

Undermining the War on Terror

BY J. MICHAEL WALLER

Top American Muslim groups courted by the Bush administration have used their political cover to launch influence operations and extend support to terrorists.



Terrorists and their supporters are doing their best to weave themselves into the political fabric of American society, say specialists in homeland security. They are operating front groups and charities to finance their operations, and they are running influence operations to weaken federal antiterrorism laws under the guise of protecting civil liberties.

The Feb. 20 arrest of an alleged leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), operating what the FBI calls a Tampa-based terrorist cell under cover as a professor at the University of South Florida (USF), has exposed one suspected operation. In doing so it has turned media focus on political groups that had been working in Washington with the accused, Sami Al-Arian, and set White House officials pointing fingers at one another about how the alleged terrorist managed to be included in the administration's controversial Muslim-outreach program.

That outreach effort, with its roots in the George W. Bush 2000 presidential campaign, has provoked controversy among the United States' growing Muslim and Arab-American communities, as well as among security-minded supporters of the president. Critics allege favoritism toward a small but vocal cadre of groups they say support terrorism. Mainstream Muslim and Arab-American organizations that were shut out of the liaison effort tell *INSIGHT* that extremists spent large sums trying to buy access in an effort to hijack the Bush administration's initiative, obtaining repeated meetings at the White House and with the president himself to acquire political cover and claim legitimacy.

The FBI's arrest of USF professor Al-Arian illustrates the problem. According to federal law-enforcement sources, Al-Arian was a principal organizer, trainer and coach for lobbying campaigns designed to eviscerate federal antiterrorism laws that had a particularly damaging effect on terrorist-support activities inside the United States. He was, say the sources, an architect of a years-long effort to repeal federal laws permitting prosecutors to use highly classified information in the arrest and detention of foreigners suspected of terrorist ties, without permitting the suspects to know the evidence. The law is intended for terrorist cases where the suspect's knowledge of extremely sensitive evidence could, among other things, result in the murders of Muslims and others who helped law-enforcement officials

Bad connection: Accused terrorist Al-Arian had been included in the Bush administration's Muslim-outreach program.

DANNY MOLOSHOK/AP

identify and build cases against terrorist operations.

Decrying the "secret-evidence" laws as unfairly "targeting" all Muslims and ethnic Arabs, Al-Arian portrayed their abolition as a civil-rights issue, appealing to liberal civil-liberties groups, libertarians and small-government conservatives to join forces against Big Brother. The same groups, an *INSIGHT* investigation shows, worked after the Sept. 11, 2001, al-Qaeda airliner attacks to gut the Bush administration's tough new antiterrorism package — the very laws the FBI eventually would use to take down Al-Arian, whom it had been watching for years, and the PIJ's network inside the United States.

Count No. 42 of the 50-count federal grand-jury indictment of Al-Arian and other defendants alleged that the PIJ "would and did seek to obtain support from influential individuals in the United States under the guise of promoting and protecting Arab rights." Al-Arian worked with several Washington-based groups, including the American Muslim Council (AMC) and the Islamic Institute, as part of his alleged influence operations. He was the first speaker at the lobbyist-training seminars at the AMC's 2000 and 2001 national conventions. He coached council members and others on lobbying Congress to influence legislation and statutes designed to give federal authorities the legal tools necessary to build cases against his and other alleged terrorist-support activities and to use that evidence in a court of law to try to put Al-Arian and his alleged jihadists in prison for the rest of their lives.

Prominent Muslim leaders have been warning the U.S. government and the public for years about such groups. Sheik Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, chairman of the Detroit-based Supreme Council of America and part of a respected family of traditional Islamic scholars that has led the muftiate of Lebanon for the last 150 years. Kabbani has been warning about the jihadist groups since 1996. "I saw there was a danger," he tells *INSIGHT*. "Many Muslims in the United States were aware of the danger, but they didn't have the capacity to speak on behalf of the Muslim community because the microphone has been hijacked."

Al-Arian says his indictment and arrest simply are the result of "politics." The AMC, in a joint statement with other groups claiming to represent the American Muslim community, echoed Al-Arian: "The community is gaining the perception that people are rounded up and targeted because of their political opinions and because they have the right to dissent on current U.S. policy. Our community is in dire need to understand

how these charges are founded on concrete evidence of criminal activity and not guilt by association or political considerations." Not showing the slightest bit of caution about the terrorist conspiracy alleged in the indictments, the AMC turned its ire on the Bush administration, particularly Attorney General John Ashcroft.

Since 9/11 the AMC and affiliated groups have portrayed American Muslims as victims of U.S. bigotry rather than partners in the fight against terrorism. And that, critics say, has helped to tarnish the public image of Muslims and Arab-Americans as unpatriotic or even pro-



terrorist. An ongoing *INSIGHT* investigation, which began within hours of the hijacked jetliners crashing into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania, shows that many of the groups the Bush administration has courted have resisted the Bush dictum, "You're either with us or you're with the terrorists." Those groups appear to want to have it both ways, condemning terrorism in general and wrapping themselves in the American flag, Constitution in hand, while at the same time extending political, moral, material or other support to international terrorists and assailing the Bush administration and federal law-enforcement agencies charged with waging the war on terror.

Angrily denying that it supports terrorism, the AMC claims to be "fully engaged" with the U.S. government in the antiterrorism fight. Communications director Faiz Rehman claims allegations that the AMC has a history hostile to Bush's war on terrorism are "blatantly false."

The AMC was founded in 1990 by Abdurahman Alamoudi, a veteran operative for Saudi-backed political-action organizations, including the SAAR Foundation, which was raided by federal agents for alleged terrorist financing. According to national-security specialists, the AMC has a long and consistent history in the United States of promoting terrorist causes or linked groups — many of which are unrelated to Islam or to the Arab-Israeli conflict. An early president of the executive board of the AMC was Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, formerly known as H. Rap Brown, who was twice on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. As a

Give me your ear: Critics claim that the White House outreach effort to American Muslims has been tainted by favoritism toward a small but vocal cadre of groups that support terrorism.

1960s radical, Brown threatened to assassinate Lady Bird Johnson when she was first lady of the United States. He now is serving a life sentence in a Georgia prison for the 2000 murder of Fulton County Sheriff's Deputy Ricky Kinchen.

As AMC executive director, both on CNN's *Crossfire* and in an open letter, Alamoudi defended Egyptian Islamic Jihad spiritual leader Omar Abdel Rahman, the "Blind Sheik" convicted of masterminding the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York City. In its April 1994 newsletter, AMC defended the ruling Sudanese National Islamic Front, which the State Department designated as a terrorist group, arguing that the Khartoum regime was "not engaged in terrorist activities and is not harboring terrorists." At its 1997 conference, the

AMC played host to Layth Shubayalat, alleged to be a terrorist tied to a plot to assassinate King Hussein of Jordan, and defended the outlawed Jordanian Islamic Action Front.

Demonstrating in front of the White House in 2000, Alamoudi was videotaped proclaiming: "We are all supporters of Hamas. *Allahu Akbar!* I am also a supporter of Hezbollah." Among the most infamous attacks officially attributed to Hezbollah are the April 1983 bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, which killed 63, and the October 1983 truck bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 Marines.

Alamoudi recruited young, articulate, personable Muslim political activists and helped them set up spin-off groups to influence the political mainstream. Canceled checks obtained by *INSIGHT* show

that he provided seed money for one of those groups, the Islamic Institute, which his former government-affairs director, Khaled Saffuri, co-founded with conservative activist Grover Norquist. Saffuri was involved in Muslim outreach for the 2000 Bush campaign and currently serves as chairman of the Islamic Institute. He has told *INSIGHT* he opposes groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Lobbying Nexus

Critics claim the AMC's main political activity has been to abolish or prevent passage of antiterrorist legislation. The AMC calls itself an "active member" of the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedom (NCPFF), which was founded in the 1960s to provide legal

support to New Left terrorists in the Weather Underground, the Puerto Rican FALN and the Black Liberation Army, and which national-security specialists say was revived to push for Islamist terrorist causes.

NCPFF Executive Director Kit Gage is a veteran legal activist, serving also as head of the National Lawyers Guild, founded in the 1930s and officially cited as a legal front group for the old Communist Party. The NCPFF has acted as a legal-aid office of sorts for members or alleged members of a wide variety of terrorist groups [see "Domestic Front in the War on Terror," Dec. 17, 2001], including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Hamas, the Basque ETA separatist group of Spain, the FALN of Puerto Rico, the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Shining Path of Peru, and for

The American Muslim Council in Its Own Words

- *AMC on terrorism*: "We are all supporters of Hamas! *Allahu Akhbar!* ... I am also a supporter of Hezbollah" (AMC founder Abdurahman Alamoudi, Associated Press, Jan. 9, 2002).

- *AMC on the United States*: "I think if we were outside this country, we can say, 'Oh, Allah, destroy America,' but once we are here, our mission in this country is to change it. There is no way for Muslims to be violent in America, no way. We have other means to do it. You can be violent anywhere else but in America" (Alamoudi to Islamic Association of Palestine, Chicago, Dec. 29, 1996).

- *AMC on Hamas*: "Hamas is not a terrorist group. ... I have followed the good work of Hamas. ... They have a wing that is a violent wing. They had to resort to some kind of violence" (Alamoudi, National Press Club, Nov. 22, 1994).

- *AMC on Abu Marzook*, deported from the United States and now Hamas leader in Syria: "Yes, I am honored to be a member of the committee that is defending Musa Abu Marzook in America. This a mark of distinction on my chest. ... I have known Musa Abu Marzook before and I really consider him to be from among the best people in the Islamic movement, Hamas — in the Palestinian movement in general — and I work together with him" (Alamoudi, Middle East TV, March 26, 1996).

- *AMC on Muslims and the war on terrorism*: "We as Muslim Americans are being called upon to either show patriotism or suffer shame" (AMC Executive

Director Eric Vickers, Sept. 24, 2002).

- *AMC on Wahhabism*: "We have no more right or business putting Wahhabism on trial for the Sept. 11 attack, as your editorial suggests, than we do putting Christianity on trial for the Oklahoma City bombing" (Vickers, letter to editor, *Buffalo News*, Sept. 26, 2002).

- *AMC on al-Qaeda*: "They are involved in a resistance movement" (Vickers, MSNBC's *Hardball With Chris Matthews*, June 27, 2002).

- *AMC on President George W. Bush's closure of the Holy Land Foundation as an alleged terrorist fund-raising front*: "Particularly disturbing ... unjust and counterproductive" (AMC statement, Dec. 11, 2001).

- *AMC on Bush's State of the Union speech and Iraq*: "In invoking God to be with American soldiers in our apparently imminent war with Iraq, what the president did not say is that he is calling on God to kill innocent Iraqi children?" (Vickers, Jan. 29, 2003).

- *AMC on ridding the U.S. Muslim community of terrorists*: "As long as the war on terrorism exists, the government is not going to cease profiling Muslims, having selective INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] registrations, spying on mosques and Muslims, detaining Muslims, raiding Muslim organizations and businesses, bringing fishing-expedition criminal indictments, etc. ... Thus I think we have no real choice but to follow the wise example of our brother Malcolm X and take our case to the world community. And who, I would ask, has better stature as a mainstream or-

ganization than the AMC to credibly present this compelling case?" (Vickers, Jan. 31).

- *AMC to imams on how to work with the FBI*: "AMC calls upon you to demonstrate mass criticism and activism against the new FBI policy, which directs FBI field offices nationwide to conduct an inventory of mosques and Muslims as part of their charge to develop demographic profiles of their regions to combat possible terrorism" (Vickers, memorandum to imams, Jan. 28, 2003).

- *AMC before Sami Al-Arian arrest*: "First let me say that when you had Mr. — professor Arian on your show — you didn't grill him, you assassinated his character. You presented him to all the world as a terrorist. And there's absolutely no evidence of that. ... What has happened to professor Arian is happening to Muslims and people of Middle Eastern descent all over this country. They are being discriminated against" (Vickers, on Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*, Jan. 15, 2002).

- *AMC after Al-Arian arrest*: "The [Muslim] community is gaining the perception that people are rounded up and targeted because of their political opinions and because they exercise the right to dissent on current U.S. policy. Our community is in dire need to understand how these charges are founded on concrete evidence of criminal activity and not guilt by association or political considerations" (AMC news release with the Council on American Islamic Relations, American Muslim Alliance and Muslim Public Affairs Council, under the American Muslim Political Coordination Council, Feb. 21, 2003).

— JMW

Stand by your man: The wife of Al-Arian speaks to the media on the steps of the federal courthouse in Tampa.

Leonard Peltier, who was convicted of the 1975 murders of FBI Special Agents Jack Coler and Ronald Williams.

From 2000 to 2002, the NCPPF president was USF professor Sami Al-Arian. And here is where the alleged Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader, whom the FBI considers a hard-core, senior terrorist, comes publicly under the AMC's wing and into the White House.

The AMC began to enter the political mainstream during the 2000 presidential campaign. Some Republican activists seized on the secret-evidence issue to woo Muslim and Arab-American voters. The AMC's annual convention, held in June, 2000, was devoted to the task of influencing Congress. Alamoudi presided as convention chairman. June 22 was designated "Muslim Day on the Hill," with seminars in lobbying held in the Cannon House Office Building of the U.S. House of Representatives. The first lobbying coach, according to the program, was Al-Arian, identified as being with the Tampa Bay Coalition for Peace and Justice. Gage of the NCPPF "provided information on secret evidence" as part of a "campaign to support the Secret Evidence Repeal Act of 2001," according to the AMC's newsletter, *AMC Report*. A Capitol Hill dinner that night presented awards to Reps. Tom Davis (R-Va.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.), Islamic Institute cofounder Norquist, identified as president of Americans for Tax Reform, and James Zogby, president of the Arab-American Institute.

Al-Arian was back at the AMC's 2001 conference, held in Northern Virginia, from June 21-24. He again kicked off the legislative-action session. "Sami Al-Arian, president of the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedom (NCPPF), spoke about secret evidence," the AMC newsletter reported. Following Al-Arian's presentation was a session called "Art of Lobbying." Indeed, "Suhail Khan, [at the time] representing the White House Office of Public Liaison, addressed the members on how to be successful in lobbying," the newsletter continued. "According to Khan, another important aspect of lobbying is facilitating meetings with congressional staffers." Coached by Al-Arian and Khan in two separate panels, the AMC delegates spent the rest of the day lobbying.

"The second day's biggest event was 'The White House Briefing' with Karl Rove, President Bush's senior political adviser, who welcomed the participants and gave them the orientation of Bush's agenda followed by a brief question-and-



answer session," the AMC reported. (Al-Arian was part of the AMC delegation, his wife, Nahla, stated at a news conference. *Newsweek* reports that the Secret Service warned White House political officials that Al-Arian was a suspected terrorist and that he should not be cleared, but that political officials let him in anyway. In the days following Al-Arian's arrest, according to Washington-based journalists, White House officials initially denied to reporters that Rove had participated in the event, but later changed their story.)

At the 2001 convention's kickoff luncheon, "Alamoudi gave the opening remarks and introduced Suhail Khan, who received an award for his contributions of work concerning the rights of Muslims," according to the *AMC Report*. The newsletter added that the AMC then ratified Alamoudi's work of the previous decade, with an officer reminding the audience "of the great role Alamoudi played in establishing and leading AMC from the days of its inception until what it is today."

Khan has said that while he has met Al-Arian he has had no personal relationship with the suspected terrorist leader. He also has strongly condemned Alamoudi and people like him.

With Us and With The Terrorists

The AMC and related groups firmly deny any and all allegations that they are soft on terrorism. In a strongly worded response to critics, dated Feb. 20, AMC's Rehman says, "While the AMC may have differences on certain domestic- and international-policy issues with the Bush

administration, FBI Director Robert Mueller was last year's keynote speaker at the AMC's annual convention, which is a testimony to the organization's support to the administration on the matters of national security."

Not so, say administration insiders, who tell *INSIGHT* that Mueller was instructed to address the AMC under political pressure from the White House. Administration officials tell this magazine that a bitter controversy erupted within the National Security Council in an effort to prevent Mueller from addressing the AMC at its June 2002 convention. Widespread but unconfirmed suspicions led to White House political operatives who wanted to assuage Muslim groups alarmed by Bush's strong antiterrorist measures after 9/11. The government's public position was awkward. FBI spokesman Bill Carter defended the AMC as "the most mainstream Muslim group in the country," but the FBI media unit could produce nothing to substantiate the claim.

In his speech, which was aimed at the Muslim and Arab-American community at large, the FBI director broke with protocol and did not recognize his AMC hosts by name or praise or credit the organization. Mueller's only reference to the AMC was this: "Unfortunately, persons associated with this organization have in the past made statements that indicate support for terrorism and for terrorist organizations."

The FBI chief credited AMC President Yahya Basha as an individual for firmly condemning terrorism, but he ignored the controversial televised statements during the previous week by Executive Director Eric E. Vickers, who would not denounce Hamas, Hezbollah,

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RADICALS

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or al-Qaeda by name when asked by Fox News and MSNBC (see sidebar, P. 28). While Mueller strongly praised “the American Muslim community” at large for providing vital support to the FBI in ongoing antiterrorism efforts, his silence about the AMC itself was taken by close observers to reflect the break between the vocal Washington-based Muslim groups and the American Muslim rank and file.

Even so, the AMC has been milking the FBI director’s appearance at its convention as confirmation of its legitimacy. The AMC and other groups, such as the spin-off Islamic Institute, have cast themselves as allies of the FBI in the war against terrorism since 9/11. The AMC recently blasted syndicated columnist Mona Charen for writing that the group after Sept. 11 had encouraged its members not to talk to the FBI. “This is far from the truth,” the AMC’s Rehman says in a written rebuttal. “In fact, on Sept. 17, 2001, AMC issued a statement urging Muslims to assist [the] FBI. This press release has been present on the front page of our Website since that date.”

But the evidence shows that Charen essentially was correct. Until Sept. 27, 2001, the AMC Website included a page urging support of the Secret Evidence Repeal Act, stating that it eliminates the use of secret information in immigration proceedings. “AMC has contacted every member of Congress. . . . We ask you to do the same.” The last sentence was in bold type and hyperlinked to an NCPFF site which instructed readers on how to avoid cooperation with the FBI or other law-enforcement officers in antiterrorism cases. The instructions are titled “Know Your Rights: Don’t Talk to the FBI.” The site as of that date — more than two weeks after the al-Qaeda attacks — contained nothing urging Muslims to assist federal officials.

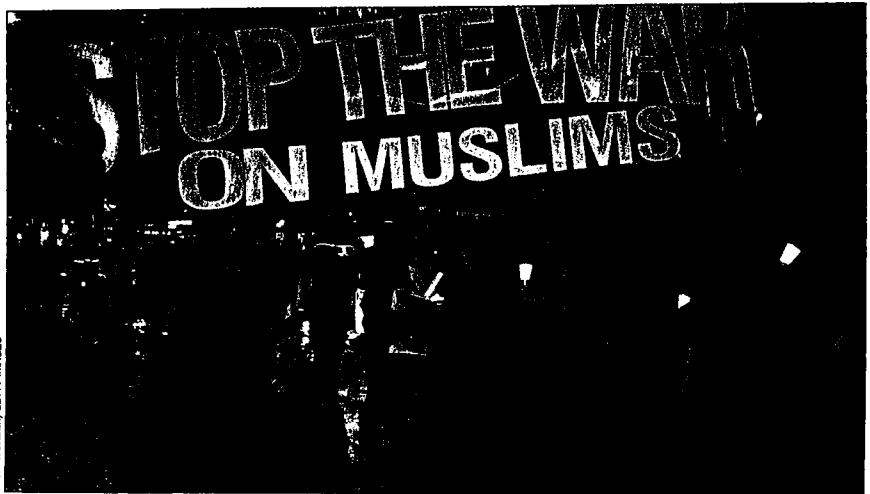
INSIGHT’s monitoring of the AMC Website shows that the council did not pull the anti-FBI material until after coming under heavy criticism for failing to mobilize its members to help federal counterterrorism investigators. The “statement urging Muslims to assist FBI,” though dated Sept. 17, was not posted on the AMC site for at least another 10 days. Even then, the statement did nothing to encourage anyone to work with the FBI to root out terrorist supporters and operatives from Islamic centers, mosques and other institutions within the Muslim community. It merely urged them to seek service, for pay, as translators — historically a favored posting for operatives and agents. Other radical jihadist activist

groups purged their Websites of anti-FBI material at about the same time.

The legislative track record against antiterrorist legislation is consistent both before and after 9/11. The AMC opposed the 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, according to its October 1995 newsletter. It lobbied for the Secret Evidence Repeal Act two years in a row “to raise the concerns of American Muslims on the infringement of their constitutional rights,” according to its Website. In concert with the GOP-oriented Islamic Institute, the AMC lobbied post-9/11 against key provisions of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, the Bush administration’s legislative package of new legal tools to defend the country against terrorism, and called for the resignation of Attorney General Ashcroft. In a June 14, 2002, statement titled “AMC Charges Ashcroft With Engagement in

Sept. 11 and showing a surprising ignorance of American jurisprudence, the statement said: “It was disturbing that Attorney General John Ashcroft inserted expressions, like jihad and martyrdom, to a major federal investigation and indictment.”

The AMC and allied groups say they have “repeatedly and unconditionally condemned violence and suicide bombings,” in Rehman’s words. “Our Website still carries these statements clearly outlining our position on these matters.” True enough. But it won’t name the perpetrators. While its president and public-relations people offer a moderate image, the day-to-day leadership shows where the organization’s heart is, a growing number of critics say. For example, executive Director Vickers, when requested to do so in four separate interviews on Fox News and MSNBC in June 2002,



Misguided: Many groups have been trying to portray American Muslims as victims in the fight against terrorism.

Scare Tactics as Pretext to Curtail Civil Liberties,” the group accused the attorney general of “using national security as a pretext” to “engage in a pattern of ethnic and religious discrimination” and “intimidation.” In February, the AMC posted notice that it will fight the administration’s proposed Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003.

Rather than praise the Justice Department for helping cleanse the Muslim community of terrorist operatives out to attack all Americans, as many had hoped, the AMC attacked Ashcroft in a joint statement with the Council on American Islamic Relations, the American Muslim Alliance (founded by its president, Agha Saeed, the former chairman of the Communist Party of Pakistan) and the Muslim Public Affairs Council. In a bizarre document disregarding the widely known facts concerning the attacks of

would not denounce Hamas, Hezbollah or even al-Qaeda by name. Linda Vester of Fox News asked Vickers, “Do you condemn al-Qaeda by name and condemn Hamas by name?” According to the transcript, Vickers would not.

Journalists Fred Barnes and Morton Kondracke, in a panel with Fox anchor Brit Hume, discussed the AMC executive director’s comments. Barnes commented, “These groups are outraged about what the victims are doing here in the United States. Their big effort is to oppose reasonable steps to protect the United States from further attacks. That’s where they aim their fire, not at these terrorists who are doing this in the name of their very own religion.” Kondracke added, “If that guy truly reflects American Muslims — and he is the executive director of this large organization — then God help us. We’ve got . . . that guy sounds like a fifth column, frankly.”

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