



## Commentary

Hashish in Morocco and Lebanon: A comparative study<sup>☆</sup>Kenza Afsahi<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Salem Darwich<sup>a,b</sup><sup>a</sup> Clersé, Université Lille 1, Bâtiment SH2, 59 655 Villeneuve d'Ascq Cedex, France<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Agronomy, The Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** In the 1960s and the 1970s, Morocco and Lebanon became major producers of hashish for export to markets in West and Central Europe, Africa and the Middle East. By using a comparative approach, this paper aims to evaluate changes in production in the traditional areas of cannabis cultivation in the Rif (Morocco) and the Beqaa (Lebanon) and to better understand the role that these countries play in current trends in the global cultivation and consumption of cannabis.

**Methods:** The comparative approach takes in account the historical and institutional context, and the perception of cannabis in those two country. We rely on primary field research done in the Rif (from 2002) and in the Beqaa (from 1995) in the form of interviews and observations with farmers and intermediaries. Acreage and production estimates of hashish for both countries have been triangulated from different sources.

**Results:** Maghreb and Middle East have a long history of consumption, production and marketing of cannabis. Over the past 12 centuries, migration, trade and different spiritual practices and trends have led to the expansion of cannabis markets. This long period is marked by stages and rifts caused by foreign interference, a worldwide prohibition of cannabis at the beginning of the 20th century and increased global demand in the 1960s and the 1970s. Morocco and Lebanon are among the most important producers of hashish to be exported for trade for the last fifty years. The global prohibition of cannabis and the global sustained demand have created opportunities for poor farmers in the Rif and the Beqaa regions to survive and get wealthy. It is difficult to understand the reasons why areas producing cannabis are steadily increasing. If the Rif and the Beqaa share some features (such are marginalized areas of production, repressive legislation, huge international demand, range of comparable tasks and Mediterranean climate suitable for growing cannabis, etc.) then a comparison between the two countries makes it more easy to notice differences in contexts, in local and international markets (Stability in Morocco, instability in Lebanon; traditional market in Morocco, absence of local market in Lebanon, etc.) In Morocco, the stability and specialized skills among Moroccan growers of hashish have enhanced a competitive economy with various production areas, products and qualities, but also prices and strategies due to competition between Moroccan and European producers. Moreover, Morocco produces cannabis for its significant local market.

**Conclusion:** As shown by comparing Morocco and Lebanon, allows us to examine their perverse effects caused by a global prohibition. The criminalization of growers has only increased their marginalized situation. The enforced eradication of cannabis has limited the cultivation for a short time but not in any sustainable way (resumption of cannabis cultivation in a time of conflict in Lebanon; replacement of local variety by hybrids in Morocco). The cultural heritage of cannabis and its social functions should not be ignored. In the light of the new global changes in the cannabis cultivation (Import substitution, technical progress in developed countries, etc.), hashish producers in the south countries are likely to face uncertain future.

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## Introduction

In the twentieth century, following increasing world-wide demand, Lebanon became a major producer of cannabis. In the 1960s, Morocco also began to produce hashish for export to the European market (Clarke, 1998). The strategic location of both countries – in the south of the Mediterranean, close to consumer markets in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East – has provided economic opportunity for poor farmers in marginalized areas, in the Rif in Morocco, and the Beqaa in Lebanon, and has allowed them to organize production and export of a drug at an affordable price.

The evolution of hashish in the Maghreb region and the Middle East has been influenced in a number of ways. For centuries, the spread of cannabis cultivation was affected by the mobility of goods and of people who transferred their knowledge and the techniques of cannabis cultivation and use. The Ottoman Empire and periods of colonization have also played a role in the development of production areas, which have either persisted or disappeared since independence. Morocco and Lebanon share certain cultural and religious similarities, but also similar socio-economic conditions in cannabis production areas. However, there are also differences in how crop growing areas have developed in the Rif and in the Beqaa. For example, unlike in Morocco where cannabis is a traditional and locally consumed crop, cannabis consumption in Lebanon remains marginal.

Using a comparative approach, and with the Rif in Morocco and the Beqaa in Lebanon as case studies, that takes in account the historical and institutional context, and the perception of cannabis in those two countries, this article aims to evaluate changes in production in these traditional areas of cannabis cultivation and to better understand the role that these countries play in current trends in the global cultivation and consumption of cannabis.

The article will trace the history of cannabis in the regions of Maghreb and Middle East, describe the specialization of hashish production (keeping in mind the socio-political context of each country) as well as the specifics of exported hashish. Finally, current production in Rif and Beqaa will be discussed, taking into consideration the global shifts in cannabis production, including improvements in production techniques and the increased competition from Europe.

We rely on primary field research done in the Rif (from 2002) and in the Beqaa (from 1995) in the form of interviews and observations with farmers and intermediaries. Acreage and production estimates of hashish for both countries have been triangulated from different sources. Figures on cannabis cultivation and eradication were obtained from the Ministries of Interior and Police departments. There is no census on acreage and cannabis production in Lebanon, however, estimates have been calculated and published in annual reports on Lebanese agricultural production by the Research Center for Agricultural Studies and the State Department (Bureau of International Narcotics Matters) have released figures on confiscated and seized drugs by authorities. In Morocco, some unofficial estimates appear in public articles prior to 2003. From 2003 and 2005 three formal investigations were undertaken by the UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) and the Government of Morocco (Kenza Afsahi participated in two of them). The producers' and intermediaries' names used in this paper remain fictional.

## Cannabis and hashish in the Maghreb and Middle East: a brief history of circulation

The consumption, production and marketing of hashish are traditional practices in the Maghreb and Middle East regions. Over

the past 12 centuries, migration, trade and different spiritual practices and trends have led to the expansion of cannabis production in the region, and have influenced cultivation techniques and consumption. This long period is marked by stages and rifts caused by foreign interference and a worldwide prohibition of cannabis at the beginning of the 20th century.

In Arabic, the word “hashish” means “grass,” or “hay.” Today, in many countries, it refers to cannabis resin. “Hashish” is derived from the Arabic word *hasisa*, which is cannabis in its narcotic form, while the Arabs referred to the cannabis used for other purposes as *qannab*. However certain countries of the Maghreb and Middle East regions call the plant consumed for its narcotic effects “hashish,” as is the case with *haschicha* in Egypt. In Lebanon, both the plant and the resin are referred to as hashish, *haschichi* or *haschichi el keif* (Bouquet, 1950). In Morocco, a distinction is made between the cannabis plant, *kif*, and cannabis resin, “hashish.” The word *kif* was apparently borrowed from the Egyptians, who referred to the dreamy state caused by cannabis as *kayf* (Sonnini, 1799). Hashish also goes by other names including *zatla* in Algeria and *chira* in Morocco.

From the 9th to the 16th century, non-psychoactive cannabis played a significant role in the Muslim world, where it was used for manufacturing paper, textiles and rope. It also held an important place in medicine (Hijazi, 1984). Different sources indicate the presence of cannabis cultivation during that period in Fez, Morocco; Kabylia, the Constantine region; northern Tunisia; south of Cairo; Homs and Damascus in Syria, etc. (Afsahi, 2009; Bellakhdar, 2013; Makhlof, 2000).

The use of cannabis for ritual and recreational purposes evolved in a secondary manner. The ritual use of cannabis was widespread in mystical circles in Maghreb and Middle East regions, and while Sufis incorporated it into their religious practices (*Dikr*; mystical vigils) (Mouna, 2009; Afsahi & Mouna, 2014), its popularity spread throughout the region. The popularity of cannabis consumption for recreational purposes grew over time, through migrations, pilgrimages to Mecca (Magne, 1948), and spiritual exchanges and trading between the North African port cities (Clément, 2007). The main narcotic cannabis-producing areas, mainly producing hashish and cannabis herb and hashish for local consumption, were in Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco (Afsahi, 2009; Bellakhdar, 2013; Bouquet, 1951; Clarke, 1998; Makhlof, 1994, 2000).

Hashish has taken various forms before evolving into its current resin. It is said to have been ingested for centuries in the Maghreb and Middle East either alone or with food and drink before smoking the drug became popular with the appearance of tobacco in the 16th century. Prior to the 10th century, an intoxicating concoction, much like the *bhāng* (India preparation made from cannabis leaves and flowering tops cooked in water, milk or other liquids), was prepared by coral fishermen in Algeria (Bellakhdar, 2013). Al Baytar (no date, translation between 1877 and 1883), Andalusian botanist from the 13th century, writes about different methods of processing *hasisa* in Egypt in the publication *Jami' al-mufradat al-aghdiya wa al-adwiya*. These methods consisted of boiling the leaves, kneading them into a paste and making tablets, or roasting dried leaves, crushing them with one's hands, mixing them with sesame seeds and sugar, and then slowly chewing the final product.

Hashish rapidly gained popularity in the region when people began to smoke it, thus prompting the development of hashish processing methods. Resin extraction is not a difficult process but methods advanced as production and the need to store and conserve the product increased. Hand-rubbing techniques, developed in India and Nepal in the 14th and 15th centuries, evolved into the sieving method (extracting hashish from dry cannabis by rubbing it on a fine to medium mesh screen), and this was adopted

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