

# Bush government deports Muslim cleric to Lebanon

Lawrence Porter  
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On July 14, immigration agents from the Department of Homeland Security secretly deported Muslim cleric and charity leader Rabih Haddad to Lebanon, bringing to a close a case that has symbolized the Bush administration's flagrant attack on the democratic rights of Arab and Muslim immigrants.

Haddad, 43 and a native of Lebanon, was a popular activist in Ann Arbor, Mich. His is one of the most well known cases of the nearly 900 Middle Eastern men rounded up by the Bush administration in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The fact that Haddad was never charged with a crime confirmed for many of his supporters that the government never had a case and that the arrest and incarceration were politically motivated, like that of hundreds of other post-9/11 detainees. In the end, despite months of investigations, the US government resorted to deportation when it came up empty-handed.

Haddad was arrested at his home in Ann Arbor 19 months ago, on December 14, 2001, on a minor visa violation. On the same day, government agents raided the Islamic charity he co-founded, Global Relief Foundation (GRF), in Chicago. While Haddad was in government custody, he was the subject of investigations on alleged ties to Al-Qaeda and other so-called terrorist organizations, allegations that Haddad and his supporters strenuously opposed. The US government never charged him with a crime, nor were they able to prove their assertions in a court of law.

Haddad's deportation came as a shock and created deep anger in the civil rights and Muslim communities. Kristine Abouzahr, a spokesperson for the Committee to Free Rabih Haddad, told the WSWS that no one was prepared for his expulsion. Abouzahr said Haddad's wife, Salma Al-Rushaid, had visited him in his prison the day before he was removed and there was no hint that anything was going to happen.

"The first anyone heard was when Salma got the collect call from Rabih in Amsterdam," stated Abouzahr. "Salma called me right after she spoke to Rabih," she said. "No one knew, not even his wife. After that we then began making calls, including calls to the attorneys."

Spokespersons for the immigration department confirmed Haddad had been deported after the media widely reported Haddad had called his wife from Amsterdam. The government said immigration agents took Haddad from his jail cell in Monroe, Mich., on Monday afternoon, gave him a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and accompanied him on a KLM flight that evening out of Detroit to Amsterdam.

Initial reports that Haddad was being held by the Lebanese government created another wave of angry denunciations. "Our worse fears have come true," Al-Rushaid told the media. "We applied for political asylum because we feared that any government would be more than pleased to please the US government and interrogate Rabih." Later she warned the Bush administration, "We hold the US government responsible for any consequences. We are fearful for his safety."

The Lebanese government held Haddad for four to six hours before releasing him to his family, following several calls from lawyers in the US.

Kristine Abouzahr said Salma was worried for the safety of her husband in Lebanon as well as for herself and her children. Al-Rushaid, born in Kuwait, is also in violation of her visa, and she had petitioned the court to have her case joined with her that of her husband. Now she and three of her four children also face forced deportation.

"After Salma received the call from her husband," Abouzahr said, "We got some sisters together and began to frantically pack as much as we could. We still don't know what will happen. They could take them away at any point."

On July 16, Salma Al-Rushaid and supporters of Haddad called a news conference to denounce the secret deportation and the continued charges that Haddad was tied to terrorism. After thanking her supporters, Al-Rushaid lambasted the government for the way it treated her husband. “I want an apology and to clear his name,” she told the packed meeting. “Willingly, I don’t want to return to America unless the old America comes back.”

Noel Saleh, the local attorney for Haddad and a staff member for the Michigan American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), told the meeting that the decision to remove Haddad was taken by top officials in the US Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in Washington after the Sixth Court of Appeals dismissed his application on July 11 to hear the asylum appeal.

Saleh also warned that it is possible the US government could request the Lebanese government to return Haddad for prosecution if anything is uncovered in the ongoing investigation into Global Relief. According to Saleh, GRF was under investigation for five years before Haddad was arrested in 2001, and nothing has been uncovered during this entire period.

Saleh said he also considers Haddad’s quick deportation to be an admission that they had no case. “If they did, they had him in custody. They could have detained him longer,” stated Saleh. “They could have filed any number of charges against him. I see it as an admission there was no real reason to be holding him. If he was this national security threat, as they kept on alleging, why would they so rapidly remove him from the United States?”

“We are outraged,” stated Kristine Abouzahr at the meeting, charging the government with suppressing the democratic right of innocence until proven guilty. “The way that the government whisked Rabih off quietly at night, and with no charges against him, confirms what we have been saying all along, that Rabih is innocent and vindicates our community for our belief in his innocence and good character.”

“The government has nothing to show for it,” Ashraf Nubani, Haddad’s primary lawyer and counsel for GRF, stated to the *Ann Arbor News*. “Here’s the chairman of the organization not charged with a crime. No member of the organization is charged with a crime. They kept him in jail when they knew for a fact he wasn’t a threat to anyone.”

Kary Moss, head of the Michigan chapter of the ACLU, agreed with Saleh’s conclusions. She told the WSWS that once the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed an

application to hear an appeal on Haddad’s petition for asylum “they just grabbed him and took him out of the country.”

Rabih Haddad was arrested 19 months ago as a part of a widespread campaign by the Bush administration to both intimidate Arab and Middle Eastern immigrants and roll back decades of civil rights gains under the guise of fighting terrorism. Haddad was initially held by the US government in a secret location and denied the right to contact his family or attorneys. He was held for weeks in solitary confinement and later denied the right to an open hearing.

Unlike the cases of many detainees arrested following 9/11, Haddad’s case generated a great deal of notoriety. The case achieved international prominence when several Detroit-area newspapers, joined by the ACLU and Detroit congressman John Conyers, sued the government over its decision to bar the public from Haddad’s deportation hearings. The lawsuit challenged the “Creppy memo,” issued by chief immigration judge Michael Creppy, requiring immigration judges to close hearings their offices determined to be of “special interest.”

In August 2002, the Haddad case won a unanimous decision from the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, which ruled that the government was wrong in closing Haddad’s hearing, leading to a brief period when the hearings were open to the public. After one day of open hearings, however, a newly appointed immigration judge once again closed the hearings, citing the government’s contention that the removal of the public was necessary to protect national security.

In November 2002, Haddad was denied a request for political asylum by Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) judge Robert Newberry, who also ordered Haddad and his family deported from the US, but denied them the right to leave on their own. By July 11, Haddad had exhausted his legal challenges when the appeals court denied him a hearing on his asylum request, and the government immediately moved to have him deported.



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