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FBI Terror Probes Focus on U.S. Muslims
Expanded Investigations, New Tactics Stir Allegations of Persecution
Washington Post

1 In the tidy working-class suburb of Bridgeview, Ill., Mohammad Salah instructed children in the Koran. He prepared the dead for burial at his local mosque. And he observed the solemn Muslim obligation of zakat, giving generously to charity with the conviction that all things belong to God.

2 But the FBI says Salah's idea of zakat included nearly \$1 million in donations to the Palestinian extremist group Hamas, some of it for Uzis, rifles and other weapons. In their first use of a new law targeting the assets of terrorism supporters, prosecutors have seized Salah's bank accounts and are trying to take his house -- all without a criminal trial.

3 The Justice Department's case against Salah is one of the few public signs of a dramatically expanded set of investigations of Muslim Americans suspected of aiding overseas terrorists. Emboldened by tough new anti-terrorism laws and huge increases in anti-terrorism funding, the FBI is scrutinizing at least 20 U.S. groups with suspected links to terrorists, including some tied to Osama bin Laden, the alleged ringleader in the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

4 In the case of bin Laden, authorities have focused on Wadiah el Hage, a Texas man charged in connection with the embassy bombings, as the main cog in a network that allegedly also included a former sergeant in the U.S. Army, Ali A. Mohamed, who was arrested last month in New York. Officials also are scrutinizing the activities of a now-defunct Muslim group in Brooklyn, the Alkifah Refugee Center, some of whose members were convicted of bombing the World Trade Center in 1993.

5 Grand juries in New York, Chicago and Tampa are investigating other Islamic groups, and the FBI has sharply stepped up its applications for secret wiretaps designed to combat terrorism on U.S. soil. Officials say the heightened vigilance is needed to monitor an expanding number of threats -- from a Detroit man who allegedly tried to smuggle high-tech surveillance gear to Middle East terrorists to an American network of Iranian students who allegedly spy for Tehran.

6 The investigations are drawing on broad powers granted by Congress to fight terrorism after the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings. The new laws give the FBI greater leeway to pursue possible associates of terrorists even when they are not suspected of specific offenses. The statutes also make it a crime to send money to foreign groups the State Department classifies as terrorist, and bolster the government's ability to use classified information to detain suspected terrorism supporters in immigration cases.

7 Meanwhile, Congress has boosted the FBI's counterterrorism budget from \$118 million to \$286 million since 1995, and the number of FBI

employees assigned to anti-terrorism matters has more than doubled, to 2,650. Under FBI Director Louis J. Freeh, counterterrorism, once considered a career dead-end, has become a marquee assignment. Still, officials acknowledge that their main focus is on Muslim individuals and groups.

1 "We have a problem with Islamic terrorism," said a senior Justice official. "If we had a problem with Latvian terrorism, we'd focus on Latvians."

2 Officials argue that because bin Laden and other Muslim radicals have declared war on America, they cannot ignore their supporters here. Some experts believe Middle Eastern terrorists are increasingly dependent on their U.S. allies. Hamas, for example, raises about one-third of its \$30 million annual budget in this country and Europe, University of Illinois terrorism experts say.

3 Investigators claim some important victories to justify their aggressive approach.

4 The first person charged using the "material support" provisions of the anti-terrorist law was Fawzi "Frank" Mustapha Assi, a Ford Motor Co. engineer who lives in Dearborn, Mich., with his wife and three children. As the result of what his attorney believes was a tip, the FBI, with authorization from the Justice Department's wiretap court, started in February watching him 24 hours a day, tapping his phones and sifting through his garbage.

5 On July 13, Assi was stopped at the Detroit airport on his way to Lebanon. In his luggage agents found \$124,000 worth of electronics: two global-positioning satellite units, seven pairs of night-vision goggles and an infrared imaging camera. The FBI says Assi said that he was delivering the gear to contacts in Hezbollah, or Party of God, an Iranian-backed group in Lebanon that attacks Israeli forces and is on the State Department's terrorism list. The FBI said Assi also tried to discard, in trash bins around Dearborn, documents about Israeli cabinet members and the locations of their offices.

6 Assi, charged with export law violations and giving material support to terrorists, insisted he was an apolitical family man with no ties to Hezbollah. A judge released him on bail with an electronic bracelet. A few days later he fled, reportedly to Lebanon. "It's peculiar," said Assi's attorney, David Steingold. "I really thought the FBI was off-base. Now I don't know what to think."

7 Salah, a U.S. citizen, has denied any links to violence. But American officials describe him as a "high-level operative" for Hamas who financed armed attacks on Israelis. He served five years in an Israeli prison for alleged terrorist activities before returning last November to Chicago, where he had first moved from the Middle East in 1970 and where, according to Israeli officials, he taught Palestinian students how to make car bombs.

8 The FBI says Salah also made several trips to the West Bank and Gaza to help a top Hamas leader named Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook, a longtime Fairfax County resident who was deported to Jordan in 1996. In hundreds of pages of public documents, the FBI has outlined a complex series of covert real estate deals it says were designed to launder \$820,000 from a Saudi company to Hamas. Eventually, most of the money ended up in

Salah's bank account after transfers from accounts controlled by Marzook in McLean.

1 While Salah has not been charged with a crime here, FBI agents tail him everywhere and question people he meets. In June, prosecutors filed an unprecedented "forfeiture complaint" seizing his bank accounts and taking steps to remove him, his wife, Azita, and their four young children from their house. They seized another \$1 million from the Quranic Literacy Institute, an Islamic group that had a hand in the real estate deals.

2 Salah admits that some of his funds may have flowed to the wing of Hamas. U.S. officials say Hamas's "political" leaders also oversee the clandestine "military" wing that has killed scores of Israelis in bombings and executed hundreds of Palestinian "collaborators." U.S. officials also say donations to Hamas charities free funds for the military cells, which promise lifetime assistance to the families of suicide bombers. The charities also indoctrinate and recruit Palestinians to Hamas's radical cause, the officials say.

3 "Hamas uses the contributions to build support for itself both in social services and 'military' operations," said Richard Ward, a University of Illinois terrorism expert. "I'm surprised at how successful it's been moving into the U.S."

4 Ismail Selim Elbarasse, 51, an accountant from Falls Church, is in prison in New York for refusing to appear before a grand jury investigating money-laundering. Agents are reviewing the funds handled by Elbarasse, including bank accounts he shared with Marzook. Before he was jailed, Elbarasse worked as comptroller of the Islamic Saudi Academy, a Saudi-financed school under construction in Loudoun County.

5 Abdelhaleem Ashqar, a fund-raiser for Palestinian causes who lives in Fairfax County, was also held in prison for several months for boycotting the same New York grand jury.

6 Civil libertarians say FBI probes of some Muslim groups show the bureau equates anti-American rhetoric with terrorism. But officials insist they have evidence that the groups encourage subversion or terrorist groups abroad.

7 Anjoman Islamie, a student group, "is comprised almost exclusively of fanatical, anti-American, Iranian Shiite Muslims," Dale Watson, the FBI's counterterrorism chief, said in Senate testimony earlier this year. Watson said Tehran "relies heavily" on the students for low-level intelligence, and could use them to mount operations against U.S. interests.

8 The Islamic Association of Palestine, a Dallas-based group that distributes Hamas literature, has seen many members questioned by the FBI. "IAP is a Hamas front," said former FBI counterterrorism chief Oliver "Buck" Revell. "It's controlled by Hamas, it brings Hamas leaders to the U.S., it does propaganda for Hamas."

9 IAP President Amer al-Shawa said his group shares many ideals with Hamas, and acknowledged that speakers at IAP events at times take extreme anti-Jewish and anti-American stands

1 The Holy Land Foundation, based in Richardson, Tex., is the nation's largest Islamic charity, sending \$2 million a year to Palestinian causes. Israeli officials say it is a Hamas front because it provides money to the families of Hamas activists killed or in prison.

2 After one PFLP fund-raiser in 1986, an agent reported that his colleagues -- who did not speak Arabic -- had discerned from posters of Palestinians with AK-47 rifles and the "general mood" that the group "was not attempting to raise money for a humanitarian cause. The music . . . sounded militaristic."

3 Perhaps the most prominent secret evidence case involves Mazen al-Najjar, a University of South Florida professor jailed in Tampa since May 1997. Federal agents describe him and his brother-in-law, fellow USF professor Sami al-Arian, as "mid-level operatives" for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group. The two men worked at a Muslim think tank whose former administrator, Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, is now the ...