

# Al-Kassar arrest revives scandal of Bush role in Lockerbie coverup

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Just when George Bush thought that he had forever buried the Lockerbie scandal, authorities in Spain early in June nabbed fugitive narco-terrorist Mansur Al-Kassar. As a result, one of the President's worst fears may have been revived.

Al-Kassar, a Syrian national with ties to the regime of Hafez Assad in Damascus, had been accused in 1989 of masterminding the Dec. 21, 1988 bombing of Pan American Airlines Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 270 people perished.

At the time of the Lockerbie tragedy, Al-Kassar had been secretly employed by the U.S. government as the so-called "second channel" negotiating the release of American hostages held in Beirut, Lebanon. Al-Kassar had, according to congressional testimony, received an estimated \$2.5 million from Oliver North's secret Iran-Contra Swiss bank accounts for his role in providing Soviet-made weapons to the Nicaraguan Contra rebels. Al-Kassar's ties to the Reagan and Bush administrations apparently continued long after the Iran-Contra scandal was exposed and North, Adm. John Poindexter, and others were booted out of the government.

According to a report prepared by former Israeli intelligence officer Juval Aviv, Al-Kassar was still working with a CIA team in Frankfurt, Germany in the autumn of 1988, when he agreed to help Syrian-sponsored terrorist Ahmed Jibril, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, plant the bomb on board Flight 103. According to the Aviv study, Al-Kassar had infiltrated several members of his Bekaa Valley heroin-smuggling ring onto the baggage handling crew at Frankfurt airport, and they had been able to bypass Pan Am security to plant the bomb on the plane, using the same *modus operandi* by which they were regularly smuggling heroin into the United States.

After U.S. Rep. James Traficant (D-Ohio) released sections of the Aviv report, Bush administration officials adamantly denied the charges. A House Government Operations subcommittee held hearings last year probing allegations that the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had been using one of Al-Kassar's drug couriers as an informant and may have inadvertently abetted the planting of the bomb on Flight 103 by sanctioning a "controlled delivery" of heroin through

Frankfurt airport for which the bomb was then substituted.

Despite DEA public denials, well-placed DEA sources have told *EIR* that the agency's Paris office was aware of the links to the Al-Kassar smuggling ring and had vehemently protested to headquarters. Paris DEA also apparently obtained evidence that CIA personnel had tipped off associates of Al-Kassar of his imminent arrest should he return to Paris. That warning was delivered in January 1989, within weeks after the Lockerbie bombing.

Furthermore, the West German federal police agency BKA revealed in 1990 that it had evidence that Al-Kassar was indeed in Frankfurt throughout much of December 1988, and that Al-Kassar had sold explosives at that time to members of the Baader-Meinhof Red Army Faction terrorists that were later used in the assassination of Germany's top banker, Alfred Herrhausen. Herrhausen, the chairman of Deutsche Bank and an important adviser to Chancellor Helmut Kohl, was killed in November 1989 by a bomb.

*Time* magazine devoted its April 27 cover story to "The Untold Story of Pan Am 103." The article, by senior *Time*-Life correspondent Roy Rowan, revived the Aviv allegations about Al-Kassar's role in the Lockerbie massacre, and pointed to the Syrian's collusion with the Frankfurt-based CIA team. Rowan went beyond the initial Aviv report and published new details:

- In January 1990, Pan Am attorney James Shaughnessy, Aviv, and a former U.S. Army polygraphist traveled to Frankfurt to administer lie detector tests to two Pan Am baggage handlers, Kilin Caslan Tuzcu and Roland O'Neill. Both men were on duty the day Flight 103 blew up. According to testimony given by the polygraphist to a Washington, D.C. federal grand jury, both men flunked the tests. The specific areas in which he said the two men were most clearly lying dealt with the switching of bags and the planting of the bomb aboard Flight 103.

- After Pan Am arranged to have Tuzcu and O'Neill travel from Frankfurt to London on a pretext of company business, British authorities refused to detain or arrest the men, claiming that they viewed them as "scapegoats."

This bizarre behavior of the British authorities lent credence to charges first published by syndicated columnist Jack Anderson in 1990 that President Bush and then-British Prime

Minister Margaret Thatcher had secretly agreed in April 1989 to bury the truth about Syria's role in the Lockerbie tragedy because it would politically blow up in their faces.

### **Government interference in federal court?**

When the *Time* magazine story hit the newsstands, Thomas C. Platt, the chief judge of the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York, was furious. Platt is presiding over a complex civil suit captioned *In Re Air Disaster At Lockerbie, Scotland on December 21, 1988*. The primary action involves a suit by relatives of the victims of the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing, who are suing the airline for millions of dollars, claiming that the airline was responsible for the bomb getting on board because of seriously flawed security procedures. Pan Am in turn is suing the U.S. government, claiming that the CIA and other agencies had been complicit in the bomb plot.

Initially, Judge Platt had gone along with Pan Am discovery requests against a number of U.S. government agencies, including the CIA, DEA, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and the State Department. However, after a series of highly irregular *in camera* briefings from government officials, the contents of which neither Platt nor the government is willing to disclose, Platt reversed every one of his discovery orders and effectively foreclosed Pan Am's ability to pursue the Al-Kassar and related issues.

In a motion filed with Judge Platt on March 28, Shaughnessy detailed the court's action: "The court noted that the government had approached the court *ex parte* and had suggested that, instead of submitting the documents for the court's review, the government simply provide a series of *ex parte* briefings to the court. The court also recounted in the order that the court had accepted the government's *ex parte* proposal and, in fact, had received *ex parte* briefings from the government on undisclosed dates by undisclosed government employees concerning undisclosed subjects. Based on those *ex parte* briefings, the court quashed the subpoenas defendants had served on the federal government agencies."

When the *Time* magazine story was published, the Lockerbie case had just gone to trial. According to sources close to the case, Judge Platt considered fining Pan Am several million dollars, based on his suspicion that the *Time* story had been arranged by Pan Am executives in order to influence the jury.

The case against Pan Am is now in the final stages of trial. Regardless of the outcome of the primary suit by the families against Pan Am, it seems unlikely that Judge Platt will permit any evidence to surface that might jeopardize the Bush administration coverup.

### **Protection may have been lifted**

Despite the widespread allegations about his role in the Lockerbie massacre, and despite standing Interpol alerts and arrest warrants in several countries, Al-Kassar had enjoyed

a charmed existence for the last four years. He traveled back and forth between Damascus, and his villa in Marbella, Spain. Not even the fact that Spanish police photographed Al-Kassar meeting with Medellín cocaine cartel kingpin Pablo Escobar Gaviria (and Siris Assad, the son of Syria's powerful vice president, Rifaat Assad) deterred his travels.

Al-Kassar's troubles ostensibly began after the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina in March, when his name surfaced in newspaper accounts as a possible suspect in the bombing that left several people dead and scores injured. More recently, the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12* published photos of Al-Kassar in Damascus wining and dining Argentine Ambassador Munir Menem. Munir Menem is the brother of President Carlos Menem. The Menem family originated in the same Syrian village as the Al-Kassar family. When word leaked out that arrangements had been made to grant Al-Kassar and a number of his associates Argentine citizenship and Argentine passports, all hell broke loose.

In mid-June, Argentine magistrate Efraín Rosales Saadi, the man who granted the passports to Al-Kassar and his friends, was found dead, according to an Argentine source in Europe. If the report is accurate, his death occurred less than a week after Al-Kassar's arrest in Madrid. Al-Kassar was taken into custody on an arrest warrant from another Argentine judge, charging the Syrian with obtaining false Argentine documents.

According to an Israeli source, following Al-Kassar's arrest, Spanish authorities searched his Marbella home and discovered a safe filled with diaries and business papers. The Israeli source reports that Al-Kassar is now spilling his guts to the Spanish police about his work for the Reagan and Bush administrations, the secret dealings between Washington and Damascus, and the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, including his personal role in developing the cover story that Libyan intelligence, acting on its own, had blown up the plane.

Juval Aviv, the New York City-based private investigator who conducted the initial investigation for Pan Am, is circumspect about where the Lockerbie probe will go from here: "The *Time* magazine story has fortunately put things back in perspective, and the arrest of Mr. Al-Kassar could lead to a real breakthrough in the case. I still stand by my original investigative report. I have no doubt that the Syrians were deeply involved in the Lockerbie bombing, as were the Iranians and elements of Libyan intelligence. In my initial investigation, I developed evidence of a kind of 'Terror, Inc.' engaged in both narcotics smuggling and terrorism for hire, running out of the Middle East into Europe. I cited the involvement of Libya in the Pan Am plot and I even referenced Mr. Al-Kassar's links to Tripoli.

"I was deeply disturbed last year when the U.S. Department of Justice indicted the two Libyans and left the world with the impression that Syria and Iran were blameless. Now, perhaps, in spite of that action and in spite of the events in federal district court in Brooklyn, the full story will come out."