

New York man receives 6-year “terror” sentence for Hezbollah TV broadcasts

Peter Daniels
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A New York man was sentenced last week to 69 months in prison on charges of assisting Hezbollah, the mass-based Lebanese Shiite movement, by providing satellite television services that included broadcasts by the party’s television station, Al Manar.

Javed Iqbal, 45 years old, was first arrested in August 2006, charged under a 30-year-old statute, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. A small businessman who was born in Pakistan and came to the US as a teenager, he had used satellite equipment at his home in the New York City borough of Staten Island to provide programming for various outlets, including Christian evangelists as well as Hezbollah.

The law under which Iqbal was charged had been amended by the Patriot Act after the September 11. The revised statute was used to target individuals accused of providing aid to organizations designated as terrorist by the US State Department.

Iqbal’s prosecution had the effect of criminalizing speech and utilized the technique of guilt by association. Law professor and civil liberties advocate David Cole pointed this out at the time.

“Mr. Iqbal is being penalized for doing nothing more than facilitating speech, and is being punished not because the speech itself is harmful, but because it is associated with Hezbollah,” Cole said.

Moreover, the original legislation had been amended in 1988 to include an exemption for news content. The American Civil Liberties Union criticized the arrest of Iqbal on the grounds that it ignored this constitutional exception to the law, but the judge in US District Court in Manhattan later upheld the charge, claiming that the prosecution was based not on content but on specific conduct, that of providing material support to a terrorist group.

Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian Islamic movement which had its origins more than a quarter century ago in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, inflicted a political and strategic blow to the Israeli regime when it fought back against Israeli attacks in 2006. It is now the largest party in the country with 11 seats in the Lebanese parliament and virtual veto power over government policy. It regularly mobilizes hundreds of thousands of supporters in mass demonstrations.

The State Department first labeled it as a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, under the Clinton Administration, in line with the foreign policy interests of US imperialism and its Zionist ally.

Hezbollah’s broadcasts, meanwhile, remain freely available on the Internet.

Mr. Iqbal is apparently not affiliated with Hezbollah, but has been caught up in the “war on terror.” A small businessman, he first challenged the charges, but, facing a jail sentence of up to 15 years, was eventually pressured into accepting a guilty plea on a single charge. His attorney read a statement in Federal District Court on April 23 stating, “I have not harmed anyone in my whole life,” but expressing sorrow for what he called a mistake that had hurt him “financially, emotionally and physically.”

This case was begun under the Bush regime and concluded under the Obama Administration. It is one more sign that the recent change in terminology, in which the White House has apparently dropped the expression “war on terror” for more innocuous-sounding language, is a change in terminology only, and not in foreign policy or the attacks on free speech and other democratic rights.



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