

There is a future even for deposed monarchs

Hawkers by appointment

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL 'anti-terrorist' industry has thrown up many strange security enterprises and odd ideologies. But few could be stranger than a royal sales syndicate of disenthroned European aristocrats, orchestrated by an unscrupulous Greek businessman who made his fortune with the Beatles, financed by the Shah of Iran, all flogging bulletproof cars to vulnerable cousins who remain on their thrones. More curious despite the free use of the British royal family's name in selling efforts, the cars they sold were more lethal to be inside during an attack than an ordinary mini.

The architect of this royal sales syndicate is a Greek expatriate, Alexis Mardas, who has set up a chain of companies with an unusual line in security hardware. His most profitable business has come through the unusual if informal use of the former King of Greece as principal salesman. Ex-king Constantine of the Hellenes, now exiled in Britain, has spent not a little of his time fixing up contacts and contracts for Mardas. They have almost become hawkers by appointment to half a dozen royal families. Although the business has suffered embarrassing setbacks, the burgeoning 'anti-terror' trade continually provides fresh opportunities. As the Shah of Iran gathers his skirts to settle in Mexico, Constantine – who was at one time a so-called 'political adviser', although the idea now seems deeply satirical – has been in closer touch with him than most others have dared. But then the Shah was one of the first customers for Mardas's bulletproof cars and is understood to have supplied much of the finance behind his companies.

Royalty is the supreme old boy network – Queen Victoria's progeny and relatives were married almost everywhere. Even the contemporary *nouveau riche* lords of the Middle East believe that they too are blue blood



brothers and sisters, so it was natural that Constantine and, hot on his heels, Mardas should turn to them as some of the first potential customers for their line in guns, electronic bugs, body armour, riot gear and, especially, bulletproof cars. Unfortunately, the Greek line in armoured cars is somewhat Trojan: their security has been a little illusory, as the Sultan of Oman discovered.

He ordered six of the Mercedes 450 luxury limousines in 1977 and quickly discovered that he had stocked up with mobile bombs. The uncertain personal security of this despot is ensured by a substantial squad of ex-SAS British bodyguards who travel with him at all times. The SAS chaps, unwilling to trust their own security on the words of foreign businessmen, went out with the Sultan for a desert shootup in July 1977. One shot ruptured an 'emergency' air cylinder in the car being tested, which blew up the petrol tank and left the car a burnt-out wreck. The remaining cars were returned – with a writ to cover their cost.

King Hussein of Jordan, also the owner of a fleet of such cars, tried out a similar test in Amman in November. An eyewitness told *NEW STATESMAN* that the tests showed the cars to be 'more lethal' than ordinary cars. Bullets went straight through the 'armour'. The one inch thick armoured glass ejected dangerous splinters when fired on, which would cut any occupant to ribbons. A bullet, it was pointed out, might have missed. Hussein ordered the bulletproofing to be taken out of his cars.

These incidents merely persuaded Mardas and Constantine to shift their attention elsewhere – particularly to the growing European market for anti-terrorist protection. A year ago a London factory was set up specially to produce the 'bulletproofed' cars, financed by an investment of £1 million or more. Anonymous Monaco and Swiss bank accounts and company accounts kept to an uninformative minimum – even to employees – have obscured the source of this money which, it seems likely, is the Peacock Throne. The Shah, with his voracious appetite for security equipment of all kinds is now very lonely, very rich and very much in need of protection from his erstwhile subjects. He needs little encouragement to get more deeply involved in Mardas's unusual business.

ALEXIS MARDAS, A RIGHT-WING Athenian hustler, came to Britain in 1965. Like his father, a major in the Greek secret police, he is a keen monarchist. He began his career in the gossip columns with his fortuitous appointment as 'inventor' to John Lennon and the Beatles' Apple empire. Less fortuitously for the Beatles, his imaginative ideas cost them at least £300,000 for a variety of unlikely and highly speculative devices he had promised to invent. However, the flower power days lasted long enough for him to get Lennon to be the best man at his marriage.

The marriage gave Mardas his foothold into the royal circles. His wife, the daughter of a renowned Greek architect, was a confidante of the exiled Greek royal family, then holed up in Rome. When the junta's 1973 referendum rejected the return of the monarchy, Constantine decamped to Britain, eventually settling in a house in Chobham, Surrey sold to him by a friend of Mardas and close to the talented inventor's own home. Their friendship blossomed. This is more than can be said for his business interests since the Beatles days which included a disastrous venture for the Beejam freezer group in which most of the production run of an electronic temperature control, worth £40,000, was left unsold. Things began to improve in 1974.

The year started in suitable manner with Mardas throwing a lavish party for the then Spanish heir, Prince Juan Carlos. Wild strawberries and other delicacies were provided at vast expense. Carlos, Constantine's brother-in-law, was delighted and contracts from Spain soon followed.

In the wake of the assassination of Admiral Carrero Blanco the royal household decided to acquire more bulletproof cars and one was sent to England – where it sat idle in Chobham for almost a year since no-one knew how to do the necessary work. The second Spanish contract, worth over £1 million, provided the financial basis to set up the new security equipment companies. The contract was to provide an extensive and sophisticated communications system, known as Project Alcom, for Juan Carlos. James Bond-like, it would link the Prince from wherever he was – in helicopter, car or yacht – to the palaces and security forces. The radio links were scrambled to prevent anyone from overhearing what was said.

A new company – Alcom Devices – was set up to handle the new business. Based in London's Edgware Road, its offices have been designed in the fashion of a second rate Star Wars film set with gaudy coloured walls and pipes, and radio controlled doors. Inside, visiting clients – who have included Prince Charles and other members of the House of Windsor – are entertained in a showroom stocked with guns, electronic bugs and surveillance equipment. There is also an office in Madrid, run by a former British secret service agent, which has recently been involved in security contracts for the Spanish airports.

Constantine provided Mardas with his introduction to the Shah and King Hussein of Jordan. Soon an old Sandhurst colleague of Hussein's – Sultan Qaboos of Oman – joined the royal queue for bulletproof cars. These started leaving the production line late in 1976. They were built by a firm of North London coachbuilders to specifications from a subsidiary of Alcom Devices. They were armoured with 'soft armour' – instead of using sheets of steel, the car body was lined with a tightly woven and bonded type of glassfibre called Kevlar. But this type of protection on its own is quite insufficient to stop heavy or high velocity ammunition; besides this, the inexperienced designers employed by Alcom had left many areas of the car body unguarded. According to one expert with detailed knowledge of the construction methods employed, they were 'worse than useless'.

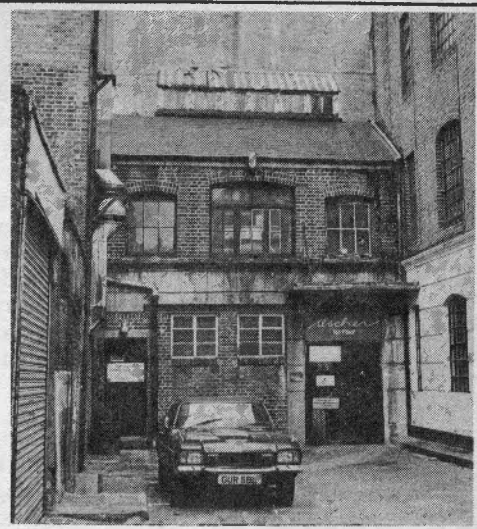
Yet by the summer of 1977, 22 cars had been delivered to Jordan, Spain, Oman and Iran. Feelers were put out to Buckingham

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Chris Davies



In a scruffy London backstreet, St Albans Mews off Edgware Road, the headquarters of the royal sales syndicate. Inside, a gaudy sci-fi interior and a showroom stocked with guns and gadgets. Just across Edgware Road from the HQ, a public showroom attached to a hi-fi shop, 'Sound Sense', openly sells the Mardas range of bugs, many of them illegal in the UK.



Palace on the royal network (Constantine is Prince Philip's cousin, and periodically sees him and the Prince of Wales). And members of the same family were called on elsewhere, such as Denmark (Constantine's wife is a member of the Danish royal family), Morocco (King Hassan was a close friend of Constantine's and has recently accommodated the itinerant Shah), and the Netherlands.

In October 1977, Mardas took advantage of a macabre opportunity to cash in on the kidnapping and subsequent death of the German industrialist, Hans-Martin Schleyer. A major German sales campaign was mounted, and Prince George of Hanover (Prince Charles' uncle) was provided with a white demonstration car to show around. Experts from the State Criminal Office visited Aldershot to view a series of tests on a bullet-proofed car door on the British Army's ranges in September 1977. A trickle of business followed.

In Italy too, the rising tide of terrorist and criminal kidnappings offered a prolific market and use was made of the services of Prince Windischgratz – another cousin of Constantine's, though actually an Austrian as the

Italian royal family had long since been dispersed. In the Netherlands, Prince Christian (another cousin) made attempts to interest the royal family, police and security forces. Shamelessly using the name of a well known rifle to bolster his prestige, Mardas formed a new company, Armalite, to deal exclusively in bulletproof cars.

New problems began however, when the Mercedes Benz company refused to approve the conversions carried out by Armalite. And the West German Ministry of Transport would not issue a roadworthiness certificate, effectively making the use of the cars illegal. This fact did not discourage the company's handful of aristocratic or wealthy customers. Prince George of Hanover took delivery of the 'demonstration' car, a 450-69 Mercedes limousine, at the start of 1978.

Then news started to leak out of the disasters in Oman and Jordan. Sultan Qaboos and King Hussein had each tested a sample of their 'bulletproof' fleets, which had cost £40,000 each to convert. The Sultan of Oman's remaining cars had been sent back to Britain and stood forlornly for many months on a freightyard at Stansted airport. The affair

Camera Press



Alexis Mardas (left), the electronic wizard, in his heroic Beatles days.

threatened to sour Constantine's friendships in the Middle East. It certainly soured Mardas's: when, by coincidence, both he and Hussein were dining at the same Mayfair restaurant this March, he had to be restrained by Special Branch detectives from approaching the king.

But Mardas and Constantine were convinced that success could be snatched from the jaws of the disaster. The backers were persuaded to increase their investment. The Middle Eastern incidents were explained away with regal adeptness. And a new initiative was taken to give substance to the royal syndicate's sales efforts.

IN SOME SECRECY a new factory for Armalite was rented at Standard Road, Park Royal in northwest London. A friend of King Constantine joined the Armalite board to supervise its activities, a specialist staff of motor trade specialists was hired and more finance arrived. Parts for no less than 125 Mercedes were ordered, at a cost of over £2 million, to try and corner the market.

A new demonstration was arranged at the military trials ground in Bisley, Surrey, in May 1978. Constantine's prestige was used to attract the presence of senior British, German and Middle Eastern security experts. A promotional film, which relied strongly on the presence of such dignitaries, was made without their knowledge, and has been shown to overseas customers by Armalite. One such spectator - Ulrich Wegener, the well known leader of the German anti-terrorist GSG9 group, which carried out the Mogadishu operation - was outraged to discover that his presence at the trial was featured in the film. Others whose prestige had been added to Armalite's products by the judicious use of close-ups included a senior British military officer and Equerry to the Queen, Ministry of Defence officials, and Iranian palace guards.

Colonel Wegener added that he had not been convinced of the authenticity of the demonstration. British security specialists commented similarly to the *NEW STATESMAN*; it was, one said, 'a circus'. Although bullets had been fired at a bulletproofed car, the tests did not include the normal scientific measurements of the bullets' final velocity or other important characteristics.

Armalite sources confirm these experts' impressions. The specifications advertised by the company were 'just made up' and 'cannot be supported'. Mardas and his assistants had never carried out any scientific tests on their armour or its characteristics. Somewhat belatedly, some of the Armalite cars were fitted with an extra layer of dense ceramic tiles which did give useful additional protection. But this nearly doubled the extra weight of the bulletproofing - which had at 210 kg already made the cars' performance difficult. Armalite literature continued to advertise the lower weight, as well as other fantasies. One leaflet offered a four wheel drive Mercedes, a proposition which certainly startled the cars, manufacturers. Unsurprisingly, no orders from security agencies followed the Bisley trial.

Other prospective customers were not so unimpressed, and the princes continued to work hard. Prince George successfully sold about half a dozen. He told business acquaintances that he received commission on his sales - unlike his relatives, he was not particularly well off. Prince Christian was apparently piped to the post on Netherlands sales by

(Keystone)



King Constantine (left) and Juan Carlos on holiday. Holding a baby may be considerably safer than some of their other joint activities.

another German, a Herr von West (royal relationship unknown) who late in 1978 was negotiating to supply the Dutch Queen Juliana with a Rolls-Royce bulletproofed by Armalite. In Denmark, King Constantine himself was the 'go-between', according to a Danish magazine, in the sale of one of the Sultan of Oman's rejects to his own mother-in-law Queen Ingrid, the Danish Queen Mother. The car, to protect her grandchildren, two royal princes aged 10 and 11, from attack or kidnapping, is unmodified from the time when it was sent back from Oman, but has been sprayed dark blue instead of silver. Any attack on the car could well be as lethal as the Sultan of Oman's own test proved. Already the car has suffered from the Kevlar bulletproofing falling off and damaging the tyres. It had to be returned to London for modifications.

It is difficult to see how Constantine could be unaware of the origin of the car, or of its defects. Business associates of Mardas say he put in 'work and pressure' concluding the Danish deal. His private secretary, Brigadier Arnautis, has commented however that the ex-king had been the 'victim of crooks' - but would not elaborate.

Another of the Sultan of Oman's rejects, a gold Mercedes was hired out to Mrs Gandhi to protect her on her visit to Britain last autumn. The hiring again appears to have been arranged by King Constantine, whom she visited during her stay. Other Omani rejects remain unsold.

Attempts at modifying a Range Rover have also been unsuccessful. This vehicle, destined for Juan Carlos, was completed at the Park Royal factory last August, under Constantine's personal supervision as he wanted it delivered whilst he was holidaying with Juan Carlos in Majorca. When it arrived, Juan Carlos could hardly wait to drive it. His first test drive had the Armalite representative who delivered it in fear of his life: Juan Carlos did not notice that the vehicle was enormously top-heavy with armoured glass and other accessories, which dangerously exaggerated its already difficult steering and stability. When Carlos's staff advised against the vehicle's use, a dismayed Constantine took it off on a precarious voyage round the hillside Majorcan roads, survived and pronounced it safe. His assurances were insufficient however

and the car was sent back. But happily two North Yemeni businessmen, purchasing on behalf of their government were persuaded to buy the vehicle by the ingenious device of telling them that no sum offered would be enough to divert such an exquisite vehicle from its intended customer, the King of Spain. A sufficient sum was offered.

WHILST MARDAS and Constantine arranged the spectacular placements, the European Princes attempted to organise the more humdrum paying business. Prince Windischgratz of Austria arranged a meeting in October 1978 with Fiat executives in Rome to commence a joint venture for the Italian market. The idea was to bulletproof the modest Fiat 132 saloon on the premise that ostentatious or large cars invited terrorist attention. In Munich, Prince George of Hanover arranged a deal with BMW to bulletproof two sample cars from their luxury range. Although the duly bulletproofed cars were sent back in spring 1978, the deal foundered. BMW found the cars wholly unacceptable, and refused even to cough up more than £50,000 for the work done. With the failure of both the BMW and the Fiat deals, sales from the Armalite factory, known as Unit 4, plummeted towards the end of last year.

The sinking reputation and the escalating disaster of the Armalite business has not deterred Constantine. Last November, he, Prince George and others got together for Prince Charles's birthday party at Buckingham Palace. Constantine gave him a present of an expensive German car radio and the Prince of Wales' Aston Martin was sent to Armalite for the conversion. When Constantine delivered it, Mardas added a bullet-proof vest on the back seat as his own offering.

Buckingham Palace officials deny that Prince Charles or Prince Philip have visited Mardas's showrooms, despite claims by employees to the contrary. Prince Charles's office admits to 'knowing Mr Mardas', but only through Constantine. Mardas frequently refers to alleged visits to his premises by Prince Philip, Prince Charles and Lord Mountbatten. Although some of this may be fanciful, we have evidence that as recently as last October Constantine arranged a trip to the Unit 4 factory by Prince Charles and himself, which was only called off as Prince Charles went abroad.

Whatever the truth, there is little doubt that Mardas's sales efforts have benefited from whatever shallow substance his connections with Buckingham Palace have. King Constantine is sufficiently close to their British majesties to make the exact truth remote, even unimportant. There seems little doubt that the names of Prince Charles and Prince Philip are being bandied about by con-men with a degree of credibility that should not be possible. Like their blue-blooded relatives, they may have an insufficient ability to see the tawdry reality behind the glittering crown.

Drunk

The editorial pencil got out of control in last week's article by Roger Protz on lager. The reference to Carlsberg should have read: 'Carlsberg... is produced in Northampton, a town rich in Danish tradition, and also by the Watney Mann and Truman division of Grand Metropolitan', as everyone, including Roger Protz, knows.