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Syrian War Aids Lucrative Cannabis Farming in Lebanon

by Zlatica Hoke

With a civil war raging in neighboring Syria, Lebanese security forces are busy guarding the country's borders. In the past three years, there have not been enough troops for regular raids on illegal crop farmers. As a result, cannabis farms have flourished in the fertile Bekaa Valley in east Lebanon, with the cannabis plant squeezing out less lucrative wheat, barley and vegetable crops.

Spiky-leafed plants are the source of cannabis resin, also known as hashish, a substance that is much in demand by recreational drug makers worldwide. It is a hardy crop that can withstand drought without the need for irrigation. Ali Nasri Shamas, a Lebanese farmer, said he makes much more money growing cannabis than growing any other crop, and he is prepared to fight for his fields.

"We want to live as everyone else does. If they want a confrontation, that's no problem for us. It will be harvest season soon. If they want to come for us, they are welcome. If they want to legalize it, we'll thank them and tell them they are good people," said Shamas.

Cannabis is an illegal crop in Lebanon and the government has conducted annual raids on farmers, destroying their fields and imposing penalties.

"We know that in the period from the 1990s until 2012, cannabis eradication took place on an annual basis and all the material, logistics, human and technical resources would be ready," said Ghassan Shamseddin, the head of Lebanon's Drug Enforcement Unit.

This has not been the case since the beginning of Syria's war, more than three years ago.

"In 2012, due to the regional and security circumstances surrounding Lebanon, some obstacles happened during the eradication. The eradication operation was halted because of the situation that year on the Lebanese borders and the instability in Syria," said Shamseddin.

Bekaa Valley farmers have always resisted government efforts to eradicate the marijuana plant. Now, they openly discuss plans to expand its production.

"Every year we are increasing the areas we are planting. We are doing what we have said we would do. Three years ago, we told them [the authorities] we will plant double. We did, and we will confront them. The next year, we promised them we would plant five times that amount. We did and we confronted them. And we will increase it every year. Either they provide an alternative, they legalize it or it will be a confrontation between us and them," said Shamas.

Shamas said the government would benefit from making cannabis legal, like tobacco, because it could collect tax from cannabis growers. Economist Marwan Iskander agrees.

"I consider that Lebanon needs this farming and needs to revive the Bekaa and Akkar regions. And according to my estimates, legalizing the cannabis crop and its exportation abroad to the United States

or some of the European countries where it is allowed, we would add \$2 billion to the Lebanese economy and \$400 million to the state budget," said Iskander.

Last year, when violence from Syria's civil war spilled across the border, with bombs and gunfights in Lebanon's coastal cities and rockets striking towns in the Bekaa Valley, authorities quietly shelved the battle they had waged with cannabis farmers for the past two decades.