

Guns and drugs: the Syrian connection

by Joseph Brewda

During the 1980s, Syria, and Syria-occupied Lebanon, emerged as one of the world's leading opium poppy plantations and heroin refineries. By 1990, the U.S. State Department and other U.S. government agencies conservatively estimated that the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad was earning at least \$1 billion a year from the trade. The same agencies also reported that the trade was used to finance terrorist organizations based there, including Hezbollah, which held dozens of Americans hostage at the time, and the PFLP-General Command, which was implicated in the downing of Pan-Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland on Dec. 21, 1988.

Yet, throughout that decade, Vice President and, later, President George Bush, routinely worked with the Syrian government to sell arms to Iran, the Nicaraguan Contras, and the Afghan mujahideen fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Veterans of the Afghan mujahideen are responsible for most of the important terrorist incidents occurring globally today, including those targeting the United States.

Patron of a criminal

Syrian arms- and drug-runner Monzer al-Kassar, is a good example of criminals that George Bush has patronized. According to a wide range of published sources, Monzer al-Kassar, together with his brother Ghassan, were two of the Syrian regime's primary arms- and drug-traffickers throughout the 1980s. Career drug smugglers with a string of arrests throughout Western Europe, the al-Kassar brothers emerged big-time after Ghassan married the daughter of Gen. Ali Duba, the head of Syrian intelligence, who oversaw narcotics production in occupied Lebanon.

Despite the fact that Monzer al-Kassar was officially under investigation by the FBI, CIA, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the U.S. Customs Service, for crimes ranging from arms- and drug-trafficking to airline-hijacking and kidnapping, he was routinely used by the Reagan-Bush administration throughout most of the 1980s to sell Soviet bloc arms to the Contras in Nicaragua.

As of 1984, for example, the DEA had identified Monzer al-Kassar as the Syrian drug-lord responsible for distribution of heroin and hashish in France, Italy, and Spain. The same year, Jorge Luis Ochoa, a founder and kingpin of the Colombian Medellín cocaine cartel, was a guest at al-Kassar's estate in Marbella, Spain. A year later, al-Kassar joined up with

Canadian cocaine dealer Kenneth Sydney Young in Rio de Janeiro, to establish a connection between Brazil and Europe which has been used for heroin and cocaine trafficking.

The DEA, other U.S. agencies, and other governments were also investigating the al-Kassar family-owned Banco de Bilbao of Portugal, in which General Duba, Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad, and his brother and heroin kingpin Rifaat al-Assad maintained sizable accounts.

However, at the same time as al-Kassar was wanted by the DEA and other law enforcement agencies, he was a business partner with Oliver North in organizing the shipment of East bloc-made AK-47 assault rifles to the Contras, on behalf of the George Bush-directed secret White House support apparatus, run through the National Security Council, via a unit called the Special Situation Group/Crisis Pre-Planning Group, as established under National Security Decision Directives 2 and 3.

Evidence of al-Kassar's involvement in gun-smuggling on behalf of the U.S. government first emerged in 1986, when a Danish freighter, the *Pia Vesta*, was detained by Panamanian authorities en route to Nicaragua. Found on board, were Soviet trucks and hundreds of tons of AK-47 rifles and anti-tank rockets.

Documents seized by Iran-Contra investigators later established that the arms onboard the *Pia Vesta* had been destined for the Contras, and that the shipment had been financed and arranged in a three-way deal among al-Kassar, North, and a Libyan bank based in Madrid. The ship was owned by SA Shipping of Copenhagen, and was managed by CSF of Switzerland. CSF was a firm identified by Iran-Contra investigators as used by North to run arms to Iran and the Contras. Another ship owned by the North network, the *Erria*, shipped tons of Polish arms to the Contras.

Al-Kassar's primary partner in this venture, according to seized files of North's Lake Resources front company, was Gen. Richard Secord (ret.), a longtime sidekick and business partner of former CIA official and Bush Presidential campaign speechwriter Theodore G. Shackley. According to press accounts in several nations, other al-Kassar partners in the supply operation included the Lisbon-based Defex Corp., run from behind the scenes by ex-CIA official Thomas Clines (a Shackley intimate), and a variety of front companies of the Special Air Services (SAS), the British elite "anti-terrorist" commando force. Among these were KMS Ltd., which North had hired in 1983 to mine Managua harbor in Nicaragua, and had also used to train the terrorist and drug-trafficking Afghan mujahideen.

Part of the financing of the Contra arms purchases was made by arrangement with the Medellín Cartel. Al-Kassar's relations with the cartel were further identified in August 1987, when Belgian police seized a Paraguayan airliner carrying 115 kilograms of cocaine. The West German national arrested while attempting to pick up the shipment, Erich Bunte, confessed that he was working for al-Kassar, and that

he had been present earlier, in July, at a meeting at al-Kassar's Marbella estate which included al-Kassar and Medellín Cartel kingpins Pablo Escobar Gaviria and Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha. On July 27, Spanish police prevented al-Kassar from entering the country. He was traveling aboard his private jet with Salman Izz-Edden, the brother of the Syrian military commander in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley—the main center of Syrian opium cultivation. At that moment, Rifaat Assad was reportedly at al-Kassar's estate waiting to meet them.

During the same period, the same cast of characters were busy selling arms to Iran. For example, a 1987 investigation into the illegal export of weapons to Iran by the Italian firm Borletti, revealed that the orders and shipments were coordinated from Barcelona by the Bovega company. Joint investigations in Italy and Spain revealed that Bovega was run by Monzer al-Kassar, on behalf of Rifaat al-Assad and his son Firaas al-Assad.

Pan-Am Flight 103

But al-Kassar was not only involved in arms and drugs. Investigations by several governments into the explosion of Pan-Am Flight 103, which killed 270 people, reportedly determined that the action had been ordered by the Syrian government, using the Lebanese-based PFLP-General Command, led by former Syrian Army officer Ahmed Jibril.

In order to cover up Syria's role, the Bush and Thatcher administrations ordered a press blackout on the evidence, and instead began to falsely accuse Libya of the crime. In 1992, the U.S. and British governments organized U.N. Security Council sanctions against Libya, under that claim. But, while no evidence has ever been publicly presented showing Libyan involvement, evidence has been presented which tends to indicate Syrian responsibility, including that of Oliver North's crony, al-Kassar.

According to Pan-Am company investigations, made public by U.S. Rep. James Traficant (D-Ohio) in 1989, for example, the Syrian government ordered the incident, and used members of al-Kassar's drug ring, who were baggage handlers in the Pan-Am cargo area at Frankfurt airport, to plant the suitcase that contained the bomb onboard the aircraft.

According to the Pan-Am report, a Frankfurt-based CIA team may have wittingly permitted the Syrian massacre, in order to silence a rival CIA team that had unearthed evidence of drug payoffs to the Frankfurt-based operatives. At least three CIA officials, including the deputy station chief in Beirut, perished in the crash. They reportedly directed a team assigned to locate the American hostages, and to determine whether a rescue operation might be possible. The hostages were held by Hezbollah, which was then earning an estimated \$100 million annually in heroin sales, according to a U.S. Congressional investigation. Al-Kassar was the major vendor of Hezbollah heroin. Reportedly, the team discovered that the CIA Frankfurt unit was profiteering from a deal with al-Kassar.

Afghanistan drugs: a withdrawal syndrome

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The Nicaraguan Contras were not the only "secret army" run through George Bush's "secret parallel government" chain of command, that got their financing through the sale of illegal drugs during the 1980s. As EIR documented, in an Oct. 13, 1995 Special Report entitled "New Terror International Targets South Asia," over 1979-89, the United States, along with the British and the Israelis, ran a surrogate war in Afghanistan, against the Soviet Red Army. Although the U.S. Congress approved a total of \$3 billion in aid for the "afghansi mujahideen" effort, and Saudi Arabia and other allies poured in matching amounts of money, an estimated 90% of the cost of the war was actually covered by the sale of Golden Crescent heroin and opium—produced in vast quantities in Afghanistan by the Afghan rebels, and processed in underground laboratories all along the Afghani-Pakistani frontier.

At one point, at the peak of the Afghanistan War, in the mid-1980s, the Golden Crescent was providing more than half of the world supply of heroin.

Like the Contra operation in Central America, the afghansi insurgency was run, top-down, by the George Bush command in the Reagan White House. Sources in Washington have told EIR that as much as \$20 billion in Colombian cartel drug proceeds are believed to have been funneled to the Afghan rebels, as part of the cartels' deal with Vice President Bush and his secret team.

Our New Delhi correspondents have sent in this dispatch, updating the EIR report from October 1995.

According to the National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee (NNICC) annual report, which is prepared by the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Afghanistan remained the second largest producer of illicit opium in 1994. The U.S. government estimated that 950 metric tons of opium were produced on 29,180 hectares of opium poppy cultivation, a 38% increase over 1993's production estimate. Officially, however, opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has been banned since 1957.

Observers claim that the U.S. government estimate is, in fact, very conservative, and considering that most of Afghanistan's opium poppy is grown on irrigated land, the actual