
Profile: Hafez al-Assad

U.S. cozies up to narco-terrorist

by Jeffrey Steinberg

When Secretary of State James Baker III traveled to Damascus, Syria in September to confer with America's newest Gulf "ally" Hafez al-Assad, the Bush administration was spitting on the graves of hundreds of Americans who have been tortured or died at the hands of Middle Eastern terrorists over the past decade.

The Alawite regime in Damascus is the biggest single sponsor of terrorism directed against American citizens. Now this regime has been designated in George Bush's "new world order" as a leading satrap in the new *Pax Americana*—in Deputy Secretary of State Larry Eagleburger's words, "a force for stability in the eastern Mediterranean." Since the major news media seem to have amnesia on this subject, let us recall the following "stabilizing" actions by the Assad clan:

- the April 18, 1983 car bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, in which the entire American team handling the Middle East was murdered, along with scores of other embassy officials. According to sources familiar with the official probe of the bomb attack, a team of Iranian-sponsored terrorists, including an American fugitive David Belfield, carried out the bomb assault, under the immediate supervision and logistical direction of Syrian Army officers operating out of the occupied Bekaa Valley of Lebanon.

- the Oct. 23, 1983 car bombing of the U.S. Marine compound in Beirut, which resulted in the deaths of 241 soldiers. Within days of the bomb attack, the Reagan White House was in possession of solid evidence that this second mass atrocity in six months had been staged out of the same Bekaa Valley Syrian Army-controlled territory by terrorists backed by the Assad regime's logistical expertise.

- the October 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship in the Mediterranean by four terrorists from the Syrian-sponsored Abul Abbas Palestinian Liberation Front. One Jewish-American, 69-year-old Leon Klinghoffer, was shot and thrown overboard in his wheelchair. In a supreme act of hypocrisy, the Anti-Defamation League, leaders of the "amen corner" for the Bush Gulf intervention and the rapprochement with Damascus, set up an anti-terrorism foundation in Klinghoffer's name. While the Reagan administration's attention was riveted on Libya's role in the *Achille Lauro* terror attack, both the CIA and the Drug Enforcement Administration obtained detailed evidence that Abul Abbas

had been sponsored by the Syrian regime, dating back to his efforts immediately after the 1975 outbreak of civil war in Lebanon to run a kidnaping ring there. Abul Abbas's partner in the ring, which presaged later hostage affairs, was Monzer al-Kassar, the son of Syria's ambassador to India, an international narcotics trafficker and a business partner of Syria's Vice President Rifaat al-Assad.

- the explosion on Dec. 21, 1988, while flying over Lockerbie, Scotland en route from Frankfurt and London to New York, of Pan American Flight 103. All 270 passengers and crew, including nearly 200 Americans, perished. Within weeks of the bomb attack, both the CIA and British MI-6 knew definitively, according to published accounts, that the atrocity had been carried out by a Damascus-based group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), headed by a captain in the Syrian Army, Ahmed Jibril. According to one account prepared by an investigator for PanAm and released to the public by Rep. James Traficant (D-Oh.), Syrian drug smuggler Monzer al-Kassar played a pivotal role in the planting of the bomb aboard the flight, providing Jibril's men access to a team of smugglers infiltrated into the ground crew at the PanAm hangar at Frankfurt Airport.

As for Bush's 'war on drugs' . . .

Al-Kassar's alleged role posed an embarrassing problem for the incoming Bush regime. Since about May 1986, al-Kassar, whom the CIA listed as a KGB agent as well as an intimate of the Assad family, had been a secret agent for the White House, ostensibly helping negotiate the release of American hostages in Lebanon.

The al-Kassar role underscored another piece of nastiness in the Bush regime's embrace of Assad. DEA files listed al-Kassar as a major international heroin and hashish trafficker, with dope convictions in England and France. The Syrian regime was known to be pumping an estimated \$1 billion a year worth of heroin into the United States from its poppy fields and laboratories in the Bekaa Valley area of occupied Lebanon. Bekaa Valley opium production has reportedly skyrocketed under Syrian Army protection; meanwhile, for the past two years the Bush administration has ordered DEA documentation of Syrian dope smuggling suppressed.

In the Bush administration's embrace of Great Britain's "balance-of-power" games, the one price it appears that Washington is prepared to pay for the aid of Damascus in crushing Saddam Hussein is Syria's annexation of a once-sovereign nation, Lebanon.

According to one experienced diplomat, one of the major topics of Secretary Baker's talks with President Assad was the prospect of Syrian terror squads killing Saddam Hussein. If that proves to be the deal—and it may take years before the truth comes out—then the Bush administration will have hired the biggest murderer of American civilians, as a covert contract murderer.