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April 30, 2004

Columnist Jeff German: Vegas has new crime element: Israeli mob

Jeff German's column appears Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in the Sun. Reach him at german@lasvegassun.com or (702) 259-4067.

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WITH ITS FREE flow of cash and high-stakes gambling, Las Vegas has always been an attractive target of opportunity for organized crime.

For years the traditional La Cosa Nostra dominated street rackets here and even managed to gain hidden interests in casinos on the Strip. We were considered an "open city" for more than two dozen of the nation's Mafia families.

Today Las Vegas still is considered fertile ground for organized crime, but as the mob's influence has waned because of stepped-up pressure from law enforcement authorities, other criminal groups have risen to prominence on the streets.

In recent months authorities have discovered that Israeli organized crime syndicates have set their sights on Las Vegas. One ranking crime figure was overheard a year ago by lawmen on court-approved wiretaps describing Las Vegas as "wide open" territory.

"They're really trying to rear their ugly head in Las Vegas," says Sheriff Bill Young, who has detectives assigned to a joint federal drug task force investigating the Israeli crime connection here.

The Israeli syndicates are involved in traditional rackets, such as loan sharking, extortion, money laundering, prostitution and illegal gambling.

And they're just as violent as the Mafia. Two of the biggest families, one based in Jerusalem and the other in Tel Aviv, currently are involved in a bloody war over control of street rackets in Israel.

But unlike the Mafia, the Israeli crime groups are far more sophisticated and have far-reaching international tentacles. Key members of the groups have homes in multiple countries and make most of their money importing cocaine and the club drug Ecstasy (MDMA) from Europe into the United States. Las Vegas has been the site of some Ecstasy deals, drug task force affidavits revealed.

The booming Strip nightclub scene in Las Vegas, where Ecstasy is popular, has become not only a favored playground for the rising stars of the Israeli crime families, but also an ideal climate to conduct their illicit business.



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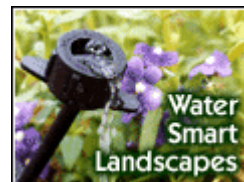


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Drug Enforcement Administration agents, who have taken the lead in gaining a handle on the Israeli mob's growing influence here, say crime family members have cultivated ties with local casinos, members of the legal community and Israeli-born business people, some of whom are being shaken down for money in protection rackets.

"In my opinion, law enforcement still doesn't have a full understanding of the presence of Israeli organized crime figures here," one member of the federal drug task force says.

But the increased scrutiny -- which has taken agents around the world and prompted unprecedented cooperation with the Israeli National Police -- has begun to bear fruit.

On April 6, following an investigation that began in Las Vegas, a federal indictment quietly was unsealed in Los Angeles charging several suspected Israeli crime figures who have ties here with conspiracy, extortion and money laundering. These figures, agents allege, are members of the Jerusalem crime family known as the "Jerusalem Network."

The indictment received no publicity in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, but it clearly has significance in the ongoing local efforts to keep tabs on the Israeli mob.

The biggest fish named in the indictment is Gabriel Ben Harosh, the reputed 39-year-old jet-setting No. 2 man in the Jerusalem Network, which authorities believe is run by Itzhak Abergil, who recently was ordered to leave Israel amid the rising mob bloodshed.

Ben Harosh, who is represented by Las Vegas lawyer David Chesnoff, was taken into custody in Toronto and is awaiting extradition.

Though investigators describe Ben Harosh in sworn affidavits as a "high-ranking member of an Israeli organized crime syndicate," Chesnoff says his Moroccan-born client is a legitimate businessman.

"He's a multimillionaire who owns one of the biggest construction companies in Israel," Chesnoff says, adding that this client is looking forward to fighting the charges against him.

Another key defendant in the case is Hai Wajnine, 32, a suspected crime family associate who has a beach front home in Los Angeles. DEA agents believe Wajnine collects debts and launders money for Ben Harosh.

Over the past 14 months local agents secretly have watched Wajnine and his entourage of bodyguards and associates live in the fast lane during numerous trips to Las Vegas. Wajnine is regarded as a high roller at several casinos, including the Venetian, Paris and the Palms.

On one trip in 2003, drug task force affidavits say, a member of Wajnine's entourage was arrested by Metro Police on drug charges at the Palms after a prostitute Wajnine reportedly brought with him from Los Angeles had overdosed and was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. Police seized a container filled with liquid GHB, a date rape drug, from the associate during the incident. Chesnoff defended him on the charges.

After the prostitute recovered, DEA agents learned through wiretaps that Wajnine had instructed her to take a large sum of cash to Ben Harosh in Spain.

One of the more intriguing defendants in the Los Angeles case is Sasson Barashy, a 47-year-old alleged Jerusalem Network member who is now in custody in Israel, where he has a lengthy rap sheet.

The Los Angeles investigation took off after local DEA agents discovered in

January 2003 that Barashy was living at a home in Summerlin with his wife. At the time he was a fugitive from Israel in a well-publicized criminal case involving a \$60 million bank embezzlement and extortion plot allegedly pulled off by the Jerusalem Network.

Telephone calls coming in and out of the Summerlin home were secretly monitored by agents, who found that Barashy was in steady contact with a who's who of suspected Israeli crime figures, including Ben Harosh and Wahnine.

Calls were made to associates in Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Miami. There were plenty of international calls as well. In one two-month stretch, according to drug task force affidavits, more than 350 calls were made to associates in Israel, Morocco and Spain.

In the ensuing months, through wiretaps and physical surveillance, agents stayed hot on the trail of the activities of the group, documenting, among other things, efforts to extort cash from a luxury car dealer in Beverly Hills, launder money through lawyers in Miami and set up drug deals in various parts of the world.

Through it all members of the group were not afraid to maintain a high profile in Las Vegas. In April 2003, for example, Barashy and Wahnine hosted a lavish Passover seder, live band and all, at Bally's.

Their days of celebrating may be over for now.

But with so much "open territory" for the taking, the odds are that other family members will be more than willing to keep the party going.

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