

The untold story of Hasanville's shadowy past: (Part 2)

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After the trial, Mr. Ford took his family, and the families of Mr. Fongenie and Mr. Cole, to Hasanville. Because of his two-year incarceration, the community-building momentum had been lost and real progress would take a long time.

Mr. Cole, Mr. Wesley and Mr. Harris --who are to be deported upon their release from prison next year --were all denied parole in 1998.

The National Parole Board acknowledged Mr. Cole's "positive record as an inmate" but denied his application because of the "seriousness of the nature of your offence."

The board rejected Mr. Harris's request for early release because he refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing and because "you saw yourself and your family as the only victims in this incident." Mr. Wesley's request, the panel said, was denied because "you display racial hatred that seriously escalates your risk for future offending."

Over the past decade, al-Fuqra and its U.S.-based Muslims of the Americas compounds have continued to expand --and investigations by law enforcement agencies have grown with them.

In 1995, the U.S. government officially designated Jamaat al-Fuqra a terrorist group.

"Jamaat al-Fuqra is an Islamic sect that seeks to purify Islam through violence," the State Department advised. "Fuqra is led by Pakistani cleric Sheik Mubarik Ali Gilani, who established the organization in the early 1980s. Gilani now resides in Pakistan, but most Fuqra cells are located in North America and the Caribbean. Fuqra members have purchased isolated rural compounds in North America to live communally, practise their faith, and insulate themselves

The untold story of Hasanville's shadowy past: (Part 2) Ottawa Citizen May 4, 2002 Saturday Final Edition from western culture ... Fuqra members have attacked a variety of targets that they view as enemies of Islam, including Muslims they regard as heretics and Hindus."

Jamaat al-Fuqra remained on the list until 2000. According to a State Department spokesman, the group was removed from the latest listing because of an apparent lack of activity, not because of any perceived change in ideology.

Sheik Gilani was recently quoted saying he has between 10,000 and 15,000 "followers" in the United States. Other reports suggest a following of no more than 3,000. While Sheik Gilani and members of the Muslims of the Americas continue to deny the existence of Jamaat al-Fuqra, the U.S. State Department uses the two names interchangeably.

Today, there are six known Muslims of the Americas communes in the United States: Islamville in York, South Carolina; Islamberg in Hancock, New York; Baladullah near Fresno, California; Red House, West Virginia; Commerce, Georgia; and Dover, Tennessee.

All of the communes are located in rural areas and have between 100 and 300 people living in mobile homes. Most have welcome signs alongside gates and guard huts. At least two have shooting ranges and Baladullah has an airstrip for private planes.

All of the compounds have drawn renewed attention from media and U.S. law enforcement agencies since Sept. 11.

Besides the communes, Muslims of the Americas offers books written by Sheik Gilani and courses from the Qur'anic Open University and runs a series of private schools called the Gateway Academies, headquartered in California.

While most residents of the Muslims of the Americas communities are believed to be law-abiding citizens, several have been implicated in various criminal cases since the 1993 trial:

-Ramadan Abdullah, a member at Baladullah, faces a murder charge in the August 2001 shooting death of a Fresno County deputy sheriff. Mr. Abdullah had moved to Baladullah from the Hancock commune.

-Last fall, Bilal Abdullah Ben Benu, Vincente Rafael Pierre and Traci Upshur were convicted of illegally owning firearms. All three lived at the South Carolina compound and Mr. Pierre was one of five people charged in a worker's compensation scam at the Colorado commune.

-James Hobson was charged with trying to smuggle weapons from New York to South Carolina last fall. Mr. Hobson was living in Baladullah at the time.

-The Gateway Academies is being investigated on fraud charges. The board is suspected of illegally gaining millions of dollars in grant money from the California state government.

-Police are probing the South Carolina commune for money laundering in a style they say is similar to the worker's compensation scam in Colorado.

U.S. government officials have also said they are investigating possible links between Jamaat al-Fuqra and al-Qaeda, the group headed by Osama bin Laden and believed responsible for the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

This year, news reports linked Jamaican-born "shoe bomber" Richard Reid to Sheik Gilani. The Boston Globe reported in early January that Mr. Reid, a British citizen, was a follower of the sheik and that investigators had linked him to the Qur'anic Open University in Lahore.

"He was there," said a Pakistani official who had been asked by the U.S. to track Mr. Reid's movements prior to his attempt to bring down a jetliner.

It was during an attempt to meet with Sheik Gilani to question him about the Richard Reid connection that Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was intercepted by another group of Muslim extremists, abducted and killed in January.

U.S. investigators have determined that Sheik Gilani was not involved in the Pearl murder.

While insisting he never knew anything about Mr. Pearl's disappearance, the sheik has described the kidnapping and the previous allegations about his links to Mr. Reid as two parts of an elaborate Zionist plot designed to discredit Muslims of the Americas.

"What they are trying to prove is that Richard Reid is al-Qaeda man," Sheik Gilani was quoted saying in Dawn, Pakistan's most widely circulated English language newspaper, in February. "If they prove that he is my (follower), then they would have an excuse to proceed against all the 10,000 to 15,000 people who are my followers in America. So, this is the main conspiracy."

Despite the arrests and convictions of some of its members, Muslims of the Americas maintains that it is a peaceful organization and that it shouldn't be held responsible for the actions of a few wayward individuals.

But amid widespread concern that "sleeper cells" of extremists are lying dormant in North America awaiting orders from Asian terror-masters, the Anti-Defamation League and the Canadian Jewish Congress have voiced fears about what they say is Muslims of the Americas' real mission in the West. In an attempt to call attention to the threat posed by Sheik Gilani's followers, the ADL Web site recently posted an essay titled "Muslims of the Americas: In their own words." The article uses quotes from the MoA's own Web site to make its point.

"Jews are an example of human Satans. This is why Jews are the founders of Satan worship," one document said.

In January, the Muslims of the Americas Web site went offline.

Hussein Umar Adams speaks in a deep voice as he leans against the Hasanville gate on a cool spring afternoon. On this day, he's the only resident visible from the dirt road.

Mr. Adams, in his early 20s, is one of Hasanville's directors. He's also the son of convicted terrorist Tyrone Cole, whose original name was Barry Adams. When his father went to jail, Hussein Adams and the rest of

the family moved to Hasanville. He got his early education at the commune before earning a diploma in civil engineering at Seneca College.

Residents of Hasanville are instructed not to talk to visitors, he says, because their words can be taken the wrong way. It is safer for all, he says, if Mr. Jilany, the group's spokesman, does the talking. When asked about al-Fuqra and Muslims of the Americas, Mr. Adams shakes his head. "We know nothing about that. We don't belong to any groups or organizations."

But what about the 1993 trial and Mr. Ford's admitted connection to Muslims of the Americas and Jamaat al-Fuqra? "It's in the past," Mr. Adams says, adding that the jury's decision to convict the three men was "the wrong decision, but it's in the past."

He acknowledges that what happened 10 years ago has had a profound impact on the residents of Hasanville. "Some of these kids grew up without fathers."

Mr. Adams points out that the smallest children don't know about the darkest chapter in the history of their

The untold story of Hasanville's shadowy past: (Part 2) Ottawa Citizen May 4, 2002 Saturday Final Edition community. "And they don't need to."

While Mr. Adams has lived the history of Hasanville, Mr. Jilany, the community's CEO and spokesman, appears to be oblivious to the commune's early years.

"I have no knowledge about (the bomb plot) because I had just moved to Toronto in 1991," Mr. Jilany says, adding that all he knows about al-Fuqra he learned from media reports of the group.

For more than 25 years, Mr. Jilany worked as a mechanical engineer. When he retired in 1999, he says the Combermere group asked him to help them build a mosque. At that time, he recalls, the group had no money and no administration, so he decided to help it grow into a self-sustainable community.

For Mr. Jilany, Hasanville is a retirement project. He lives in Brampton and gets to Hasanville once or twice a month, staying in a hotel in Barry's Bay when he checks on progress at the compound.

The first thing Mr. Jilany did when he arrived in 1999 was incorporate the community as Muslims of the Americas Al Madrasah-lul Islamia so he could raise funds for it. He says he's still waiting for the government to approve the charity designation so he can raise money through fundraising and government grants.

"In a little while it will be a little more developed where they're living; a little bit better. I am teaching them how to survive in this country with their own means."

He says he knows nothing about Mr. Ford's past and doesn't want to know, because his only concern is developing the commune. "I didn't know why he was involved. I never encouraged myself to know. Let the past be the past. I have no time for this nonsense."

Although Mr. Fongenie's whereabouts remain a mystery, his family also lives on the land.

Mr. Jilany said the family doesn't have any contact with the fugitive: "Fongenie is a jamaat fighter. He is a fighter according to the FBI. That is all I know. His family has no ties to him anymore, where he is, what he's doing."

When asked about Sheik Gilani, Mr. Jilany praised him as a "very outstanding Islamic scholar" but insisted he didn't personally have any connections to the Pakistani cleric.

However, Mr. Jilany says that because he is rarely in Combermere, it is possible that some members have connections to other organizations.

"They are all converted Muslims. So they may have connections. Any community in Ottawa (in which) there is so many people, they may be helping some organization in the United States, how do you know even if you are living next door?"

Referring to Sept. 11 and other acts of Islamic extremism, he says: "You cannot control it. Terrorism is bad. Terrorism is bad for any religion and any people. But what can I do?"

Mr. Jilany insists his only concern is building a self-sustaining community and guiding them to a better life. "As far as I am concerned, they are 100-per-cent following the rules of Canada. I cannot interfere in their personal lives. I cannot go into their minds. But what I see physically --how they live, how they express themselves --it is an excellent way they are living in Canada."