

## Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

### The A. Basmouk connection

*The dope-dealing Assad brothers of Syria may soon find that they and their friends are out of luck.*

**E**vidence is accumulating that a certain A. Basmouk, a shadowy Syrian national reported currently to be in the New York area, may figure prominently in efforts by Syrian President Hafez Assad and his gangster brother Rifaat to expand their organized-crime networks in the United States.

According to reliable Arab sources, the corrupt Assad brothers are working closely with the Mafia in New York and New Jersey, as well as in Sunnyvale, California, and Lynchburg, Virginia, to facilitate the entry of illegal drugs from the Middle East into the United States. Cooperating with the Assads are several well-placed U.S. Customs agents and Bureau of Immigration officials, whom the Syrian regime has managed to buy off.

Last year, at Kennedy Airport in New York, one Riad Rahmou, a Syrian national related to Hikmat Chehabi, Hafez Assad's chief of staff, was picked up by the Drug Enforcement Agency trying to smuggle in a large cache of drugs from the Middle East.

The incident was immediately hushed up, and Rahmou was released and has never been brought to trial.

Although the Assad family is known to be involved in numerous organized-crime operations, drugs are the mainstay of their dealings. Following Ankara's highly effective clampdown last year on illegal drug trafficking through Turkey—

long the favorite route of Middle East dope smugglers—drug transshipments have been diverted into Syria, and from there to Europe and the United States.

According to Arab sources, the Syrians are working closely with the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad and with corrupt elements in Turkish intelligence to protect and expand the Syrian connection. Specifically, the Assad regime, which is made up almost exclusively of members of Syria's minority Alawite sect has cultivated close ties with its "Alawite brothers" in the opium-growing Iskenderun region in southern Turkey. According to the sources, opium from Iskenderun is being smuggled into Syria by Assad-linked Turkish Alawites.

Syria's connections in Cyprus and Greece, much augmented since the installation of Socialist Andreas Papandreou as Prime Minister in Athens, are also important. Both Cyprus and Greece are reported to be major transshipment points on the Syrian-European drug route. In recent months, Syrian-Cypriot-Greek trade has jumped dramatically, providing a perfect cover for enhanced drug trafficking. At the same time, a direct ferry link between the Syrian port of Latakia, an Assad/Alawite stronghold, and the Greek port of Volos has just been established.

The Greek-Cyprus connection goes deeper. According to intelligence insiders, Rifaat Assad is part

owner of Monte Carlo radio, along with a Greek Cypriot who is reputed to be deeply involved in the international diamond market, a market whose long-standing control by Israeli organized crime and related networks has become infamous.

Syria is also angling to maintain a controlling interest in Lebanon, which is viewed by Assad and his friends in Israel as a highly profitable plantation for opium and hashish cultivation.

To this end, Assad is said to have decided to support old feudal Lebanese warlord Camille Chamoun as president of Lebanon in the elections there this summer. Chamoun, who is known in Lebanon as a British agent, has recently allied himself with the drug-connected Lebanese left and Libya.

The Assad brothers' efforts to expand their sordid operations in Syria into a far-flung international crime empire have run into opposition inside Syria, where a revolt against the regime continues.

Despite reports of an apparent calming of the internal Syrian situation, the town of Hama is said to still be out of Assad's control, and tension grips the country as a whole.

This month, Hammoud el-Choufi, a former Syrian ambassador to the United Nations and firm opponent of the Assad regime, issued a call from Baghdad, Iraq, for the formation of a national front to overthrow the Syrian government. Choufi, who resigned in December 1979 in part because of his opposition to Syrian support for Khomeini in Iran, said that all measures including "armed struggle" would be needed to topple the Assad regime.