



# Moroccan 'roll

There are official claims that Morocco's days as a leading exporter of hashish are over. But do such claims stand up to scrutiny? By Adrian Gattou

LAURENT LANIÉL

In recent years Casablanca, Morocco's heaving commercial capital, has taken on a new buzz – with exclusive boutiques, shops and cafes springing up. In 2008, an inquisitive US embassy official was in conversation with one of his sources. How is all this funded, he asked? “We have dirty money,” the source told Douglas Greene, “The problem is we don't know how much.”

In a secret cable, Greene cited the State Department's own International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR): “Morocco is the world's biggest producer of cannabis resin (hashish) and is consistently ranked among the world's largest producers of cannabis.” Might this be an explanation for Casa's new-found glow?

The report put Morocco's annual drug trade, mostly to Europe, at \$13bn: more than twice Morocco's earnings from tourism. Greene observed that some of these drug profits poured into Casablanca where they got blown on

“jewellery, cars, houses and other items”, or “laundered”, he added. Sure, there was a lot of legitimate wealth, but also “some tough-to-track, but significant, negative elements such as drug-trafficking”. One finance professional Greene was acquainted with joked that indeed “money laundering creates a nice café culture in Casablanca”.

Greene's cable of 23 May 2008 highlights a question about Morocco: has it got to grips with its drug trade or not? Since 2003 the government has been waging a war on kif, a campaign known as *el hamla* (“the raid”). There are signs it is working, but agencies like the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are waiting for definitive proof.

Two hundred miles north of Casa in the Rif Mountains, near Morocco's northern tip, is the frontline in this largely unreported war. In these mountains, most farmers growing the crops only scratch out a living, while traffickers make the real money.

29 June 2010 is a black day the villagers of Beni Ahmed Charquia won't forget. One farmer, ‘Zakaria’, woke up to a deafening noise. He rushed out and saw a helicopter buzzing up and down his valley “nose diving” the crops, and spraying a white powder. He collapsed in shock. “Green gold” withered under the effects of the chemical powder, and with it so did the livelihoods of many otherwise hard-up locals. The incident is a striking testament to the war on drugs: one local captured it on video camera and posted it on YouTube.

Helicopters rain down herbicide from the sky. Meanwhile, fanning out across the Rif below are ‘destruction brigades’, men harnessed with heavy portable tanks squirting a dark green herbicide called Gramoxon. Often old-fashioned methods will do: sickles, chainsaws and tractors hack down the Rif's abundant cannabis fields.

By September 2010 the province of Larache was declared officially “hash

free". So the government set to work in nearby Taounate (the second of five Rif cannabis provinces in their sights).

Perhaps the moment when Morocco's cannabis farmers were doomed was in 2003, when staff from the UNODC in Vienna arrived in the kingdom and set up their office in Rabat (sanctioned by the Moroccan authorities). A mix of highly-accomplished agronomists and satellite imagery specialists set to work, employing commercial spy satellites, like SPOT 5 and IKONOS orbiting 500 miles above the Rif, and combined with staff working on the ground, they built up a comprehensive picture of Morocco's cannabis trade.

The UNODC's Morocco Cannabis Survey of December 2003 was the result, a landmark report that for the first time offered indisputable, officially gathered evidence of the scale of Morocco's cannabis production. Its conclusions were astonishing: an area the size of Los Angeles, 135,000 hectares, was under cannabis cultivation.

Now Antonio Maria Costa, the UNODC's boss spelled out the problem: "A quarter of the agricultural land in the Rif region is now occupied by an expanding cannabis cultivation"; "two-thirds" of the rural population were dependent on cannabis (or 800,000 people). He feared an environmental and, in the long term, social disaster. Informed observers say that the Moroccan government never expected the UNODC to publish figures on this scale. Hitherto the kingdom had played down the scale of the growing zone. This posed a problem.

In the 1990s, Morocco's King Hassan II had launched crackdowns on the hash trade, yet each year only brought bigger harvests. But 9/11 was the game-changer. The War on Terror had spotlighted the links between the drugs trade and terrorism: Casablanca was hit by suicide bombers in 2003; when 191 people died in the Madrid train bombings of 2004, the gang of Moroccan bombers had financed the job from profits from their hashish racket.

The *el hamla* crackdown began. In 2006 Abdelaziz Izzou, the high-ranking security chief in the royal palace itself, was arrested, according to press reports and US cables monitoring the operation. In September 2009, a former MP, Mohammed Jouahi, "considered to be among the biggest and most powerful of the drug barons" was arrested. Traffickers fell like toy soldiers: in January 2009

## 'WHATEVER CLAIMS MOROCCO IS MAKING ABOUT ERADICATION, SEIZURE STATISTICS TELL ANOTHER STORY'

Nador speedboat operator Mohammed Lghani, was arrested and his confession led, in a few days, to 80 more arrests, including officers from the Royal Navy, gendarmerie and army. Hundreds of speedboats were seized, even a plane. In 2009, 27,226 individuals were arrested for drug related offences.

The US State Department seemed impressed. Morocco was "serious". The government wanted to change its "negative image as the world's largest producer of hashish," reported a February 2009 cable (later disclosed by Wikileaks).

Another US cable, from October 2009, revealed just how optimistic Moroccan officials were about *el hamla*: "The Moroccan Ministry of Interior (MOI) has the goal to reduce cannabis cultivation to 12,000 ha by 2012. If this goal is accomplished, it will mean that Morocco will have reduced cannabis cultivation by 91% since it first started serious eradication efforts in 2003, according to the GOM." In 2009 the government reported to the UNODC a drop in cannabis production to 52,000 ha. Compare these figures to the 2003 findings of the UNODC. In this version, Morocco, clearly, was no Colombia in terms of having an intractable problem.

But given this apparently extraordinary progress, there is an abiding mystery that puzzles experts. Why won't Morocco allow the UNODC to return to the country to verify this incredible success story?

UNODC was last involved in survey work in 2005, when Coen Bussink, a specialist on 'remote sensing', worked in Morocco updating the 2003 report. He told *Druglink*: "In 2005 there was a severe drought which affected the area cultivated and the yields, and yes this [fall] was dramatic." Cultivation dropped 40% to 72,500 hectares, thus getting closer to Morocco's 2009 figure.

Dr Kenza Afsahi, who did her PhD on the Moroccan kif industry and worked on the 2003 UNODC report, did fieldwork in Morocco as recently as 2010. According to a 2011 paper she wrote, eradication has been "fierce" and cannabis faces the stark possibility of being "brutally

eliminated". She paints 2003 as an historic peak in production, a "golden age" that is now gone.

But her informal observations await formal confirmation by a new UNODC report. "The Moroccan Government says that they used satellite images and ground information to come to these [2009] figures," says Coen Bussink. "However, UNODC hasn't received any technical report on the method and the results, so we cannot say whether it is true or not."

Bussink added that the UNODC wants to go back: "But the Moroccan Government has never come to a real commitment to conduct another survey." There are not even discussions, he added.

The UNODC's frustration is reflected in the 2010 International Narcotics Control Board's (INCB) report, which noted Morocco's lack of co-operation with "regret" and urged it to conduct a fresh survey "as soon as possible".

Whatever claims Morocco is making about eradication, seizure statistics tell another story: "Seizures data suggests that Morocco continues to be a major producer of cannabis resin, since the majority of countries still mention Morocco as a source," says Coen Bussink. "Data on seizures and prices in Europe suggest that the supply of cannabis resin from Morocco has remained the same or slightly decreased."

Dr Gary Potter of London South Bank University, editor of the recent book *World Wide Weed*, which covers Morocco, says: "Morocco still remains the key provider of hashish to Western Europe – but with more and more of the cannabis market in many of these countries being taken over by domestic cultivation, there has been a decline in demand for Moroccan hash." A 2008 paper by Dr Potter suggested that as much as 60% of the UK's cannabis could be homegrown.

It seems that whatever the outcome of Morocco's drugs war, the market has moved on. "The UN claims that cannabis cultivation reduction efforts in Morocco have been moderately successful," adds Dr Potter. "More likely, cultivation in Morocco has declined in reflection to the changing market in Western Europe."

And as one former senior SOCA officer warned *Druglink*, cocaine imported mostly via West Africa and snaking its way up north in routes that include Morocco is now the real worry.

■ **Adrian Gatton** is a freelance journalist.