

Interviews with supporters of Rabih Haddad

Muslim cleric the target of Bush "anti-terror" dragnet

Lawrence Porter
26 March 2002

The arrest and treatment of Rabih Haddad are emblematic of the anti-democratic and racist nature of the "anti-terror" campaign of the Bush administration. Haddad, a prominent Muslim cleric living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was arrested at his home last December 14 on purported minor visa violations. The same day, the charity he co-founded, Global Relief Foundation (GRF), had its assets frozen and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and US Treasury Department raided its Chicago offices.

Haddad's case, explained here in interviews with two of his supporters, demonstrates the implications of the government's targeting of Arab immigrants en masse as suspects or supporters of terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The sheer numbers are staggering. It is now estimated that close to 2,000 Arab or Muslim immigrants have been arrested at some point during the last six months, not to mention the nearly 5,000 "voluntary interviews" that were conducted by the Justice Department in December and January. US Attorney General John Ashcroft stated last week that an additional 3,000 "interviews" would be conducted, making the targeting of Arab immigrants one of the most sweeping racially-directed campaigns in US history.

Rabih Haddad's case has been widely cited as an example of the mistreatment and illegal abuse of Arab immigrants in large measure due to his reputation as a respected community leader. In the wake of September 11, he spoke out against the terrorist attacks both within the Metropolitan Detroit Islamic community as well as among the broader population.

Like hundreds of Arab immigrants arrested since September 11, the government will not say on what basis they are holding Haddad, and have invoked the secrecy laws of the USA Patriot Act as a justification for holding him indefinitely.

Until recently, Haddad has been held in solitary confinement, and restricted to one 15-minute phone call with his family every 30 days. Due to the precedent-setting actions of the federal government, his case has now drawn international attention. The international human rights organization Amnesty International prominently cited the Haddad case in its March 14 report on US treatment of detainees. (See <http://web.amnesty.org/web/news.nsf/WebAll/021956D799890D4C80256B7A0053AF80?OpenDocument>)

On the weekend of January 19, Salma Al-Rushaid, Haddad's wife, also received notice that she and three of the couple's four children would also be deported. The one son not notified was born in the US and is a citizen. Al-Rushaid has requested that her and her children's cases be combined with her husband's. Al-Rushaid has recently been notified that the two cases will be combined, but that the hearings will be held in secret.

Kristine Abouzahr, a spokesperson for the Haddad family, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the conditions facing Haddad and what the case has meant for his wife and family. Ms. Abouzahr is Salma Al-Rushaid's assistant and a friend of the family. She is also a member of the Free Rabih Haddad Committee and has traveled with Al-Rushaid as she has campaigned for the release of her husband and against the allegation Haddad has ties to terrorism.

"First he was in the Monroe County jail [in Michigan]," Ms. Abouzahr recounted, where he was held in solitary confinement and the judge in his case refused to allow him bail. The local immigration judge, under orders from the office of US Attorney General John Ashcroft, charged Haddad as a danger to the community, despite the testimony of prominent Ann Arbor citizens at his first hearing. The judge cited Haddad's ownership of a hunting rifle. "Can you believe that?" asked Abouzahr. "Are you going to be a terrorist with a hunting rifle?"

"Then he was moved to an 'undisclosed location,' which turned out to be Milan, Michigan. Then he was moved to the Metropolitan Correctional Center on West Van Buren, in Chicago," Ms. Abouzahr continued. The transfer to Chicago was again carried out in secrecy, without notice to Haddad's lawyers or his family. "Since he left Michigan he has not had a contact visit with his family, nothing where he is able to be face-to-face, only through glass."

Kristine Abouzahr described Haddad's conditions in the Chicago correctional center at the time of our interview: "He is being held on a floor for people convicted of serious crimes. No criminal charges have ever been brought against him, only minor civil violations. He should not be on that floor. The people on that floor are not allowed to have contact visits [face-to-face visits with family or legal counsel].

"He is in a cell, 6 feet by 9 feet. There is a bed in the middle, bolted to the floor, with restraint straps that could be used. It is a cell for violent criminals. There is a window with a light coating over it, so you cannot see out. He doesn't have a radio or contact with other prisoners. It is very close to solitary confinement. His food is passed through an opening in the door.

"He is handcuffed to walk 10 paces down the hall for what they call 'exercise.' It is literally a cage with an exercise bike with no resistance. He has to wait for the other prisoners to finish before he can go there. Nobody should be treated like that. To the best of my knowledge, he has not been outside." Haddad was shackled whenever he left his cell, including during the time he took a shower, Ms. Abouzahr related.

She showed the WWSW a letter which Rabih Haddad sent to a supporter. Haddad described the "waves of cockroaches" that descended on his cell at night. "I have been treated like the worst criminal you can imagine when I have not even been charged with a crime, save overstaying my visa, which I was in the process of remedying," he stated. After thanking

his supporters for their efforts, he wrote, “All of this has done nothing but harden my will and strengthened my resolve to overcome and persevere.”

In Chicago, Haddad was called to testify before a federal grand jury. Subsequently, Haddad was reportedly informed by the US attorney for northern Illinois, Patrick Fitzgerald, that neither he nor Global Relief Foundation were the object of the probe. However, this reporter spoke to Randy Sanborn, a spokesperson for Fitzgerald, who declined to comment on the current status of either Haddad or GRF.

We asked Ms. Abouzahr to explain the role of the charity Rabih Haddad co-founded:

“The first time I met Brother Haddad was when I was teaching part-time at our school, the Michigan Islamic Academy. Rabih was a volunteer teacher. The first week after school began there was a big earthquake in Turkey. If you recall, hundreds of people died when buildings collapsed on them. The children made a plan to raise funds for the people there. They were trying to figure out how to get the funds to the people, and one of the children said, ‘If you want to get funds to the poor people in the Muslim world, go to Rabih Haddad.’

“Global Relief sends their own people and funds. They also work through existing structures. It has one of the lowest overhead costs of the Muslim charities. It is growing in proportion to the growth of the Muslim community. They have sent funds to Bosnia, Lebanon, the camps in Pakistan, Palestine, Afghanistan and other places.

“Global Relief would go right in to areas where others wouldn’t go. They dealt with the Taliban, not because they supported the government, but because they were the current regime. You have to deal with the people in power if you want to be able to help the civilian population. The US government is presuming that GRF is ‘guilty until proven innocent’ in this case because they gave assistance—instead of ‘innocent until proven guilty.’

“They have even blocked the departure of some detainees who want to leave the country,” she continued, “until they can prove that they aren’t terrorists. They are supposed to look at someone’s criminal activity, but instead they’re looking at guilt by association.”

Ms. Abouzahr said Haddad’s community role was exemplary, especially following the September 11 events. “Rabih Haddad spoke at Washtenaw Community College, Eastern Michigan University, the University of Michigan, and at Friday prayers at the school,” she said. “Not only did he speak out against terrorism—that no sneak attack can be justified—but he spoke of healing, and of what people have in common. He spoke about both mourning for the victims and how we can go on. At the mosque he was telling us to reach out to others.

“His Arabic is excellent, but because of his education in the US, his English is also excellent,” she commented, noting that he has wonderful command of figures of speech.

A report covering the background of Rabih Haddad and Salma Al-Rushaid, published in the *Metro Times*, a weekly Detroit publication, details the history of the couple. (See <http://www.metrotimes.com/editorial/story.asp?id=2879>) Both are highly educated, born of upper middle class families that did not practice religion. The two became religious themselves while in college. Rabih, 41, born in Lebanon, received both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in mechanical engineering at the University of Nebraska. Salma, 37, the daughter of a Kuwaiti diplomat, completed her undergraduate degree at Ashland University in Ohio. Rushaid considered a diplomatic career before marriage, and is fluent in several languages.

According to Ms. Abouzahr, both Rabih Haddad and Salma Al-Rushaid played critical roles in maintaining a sense of stability and cohesion within the Muslim community after September 11, at a time of apprehension and withdrawal among some members of the Islamic community. “After September 11 there is a fear of Middle Easterners,” she explained. “Rabih Haddad was well known as a very balanced speaker. He talks about tolerance; he talks about peace, reaching out to others.”

She continued: “Many of us among the peace activists would like to see some precedent set with this case for other detainees. That would be good. This is not just a case about one man. This is a civil rights case, not just about the Muslim community. It is about how we should treat human beings, immigrant or not. This should not be happening. Enough is enough.”

Ms. Abouzahr said unlike most of the other detainees, Haddad has had a tremendous amount of support in the area, including a resolution passed by the Ann Arbor City Council calling for due process, over 5,000 signatures to the Bush administration demanding Haddad’s release, rallies at the court hearing attended by hundreds of supporters and an invitation to Salma Al-Rushaid by US Representative John Conyers to testify before Congress on her husband’s case.

In the recent period, the British newspaper the *Independent* ran a major article on detainees that prominently cited Haddad’s case. The BBC also ran an interview with Al-Rushaid. In addition, two other US representatives, Cynthia McKinney of Georgia and Lynn Rivers of Ann Arbor, have raised concerns about the case.

Local media, civil rights groups, the American Civil Liberties Union and Rep. Conyers have filed several lawsuits challenging the closed hearings decision as an unconstitutional breach of Haddad’s democratic rights and the right of the public to scrutinize the government’s charges. A hearing has been scheduled on the lawsuit for March 26 at the federal courthouse in Detroit.

Ms. Abouzahr told us, “I am continually surprised, and not surprised, about this case. Yet knowing the way our government has reacted since September 11, it is not surprising. This is not worthy of the US. It’s something you’d expect from a Third World country.

“I think it’s clear that this is coming from higher up, from the Department of Justice. They are looking for weak spots—visa violations, tax violations. Rabih Haddad was not hiding; he was prominent, working with an Islamic charity. They could have gone after any number of people, and there are any number of people detained.”

A week ago Ms. Abouzahr informed me that on March 1, the prison warden called Haddad and told him his visitation hours would be increased to four hours a week and that contact visits would be allowed. On March 4, the day before John Conyers visited Haddad in prison, he was able to see and hold all his children for the first since his removal from Michigan.

“The publicity surrounding the visit must have been embarrassing to them,” Abouzahr said. “After Conyers’ visit, Brother Haddad was removed from solitary confinement and placed with the general prison population.” Haddad was allowed to make phone calls and for the first time watch television. “We were so happy about the improvement we had to remind ourselves that he is still in prison and that we had to continue the fight to win his freedom,” she said.

The Justice Department has used Haddad’s immigration status to justify his imprisonment and is proceeding with deportation proceedings against the family. Abouzahr said the family believed that applying for amnesty under a bill passed by Congress had put them into legal status. “They were not hiding. They were prominent members of the community. He was a public spokesperson here,” said Abouzahr, “especially after September 11.”

The WSWS also spoke to Asim Ghafoor, the legal assistant to Haddad’s lawyer, Ashraf Nubani. Mr. Ghafoor explained some of the legal and

political issues behind Haddad's case.

Ghafoor explained that Haddad and his family arrived in the US on a tourist visa in April 1998. While a tourist visa expires in six months, Ghafoor stated, it is fairly routine that an extension of six months is granted. It is well known that the government typically allows extra time even if one is not immediately approved.

"The backlog at the INS was enormous," Ghafoor said, primarily due to a lack of resources. "If it [money] was for border patrol to build a wall in San Diego, they got it. If it was for helicopters to interdict people crossing the river in Texas, they got it. But if it was to hire more adjudicators to process applications in Nebraska or the service center in Vermont, INS didn't get it."

Ghafoor stated that their office filed for permanent status for Haddad and his family under a provision called 245(i) of the Legal Immigration Family Equity Act (LIFE Act), passed by Congress and enacted on December 21, 2000.

He explained that during 1998-99 the issue of immigration became a major political issue leading up to the 2000 presidential election campaign. He said the bill was especially important among Hispanics who had family ties in the US and who, under the existing laws, would have to leave the US, apply for a visa in their home country and would be barred from entry for 10 years. The new law would allow undocumented immigrants to stay in the US, apply for permanent residency and pay a \$1,000 fine. "Bush was sucking up to the Hispanic vote," said Ghafoor. "Bush told the Congress, 'Look, you should pass this. 245(i) is very, very popular among Latinos.'"

Clinton signed the act into law in December 2000 and Bush continued to support it when he came into office. Ghafoor said there was a vehement debate in Congress between supporters of the law and mainly Republican opponents who felt the law would reward illegal aliens and allow people to be in the country who otherwise should not be here. For that reason the period for filing under the amnesty program was a very short four months.

In the days leading up to the April 30, 2001 deadline, thousands of people lined up to file their applications. Many did not make it. Ghafoor said Haddad and his family did. The provisions for qualifying were restrictive. You had to have either a family reason for staying or an employer that needed your presence. Haddad's application was sponsored by GRF, who wanted to keep him in the US.

A letter issued by President George W. Bush to Congress on May 1, 2001, one day after the filing deadline, acknowledged the problem. In the letter he urged Congress to extend the deadline to allow more people time to apply under the provisions of the new law. Bush said he is a supporter of the LIFE Act, particularly 245(i), as a means of strengthening "family values." "According to the agency estimates, there are more than 500,000 undocumented immigrants in the country who are eligible to become legal permanent residents," Bush stated in his letter. "However, the law generally requires them to go back to their home country to obtain a visa, and once they do so, they are barred from returning to the United States for up to 10 years. Many choose to risk remaining here illegally rather than be separated from their families for those many years." Bush went on to say this issue was discussed by Colin Powell and John Ashcroft with officials of the Mexican government. Thousands of immigrants from other countries, such as Haddad, saw the law as an opportunity to acquire legal status without penalty.

Ghafoor said their law firm interpreted the law to mean that once immigrants had applied they were protected. "We knew that for everyone who is out there, this wasn't a blanket amnesty for the future. But we understood it to mean that for anyone who is out of status, to avoid having to leave the country to get into status because your paperwork is taking so long or other problems not your fault, or it could be your fault, we will give you the four-month window to apply."

"So, if you apply by April 30, 2001, which Pastor Haddad did—hundreds

of thousands did—then you are OK, then effectively you are in status, or so we thought."

"And sure enough," stated Ghafoor, very few people who have filed under 245(i) are in jail. [Haddad] was only arrested, we believe, because of his ties to Global Relief. It is no coincidence that he was arrested the same day that the INS raided the Global Relief Foundation."

The INS and the Justice Department are now retroactively saying applying under 245(i) is not an amnesty. Ghafoor stated, however, that is how it was treated in practice before September 11. He added, "If Global Relief had not had its accounts frozen, and the application came in and Global Relief said it wanted to hire this guy, the INS would not be able to say, 'Hey, he has been out of status for the last year and a half.' That would not have happened. He would have received his green card and he would have been on his way."



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact