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## Terrorist-linked Islamic Charities Responsible for Funneling More than \$1 Million in Aid to Central Iraq



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Though great strides have been made in the war against terrorist financing in the past four years, loopholes continue to exist whereby alleged terror front organizations are able to funnel money and “humanitarian aid” to combat zones in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia. The new frontier in countering terrorist financing is in central Iraq, where insurgents are locked in deadly battle with U.S. and coalition military forces. In October 2004, the New York Times quoted senior government officials—with “access to detailed intelligence reports”—as confirming the significant role of “wealthy Saudi donors and Islamic charities” in providing material support “through Syria” to as many as 50 hardcore insurgent cells spread across the country. Though the exact role of such Islamic charitable organizations in Iraq is still unclear, several groups confirmed to be past benefactors of terrorism are now present and hard at work in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq, including with the financial support of U.S.-based affiliates.

Two such entities—linked to armed extremist groups as early as the Bosnian civil war—are the Egyptian Human Relief Agency (EHRA) and the Istanbul-based Foundation for Human Rights, Liberties, and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). In 1985, the Egyptian Doctor’s Union established EHRA (a.k.a. “Lajnat al-Ighatha al-Insaniyah”) as its charitable arm, ostensibly to provide much needed

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emergency relief in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Somalia, Palestine, and Kosovo. According to a declassified 1996 U.S. intelligence report on Islamic charities (attributed to the CIA), the Egyptian Doctor’s Union and its subsidiary EHRA are “dominated by members of the [Egyptian] Muslim Brotherhood.” Moreover, the report counted EHRA as among “approximately one third of these Islamic NGOs [that] support terrorist groups or employ individuals who are suspected of having terrorist connections.”<sup>1</sup>

EHRA was actively involved in “humanitarian” efforts during the Balkan wars of the mid-1990s. Arabic-language fundraising videotapes produced by EHRA in

EHRA videos from the Bosnian war boast of aiding the “families of the shuhadaa [martyred guerillas].”

<sup>1</sup> January 1996 CIA Report on “International Islamic NGOs” and links to terrorism. *Page 1*. See also: Affidavit by Senior Special Agent David Kane (Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Department of Homeland Security). United States of America v. Soliman S. Biheiri. United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division. Case #: 03-365-A. August 14, 2003. *Page 2*.



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1993 conveyed that the group was engaged in supporting refugees, orphans, and “the families of the shuhadaa [martyred guerillas].” Later in these tapes, a young Bosnian woman in hijab bitterly vowed, “we will continue to fight as mujahids to remain in our land and to uphold the flag of Islam. Allah promises us victory, and this is enough for us.”<sup>2</sup> At the time, the forty Egyptians employed by the charity in Bosnia flaunted their status as wanted terror suspects. Ayman el-Hamalaway, a member of the Balkans EHRA staff, declared, “We are all code red... If we ever go back to Egypt, which we will not, our names come up bright red on a computer so the police know we should be immediately arrested.”<sup>3</sup>

EHRA has also been implicated in providing aid and support to the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas. In 1992, when Israel deported 400 Palestinian Islamist activists (many of them members of the Hamas terrorist organization) to Marj el-Zuhur in southern Lebanon, EHRA proudly stepped forward to provide them assistance in exile. Likewise, EHRA bitterly denounced the targeted killing of Hamas spiritual chief Shaykh Ahmed Yassin in 2004, condemning the “Zionist gangs” responsible as “prophet killers” backed by the explicit “support of the United States of America.” EHRA reacted to the similar death of former senior Hamas leader Abdelaziz al-Rantisi by vowing that “the [fighters] will remain steadfast, if Allah wills it, until victory or martyrdom... as for these villainous Zionist prophet killers, Allah has promised that we shall meet them soon... our noble prophet has told us, ‘The Day of Judgment will not arrive until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them, until the Jew hides behind the stones and the trees; and each stone or tree will say, O’ Muslim, O’ servant of Allah, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him.’”<sup>4</sup>



EHRA aids exiled Hamas members in Marj el-Zuhur, Lebanon, 1992

More recently, the EHRA began emergency aid operations in the Sunni-dominated region of central Iraq following the U.S.-led effort in March 2003 to depose former Baathist dictator Saddam Hussein.

On March 25, while the war was still ongoing, EHRA sent its first relief convoys into Iraq across the Syrian border to “assist in the reception of the wounded from this illegitimate aggression.” Within a month, EHRA claimed that it had already committed over \$500,000 to “relief efforts” in southern Iraq—but blamed “the powers of injustice and oppression” (i.e. the United States) for preventing some of this aid from reaching “our brothers in Iraq.” By the spring of 2004, the focus of EHRA’s suspect endeavors in the region seemed squarely targeted on the insurgent holdout of Fallujah. The group characterized its charitable contributions as a “response to the cries of Iraq—especially the people of Fallujah—who have been exposed to savage aggressions by the American army in the name of freedom and democracy, which surpass the



An EHRA relief convoy outside the Ar-Ramadi General Hospital in central Iraq

<sup>2</sup> “The Bosnian Holocausts.” PAL videocassette produced by the Egyptian Humanitarian Relief Organization (a.k.a. “Human Relief Agency.”) Croatia – 41000 Zagreb, Draskoviceva 53. Phone: 0038-41-92-68, 0038-41-92-69, 0038-41-80-60, 0038-41-92-27. ©1993.

<sup>3</sup> Hedges, Chris. “Foreign Islamic Fighters in Bosnia Pose a Potential Threat for G.I.’s.” *The New York Times*. December 3, 1995. Sec. 1; *Page 1*.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.doctorsreliefeg.com/Arabic/magazine.asp>. January 2005.



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Zionist aggressions on the Palestinian people.” One EHRA relief convoy alone destined for Fallujah and the Sunni Triangle in mid-2004 was purportedly laden with over \$340,000 in medical supplies and other materiel.<sup>5</sup>

But EHRA is not the only notorious terrorist-linked charity that has operated seemingly unhindered in Iraq. The benignly-named Istanbul-based Foundation for Human Rights, Liberties, and Humanitarian Relief (IHH) is an infamous and widely known terrorism financing front that played “an important role” in the failed Al-Qaida Millenium bomb plot targeting Los Angeles International Airport. Turkish authorities began their own domestic criminal investigation of IHH as early as December 1997, when sources revealed that leaders of IHH were purchasing automatic weapons from other regional Islamic militant groups. IHH’s bureau in Istanbul was thoroughly searched, and its local officers were arrested. Security forces uncovered an array of disturbing items, including firearms, explosives, bomb-making instructions, and a “jihad flag.” After analyzing seized IHH documents, Turkish authorities concluded that “detained members of IHH were going to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Chechnya.”

According to a French intelligence report, the terrorist infiltration of IHH extended to its most senior ranks. The report, written by famed counterterrorism magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere, revealed that IHH President Bulent Yildirim had directly conspired in the mid-1990s to “recruit veteran soldiers in anticipation of the coming holy war [jihad]. In particular, some men were sent into war zones in Muslim countries in order to acquire combat experience.” Furthermore, in the hopes of “obtaining political support from these countries, financial aid was transferred [on behalf of IHH], as well as caches of firearms, knives, and pre-fabricated explosives.” An examination of IHH’s phone records in Istanbul showed repeated telephone calls in 1996 to an Al-Qaida guesthouse in Milan and various Algerian terrorist operatives active elsewhere in Europe—including the notorious Abu el-Ma`ali, who has been subsequently termed by U.S. officials as a “junior Osama Bin Laden.”



(At left), would-be LAX Millenium bomber Ahmed Ressam. (At right), Algerian terrorist commander Abu el-Ma`ali, reputed by U.S. officials as a “junior Osama Bin Laden.”

During the later Seattle trial of would-be Al-Qaida Millenium bomber Ahmed Ressam, federal prosecutors called French magistrate Bruguiere to the stand as an expert witness. Bruguiere testified that IHH had played “[a]n important role” in the Al-Qaida Millenium bomb plot targeting LAX. Under repeated questioning, Bruguiere insisted that “[t]here’s a rather close relation”:

*“The IHH is an NGO, but it was kind of a type of cover-up... in order to obtain forged documents and also to obtain different forms of infiltration for Mujahideen in combat. And also to go and gather[recruit] these Mujahideens. And finally, one of the last responsibilities that they had was also to be implicated or involved in weapons trafficking.”<sup>6</sup>*

Years later, Bulent Yildirim and the IHH also played a key role in galvanizing anti-Western sentiment among Turkish Muslims in the lead-up to the 2003 war in Iraq. By late 2002, the IHH was instrumental in convening large and raucous protest rallies opposed to the then-imminent effort to depose Saddam Hussein. In December of that year, Yildirim delivered a fierce condemnation of America in front of a crowd of thousands of supporters in Turkey, capped off by the burning of U.S.,

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.doctorsreliefeg.com/Arabic/magazine.asp>. January 2005.

<sup>6</sup> “Reporter’s Transcript of Proceedings.” *United States of America v. Ahmed Ressam, aka Benni Noris*. United States District Court for the Western District of Washington. Case #: CR 99-666-JCC. Dated April 2, 2001. Pages 11-12.



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British, and Israeli flags. Yildirim also lobbied hard to prevent Turkish troops from joining the renewed coalition against the Baathist regime in Baghdad.

Yet, despite all this, the IHH is now active—and outspoken—in providing “charitable donations” to rebel-dominated areas of restive central Iraq. In mid-2004, IHH issued an English-language news update from its representatives on the ground in Fallujah: “the women and children shot by [U.S.] snipers now rest in a football field turned into a graveyard for the brave freedom fighters who resisted the invasion... The American troops [turned back] the injured being transported to hospitals by shooting at the ambulances. The freedom fighters crashed one airplane and 18 helicopters... Iraqi authorities stated that the resistance of [Fallujah] created a high spirit among their people while causing chaos and confusion among the Americans... As for the search for a new flag by the transition government, the Iraqis are sending a clear and firm message by raising their old flag in every possible place such as the roofs and walls of their houses, cars and gas stations... All the Iraqis share one hope which is the departure of the invading Americans. The big bubble of anger that covers all parts of the country can explode any time.”<sup>7</sup> IHH has continued in its “efforts” in Iraq, at least as recently as late last month, when Bulent Yildirim announced the departure of two more truckloads “of humanitarian aid to Fallujah city of Iraq. In the coming days, we will send more aid.”<sup>8</sup> Yildirim failed to specify who exactly in the city of Fallujah would be the recipients of IHH’s contributions.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about IHH’s suspicious activities in Iraq is that they have been co-sponsored—wittingly or unwittingly—by at least one U.S.-based Islamic charity in Worth, Illinois, known as The Zakat Foundation of America (TZFA). TZFA is headed by Halil Demir, a former “Public Relations Officer” for the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF)—yet another “humanitarian relief” organization from Worth, Illinois designated by the U.S. government as a terrorist entity in December 2001 for supporting Al-Qaida and other violent fanatics. According to its official newsletter, by mid-2003, Demir’s Zakat Foundation had sponsored at least two truck convoys traveling from Turkey to Mosul, Kirkuk, and Baghdad carrying at least \$120,000 in materiel “done in coordination



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Photo from a TZFA Newsletter: “A convoy of Zakat Foundation relief trucks getting ready to bring desperately needed assistance to war-torn Iraq.”

with IHH, a humanitarian organization based in Turkey... Portions of the supplies from [the] second relief convoy were donated locally by individuals and businesses in Turkey.”

Reflecting on all this data, it seems highly unlikely that the Egyptian EHRC and the IHH in Turkey have finally reformed themselves and are committed solely to aiding needy people in central Iraq—rather than Islamist insurgent groups. Given their lengthy past histories and their more recent inflammatory anti-American propaganda, the U.S. military and the Iraqi government should carefully

<sup>7</sup> “IHH: HUMANITARIAN AID FROM TURKEY TO FALLUJAH.”

<http://www.ihh.org/english/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=102>. January 2005.

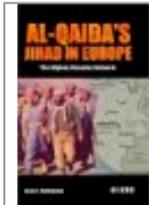
<sup>8</sup> “IHH sends humanitarian aid to Fallujah.” *Anadolu News Agency* (Turkey). December 21, 2004.



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monitor these and other similar purported “humanitarian organizations” to ensure—at a minimum—that their vociferous support for the so-called “freedom fighters” in Fallujah and the Sunni Triangle does not extend beyond mere empty rhetoric.

*Evan Kohlmann is an NBC terrorism analyst and author of the book, Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: the Afghan-Bosnian Network.*



## **Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: the Afghan-Bosnian Network**

***“For Bin Laden’s involvement in the Bosnian conflicts, see Evan F. Kohlmann, Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe.” - U.S. 9/11 Commission Final Report (July 2004)***

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