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Two Muslim Charities Under Scrutiny

By David B. Ottaway and
Dan Morgan
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When Mahmoud Jaballah left Egypt in 1991 after numerous arrests for alleged ties to a terrorist group, he quickly found a job with a Muslim charity funded by the Saudi government and royal family.

Now Jaballah, who spent three years working as a teacher in Pakistan for the Saudi-financed International Islamic Relief Organization, is in custody in Canada. He is accused of being a member of the terrorist group Egyptian Islamic Jihad and of having repeated contact with two top lieutenants of Osama bin Laden, the suspected mastermind of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The IIRO and a closely-affiliated group, the Muslim World League, have come under growing scrutiny as investigators seek to trace the networks that support bin Laden's organization, al Qaeda. Jaballah's murky past illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing between the charities' legitimate humanitarian activities and their possible assistance to terrorists.

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Spokesmen for the IIRO and Muslim World League say their organizations are sometimes victims of terrorist machinations that they have no way of spotting. Neither charity was on the list of 27 individuals and groups whose assets were ordered frozen by President Bush last week.

Yet time and again, both charities have been the subject of probes into their use as covers or financial conduits for terrorists. The controversy has placed the Saudi monarchy in a delicate position, because it is both the charities' principal source of funds and a prime target of bin Laden.

In the Philippines, bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohamed Jalal Khalifa, headed the Manila branches of both the IIRO and Muslim World League in the early 1990s. The Saudi-financed charities built mosques and provided social services to Muslims caught up in a separatist struggle led by Islamic radicals. But Philippine police and intelligence officials charged Khalifa also used the organizations to funnel money to militant separatists.

Khalifa, now in Saudi Arabia, denied these allegations in a phone interview last year with the Filipino Daily Inquirer. "I am not a terrorist. Neither did I help any terrorist group in the Philippines financially or otherwise," he said. Khalifa added that he "hates and condemns" bin Laden, the brother of his second wife.

The IIRO was also investigated after the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Kenya temporarily suspended the

organization's permit to operate there, but later reinstated it.

In the United States, an Orlando resident who had worked for the Muslim World League in Pakistan was jailed for contempt of court in 1999 after refusing to explain his contacts with persons convicted in the 1998 embassy bombings. In India, one man arrested with explosives in 1999 told police he was working for the IIRO and had received guerrilla training in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Saudi government and its charities initially provided key financial and political support to Afghanistan's Taliban, who have been strongly influenced by the Wahabi fundamentalist strain of Islam developed in the Saudi kingdom. The IIRO alone has given more than \$60 million to the Taliban and people under its control, according to its secretary general, Adnan Basha.

IIRO officials deny any terrorist ties and say the organization strictly provides humanitarian, social, educational and religious services to Muslims around the world.

"IIRO has nothing whatsoever to do with any suspects or suspected organizations," said Arafat Asahi, a Canadian of Palestinian origin who directs both the IIRO and the World Muslim League in Canada. "If some individuals are discovered later [to be terrorists], the individuals are to blame."

A senior Saudi official said his country's intelligence services have been unable to track any charitable donations going to bin Laden. Although he did not dispute the U.S. contention that Saudi donations may be finding their way to al Qaeda, he said the U.S. government had not responded to Saudi requests for leads.

But in testimony before a Senate committee after the Sept. 11

attacks, former State Department official Jonathan Winer said a number of Islamic charities have "either provided funds to terrorists or failed to prevent their funds from being diverted to terrorist use." He added that "a method to cleanse these charities of their terrorist connections must be found."

For the Saudi ruling royal family, allegations that their charities have been used by anti-American terrorists are especially embarrassing.

Members of the royal family express immense pride in the hundreds of millions of dollars they spend annually to set up Islamic organizations that provide assistance to Muslims abroad.

The Saudi Embassy Web site in Washington says the government has built 210 Islamic centers throughout the world and has taken the initiative to form the IIRO, among other groups, to serve Muslims inside and outside the Islamic world. These activities, an integral part of Saudi foreign policy, have helped spread the Wahabi strain of Islam and strengthened the royal family's claim to legitimacy at home.

But allegations that the Saudi-backed charities have aided terrorists complicate the royal family's efforts to preserve a special relationship with the United States, its principal military shield.

Olivier Roy, an Islamic scholar at the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris, expressed concern that the Saudis were losing control of the aid they give. But some IIRO officials say that the Saudi government in fact keeps a tight rein over their activities.

The movements of Mahmoud Jaballah, as described in Canadian court documents, illustrate how suspected terrorists may be using the Saudi-financed charities to support themselves, travel, and

establish legitimate identities.

Jaballah, who describes himself as an Egyptian fundamentalist, fled that country in 1991 after seven arrests in 10 years on suspicion of involvement in plots to assassinate Egyptian politicians. While in Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage visa, he was hired by the IIRO to teach at a Pakistani school for \$800 a month, according to court documents.

In 1994, he fled Pakistan using false Iraqi and Saudi passports, arriving in Canada in 1996. Canadian immigration officials said Jaballah told them he had gone to the IIRO because he was "in need of assistance."

During his first Canadian deportation hearing in Ottawa in 1999, a key defense was that he had held legitimate employment with the IIRO in Pakistan. The Canadian judge ruled in Jaballah's favor after noting that he had never been formally charged in Egypt but would have "some reason to be concerned" if he returned to Egypt.

But this August, Canadian immigration authorities again asked for his deportation and detained him. The new allegations, citing Interpol, the international police organization, said Jaballah was wanted in Egypt on charges of belonging to Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the outlawed terrorist organization that attempted to kill Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 1995.

The official complaint said the Canadian Security Intelligence had "reason to believe" he had engaged in terrorism and been in repeated contact with the head of Egyptian Islamic Jihad's cell in London.

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