

US authorities arrest Islamic charity leader on perjury charges

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US authorities on Tuesday arrested Enaam Arnaout, the Syrian-born head of one of the largest international Islamic charities, on charges of perjury. Arnaout, 39, executive director of the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), was taken into custody at his suburban Chicago home and charged with lying under oath in documents his group had filed in federal court.

Three months ago, the US government raided the offices of BIF along with those of another charity, Global Relief Foundation (GRF). The Treasury Department froze the two groups' assets based on Justice Department allegations the charities were funding terrorist organizations. Arnaout is accused of committing perjury in documents filed in a lawsuit in support of BIF against Attorney General John Ashcroft and other government officials challenging their allegations of terrorism against the group.

The government's 35-page affidavit charges: "Various persons involved in terrorist activities, specifically including persons trying to obtain chemical and nuclear weapons on behalf of Al Qaeda, have had contacts with [BIF] offices and personnel."

The government document further claims that a close connection exists between bin Laden and BIF, and that a "reliable" former Al Qaeda member reported BIF was "one of the organizations utilized by Al Qaeda" to move money. This Al Qaeda member, however, is not identified. Furthermore, the government claims the funds allegedly moved by BIF are "untraceable" because the charity fabricated its records.

Although government spokesmen have made public statements that BIF has funded terrorism, it is significant that Arnaout is being charged not with terrorism, but with perjury. The government affidavit does not accuse Arnaout or the charity of involvement in alleged terrorist plots, but says they lied about their

ties to terrorists who were involved in such activities.

Enaam Arnaout's arrest, and the sensational claims of the Benevolence International Foundation's ties to terrorism, were pronounced by the Justice Department with much fanfare and broadcast Tuesday evening on the cable and network news programs. These actions followed what has now become a familiar pattern: the government announces that a group or individual is implicated in terrorist activities; the media widely publicizes the charges. The accused are then charged with relatively minor infractions after public opinion has already been rallied against them.

This has been the situation in a case involving another Islamic charity leader. Rabih Haddad, a co-founder of Global Relief Foundation, was arrested last December in Ann Arbor, Michigan and has been held by the government for more than four months on a minor visa violation. Government claims of Global Relief's ties to terrorism have been echoed in the press, but Haddad has not been charged with any terrorist connections.

Arab-American groups denounced Enaam Arnaout's arrest and the claims of BIF's ties to terrorism as a continuation of the government's vendetta against Muslims and Arabs in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Arnaout's lawyer, Matthew Piers, said the charges against his client are a continuation of the government's "heavy-handed" treatment of the charity.

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, characterized the charges as "a back-door legal technicality" which "creates the impression there's nothing of substance to the government's charges." Hooper added, "If you've got evidence of him having breakfast with Osama bin Laden, then charge him with terrorism, not perjury. Bring the evidence into court and let him rebut it."

The government's charges against Benevolence International Foundation and its leader are sketchy at best—based on circumstantial allegations and information provided by unnamed sources. The affidavit claims that Mamdouh Salim, currently being held in New York on terrorism-related charges, is connected to the charity. It claims the connection between BIF and bin Laden was documented when Salim traveled in 1998 to Bosnia using documents signed by Arnaout, describing Salim as a director of BIF.

The government also alleges Salim “participated in efforts to obtain nuclear and chemical weapons for Al Qaeda,” and that BIF “made efforts” to provide Chechen rebel groups with money, an X-ray machine and “anti-mine boots, among other things.” They also say BIF had contact with another individual, Mohamed Bayazid, who allegedly “made repeated efforts to get uranium for Al Qaeda to develop a nuclear weapon.” Bayazid reportedly carried an Illinois driver's license with the charity's address. US Attorney Fitzgerald admitted that there is no evidence any of these alleged plots succeeded.

The affidavit also claims that BIF had links to people involved in the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing, a plot to bomb US airlines and a plan to assassinate Pope John Paul II during his visit to the Philippines in 1995.

A central element of the government's case is its claim that Arnaout was a personal friend of bin Laden for more than a dozen years. FBI Agent Robert Walker stated in the affidavit: “Arnaout has a relationship with Osama bin Laden and many of his key associates dating back more than a decade.” Another unnamed source is cited, who said that in 1989, while living in Pakistan, Arnaout picked up one of bin Laden's wives at the airport and kept her at his home until she was picked up a week later. The source claimed that “if Arnaout had not been a trusted associate” of bin Laden he would not have been chosen for the task.

Enaam Arnaout acknowledges that he was casually acquainted with Bin Laden in the late 1980s, when both of them lived in Peshawar, Pakistan. Arnaout was a student at the time and bin Laden was involved in road construction projects. Arnaout's lawyer, Matthew Piers, commented, “That doesn't make him a terrorist. Peshawar wasn't that big a town. Bin Laden was a prominent guy.”

If such casual acquaintance with Osama bin Laden is a criterion for suspicion of terrorism then many members of the CIA, State Department and the US intelligence community—who worked closely with bin Laden during this period—should face charges as well. In 1989, Osama bin Laden was not being denounced as a terrorist. In fact, only a few years before he had been working with the US government in its covert war against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul.

Moreover, one individual who should be targeted for prosecution on this basis is George W. Bush's father, the former president Bush, who along with many members of his administration had the closest business and personal ties with the bin Laden family. George Bush personally visited the bin Ladens' palatial estate in Saudi Arabia only a few years ago. Bin Laden family members were major investors in the Carlyle Group, a multibillion-dollar venture capital firm which employs the former president. The bin Laden family only sold their Carlyle Group holdings after the September 11 events.

Benevolence International Foundation has denied all the Justice Department's charges. In its lawsuit, BIF asserted that it had “never provided aid or support to people or organizations known to be engaged in violence, terrorist activities or military operations of any nature.” It raised more than \$3 million in contributions in the year ending April 2000, and describes itself as a humanitarian organization “dedicated to helping those afflicted by wars and natural disasters.”

Arnaout, who is an American citizen, is being held without bond as a “risk of flight.” The government says it arrested him Tuesday because an unnamed FBI source reported to agents that he had discussed fleeing to Saudi Arabia.



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