. Two diplomats are reported to have been arrested and expelled. The issue heated

up to the point of threatening relations between Madrid and Damascus.

After the preliminary arrests, a major break came on May 29, 1985, when police arrested one Yusuf Kassar, a long-time courier, as he was about to open the trunk of a car. Inside were several kilograms of heroin. The car belonged to Hajj Ibrahim, the general consul, and had been left for four days in a parking lot, the usual procedure of the Syrian smugglers. (The heroin would arrive by diplomatic bag, be deposited in the car, and then four days later, Kassar would remove and sell it.)

Interrogation of Kassar revealed that Syria was introducing large quantities of drugs to Spain through two routes; the diplomatic bags arriving directly in Madrid, the route considered the safest, and another route from Syria to Barcelona by truck via Bulgaria and Turkey. Two Syrians were arrested in Barcelona, from where heroin was sent elsewhere in Europe.

Within Spain, the network has been run jointly by the Syrian diplomatic mission and a Lebanese millionaire, Ali Abdullah. Proceedings of the sales were deposited in two accounts in Marseilles, at the Banco Hispano-Americano and the Banco di Bilbao, under the name of Mohammed Khalidal, another Lebanese.

But the Syrian connection in Spain is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

First, there is growing evidence that drug proceeds have been used by the Syrian intelligence services to buy

weapons and otherwise service the numerous terrorist organizations they control in Europe. Barcelona is of special importance. In recent years, it has become the headquarters not only of Spain's separatist groups like the Basque ETA, but of others such as GRAPO. A July 1984 series of arrests also revealed Barcelona to be the base for Iranian hit squads deployed throughout Europe. These were found to be associated with, Eric Moreau, one of the founders of the French terrorist organization, Direct Action.

Second, Syria has clearly become one of the most important heroin producers in the Middle East, if not the world, thanks to its control over Lebanon and informal deals with the Israeli mafia represented by Ariel Sharon.

One victim of such deals is Egypt, which has been targeted by both Israeli and Syrian drug-smuggling networks. In early November, Egyptian police shot dead what was believed to be an Israeli intelligence agent working for the Israeli mafia, with 10 kilograms of heroin in his flat. However, Egyptian narcotics officers have made no secret of the fact that most of the heroin in their country is coming from Syria.

Nothing new: In 1981, President Sadat ordered a crack-down against drug smugglers, calling them "Syrian agents."

More than 60 kilograms of heroin has been seized since the beginning of 1985, compared to a mere 19 kilograms for the whole of 1984. The heroin and cocaine-smuggling business within Egypt is estimated at \$3 billion a year—equal to the cost of the country's annual food consumption.

The enormous financial power this represents was shown in the collapse of the Egyptian pound during November, because smugglers began buying hard currencies.