

## Middle East Report by Jeffrey Steinberg

### Losing the 'war on drugs' in Lebanon

*If the U.S. continues to refuse to condemn Syria's aggression, Lebanon will remain in the hands of the drug lords.*

**I**t is no secret that the underlying issue in the six weeks of Syrian genocide against the civilian population of Lebanon is drugs. When Gen. Michel Aoun, the Interim President of the country, moved to shut down a string of illegal ports that are principally used to export drugs to the Western European and U.S. markets, Syria's drug lord-cum-President, Hafez Assad, opened up both barrels.

In the past six weeks of continuous artillery shelling of predominantly Christian East Beirut, at least 230 people have been killed; food, electric power, and water supplies into the area have been all but cut off; and much of the city that once served as the commercial center of the eastern Mediterranean has become uninhabitable rubble.

The logic behind President Assad's strategy is clear: Without Beirut, Lebanon ceases to exist as a united sovereign nation. And so long as the United States and the world community stand idly by and refuse to label Syria the aggressor and illegal occupying force, nothing of consequence will intercede to prevent Damascus's long-held dream of absorbing much of Lebanon into a "Greater Syria."

Middle East sources, however, have told the weekly newsletter *Middle East Insider* that Hafez Assad is now steaming over General Aoun's courageous call for all Lebanese to stand and fight to drive the Syrian invaders, as well as the Israeli and Iranian occupying forces, out of the country. Even more infuriating than Aoun's international call for a "national liberation" struggle against Syr-

ia's 40,000 occupying troops, has been the international spotlight focused on Syria's dominant role in the region's massive illegal narcotics trade.

At a recent demonstration of an estimated 12,000 Lebanese-Americans in front of the White House, leaflets and banners focused on the Assad regime's use of Lebanon as a hub of its drug-running activities.

It is widely known that since Syria's 1976 move into Lebanon, initially at the behest of the Arab League and the invitation of the Lebanese government, areas under Syrian occupation have become major centers for the production and manufacturing of illegal drugs. The Bekaa Valley, dominated by Syrian Army presence, is emerging as a center for the processing of opium into heroin, as well as the traditional "local crop," hashish. Opium poppy from as far away as the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia is now reportedly finding its way into areas of Lebanon under undisputed Syrian control, for processing and delivery to the world market.

In moving to consolidate his designs on Lebanon, President Assad has forged "mafia-style" arrangements with all of the militias, from the Druze to the Shi'ite Hezbollah and Amal to the Christians. The glue binding all these arrangements is the drug trade. The control over the smugglers' ports constitutes a principal source of revenue for all the militias, enabling them to purchase the weapons needed to keep the civil war going.

When General Aoun moved in early March to shut down these illegal ports and put them back into the con-

trol of the centralized government, that was a *casus belli*. Despite the enormous casualties inflicted primarily on the civilian population of Beirut, the future of sovereign Lebanon hangs on Aoun's ability to live up to his promise to drive the Syrian and other foreign invaders from Lebanese soil.

In mid-April, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III told congressional leaders that he was hopeful that Moscow would exert pressure on Damascus to end the slaughter in Beirut by submitting to the cease-fire call put forward by the Arab League. This weak-kneed remark prompted General Aoun to denounce the Bush administration, likening it to a Hollywood comedy.

What may have triggered that angry reaction is the knowledge that Syria's drug dealings, a key motive behind Syria's Lebanon genocide, were likely "made in Moscow"—perhaps as early as 1967. The late Yuri Andropov, in one of his first acts as head of the KGB, convened a 1967 meeting of top Warsaw Pact secret police and interior ministry officials to map out a major expansion of Soviet bloc involvement in drug trafficking. The Bulgarian government was given responsibility for drug trafficking in the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East.

Reportedly, the Bulgarian ambassador to Damascus launched this program in earnest by no later than 1969—just the year before Air Force officers led by Hafez Assad seized power in a military coup. According to one source who was in Damascus and Sofia during this period, it was the nascent drug-trafficking infrastructure that put the Assad regime in power in Damascus. If these accounts are accurate, then drug trafficking and narco-terrorism are the very essence of the Assad regime.