

Turning a Blind Eye to Hamas in London

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On September 6, the European Union finally abandoned the sophomoric position that the social and political wings of Hamas are somehow distinct from the group's military wing, banning not only the Izz al Dinn al Qassam Brigades but Hamas overall. This should have made it harder for Hamas to raise financing in Europe.

But less than three weeks later, in the first test of the new EU policy, Britain's Charity Commission for England and Wales unfroze the accounts of the U.K.-based Palestinian Relief and Development Fund, or Interpal, one of the largest Hamas front organizations operating in Europe. Why?

On August 21, the U.S. Treasury Department had fingered five charities, including Interpal, as Hamas front organizations and branded them "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" entities. While the Charity Commission cleared it of terror financing charges in 1996, Interpal has since been implicated in several international terrorism cases. Following the U.S. designation, the Commission quickly froze Interpal's accounts pending a complete investigation, forcing the charity to receive the commission's special approval before sending donations abroad.

The Charity Commission's decision to unfreeze Interpal's accounts was therefore an unwelcome surprise. The Commission claims U.S. authorities failed to provide evidence to substantiate their charges, a point that is disputed by the relevant U.S. official. But even if it is true that they didn't, the Commission does not take into account the plethora of open source evidence linking Interpal to Hamas.

Consider the following examples of openly available evidence the Charity Commission failed to consider: Already in 1996, the year the Charity Commission first cleared Interpal, authorities determined that the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), both Saudi charities associated with al Qaeda, were funding Hamas through Interpal. In documents confiscated at the time, recipient Hamas organizations were asked to send thank-you letters directly to IIRO and WAMY rather than to Interpal. Last year, Israeli raids of Hamas run charities in the West Bank netted material lauding Hamas suicide attacks and records showing that the IIRO donated at least \$280,000 to the Tulkarm committee and other Palestinian organizations linked to Hamas.

A recently disclosed 1996 CIA document on world-wide charitable organizations financing terror refers to Hamas operatives and front organizations throughout Europe, including the U.K., Denmark, Austria, and Croatia. The document reveals that even then authorities were aware that Hamas fronts like Human Appeal International and

Human Relief International were operating offices in London.

Authorities now know the trend continued after the Charity Commission last cleared Interpal of charges linking it to Hamas in 1996. The index of documents seized in last year's raids of West Bank charity committees revealed that Interpal and similar organizations contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Hamas charities, often specifying that the funds were to benefit "the families of martyrs," in other words, blatant payments for suicide bombings. Interpal features prominently in these documents, which include accounting spreadsheets, written correspondence, and more.

Shortly after September 11, the FBI tied Interpal to the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development (HLFRD), the largest Hamas front in America until it was shut in December 2001. According to an FBI memorandum on the HLFRD, Hamas members tied to terrorist activity often run the charity committees funded by Interpal, HLFRD and others.

For example, Fadel Muhammad Salah Hamdan of the Ramallah charity committee, Ahmed Salim Ahmed Saltana of the Jenin charity committee, and Khalil Ali Rashad Dar Rashad of the Orphan Care Association in Bethlehem were all involved in Qassam Brigades operations. Interpal openly reports its funding of these and other suspect charity committees.

The FBI memo also stated that "FBI analysis linked Sanabil, Interpal and the HLFRD." Sanabil, a Hamas front in Lebanon through which Interpal transferred funds, was among the Hamas fronts designated in August. The report added, "a review of the HLFRD's financial records shows that on April 11, 2000, the HLFRD wired Interpal \$66,000.00."

U.S. and German investigators also tied Interpal to Sheikh Mohammad Ali Hassan al Moayad. In addition to heading the Yemen office of the al Aqsa International Foundation, a Hamas front organization operating on several continents, Moayad was arrested in Germany for providing money, arms, communication gear, and recruits to al Qaeda. As proof of his ability "to get money to the Jihad," Moayad offered an FBI informant a receipt showing he transferred \$70,000 to Interpal. Moayad also told FBI informants he provided \$3.5 million to Hamas and \$20 million to al Qaeda.

Most recently, telephone intercepts introduced in the case of Shaykh Raed Salah, an Israeli-Arab leader charged with funneling money to Hamas through Islamic charities he ran, reveal Salah engaged in conversations with Interpal officials and other Hamas financial supporters throughout Europe.

Given all this, it boggles the mind that the Charity Commission could make the mistake of clearing a demonstrated Hamas front organization like Interpala second time given the wealth of publicly available evidence of its ties to Hamas. In fact, a senior U.S. Treasury Department official recently testified before the U.S. Congress that the U.S. provided the Commission "definitive proof" Interpal financed Hamas.

In the first test of the EU's decision to ban Hamas, Britain's Charity Commission has then failed miserably. Inexplicably, the Commission ignored the plethora of readily available, unclassified evidence, choosing instead to turn a blind eye to the blood money Hamas openly raises in the U.K. ❖

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