

Uncharitable Organizations

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Articles & Testimony

Islamists are bankrolling terrorist groups across the Middle East and calling it aid work.

In 1997, employees of the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation (AHIF), a Saudi-based charity, were mulling how best to strike a blow against the United States in East Africa. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, one employee indicated that the plan they hatched "would be a suicide bombing carried out by crashing a vehicle into the gate at the Embassy." A wealthy foundation official from outside the region agreed to fund the operation.

The employees' plans would go through several iterations, but AHIF would eventually play a role in the ultimate attack. In 1998, simultaneous explosions ripped through the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya -- attacks eventually traced back to al Qaeda operatives. Prior to the bombings, a former director of AHIF's Tanzanian branch made preparations for the advance party that planned the bombings, and the Comoros Islands branch of the charity was used, according to the Treasury Department, "as a staging area and exfiltration route for the perpetrators." The ultimate result was deadly: 224 people killed and more than 4,000 wounded.

This was, of course, before the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent crackdown on wealthy Islamist charity organizations such as AHIF, which provided a large portion of the funding that made international terrorism possible. As a monograph produced for the 9/11 Commission noted, prior to 9/11, "al Qaeda was funded, to the tune of approximately \$30 million per year, by diversions of money from Islamic charities and the use of well-placed financial facilitators who gathered money from both witting and unwitting donors."

But despite all the efforts made to shut down such groups, Islamist-leaning international charities and other NGOs are now reemerging as sponsors of jihadi activity. In countries like Tunisia and Syria, they are providing the infusion of funds that have allowed extremist groups to undertake the hard work of providing food, social services, and

medical care. Jihadists, meanwhile, have discovered that they can bolster their standing within local communities, thereby increasing support for their violent activities. And governments are struggling to keep up.

TUNISIA

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), best known for its members' involvement in the September 2012 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis, represents the most prominent example of this phenomenon. AST, a Salafi-jihadi organization, has been active since March 2011 in undertaking *dawa* -- missionary work calling people to their interpretation of Islam.

In addition to direct outreach at cafes and universities, AST performs *dawa* through a variety of social services. The group organizes charitable convoys through which it distributes food, clothing, and other supplies to different parts of the country. It also sponsors medical convoys, which it sets up at local buildings or mosques to provide medical care and medicine.

This may seem like purely humanitarian work, but it is explicitly designed to strengthen the group's *dawa* efforts. At all functions, AST passes out religious literature and then posts pictures and videos of these charitable activities to its official Facebook page (which has been taken down repeatedly, but re-emerged more than eight times in the past six months). Based on AST's media releases, the group has performed these activities more than 90 times in more than 30 cities and villages in Tunisia.

Although AST has collected donations at mosques during Friday prayers, the economic climate in Tunisia makes it likely that these donations comprise only a small portion of the funds that the group requires. The pictures, videos, and information that AST posts on its Facebook page suggest another source of funding: In at least one case, it received medical supplies from the Kuwaiti charity RIHS (the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society), which is known as the Society for Preservation of Islamic Heritage in Tunisia.

The fact that RIHS has been involved in supporting a militant group in Tunisia will come as no surprise to seasoned watchers of terrorist financing. The Treasury Department designated RIHS in 2008 "for providing financial and material support to al Qaida and al Qaida affiliates, including Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya." The Treasury designation also charges that RIHS provided financial support specifically for terrorist acts.

That's not AST's only connection to sympathetic foreign organizations. The literature it passes out at its *dawa* events can be traced to at least three book publishing houses in Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Qassem, based in Riyadh; Dar al-Tarafan, based in Taif; and the Cooperative Office for the Call and Guidance and Education Communities, based in Dammam. It is unclear what kind of relationship AST has with these publishing houses, and it is possible that it does not receive support from any of them. Nonetheless, the fact that a significant amount of its literature originates from Saudi Arabia -- a traditional supporter of Salafi organizations -- is likely a sign that it is receiving outside assistance from the kingdom.

SYRIA

The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF) -- an umbrella group of six organizations that is considered one of the key jihadi elements within the Syrian opposition -- is another benefactor of money from sympathetic charities. SIF has clearly expressed ties to government-linked NGOs in Turkey and Qatar: The video proclaiming the creation of this new group in December showed SIF members providing aid to Syrian civilians with boxes and flags bearing the logos of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), which the German Interior Ministry banned for contributing funds to Hamas. Additionally, in early January, SIF posted a video to YouTube depicting its members picking up aid from IHH in Yayladagi, Turkey, that was to be distributed in Syria.

Other boxes and flags in SIF's December video belonged to Qatar Charity, which used to go by the name Qatar Charitable Society. As evidence submitted by the U.S. government in a criminal trial noted, in 1993 Osama bin Laden named the society as one of several charities that were used to fund al Qaeda's overseas operations. In 1995, the group's funds were used to support an assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

TERRORISM WITHOUT BORDERS

These charities form an international network that has financed radical groups across the Muslim world. Most significantly, Qatar Charity is known to have operated in northern Mali when it was overrun by Islamist groups, including al Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa. These jihadists were not only well armed, but also well funded: The U.N. news agency IRIN reported in October that displaced Malians were risking a return to the north because of economic opportunities. The Islamist groups, the report stated, "removed taxes on many basic goods, say traders in the region, provide erratic electricity and water services at no charge, and have fixed the price of some basic foods."

Qatar Charity was part of that mix in Gao, one of the Malian cities that fell under Islamist control. IRIN reported that 35-year-old Moussa Toure returned to Gao, where Qatar Charity paid him twice the salary that he made previously. Because of such efforts, Maliweb, an independent Malian news source based in the United States, accused Qatar Charity of being a major financier of "the terrorists in northern Mali." Although Qatar Charity has its defenders, the focus of its charitable efforts and the manner in which they coincided with Islamist attempts to bolster the economy provide reasons for suspicion.

The international record of RIHS is just as shadowy. In January 2012, a commission of inquiry set up by Egypt's Justice Ministry issued a report stating that the Kuwaiti charity was funding Salafi groups in that country. And Spanish intelligence issued a report in late 2011 singling out RIHS: The version of Islam advanced in its mosques in Reus and Catalonia, the report said, "opposes the integration of Muslims into Spanish society," thereby "promoting segregation from and hatred toward non-Muslim communities."

Other charities that in the past supported al Qaeda and jihadi causes may also be on the rebound. For example, when the Treasury Department designated AHIF, the Saudi charity linked to the U.S. Embassy bombings, for "having provided financial and material support to al Qaida," it noted that AHIF's leadership "has attempted to reconstitute the operations of the organization, and parts of the organization have continued to operate."

As the monograph on terrorist financing for the 9/11 Commission notes, two types of charities become involved in sponsoring jihadi activities. In the first case, lax oversight allows jihadi operatives or supporters to divert money intended for legitimate purposes to militant causes. But in the second case, "entire charities from the top down may have known of and even participated in the funneling of money" to jihadi causes.

Even charities that have made an organizational decision to support jihadi causes will no doubt do some legitimate -- perhaps even praiseworthy -- work. But there is a dark side to these groups: They are making it possible for terrorist organizations to provide social services, thus increasing the base of support for their deadly work. As the United States learned in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, this dark side must be taken seriously.

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