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Heroin Trafficking: The Syrian Connection



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An Intelligence Assessment

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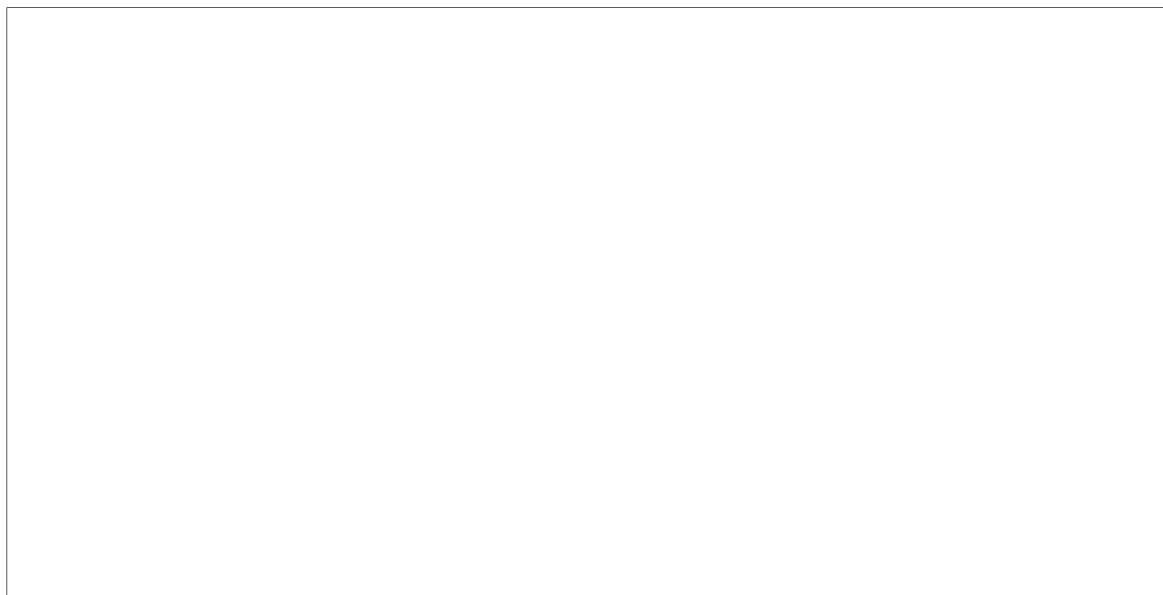
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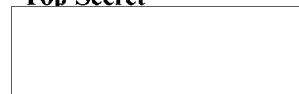


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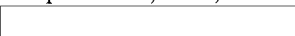
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Heroin Trafficking: The Syrian Connection



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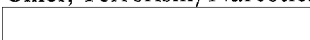
An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by 
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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis
Division, OGI, 

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**Heroin Trafficking:
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 1 February 1985
was used in this report.*

Syria has changed from a secondary staging area for drugs moving from Southwest Asia and the Middle East to Europe and the United States to an important trafficking and processing center. We judge that Syrians are more involved than ever in narcotics trafficking, that drug moguls now operate extensive distribution networks, and that Syrians are refining heroin. Aggressive narcotics control in Europe and turbulence in the Middle East prompted Syrians to expand their narcotics operations, and the persistence of these conditions is likely to encourage continued narcotics trafficking and processing in Syria. [Redacted]

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We judge that the current level of trade could not be sustained without significant involvement of Syrian officials. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] implicates various high-level government officials and senior military officers. Some Syrian-supported terrorist groups have also been implicated—at least marginally—in narcotics trafficking. [Redacted]

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We believe the Syrian Government is unlikely to crack down on narcotics traffickers. Drug law enforcement takes a backseat to other more important military, defense, and internal security matters, and the government has shown no inclination to publicize and lead a stringent antinarcotics campaign. Corrupt military officers have little incentive to curtail an activity that provides personal wealth and also relieves the Syrian Government of some of the financial burden of supporting terrorist groups. Even if Syria were to emphasize narcotics control, trafficking would be difficult to suppress because smuggling has long been tolerated by Syrian society.

[Redacted]

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The Syrian connection will probably continue to grow as a heroin source for the United States and Europe, and the increased drug activity will pose serious enforcement problems for both. With little or no practical leverage over the Syrian Government, interdiction will be the only way of reducing heroin imports. [Redacted]

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Heroin Trafficking: The Syrian Connection

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Introduction

Syria, once just a transit zone or staging area for narcotics bound for Europe, is rapidly becoming a major player in the world narcotics arena (see figure 1). Syria has long attracted all kinds of smuggling with its mountainous topography, porous borders, location astride traditional Middle East smuggling and trade routes, commercial and family links to neighboring countries, and a government and society indifferent to the problem. In this kind of environment, Syrian smugglers were well placed to move into narcotics trafficking.

[Redacted] recent disruptions in established Middle East trafficking patterns have enabled these ambitious smugglers to move into the world's most profitable crime:

- Syrians reportedly assumed control over Lebanese trafficking networks when the civil war in Lebanon limited travel and traditional smuggling routes to Europe.
- Evidence of Syrian drug distribution networks began to appear in Europe after authorities there closed down many of the mafia-controlled trafficking and heroin processing operations.
- Reports of Syrian heroin laboratories became more frequent after the Turkish Government stepped up narcotics enforcement and cracked down on heroin processing centers.

Syria's Expanded Role: The Evidence

[Redacted]

[Redacted] Syria is more than just a transit zone. Statistics on heroin seizures, intelligence, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and State Department reporting strongly suggest that Syrians are now heavily involved in trafficking drugs to Europe and the United States; that Syrian smugglers are developing more sophisticated organizations capable of distributing and marketing drugs; and that at least some of the heroin distributed is refined within Syria (see figure 2).

[Redacted]

Trafficking. Most of the evidence of increased Syrian trafficking comes from Europe, where [Redacted] authorities are arresting more Syrian traffickers and identifying Syria more often as the source of seized heroin:

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- According to State and DEA sources, French authorities believe Syrian networks are moving more heroin into France, causing heroin seizures to rise from 83 kilograms in 1982 to 170 kilograms in 1983. DEA sources confirm that Syrian nationals have set up operations near Paris and that Syrian organizations are moving heroin into France.

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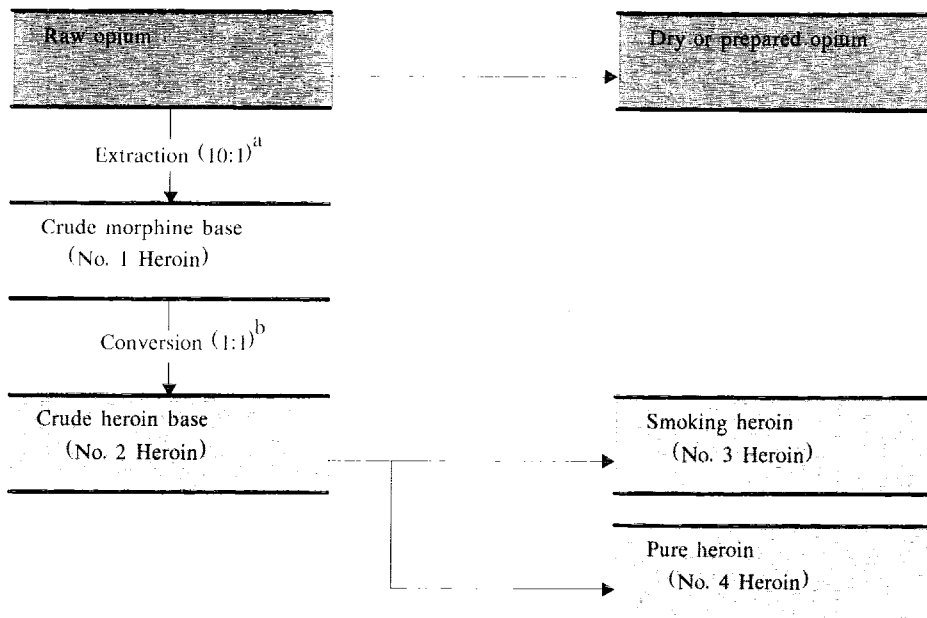
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Figure 2
Opium Refining



^a 1 part morphine is extracted from 10 parts opium.

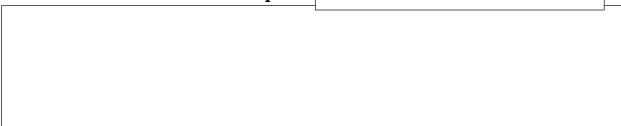
^b 1 part heroin is converted from 1 part morphine.



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Similar signs of increased Syrian trafficking have been registered in the United States. Before 1981, there were apparently no arrests of Syrians trafficking heroin into the United States. According to DEA reporting, a total of 16 kilograms of Syrian heroin was smuggled aboard the Royal Jordanian Airline (ALIA) into the United States during the first six months of 1983, and a Syrian smuggling ring was responsible for 5 kilograms of Syrian heroin seized in May 1983 at JFK International Airport.



DEA arrested six men and seized 8 kilograms of nearly pure heroin in May 1984 in Boston. The heroin in this seizure was reportedly

shipped from Damascus and had a street value of \$12 million to \$15 million.

The Syrian Government also reports increased drug seizures and arrests, even though its antinarcotics efforts remained at the same low level. The quantities of opium, morphine, and heroin seized within Syria increased by more than 400 percent from 1981 to 1983. In 1983 Syrian officials investigated nearly 350 drug cases—an increase of nearly 50 percent from 1981—and arrested nearly 800 persons—an increase of nearly 30 percent.

Distribution.



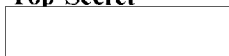
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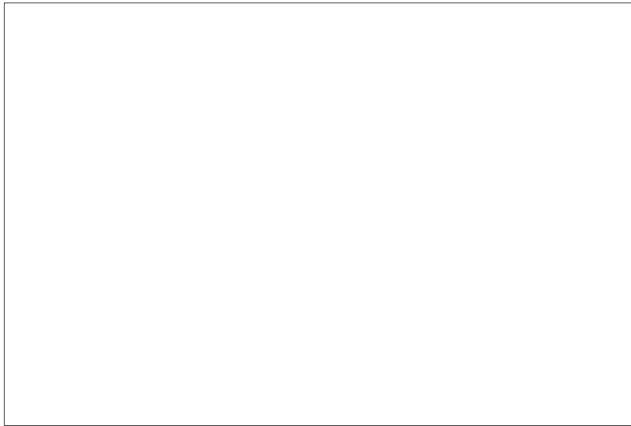
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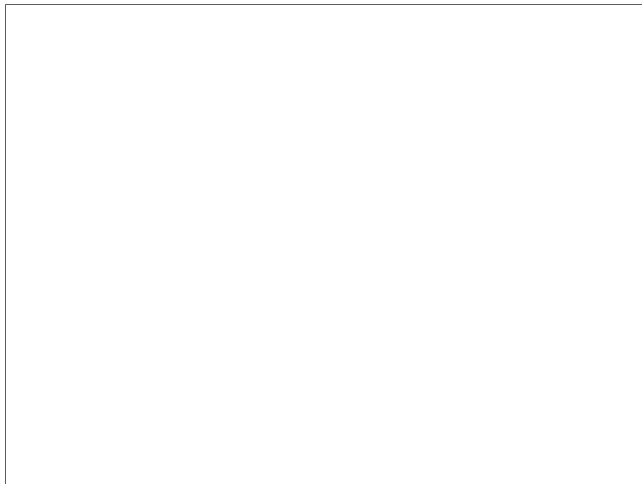
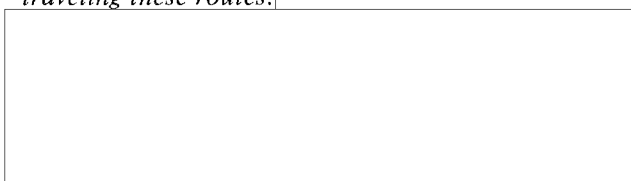


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Rif'at al-Assad: A Drug Smuggler?

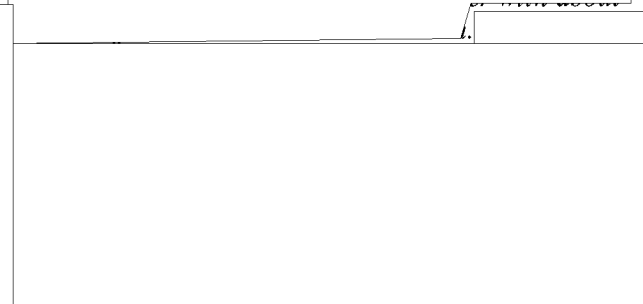
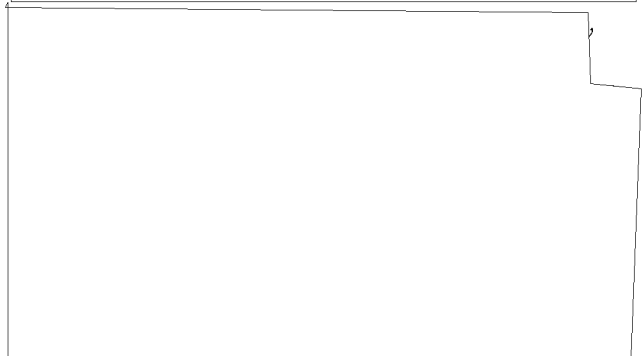


Rif'at has acquired a reputation for being corrupt and, [redacted] he is believed to tolerate or even run smuggling and drug trafficking operations. The Defense Companies are responsible for defending Damascus, as well as Hamah, Latakia, and Tartus—three acknowledged smuggling and drug trafficking centers—and Rif'at probably knows of the illicit activity in these cities. According to press reporting, Rif'at also controls the northern Lebanon truck routes over which drug convoys travel, and he allegedly is earning a sizable income from charging smugglers and traffickers for traveling these routes.



Al-Kassar: Guns and Drugs?

[redacted] four Syrian brothers—Ghassan, Monzer, Haissam, and Mazen al-Kassar—run a major league illicit arms and narcotics trafficking organization [redacted]



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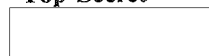
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Circumstantial evidence also points to the existence of large, well-organized Syrian drug smuggling rings. Both State Department and DEA sources report that Syrian networks are supplying a constant flow of heroin directly to European and United States markets via numerous couriers carrying small amounts of heroin. These couriers use sophisticated concealment techniques and intricate smuggling routes. In our judgment, such activities require the kind of planning, resources, and connections found only in large organizations. The apparent sophistication of these networks is particularly evident in some of the safeguards taken: several couriers handling the drug shipment before it reaches its final destination; couriers dealing only with known associates; elderly ladies serving as couriers; and several couriers traveling on the same flight who are unwitting of each other. [Redacted]

[Redacted]

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The first two shipments, like the third, could have ended up in Turkey. Because Turkish authorities are enforcing antinarcotics laws vigorously and outlawing the importation of these chemicals, we suspect northwestern Syria is becoming the likely destination. [Redacted]

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Processing. Most successful trafficking groups soon begin to refine their own heroin to increase profits. The US Embassy in Damascus believes that Syrian trafficking groups may have already reached this more sophisticated stage of development. [Redacted]

We judge that Aleppo, a dynamic commercial and industrial city located along traditional narcotics smuggling routes in northwest Syria, is likely the major center for heroin processing. It was here that the first heroin laboratories were rumored and subsequently discovered. In 1984, Syrian authorities claim they arrested several heroin refiners in Aleppo, although they did not discover any laboratories. Aleppo merchants, largely Kurds and Armenians, have long-established commercial ties throughout the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. The Kurdish and Armenian communities also offer a bridge to a number of active underground organizations throughout the Middle East and Europe. These ethnic, communal, and family ties provide the kind of secure and reliable network needed to process and distribute heroin without detection by authorities. [Redacted]

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Heroin laboratories have been rumored in a number of Syrian cities including Aleppo, Azaz, Hamah, Latakia, and other locations in northwest Syria, as well as in Damascus. [Redacted]

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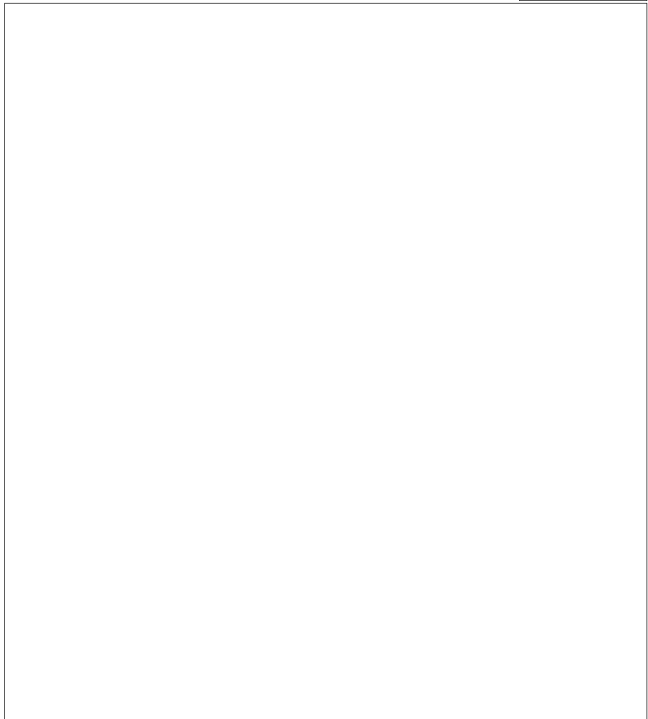
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Smuggling Routes and Methods

Syrians can obtain the raw opium and morphine base they need from the highly efficient traffic networks moving drugs out of the Golden Crescent—producing countries. Much of this opium originates in Afghanistan and Pakistan, transits Iran, and arrives by pack-horse caravan over the mountains near the Iran, Iraq, and Turkey triborder area. According to DEA sources, narcotics also arrive in Syria by ship out of the Iranian port of Chah Bahar. The US Embassy in Damascus reports that opium and morphine also are brought to Damascus from Tehran on commercial aircraft. 

or financial support, tacit acceptance by the government, or participation by individuals in the government, often as a result of drug-related graft. 



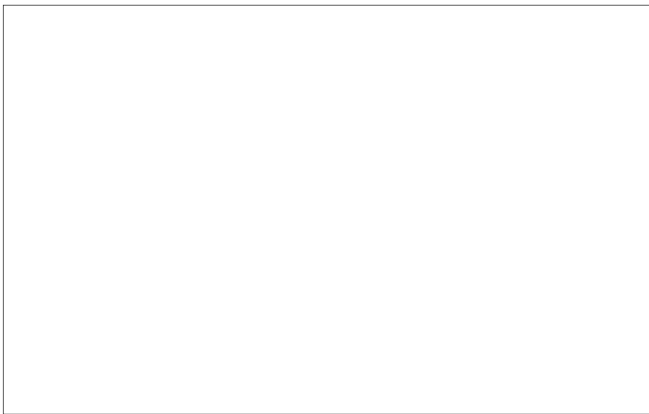
According to DEA sources, Syrian traffickers rely on numerous routes to move heroin into the European and US markets. The Syrian ports of Latakia and Tartus are the embarkation points for large shipments. Small shipments, now more common, are usually body carried or concealed in luggage on commercial air flights out of the Damascus or Amman airports, transported by automobiles, or shipped by ferry. Automobiles and Transport International Routier (TIR) trucks generally cross the Balkan countries into Austria and then to the rest of Europe.¹ By water, drugs depart Syria or Lebanon for various Mediterranean ports, usually via Greece, Cyprus, or Malta. Numerous air routes are available to the United States and Europe. 

We also conclude that the current level of narcotics processing and trafficking in Syria could not be sustained without participation by the military, primarily because of its powerful role and privileged status in the Syrian Government and its past involvement in other forms of smuggling. The US Embassy in Damascus reports that involvement of lower level Syrian military personnel in drug graft is widespread. 

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- According to press and DEA sources, four of the military's high-ranking and better known officers have been involved in narcotics trafficking: Rif'at, the president's brother, long the commander of the Defense Companies, and recently appointed Vice President for Security Affairs; Ali Haydar, Commander of the elite Special Forces; Mustafa Talas, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense; and Shafiq Fayyad, Commander of the Third Armored Division.

Government and Military Involvement

Government or military involvement in narcotics can take many forms—active promotion through logistic

¹ TIR is the internationally administered commercial commodity transport system in use throughout Europe and the Middle East. 

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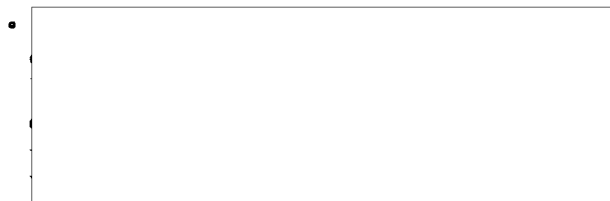


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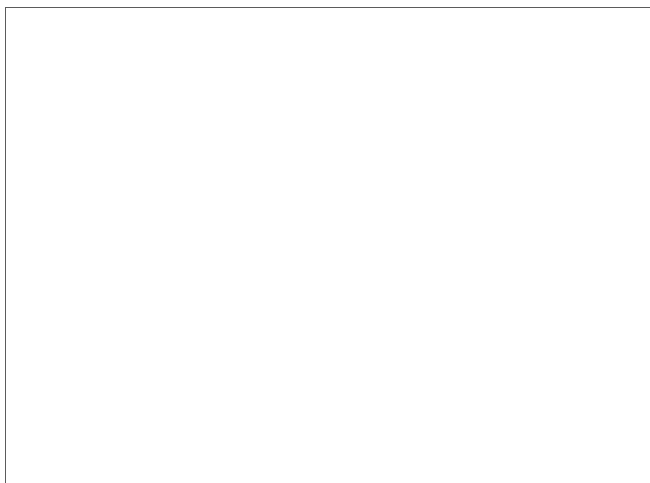
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Terrorist Involvement



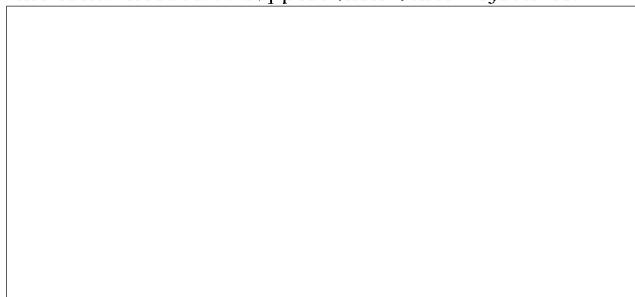
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Embassy in Damascus has noted occasional comments in the Syrian press stating that terrorist groups operating in Syria have turned to narcotics trafficking for the funds needed to support their other objectives.

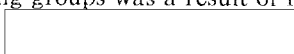


Prospects for Narcotics Control

The record shows that Syrian authorities have little interest in limiting Syria's role as a major transit point and supplier of drugs to international markets. Although a signatory to several multilateral narcotics conventions and agreements, Damascus has paid little more than lipservice to their goals. In July 1983, for example, Pan Arab Narcotics Bureau Director Gharaibeh protested the lack of Syrian efforts to control trafficking of heroin to Europe and the United States. He also reported that the Bureau had unconfirmed information that the success of several Syrian trafficking groups was a result of laxity by police officials.

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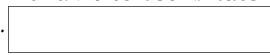


- According to the Turkish press, an Iranian Kurd was arrested near the Syrian frontier in Turkey for selling heroin to buy weapons for an Iranian underground group.

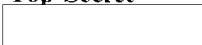
Damascus has shown similar disinterest in cracking down on narcotics activity within its borders. Domestic drug laws have been enacted but are only occasionally enforced, and we believe the recent increase in seizures is more a reflection of increased narcotics activity than a commitment to combat drug trafficking. Drug law enforcement takes a back seat to other more important internal security matters, and the government has shown no inclination to publicize and lead a stringent antinarcotics campaign. The Antinarcotics Section of the Damascus Northern Division Police and Syrian Customs, both responsible for drug law enforcement, are inadequately funded, poorly trained, and unable to coordinate enforcement operations.

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Syria recently suggested a willingness to improve its drug control capability. Anti-Narcotics Director Ahmad Hariri in January offered to cooperate more closely with the United States Government in narcotics control and expressed an interest in participating in US-sponsored and -funded training programs, coordinating cases, and exchanging information. We doubt, however, that Damascus is ready to mobilize its antinarcotics troops. Syria has rebuffed previous offers of assistance from the United States and other countries, and we have no indication of higher level support within the Syrian Government for Hariri's initiative. [redacted]

couriers and distributors that will be difficult for enforcement authorities to penetrate. We expect Western Europe, the more traditional market for Middle East drugs, to remain the principal target for Syrian heroin producers. Nevertheless, the strength of the US dollar relative to European currency makes trafficking to the United States more profitable, and Syrian traffickers are likely to begin opening up more and better channels to the US heroin market. [redacted]

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Outlook

In the absence of strong government action—unlikely under the current regime—the “Syrian Connection” will probably continue to grow as a heroin source for the United States and Europe. The newly established Syrian trafficking groups, having experienced the enormous profits from an integrated drug smuggling effort, are likely to increase their activity. Their source of raw material—opium—seems secure. Production from Southwest Asia is on the rise, and we believe Syrian traffickers will get their share of future crops. Moreover, most trafficking groups, as they mature, begin to use more sophisticated techniques that make control more difficult. In the absence of a domestic drug abuse problem, the Syrian Government—faced with other more pressing domestic and foreign policy concerns and hampered by drug-related corruption—is not likely to move against the flow of heroin any time soon. Narcotics trafficking is extremely lucrative and one way for Syrian-based terrorists to finance their activities and reduce their demands on the financially strapped Syrian Government. [redacted]

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The increased drug activity by Syria will create serious enforcement problems for the United States and Europe. With little or no practical leverage over the Syrian Government on narcotics control issues, interdiction is the only way of stemming the tide of heroin imports. Any interdiction effort will be hampered by Syrian traffickers' reliance on large numbers of couriers and direct contact with dealers. The large community of Syrian expatriates living on both continents provides an in-place network of potential

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