

Detained Detroit Muslim cleric seeks political asylum

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On July 9, Rabih Haddad's attorneys appeared in Detroit before Immigration Court Judge Elizabeth Hacker to petition for his political asylum in the US. Haddad, a co-founder of the charity Global Relief Foundation (GRF), was arrested nearly seven months ago on an alleged minor visa violation. The government is seeking to deport Haddad and his family to Lebanon. This was the first public hearing for Haddad since he was arrested at his Ann Arbor, Michigan home on December 14, 2001. A trial date has been set for August 27.

Like the approximately 1,200 Arab and Muslim immigrants rounded up in the government's dragnet since September 11, Haddad was arrested by Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents, spirited away and held incommunicado from his family, lawyers and friends. Later he was secretly moved to Chicago to face a grand jury without the knowledge of his supporters. To date, the government has filed no criminal charges against the 41-year-old Muslim cleric or his family, all of whom face deportation.

Haddad's case has become emblematic of the government's vendetta against Arab and Muslim immigrants because of Haddad's stature in the community as well as the widespread support he has received from those concerned with the government's attacks on democratic rights.

His attorney, Ashruf Nubani, explained he was petitioning for asylum because "There is a justifiable fear that he could be persecuted." Nubani said Haddad's religious beliefs could cause him problems in his native country. A report on Lebanon issued by Amnesty International on May 3 corroborates these concerns. Titled "Amnesty International reiterates its concerns on

the situation of refugees and asylum seekers," the statement exposes "torture and ill-treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers while detained by the Lebanese authorities" as well as "deaths in custody" within Lebanon.

"In addition," Nubani stated, "by this government linking him to terrorism they have made it difficult for him to go anywhere else."

As a result of a legal challenge by the local media and US representative John Conyers, the July 9 hearing was held in public. The Justice Department, however, continues to press for the right to close Haddad's trial along with those of other immigrant detainees.

On August 6, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals is expected to hear the government's petition to close Haddad's upcoming trial to the public. Meanwhile, in a separate ruling on a New Jersey case involving two Jordanian cousins charged with overstaying their visas, the US Supreme Court intervened to stop a federal court ruling that said the hearing should be open to the public. In a one-sentence statement issued on June 28, the US Supreme Court stated the government could continue holding secret immigration hearings pending the outcome of a ruling by an appeals court. The Justice Department submitted a 10-page affidavit asserting that an open hearing would disclose information that would jeopardize its anti-terrorism campaign. If the appellate court's decision goes against the Justice Department, it is expected to be appealed to the US Supreme Court.

At the center of all these appeals is the unprecedented directive by the US Justice Department, known as the "Creppy memo," which instructs the government to close immigration trials deemed of "special interest" to the anti-terrorism campaign. While the total number is not known, it is reported that at least 700 cases have been closed under this order.

In another affront to his civil liberties, Haddad was not

allowed to be present in the Detroit courtroom, but remained in prison and was viewed via video hook-up from Chicago.

Haddad's lawyer, Ashruf Nubani, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* outside the courtroom. He blasted the government's case, stating: "They have nothing. Every officer of GRF was questioned by a grand jury and they all willingly testified. And they will find nothing," he continued, "because there is nothing there."

Kristine Abouzahr, chairperson of the Committee to Free Rabih Haddad, also spoke to WSWS while picketing outside the courthouse. "The INS should charge him or release him," she stated. "The government is using the Patriot Act to its maximum ability. I don't agree with this law. It curtails civil liberties for everybody. Profiling is something extremely dangerous in any society. Profiling for ethnicity or religion is taking big risks for treating people unfairly."

Despite the government's attempts to suppress all information about the Haddad case, US District Judge Nancy Edmunds ordered the transcripts of Haddad's earlier immigration hearings released to the public in March. Prosecutors then appealed, but the ruling was upheld in April and the government was forced to comply. Failing in their secrecy attempts, the government then focused on a smear campaign, charging Haddad with established links to Al-Qaeda and with falsifying his income.

One example of the flimsy basis of the government's charges, reported uncritically in the media, was Judge Hacker's use of an apartment application to claim that Haddad lied about his employment and income, knowing that immigrants with a tourist visa are barred from employment. To secure an apartment Haddad stated he earned \$29,500 a year and was employed by GRF. Haddad feared the managers would reject someone who lived on charity.

Haddad has stated many times that he and his family derive their income from what is known in the Islamic tradition as "zakat"—a charity or tithe. "There have been a lot of statements flying around," commented Mrs. Abouzahr. "I was very upset about the statement about his income. Income contains many sources. What are you going to say if you're going to get an apartment?"

Floundering for any evidence of wrongdoing on Haddad's behalf, the government has worked to plant information in the media to give credence to its vendetta. One headline appearing in the *Chicago Tribune* read, "U.S. Files Link Founder of Charity to Al-Qaeda."

Haddad replied angrily to these falsifications, writing in a letter: "I was outraged! There was no mention of this in any of the three hearings that I had." The FBI claimed that Haddad was observed at overseas locations that "housed and supported terrorist organizations associated with Al Qaeda." This assertion was then reprinted as a "declaration," and therefore was not legally challengeable in court, according to his attorneys.

"This is supposed to have taken place in the late '80s to early '90s," stated Haddad. "I declare that the FBI are dishonest. The proof is quite simply that I left the region in mid-1992 when there was no such thing as Al Qaeda. I wonder if they are referring to the same overseas locations where the Consul from the US Embassy used to pay me regular visits at the height of the 'Gulf War' and where we used to share views and exchange ideas. I was the Director of External Relations of one of the major Muslim relief organizations at the time. It was also, at those very locations, where I received an official invitation from the US Embassy to attend a special reception in honor of a high-ranking State Department official visiting the area in regards of US AID projects for the refugees."

"The late '80s and early '90s was a time when the US was pumping all sorts of aid into Afghanistan," Haddad continued. "Some of that aid later helped found the 'Taliban,' as some analysts contend. What does the FBI declare about that?"

Haddad's letter charges the FBI with negligence in the death of 3,000 people at the World Trade Center and with ignoring "home grown" terrorists. "This is a sad day for democracy and freedom where the media becomes a rubber stamp for the government's propaganda machine," he added, lambasting the role of the press, charging that it is "even an accomplice at times, and relinquishes its main role of being the watchful eye of the people. I am deeply troubled and saddened by the fact that the media ignored the real facts in my court transcripts and chose to go after the 'scoop.'"



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