

Syrian drug mafia tried to buy Lebanon

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Last August, a Syrian-Lebanese branch of the international drug cartel tried to buy the presidency of Lebanon for Syrian stooge Suleiman Franjeh with \$100 million in hashish and heroin revenues. The operation, centered in Mexico and directed by a well-known Soviet asset, the Antiochian archbishop of Mexico, Antonio Chedrawi, was apparently short-circuited when the Mexico City daily *Excelsior* exposed the plot to pay off Maronite Christian members of the Lebanese Parliament to cast their votes for Franjeh in the Aug. 18 presidential elections.

According to our special correspondent in Mexico City, the Lebanese ambassador to Mexico, Amin el-Khazen, traveled to Beirut in early August to negotiate the vote-buying effort, apparently on behalf of fugitive Lebanese-Mexican real estate baron and Franjeh ally Emilio Checa. Checa escaped from Mexico in April, using a phony diplomatic passport provided by Ambassador el-Khazen. He was under indictment at the time on charges that he defrauded a business partner of \$100 million in a real estate deal, and there was an arrest warrant out for him when he fled. Checa is now reportedly living in Houston at the home of his brother-in-law Anwar Aiza.

The \$100 million-plus that Checa stole was to be the payoff fund for the votes to "win" Franjeh the presidency. Checa was then campaign manager for all of Latin America—where an estimated 6 million Lebanese live—for the Franjeh candidacy.

The scheme, which would have consolidated Syria's absorption of all of Lebanon under a federated Greater Syria, apparently was launched with a series of trips to Mexico by Robert Franjeh over the last two years.

When President Amin Gemayel traveled to Damascus on the eve of the Lebanese elections to consult with Syrian President Hafez Assad, that was apparently read by the Chedrawi-Checa group as the green light to put their payoff scheme into full swing.

The pro-Syrian wing of the Maronite community in Mexico has long been suspected of playing a pivotal role in the "Middle East connection" in the international drug cartel. Emilio Checa, a former business partner of the late Tony Franjeh and Rifaat Assad (brother of Syrian President Hafez Assad and reputed head of the Syrian mafia), is at the center of that connection. According to Mexican sources, Checa's real estate ventures have been used to launder the dope rev-

enues of Mexican drug kingpin Rafael Caro Quintero, apparently through a Guadalajara associate in the real estate business named Plaza Boneita.

Another intimate of Archbishop Chedrawi and Checa, Badih Pechalani, was jailed in Guadalajara in April 1987 on charges of drug trafficking. Pechalani, the director of the Lebanese Center in that city, is also the local head of the Syrian Popular Party (PPS), and has been linked to Ernesto Fonseca, a major figure in the Mexican branch of the Colombia-based Medellín drug cartel.

A well-timed intervention

On the eve of the first round of the Lebanese presidential vote, *Excelsior* blew the whistle on the planned buy-off. On Aug. 15, reporter Jesús Rangel published an interview with Dr. Alfredo Jalife, a prominent member of the Lebanese Maronite community in Mexico City and an ally of Lebanese Forces chief Dr. Samir Geagea. Jalife, in response to questions about Emilio Checa's flight from Mexican justice and his involvement in money laundering and capital flight, revealed the plot to buy off a majority of Maronite members of Parliament to cast their votes for Franjeh, who had just announced his availability for the presidency.

That interview was followed the next day with a half-page ad signed by Dr. Jalife opposing the Syrian takeover of Lebanon by means of the Franjeh candidacy. The treasonous effort exposed, the Maronite community both inside Lebanon and in Mexico, closed ranks behind Geagea and Lebanese Army chief Gen. Michel Aoun.

The attempted buyoff blocked, the Maronite parliamentarians boycotted the Aug. 18 vote, and a subsequent effort, sponsored by Hafez Assad and U.S. State Department official Richard Murphy, to install a Franjeh puppet, Michel Dehar, in the presidency during September in a final effort to assemble a quorum of parliamentarians to choose Gemayel's successor.

Ambassador el-Khazen, still in Beirut, apparently decided that it was no longer wise to return to Mexico, particularly since his role in Emilio Checa's escape from Mexico was now exposed. According to our sources, the ambassador is still in Lebanon, and ex-President Amin Gemayel is now under de facto house arrest in Beirut, on charges that he stole \$200 million from the Lebanese Forces just prior to his stepping down as President.

Emilio Checa is still in hiding somewhere near Houston, Texas, his hopes of a triumphal return to a Franjeh-run Lebanon dashed, for the time being.

And in a brutal move that suggests that the Lebanese mafia in Mexico is not prepared to roll over simply because the payoff scheme was exposed, the mother of *Excelsior* reporter Jesús Rangel was found dead in October in her home in Mexico City, her throat slit. The two men apparently responsible for the murder of the 70-year-old woman escaped, and their identities remain unknown.