

Lebanon's up in smoke

Watching the mess in Lebanon from afar, you get the impression that religious and ideological factions are fighting over the shattered body of this beautiful, mountainous land. Up close, the struggle is less noble. What many people are fighting about in Lebanon is hashish.

Ever wonder how all those little armies and warlords managed to keep fighting, buy weapons and ammunition, feed their people and find time for shopping trips to Paris? In fact, what was Lebanon living on after 10 years of civil war and invasion? Drugs, of course.

Lebanon's strategic Bekaa Valley, now divided between the Syrians and Israelis, grows some of the world's finest hashish. From its sun-drenched upper slopes come the two supreme Middle Eastern varieties: Deep Red and Lebanese Gold. To connoisseurs of hash, the Bekaa is equivalent to Burgundy's Cote d'Or.

Before the nation was swept up into civil war, the hashish trade used to be dominated by the Gemayel family and other powerful Christian clans. The bulk of the trade was exported to Europe; the remainder went to Egypt and Syria.

The civil war, and ensuing Israeli invasion, changed this quiet, lucrative business. Many of the private armies that sprang up quickly muscled their way into the hash trade. When the Syrian army occupied part of Lebanon, during the civil war, its local commanders suddenly discovered a whole new source of income.

By 1983, it was reported that Rifaat Assad, the powerful brother of Syria's president, was running the hash trade in the Bekaa Valley in partnership with his erstwhile political enemies, the Gemayels. Christian Phalangists were fighting Syrians in the streets while their leaders were sharing profits from hash exports.

It was not long before elements of the PLO, the Druze and the Sunni Morabitoun joined in the trade — how else were they going to buy arms and pay their troops? The trick was to get hold of a port. The Maronite Christians had grabbed most of the best ports but competing groups managed to acquire a fair share. Out went boatloads of hashish to Europe; in came Mercedes-Benz cars, cases of scotch, guns and ammunition. Much of this swag was then smuggled into puritanical Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, or into fun-starved Syria.

Business was good. A steel-nerved entrepreneur could retire for the rest of his life just by smuggling one truckload of whisky into Saudi Arabia. If caught, however, he could face decapitation. No matter, the enterprising Lebanese, as always in their long history, moved merchandise into the Arabian interior.

The scores of small private armies that dotted the landscape spent a great deal of time fighting among themselves for control of the hash trade. What were reported in the West as political battles were often no more than gangster shootouts.

When the U.S. and Israel became deeply involved in Lebanon after the 1982 Israeli invasion, it became painfully evident to Washington and Jerusalem that their local allies were the top men in the local drug trade. Here was Washington, for exam-

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ple, fighting the international drug trade and, at the same time, aiding the Gemayel family, the kingpins of Lebanese hash.

Israel also got itself into this same predicament. It created a small, local militia in southern Lebanon, headed up by a renegade Lebanese, Maj. Saad Haddad. As it turned out, Haddad was running the local hash trade. What was even worse, Haddad, a creation of Israel's intelligence agency, the Mossad, was funneling hash into Israel itself.



AMIN GEMAYEL
Lebanese president

This dirty business happened once before, during the Vietnam war; the CIA found itself supporting Lao tribesmen and the army of Gen. Kun Sa, both of whom were running the opium trade. The U.S. found itself trading opium for arms. In Lebanon, the U.S. and Israel were in the same mess.

In 1975, the use of hashish by Jews in Israel was almost unknown. By 1985, it is estimated that 16 tons of hash are smuggled from Lebanon into Israel each year. Israeli estimates that only 4,000 people use hashish are clearly absurd. Many Israelis are growing deeply concerned by the rapid spread of drugs in a society noted for its spartan ways.

The new generation of Israeli youth has gotten used to Lebanese hash. The tens of thousands of Israeli soldiers garrisoned in occupied Lebanon were exposed to hash during boring, dangerous duty — just as American troops turned to drugs in Vietnam.

Both the Israelis and the U.S. government have tried to hush up the deep involvement of their Lebanese clients in the drug trade. To Washington, now pounding on Latin Americans to halt drug exports, revelation about its allies' business dealings would be hugely embarrassing. The Syrians, also deep in the hash trade, have been equally reticent. Their army has also suffered from massive corruption and poor morale as a result of garrison duty in Lebanon.

Now, things have become so bad in Lebanon that almost everyone is smoking hashish. What makes Beirut so very dangerous are the roadblocks manned by stoned gunmen, who open fire at any sound. The only exception are militias of the fundamentalist Muslims who have stayed completely out of the drug trade — they are high on religion.