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SARSOUR

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## Charity or terrorism?

### Milwaukee businessman jailed for giving money to Hamas

By TOM KERTSCHER  
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Last Updated: Oct. 28, 2001

A longtime Milwaukee businessman is serving a prison sentence in Israel, having been convicted of financing terrorism through a group that has supported Osama bin Laden.

The businessman, 50-year-old Jamil Sarsour, is a Palestinian from the West Bank who became a U.S. citizen after moving to Milwaukee more than 20 years ago. His relatives say he is behind bars only because Israel tortured him into a confession as part of its campaign of repression against Palestinians.

"My dad didn't do anything wrong," Yahya Sarsour said of money his father gave to Palestinians in his homeland. "He did something that anybody would be proud of, to help poor people."

But Israeli officials paint different picture of the elder Sarsour.

The military court that convicted him said Sarsour gave \$40,000 and other aid to Hamas, an Islamic militant group regarded by Israel and the United States as a terrorist

### Dispute



Photo/Gary Porter

Othman Atta (left) and Yahya Sarsour discuss his father, Jamil Sarsour, who is in prison in Israel after being convicted of giving money to a Hamas leader. Sarsour's family says the money went to the poor in the West Bank.

### What is Hamas?

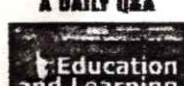
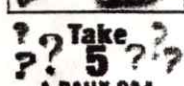
- Some Arab nations consider the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, a legitimate group fighting Israeli repression.
- The U.S. and Israel have labeled it a terrorist organization.

### Quotable

"My daddy doesn't even have a parking ticket."

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organization responsible for suicide bombings and other acts of deadly violence against Israel.

- **Yahya Sarsour**,  
son of man in Israeli  
prison

Hamas, said David Roet, an Israeli consulate official in Chicago, "is a bloodthirsty organization."

Sarsour's case is significant because it is rare for a local resident to be tied to international terrorism. Moreover, Hamas has spoken favorably of bin Laden, and bin Laden has said that much of the Arab hostility toward America is based on U.S. support of Israel over the Palestinians.

There is no known evidence of any link between Sarsour and the Sept. 11 attacks, although federal authorities did question one of his relatives here that same week.

Since those attacks, however, local Palestinians have begun speaking out anew about Sarsour's case. They say the U.S. would have come to his defense, had he been prosecuted in a non-civilian court in a country other than Israel.

"There is a total hypocrisy," said attorney Othman Atta, a leader of the Palestinian community in Milwaukee. "Americans of Palestinian descent are second-class citizens when it comes to our government."

### Owned properties

Before his arrest in Israel in October 1998, Sarsour had shown no sign of being anything more than a successful immigrant. He owned a number of properties, ran businesses and had no criminal record in Wisconsin.

Sarsour is from El-Bireh, a city next to Ramallah, which is the West Bank seat of government for Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. Sarsour came to the U.S. around 1970 to get a college education, said Yahya Sarsour, 17, one of his seven children.

Jamil Sarsour settled in Milwaukee in the 1970s and studied at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where Yahya is now a freshman in computer science.

Yahya said his father earned money by buying, fixing and reselling properties and then eventually running a number of grocery and furniture stores, mostly in Milwaukee's central city.

Jamil Sarsour is no longer registered as the proprietor of any of the businesses, but he does own nine mostly commercial properties in the central city, city records show. One is a W. Vliet St. property that houses Best Quality Furniture, which is run by one of Sarsour's



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SARSOUR →

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X brothers, 28-year-old Salah Sarsour.

During his time in Milwaukee, Jamil Sarsour typically traveled two or more times a year to the West Bank, where he kept a home and ran a car dealership and a laundry business. He regularly brought money for poor Palestinians, many of whom had no means of support after losing breadwinners in the conflict with Israel, his family said.

"He has a big heart. Maybe the biggest heart in the world," Salah Sarsour said.

The destination of those donations is at the root of the criminal charges that were brought against Jamil Sarsour.

In October 1998, on one of his trips to the West Bank from Milwaukee, Sarsour was taken into custody at an airport in Israel. When he called to say he wouldn't be home on time, he wasn't overly concerned because Palestinians often are detained by Israelis, said Yahya, who was living with his family in the West Bank at the time.

But Sarsour remained in custody and, according to his family, was not allowed to speak with an attorney or family members for more than three months. During that time, in December 1998, he was charged by an Israeli military court with having given \$40,000 and other assistance to Hamas in 1997 and 1998.

News of the charges appeared in newspapers around the U.S. at the time, though not in Milwaukee. Sarsour was identified only as an American businessman whose hometown was unknown.

Despite Sarsour's U.S. citizenship, his family members say, American officials made virtually no effort to investigate the case, even though he had complained of being tortured before making a plea bargain and getting a nine-year sentence.

In bringing its charges, however, the Israeli military court detailed what it said were extensive ties between Sarsour and Hamas.

### Terrorist organization?

Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, is regarded by some Arab nations as a legitimate organization fighting against Israeli repression. The U.S., however, has officially labeled Hamas as a terrorist organization, and Hamas has been blamed for numerous suicide bombings and other violent acts against Israel.

Sarsour was convicted of giving money and information directly to Adel Awadallah, a man from his hometown who was a Hamas leader. In a news account after his arrest, Sarsour denied charges of financing Hamas, saying he had only made "a small contribution" to the

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Awadallah family.

Shale Horowitz, a political science professor who specializes in international relations at UWM, said that while he is not familiar with Sarsour's case, the allegations are strong because he knowingly gave assistance to a recognized leader of a terrorist organization. Palestinians who want to help the poor in their homeland can easily give money to reputable charities where support of Hamas would never be a question, he said.

Israel had accused Awadallah of being a mastermind of suicide bombings and other terror in Israel. In September 1998, about a month before Sarsour's arrest, Awadallah and his brother, also a fugitive, were killed in an Israeli commando raid.

A few days after the brothers were killed, a Hamas leader vowed revenge. In the same speech, he also said Osama bin Laden was "a hero because he defends the cause, his homeland and the Islamic nation."

At the time, bin Laden had been accused by the U.S. of planning the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa.

### Possible links

There are other links between bin Laden and Hamas. Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.), at a congressional hearing on developments in the Middle East, said, "Israel has also found cells of Osama bin Laden working freely in the West Bank in close cooperation with Hamas." And after the Sept. 11 attacks, Hamas organized a rally in the West Bank in favor of bin Laden and against the U.S.-led attacks on Afghanistan.

The U.S., however, while freezing the assets of bin Laden's al-Qaida network and other terrorist organizations since the Sept. 11 attacks, has not done the same for assets of Hamas. And Arafat, as well as Hamas leaders, has condemned the attacks on the U.S.

For their part, Sarsour's family worries about his health because he has kidney problems and because they have not been allowed to see him for more than eight months. They also worry that America's new focus on terrorism could threaten him or other family members, as it is likely that he will be deported to the U.S. after getting an expected early release from his sentence, perhaps in 2003.

"I would like to say that my father is a good man. He's a peaceful man. My daddy doesn't even have a parking ticket," Yahya Sarsour said.

The military court, however, concluded that Sarsour was "a full partner" of Hamas' activities. Roet said there is no reason for his

bin Laden  
support after  
Awadallah killed.

Sarsour is a  
full partner of Hamas

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government to target Palestinians who are not involved in terrorism.

"I think there is an effort by the family to use the media to get sympathy," he said.

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