

**THE INTERNATIONAL
TRUE CRIME BESTSELLER**

WASH

**The Secret and
Chilling Story
Behind the
Drug's Beadly
Underworld**

WENSLEY CLARKSON

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Chilling Story
Behind the
Drug's Deadly
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Quercus

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WENSLEY CLARKSON is one of Britain's most knowledgeable writers when it comes to the criminal underworld. His books have been published in more than thirty countries and sold more than one and half million copies. He has also written movie screenplays and made numerous TV documentaries in the UK, US and Spain.

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What are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms? A gang is a group of men under the command of a leader, bound by a compact of association, in which the plunder is divided according to an agreed convention. If this villainy wins so many recruits from the ranks of the demoralised that it acquires territory, establishes a base, captures cities and subdues people, it openly arrogates itself the title of kingdom.

– Saint Augustine

To Zaid, who paid the ultimate price for dealing in hash.

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4.4 per cent of the world's population consumes marijuana – about 190 million people – and 0.6 per cent use it on a daily basis (22.5 million people).

Marijuana is a highly lucrative cash crop with a worldwide value of \$35.8 billion. That exceeds the combined value of corn (\$23.3 billion) and wheat (\$7.5 billion).

Cannabis has the greatest non-medical usage of all the drugs in the UK controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Overall, about 10 million people in the UK admit having tried it, with at least 1.25 million regular users. Over a third of 16–24 year olds, or around 2.3 million people, have taken it at least once in their lifetimes.

Because of the nature of the revelations contained in this book, some names have been changed in order to protect the identities of the people involved.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to HASH, renowned as the world's most socially acceptable recreational drug. Yet its illicit tentacles spread across the globe, financing everyone from poverty-stricken farmers to professional criminals. Hash is a business worth many billions of dollars a year with a truly dark and sinister side, fuelled by a chilling underworld network of dealers, gangsters, drug barons, crooked cops and even terrorists using sex, intimidation, bribery and murder in their quest for vast profits.

It's reckoned that hash provides the biggest single source of actual income for organised crime across the globe.

The world's law enforcers are failing to eradicate it from our streets because they tend to target other more lethal, so-called harder drugs. As a result, the hash business goes from strength to strength.

Even the United Nations admits that its attempts at hash eradication programmes have dismally failed. Authorities often resort to law enforcement crackdowns without implementing any economic or development measures to help cannabis farmers cope with the sudden loss of income. Officials are supposed to conduct alternative development projects in the areas targeted by the eradication measures. But, more often than not, no economic help is received by the farmers, meaning they often go back to producing hash in order to survive.

So what is hash and how has it hooked so many hundreds of millions of people around the world?

Hash is essentially a concentrated form of cannabis, made from the resin of the female cannabis plant. It is consumed for the effects of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, THC, which causes a euphoric high in the user. Hash can contain up to 35 per cent THC, while other forms of marijuana usually only have between 5 and 15 per cent. The strength of hash depends on the strength of the marijuana from which it is produced.

Smokers of hash say it alters sensory experiences and perceptions of reality and insist it is harmless. Critics say regular consumption can cause psychological dependency and destroy people's motivational senses.

Hash can be produced through two different processes, depending on techniques employed in various parts of the world. In Morocco, the resin glands of the cannabis inflorescence – where its main psychoactive substance, tetrahydrocannabinol THC is concentrated – are collected by sieving when the plant has been harvested and dried. Sieving is also favoured in the Bekaa Valley, in Lebanon, where Lebanese Red hashish was renowned for its high quality up until the early 1990s, when the violence in the Middle East slowed down production.

The other technique for producing hash – used in some parts of Asia – is hand rubbing. Much less technical than sieving, it consists of rubbing the flowering cannabis branches back and forth between the palms and fingers until the resin builds up on the hands. This process occurs mainly in India, including Kashmir, and Nepal.

But sieved hash is much easier and faster to obtain than hand-rubbed hash. One kilogram of sieved hashish can be collected in only a few hours versus 10 to 25 grams of hand-rubbed hashish by one collector during a full working day. Sieving also makes hash more potent because almost no resin is left on the plant.

*

My interest in unravelling hash's secret criminal underworld began more than twenty years ago when I was investigating the activities of one of Britain's most notorious professional criminals. This man had been a London bank robber back in the 1980s but one of his oldest associates explained to me that

cannabis was where this character – we'll call him 'H' – had made his biggest fortune. 'Going across the pavement' – as robbery was known in London in the 1970s and '80s – was a far more risky crime. Drugs were where the really big money could be made and 'H' insisted on dealing only in cannabis because he believed the authorities would be more lenient with him if he was caught. UK authorities had already started coming down hard on cocaine and heroin, so 'H' believed cannabis was much 'safer' for him. And, as I was to eventually discover, the profits he could make from hash were one hundred times that of any robbery.

So, I gradually began to unpeel a layer of the underworld that has existed very much beneath the radar for the past forty years. Those inquiries would eventually take me to many parts of the world because the influence of hash is truly global.

Many people I know simply shrug their shoulders at the mere mention of hash as if it is barely worth anyone's attention, which perfectly sums up the way this illicit industry has been allowed to balloon into a multi-billion-dollar worldwide drugs network. The authorities are often too stretched to prioritise capturing hash gangs and, as a result, its availability has continued unchecked. As one old-time British criminal told me: 'Most police forces aren't that interested in hash and the villains like to make out it is virtually harmless.'

Yet most of the world's hash is produced in some of its poorest nations where farmers can survive only if they cultivate cannabis. Many of these farmers say they would much prefer to be growing vegetables or herd cattle but hash provides them with a guaranteed income, which nothing else can do.

In Morocco's Rif Mountains, for example, lives a population the size of Wales and it is estimated that at least 70 per cent of those inhabitants rely on hash for their income. Many believe the Moroccan government has deliberately 'stepped back' and allowed the area to virtually govern itself because the hash business employs such a big chunk of the population.

It is also clear that cannabis crops in many of the world's so-called troublespots help finance terrorism. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban have a stranglehold over hash production because it helps feed and arm that war-torn country's deadly insurgents. Hash is relatively easy to grow and the farmers know that even extreme bouts of weather are unlikely to ruin their crop.

Experts believe that pressure put on the cannabis farmers by gangsters and terrorists has led to the worldwide output of cannabis almost doubling in the past 20 years.

One of the first cannabis smugglers I ever met was a professional criminal called Tony from Kent in south-east England. He'd set up a 'removal firm' with another gangster's backing and began shipping cannabis in from Afghanistan and Turkey almost forty years ago. It was a perilous drive back then and still is to this day. Tony's employees continue to drive the 10,000-mile round trip because the profits from hash remain sky high.

Tony and his secretive group of hardened professional backers are virtually guaranteed that their 'cash investment' will give them a return of five times the original amount within a month of the shipment arriving back in the UK. 'It's just a commodity to me and I run a business, which needs to make profit. It's as simple as that,' says Tony.

Across the world there are many other examples of massive hash shipments financed by the underworld. Tony's trucks always carry legitimate goods such as fruit and vegetables as cover, which are themselves often sold in the UK for an extra, healthy profit.

Yet as I've probed further and further into the hash business, I've come to realise the risks are just as deadly as for any of the Class A drugs. I've been told of hitmen paid to kill rival criminals who dared to encroach into another gang's cannabis territory. I've found myself feeling just as uneasy in the company of hash barons as any Colombian cocaine dealers or Turkish heroin smugglers.

I came across a Dutch yachtsman called Jak, who said he had a price on his head because the boat he used to smuggle hash had sunk in an accident off the coast of Majorca, with the loss of the lives of

his two best mates. He explained: ‘That hash shipment was my responsibility and the criminals who paid for it are still after me because they believe that I owe them the cost of the entire shipment, even though it’s lying at the bottom of the sea alongside the bodies of my two friends.’

It’s five years since that tragic accident, but Jak believes he still has that underworld price on his head and he continues to watch his back and move house once every few months. ‘I’ve got no choice. If I went to see them to ask them to let me off, they’d probably shoot me dead on the spot. As far as they’re concerned that shipment was my responsibility and unless I pay them back the full value of the hash, then they will continue to try and hunt me down.’

So, the violence committed in the name of the hash trade is as cold-blooded and senseless as every other heavyweight criminal enterprise, it seems. Another hash smuggler called Billy, an expat Brit living in southern Spain, told me how he was cornered in an English bar near Marbella and beaten by two men with baseball bats after he was suspected of talking too loudly about his hash baron bosses.

Billy shrugged his shoulders as he explained how he was attacked in the middle of the bar in full view of all the customers. Eventually they dragged him outside into the street where they ‘beat me to pulp’ and then left him semi-conscious in the gutter for all to see. It was a classic criminal reprisal, deliberately done in public so that anyone who might be stupid enough to talk openly about the gang would get the message loud and clear that they should keep their mouths shut.

Numerous other examples of the violent, destructive side of the hash business have emerged while researching this book. The cast of characters expanded as it became increasingly clear that hash’s criminal influence spread across the world and affects a vast range of people from all classes and backgrounds. Ultimately, most of it is down to one driving force; the major league criminals are only interested in securing the maximum profits, irrelevant of the hardship and danger for those producing and smuggling the actual drug. They see hash as a business like any other. And if they can’t guarantee themselves a fat profit, then they’ll happily mix the hash with anything to ‘stretch it out’ in order to retain those big profits.

There is a common misconception among recreational drug users that cannabis resin is always 100 per cent pure. It’s complete nonsense, as any hash baron will tell you, *off the record*. Cocaine users have come to expect their produce to be laced with all sorts of things from baby laxative to flour. Ask a hash smoker the same question, however, and he or she will almost always say they like hash in part because they know it’s pure. Yet by the time hash usually reaches many smokers in the West, it has often been ‘watered down’ by up to 50 per cent. Everything from bits of plastic to strips of tree bark have been known to be used to stretch out the profits for the hash gangsters.

It’s ironic when you consider that most hash farmers see themselves as hardworking people who pride themselves on the quality of their crop and who shrug their shoulders with a sense of apathy when they hear about the vast profits being made off the back of their ‘product’.

So perhaps not so surprisingly, behind most farmers there is a middle man, who usually has close criminal connections in nearby cities. He negotiates the prices paid to the farmers and then uses teams of smugglers, who will handle the drug’s journey across oceans and borders.

Often those same middlemen own the land that the farmers grow the cannabis on, which gives them even more control over the product. They in turn are often financed by local drug lords. In many of the world’s biggest hash producing countries there are even local politicians – and sometimes governmental officials – involved in ‘waving through’ the hash when it makes its way from the countryside into the cities and ports.

And relationships between the gangsters and their smugglers can frequently be tense. The smugglers are often led by foreigners, who come from the country where the hash is eventually going to be delivered.

One Scotsman I met called Geoff spent five years working as a smuggler in Morocco’s notorious

Rif Mountains – the world’s biggest producer of hash. He described being a smuggler as ‘the worst fucking job in the world’. Geoff explained: ‘I had the Moroccans trying to con me every inch of the way and I had a paranoid cokehead of a gangster back in London accusing me of ripping him off. I hated it.’

Inside the twisted criminal underworld of hash it’s always best not to presume anything. Most of these characters live by their wits and know that their next shipment could well be their last. A lot of the criminals I came across had records for violence and robbery and involvement in heavier drugs, such as cocaine and heroin.

At the very top of the criminal ladder, there are a small number of kingpins making tens of millions of dollars each year out of hash. Most of these faceless gangsters lead through fear and intimidation, especially of their own workforce. They also often pride themselves on not even touching the drugs themselves, which makes them ‘clever’ in underworld terms.

Yet a surprisingly large number of criminals at the lower end of the underworld ladder smoke hash themselves. Many are so heavily into it that it is undoubtedly affecting their ability to operate in a criminal environment. The money that many of these villains boast they have made from hash often doesn’t stack up when you find them living in seedy rented accommodation in rundown city slums.

As someone who’s never particularly enjoyed smoking cannabis it’s been awkward to refuse the offer of a joint and sometimes, in the name of ‘research’, I have succumbed because it would be considered offensive if I didn’t sample the ‘product’.

Take Irishman Sean. He was the son of one of Ireland’s richest criminals and was very upset when I refused a toke of his joint after saying I was about to undertake a road journey of fifty miles and didn’t want anything to impair my ability to drive. He eventually calmed down but I realised then that I would have to smoke the stuff occasionally when it came to twitchy villains, who seemed to need the reassurance that their product is socially acceptable.

Inside the secret world of hash, I found countless layers of characters whose income was wholly derived from the drug. Yet it also became clear that much of the ‘vast profit’ projected by most law enforcement agencies whenever they try to crack down on hash smuggling is often greatly exaggerated. The phrase ‘street value’ is a favourite term used by the police after making up a figure of money in order to pat themselves on the back whenever they uncover a large shipment of drugs. That may sound a harsh appraisal but I believe it to be true.

And, finally, then there is the effect of hash itself. One of the wealthiest hash barons I met summed up what the drug meant to him personally when he told me:

I wish I’d never set eyes on a joint, let alone getting involved in the ‘business’. Many of us go into it because we think the risks are lower than for coke and smack but the sheer volume of hash means that it is a non-stop conveyor belt and once you are on, it’s very hard to get off. My own son got hooked on hash to such an extent that he could barely function. In the end I had to get him committed to a clinic in order to get him off the stuff. In many ways it’s more evil than any A-class drug. It pulls you in gradually and then turns you into an apathetic person, incapable of making a decision. I feel so bad about my kid, especially since it was my involvement in the business that got him smoking hash in the first place. People need to know the true story of hash and the way it reaches their homes. They need to appreciate that it’s no better than any of the other stuff.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much of the structure of this book relies on a long series of interviews, conversations, and recollections supplied, at times unwittingly, with dozens of individuals over the past two years. Some of the dialogue represented in this book was constructed from available documents, some was drawn from courtroom testimony, and some was reconstituted from the memory of participants.

Obviously, there are few readily available written records covering much of the activities of the criminals involved in the hash business, so I have had to trust the judgement and recollections of numerous individuals, many of whom would rather not have their names reproduced in this book. It has been dependent on the memories of men, fallible, contradictory, touched by pride, and capable of gross omission. But I believe them because there are no hidden agendas in this story and I make no apologies for the strong language, either.

To ensure the accuracy of these stories and anecdotes, I tried where possible to verify information with more than one source but it was not easy, since paranoia rules when it comes to the underworld and on more than one occasion I was accused of being a 'spy' on behalf of the authorities. So I had to accept the word of many.

I have cross-referenced many incidents with newspaper and TV reports of the same – or similar – crimes and that has helped me fill in many of the holes while at the same time providing the sort of colour and detail which is needed when describing these incidents fully. I have also used Google and newspaper libraries to retell some of the most important other stories involving hash from the past ten years. Some of these accounts are like gold dust to a writer because they enabled me to expand and elaborate in a way that might not have been possible without such important additional details.

Throughout my career as a writer of investigative books about the underworld very few criminals have been unwilling to talk to me once I have met them personally and established a working connection. When I entered the world of hash, I was able to get an introduction to other gangsters and it was as if I was opening a huge door into a secretive world, as more and more criminals contacted me to talk about their involvement with the drug.

I travelled to far-flung, isolated places such as the Rif Mountains of Morocco in my quest for the full story of hash and I was not disappointed. I sometimes spent days on end with only these criminals for company and I learned about their lives outside of crime and how many of them see themselves simply as hard-working individuals, who chanced upon a highly lucrative way to make a living.

I avoided the clichéd, celebrity criminals who've come out in the past to talk about their experiences because the key to this book is that it goes inside a world never previously revealed. I enlisted the help of some ex-criminals and current gangsters in my quest and I remain convinced they were extremely reliable on the whole and I owe them a debt of gratitude for trusting me enough to allow me to hear their most closely guarded secrets.

The way that I linked up with some criminals was truly bizarre. In London, I met a friend of a friend who happened to own property near Tangier and he in turn put me in touch with a Moroccan, who chauffeured him whenever he was in Morocco. This man then contacted a distant cousin who financed a hash farm in the Rif Mountains and that enabled me to make the sort of breakthrough that is essential in my 'business'.

It was a similar story in Britain, Spain and other countries where an assortment of underworld contacts went out of their way to put me in touch with some genuine hash gangsters.

One time I had to meet a Spanish gangster in his hometown of Algeciras in a broken-down, badly lit boathouse. It was impossible to know if I was being set up but I trusted my instincts and, thank goodness, they proved to be right.

In Holland, I met one of Europe's most notorious hash barons on his luxury canal barge in Amsterdam in the heart of one of the main tourist areas.

Back in Spain, one expat Brit gangster insisted on taking me out on his powerboat because he was paranoid about being spied on by the authorities. The weather was atrocious and the hash baron was snorting lines of cocaine in front of me as he struggled to stop the boat tossing and turning in the storm. In the end he agreed to head back for port. He admitted afterwards he was 'testing' me to see what I was made of. When I didn't complain, he decided he could trust me.

So to all the people I've met during my research who've given me a helping hand, I say, 'Thank you'. Without their input, this book would not have been possible.

The driving motive behind writing this book is to uncover the real story of this shady underworld, which has turned hash into an extraordinarily lucrative business. Sure, there are numerous *smoker's* books out there about the wonders of hash and its emergence as a drug of choice for so many people. But this is the first inside account of hash's hazardous, sometimes even deadly, journey into ordinary people's lives.

Ultimately, I've revealed a story that twists and turns from the mountains of northern Morocco to darkened warehouses overlooking the Mediterranean and beyond, where hash provides a much-needed boost to local economies while also lining the pockets of underworld drug lords. It's been a fascinating journey, which I hope you are going to find as illuminating as I have.

Wensley Clarkson, 2011

PART ONE

MOROCCO – THE KILLING FIELDS WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

Morocco produces more hashish than any other country on earth. Western influence has not only fuelled cannabis cultivation in Morocco, initially through colonialism, it has also steadily pushed up hashish production in the country ever since the onset of the hippy culture in the 1960s.

According to European Union estimates, hash production is Morocco's main source of foreign currency and is a major contributor to the kingdom's gross domestic product.

Some 42 per cent of global hashish production originates in Morocco. The rest of the world's hashish is produced by nearly ninety other countries, including Pakistan (18 per cent), Afghanistan (1 per cent), Lebanon (9 per cent), and India (9 per cent). It is mostly destined for the western and central European markets such as those of the UK, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Belgium and the Czech Republic. Not surprisingly, most of these markets are dominated primarily by Moroccan hashish.

The cannabis plant first took root in Morocco's Maghreb region in the seventh century AD in the wake of the Arab invasions. However, historians today insist that hash cultivation only began in the fifteenth century. Much later, in the nineteenth century, Sultan Moulay Hassan (King Hassan I) officially authorised cannabis cultivation for local consumption in five douars, or villages, of the Ketama and Beni Khaled tribes, in the Senhaja area of the Rif.

In 1912, the kingdom was split into two protectorates by Spain and France, and the right to cultivate cannabis was granted to a few tribes, this time by Spain. In 1920, local warlord Abdelkrim el-Khattabi unified the Berber tribes of the Rif in their resistance to Spanish authority and set up the independent Republic of the Rif (1921–6), before being defeated by a Franco-Spanish coalition.

Abdelkrim el-Khattabi successfully advocated against 'un-Islamic' cannabis cultivation and consumption during the five years that the independent Republic of the Rif existed. But after 1926 – according to the United Nations Bulletin of Narcotics – the restored Spanish colonials 'set up a zone of toleration to the north of Fez', around the town of Ketama. That zone was gradually reduced until it was officially abolished in 1929, although production continued at a high level.

The French rulers of Morocco tried to ban hash production by royal decree but it wasn't until 1954 that cultivation was completely prohibited in the French protectorate. In 1956, when Morocco gained independence from France, that cannabis prohibition was extended to the former French and Spanish zones.

In 1958, the Berbers rose in rebellion against the government and the uprising was put down by a military expedition composed of two-thirds of the Moroccan army, which, under the command of then-Crown Prince Hassan, even resorted to napalm bombing the Berbers. The civil unrest was partly caused by economic deprivation, since Moroccan Berbers made up the majority of the poorest classes in Morocco. Berber regions had not seen the same development aid as Arabised coastal and urban regions. Eventually it was decided to once again allow cannabis cultivation in the five historical douars of the Ketama and Beni Khaled in order to try and end the conflict in the Rif region.

The town of Ketama – a rural community in the heart of the Al Hoceïma Province of the Taza-Al Hoceima-Taounate region – would eventually become the unofficial hash capital of Morocco. Today has a population of around 20,000 with an average of ten people per household. Yet behind this poverty lie some of the richest drug barons in the world.

Cannabis cultivation in the Rif expanded greatly in the early 1980s, thanks to ever increasing European demand for hash which had forced the Moroccan cannabis economy to switch from *Kif*, a mixture of chopped marijuana and tobacco, to producing pure hash. Wars in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Syria, plus increased global counter-narcotics efforts had created a gap in the market, enabling Morocco to step in and become the world's number one hash producer.

And as this trade has thrived, so Tangier and the surrounding coastal region evolved into the hash hub of the world. Today, vast hash transactions infuse large amounts of cash into the local economy. At the same time, the recent Algerian civil war next door created a black market in small arms passing through Morocco. This lethal combination of weapons and money sparked intense and violent competition among drug runners in northern Morocco.

Large quantities of Moroccan hash are also sent to West Africa where they are exported through a so-called 'backdoor route' to Europe. Recent seizures of cocaine and hashish packed together in the same manner were made in Morocco and in Spain. Colombian drug traffickers have allied themselves to their Moroccan hash counterparts and either now ship cocaine directly to Morocco, or store it temporarily in West Africa. Some Moroccan hash is also exported to Algeria, via the Oujda–Maghnia road, a notorious route for contraband and people-smuggling.

In more recent years there have been numerous examples of the Moroccan hash barons' power and influence. The drug lords use increasingly complex money laundering schemes involving numerous countries. Many in Morocco believe the drug trade has 'gone industrial', integrating itself into large Moroccan firms in agribusinesses, fishing, transportation and import-export operations. It's the perfect cover for hash smuggling.

One of Morocco's most notorious hash barons – arrested in the mid-1990s – revealed at his trial how his sophisticated and massive organisation had multiple international connections. His gang transported hash out of the central Rif, stockpiled it in the Rif 'border' town of Tetouan, shipped it to Spain by sea where it was then delivered to wholesalers in Amsterdam. In addition to bank accounts in Morocco, Spain, Gibraltar and Canada, along with a yacht and fifteen cars, this particular hash baron boasted of personal, commercial and political ties to the Castro regime in Cuba. He was also in regular contact with the Colombian cocaine cartels, eager to use Morocco's easily penetrable borders as perfect distribution points into Europe.

Today, Morocco's hashish trade is estimated to net \$12 billion a year, providing a livelihood to nearly one million people and hash production continues to soar in the Cherifian kingdom, in the heart of the Rif region, where the Berbers' favourite saying is that 'only Kif grows on the land of Ketama'.

According to Dutch and European Union official estimates, cannabis was grown on around 25,000 hectares in the mid-1980s, on 60,000 hectares in 1993, and on 75,000 hectares in 1995 and it's safe to assume it has been rising at that rate ever since. Pollen counts in Southern Spain recently revealed that huge quantities of cannabis pollen were blowing north from the Rif Mountains, 42km across the Straits of Gibraltar and up to 160km inland.

In the mid-1990s, record rainfalls followed drought years, helping the Rif area increase its cultivation of cannabis by another 10 per cent (the average hectare of cannabis produces two to eight tonnes of raw plant). This meant more jobs in the drug trade for those who could find no other work. With the hash trade continuing to grow, areas used for cultivation spread beyond the traditional growing areas of the central Rif to the west and south in provinces including Chefchaouen, Larache, Taounate and also to the east in the province of Al Hoceima.

The inhabitants of this barren region of Morocco are known as Riffians, a Berber people with their own language called Riffian, although many speak Moroccan Arabic, Spanish or French as second or third languages. Riffian Berbers are defined as Mediterranean, making these tribes closer to Europeans than to Africans (which explains why so many of the people I encountered in this region had blue eyes and European features).

The Berbers are often portrayed as nomadic peoples crossing the desert on camels. But they also practise sedentary agriculture in the mountains and valleys in this region. Throughout history the Berbers have engaged in trade, which has had a tremendous influence on the history of the African and European continents as they were the first to establish trade routes from as far afield as West Africa to

the Mediterranean and have helped connect the peoples of southern Europe with much of sub-Saharan Africa for more than a thousand years. No wonder that many of the Berbers of today provide the backbone for the production of hash demanded by Europe and beyond.

For centuries, the Berbers in these parts cultivated the lowlands in winter and grazed their flocks in mountain meadows during the summer. Others were year-round pastoral nomads. The principal Berber crops then were wheat, barley, fruits, vegetables, nuts and olives. Cattle, sheep and goats were maintained in herds, together with oxen, mules, camels and horses for draft and transportation. But the value of hash has overtaken everything to become the crop of choice for most Berber farmers.

Hash thrives on the Rif region's steep slopes and poor soils, combined with heavy but irregular rainfall compounded by a lack of irrigation infrastructures, making most crops other than cannabis not worth the intense labour they require. Rain-fed cannabis cultivation brings seven to eight times more revenues than barley cultivation.

Today, as they have done for hundreds of years, those same sedentary Berber farmers occupy single-storey stone houses while seasonally nomadic groups erect strongholds of pounded earth for defence and storage and live in goat-hair tents when at pasture. Meanwhile the Berber women – who have a greater degree of personal freedom than females among the traditional Arabs – work at pottery making and weaving. Almost all Berbers are Muslims, but various pre-Islamic religious elements survive among them, chiefly the worship of local saints and the veneration of their tombs.

Berber local governments tend to be more communal and less authoritarian than their Arab counterparts. Yet Berber society can be fragmented with a handful of families making up a clan. Several clans form a community, and many communities make an ethnic group. The simplest Berber political structure, found in villages in the Rif mountains, is the *jama'ah*, a meeting of all reputable adult men in the village square. Fully nomadic groups elect a permanent chieftain and council, while seasonal nomads annually elect a summer chief to direct the migration.

Every now and again the Moroccan government captures a hash shipment to try and demonstrate to the US and European authorities that they are serious in their fight against drugs. In 2008, the Moroccan navy seized three tonnes of Europe-bound hashish off the Mediterranean port of Nador. Local politicians suspected that 'raid' was set up through local hash barons, who wanted to help the government look as if they were winning their 'war' against drugs. Moroccan drug lords also suspected that a local terrorist group was trying to muscle in on their hash crop. They were right.

A joint secret service investigation by French and Spanish intelligence officials later established that this shipment of hash together with another hash seizure by the Spanish authorities off the island of Ibiza was an important part of a complex financing network serving the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, affiliated since 2005 with al-Qaeda. The group admitted responsibility for two bombings in Algiers that killed thirty people and left 200 injured.

The investigation – by Spain's Centro Nacional de Inteligencia and France's Renseignements Généraux – was first launched after Spanish police found that the Islamists behind the deadly March 2004 bombings in Madrid that claimed 191 lives bought their explosives from former miners based in northern Spain, in return for blocks of hashish.

Meanwhile, Moroccan government officials continue to bridle at open criticism of their 'policy' on hash.

When Moroccan politician Chakib el-Khayari criticised his country's loose anti-drug policy he got three years in prison. Moroccan officials claimed that el-Khayari made his outburst at the request of the Spanish secret services. In response, the Moroccan government closed down two European manned observation posts set up as part of the so-called war on terror. Many believe Moroccan authorities were sending out a clear message to their critics: don't touch our hash, or we'll be less than co-operative in the fight against terrorism.

Hash trafficking from Morocco, it seems, also goes hand in hand with human trafficking. There are many different methods used to smuggle migrants: in cargo boats or fishing boats, but there are also networks in Morocco with contacts within the crews of passenger boats and customs officials who accept unrecorded passengers. In Larache province, the cheapest and most popular method is to cross the Strait of Gibraltar in *pateras*, small five-to-seven-metre fishing boats. These illegal migrants smuggled to Europe are often forced to carry hash to hand over the other side.

In Morocco, few cannabis growers from the Rif have the resources and connections required to ship hashish to Tangier and the other main ports on the Mediterranean coast, let alone across the sea to Spain. Hashish trafficking from the Rif area relies on 'bought' roads and traffickers, not farmers, having the financial and socio-political means to do this.

'Buying the roads' is renowned as an integral part of the Moroccan trafficking and smuggling process. Hash barons often pay for tracks and roads to be built across national and international roadblocks and checkpoints. They look on it as purchasing the transit of their cargo, no matter what that cargo consists of. Both legal and illegal goods can be traded on the same routes or even together in the same shipment.

So the mountaineous Rif region's reputation as a 'country within a country' is clearly defined. It's a dangerous place where the law of the gun rules above all else. But it is the obvious first step in uncovering the truth about hash.

THE SECRET KINGDOM OF 'KIF'

My journey into the hash badlands of Morocco's Rif Mountain region began with a meeting in a fashionable pub in London's trendy King's Road with a former cannabis smuggler called Si, who still owned property in Morocco and had promised he could get me access to one of the secretive, isolated mountain-top hash farms that dominate the Rif region.

Si immediately warned me that it would not be easy. 'They'll think you're planning to try and set up a hash deal. They're Berber people and they don't trust strangers,' said Si. 'It's a closed society, mate. That's why it's survived all these hundreds and thousands of years. They don't like foreigners sticking their noses in their business.'

Eventually Si pulled his mobile out of his pocket and punched out a number. Speaking in rapid fire French he told the person at the other end of the line my name and that I was a writer. Then he handed the phone to me. 'His name is Leff and he speaks good English.'

It turned out Leff was speaking to me from Tangier and his cousin, he said, 'knew of' a hash farm in the mountains overlooking the so-called hash capital of Ketama, where the drug ruled every aspect of local life. It was also a place that foreign criminals and even tourists had ventured – and never returned. Leff sounded friendly enough and said with remarkable coolness and ease that he could set the whole visit up for me – for a price.

I explained that my budget was non-existent. Surprisingly, Leff agreed to my terms without any argument. I had expected a long bartering session. After making an arrangement to meet him in Tangier the following week, I put the phone down and asked Si why Leff was helping me. 'Because he owes me a big favour. That's why.'

Si never told me what had happened between them and I decided from the tone of his voice it was best not to ask. The following day Si called me and said he had a 'business meeting' in Morocco the following week, so he'd accompany me on my trip into the Rif Mountains. I was relieved to have him along for the ride.

*

Five days later I arrived with Si in the bustling port city of Tangier on a ferry from the Spanish mainland. We met Leff and his 'cousin' Fara in a cafe and discussed the arrangements. They promptly disappeared after promising to meet us in Ketama forty-eight hours later. Si assured me they would turn up. It all seemed too easy at this stage but clearly having Si on board was my passport into Morocco's secret world of hash.

The following morning we headed east out of Tangier in a rented four-by-four along the Mediterranean coast and then turned south towards the Rif Mountains. Gradually, the influences of hash became obvious: heavily guarded villas with strangely stylised pagodas and expensive German cars in the driveways plus a seemingly endless supply of young men drifting along the main roads – and we hadn't even got into the Rif region yet.

Many are said to fear that Morocco is under threat from an Islamist challenge to its stability and that international drug trafficking is relentlessly chipping away at the state's power and influence. But from where I sat that day it looked as if Morocco's drug networks were also aiding financial stability. The hash barons are rich and wealthy and, in Morocco, money buys you everything. Many even reckon the drug barons and the strict Islamists in the north draw upon the same group of discontented poor, creating possible alliances and the sharing of resources and tactics. No wonder many people say these

two groups hold the majority of power in these parts.

One Berber hash baron called H'midou Dib still retains folk hero status in the Rif region. A former fisherman, he constructed his own port in Sidi Kankouch on the coast north of Tangier, which was an embarkation point for a steady stream of high-speed inflatables on their way to Europe with hash shipments. Dib developed an enormous network of loyal foot soldiers and villagers eager to protect him. He supplied jobs, built mosques, delivered social services and kept the despised authorities at bay. Dib was also involved in complex real estate transactions in Tangier, money laundering operations and other elements of organised crime. Through sheer wealth and organisation, he was one of a handful of criminals who'd become leaders of that quasi-state in the Rif region. Even the Moroccan government itself admits that Ketama and the surrounding Rif region enjoys 'semi-independence' from the rest of the country. Surrounded by mountains with peaks reaching heights of almost 3,000 metres, it has been a smugglers' paradise for centuries.

As we drove up the potholed, winding, deserted blacktop towards Ketama, I noticed a police car in my rear mirror. Within five minutes, we'd been stopped and the car searched and Si had suggested I hand over a 20 dirham note to the two friendly officers, who then wished us well on our journey. 'Look out for the bad men,' said one of them, laughing as he slid his finger across his own throat.

From here onwards, the countryside turned steep and rugged. It was clear we were now in no-man's land, a place where few strangers dared to tread. 'I bet those cops'll be telling all their mates in Ketama that we're on our way into town,' said Si. 'That police roadblock marked the end of Moroccan rule. We're now in bandit country, my friend.'

*

The early golden sun rises over Ketama. The earth-red rooftops glow in the morning light. Prayers are being called as the city wakes. The hypnotic sound of a muezzin wailing through loudspeakers casts an eerie atmosphere.

Ketama's status is perfectly summed up by the absence of Moroccan police, as well as of Moroccan flags on any house or building. You get the impression these people look after themselves and don't appreciate any interference – but then the main produce of the region is hash, so it's not that surprising.

This gateway to the hash frontier is notoriously – and many say deliberately – badly connected to other urban centres of Morocco by winding, treacherous mountain roads, which help it thrive as a base for the illicit production and sale of what locals call *Kif*, an Arabic word meaning 'perfect bliss'.

In Ketama, you instantly get the feeling that local people are sizing up all newcomers. They are up early in these parts. The cafes are bustling with men, most of whom earn their living from the cultivation of cannabis.

Some are smoking *Kif*. Nearly all are watching the early TV news on Al-Jazeera. It's the middle of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Uprisings across the Arab world are all that anyone seems to be talking about.

There were fears within the Moroccan authorities that the neighbouring anarchy might spread into this nation. As a result, two army tanks are positioned just outside Ketama's main square as a 'warning' to anyone who might decide that Morocco should get caught up in the biggest revolution to hit the Arab world in centuries. But Ketama's Berber population don't even acknowledge the tanks because they know the army will not stop them going about their daily business, dealing in hash.

The men up early in the cafes that morning seem to be no more than vaguely curious about what their Arab neighbours are doing. There is a feeling of contentment among many more Moroccans than in most other North African nations. A local man we met called Omar explained: 'In Morocco we like

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