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personal use in Afghanistan. Khaleel's detention was widely seen as a reaction to authorities uncovering a transnational Al-Qaida terrorist plot to bomb locations in the U.S. and Jordan on the eve of the Millennium.

Yet the connection between IARA and the Millennium terror cell goes beyond the mere arrest of Ziyad Khaleel. Several months earlier, on August 17, 1999, a massive earthquake rocked Turkey, leaving many dead and homeless. IARA-USA attempted to transfer at least \$250,000 in American charitable donations to Turkey in response to the disaster. However, during the last week of August, IARA's office in Missouri suddenly received a faxed message from the recipients of IARA's generous grant—a group benignly named the Foundation for Human Rights, Liberties, and Humanitarian Relief (IHH). The fax urgently advised them to send no further funds; IARA representatives were subsequently informed that the IHH had been blacklisted by the Turkish government as a "fundamentalist organization" charged with operating "secret bank accounts" and refusing to allow local authorities to oversee the money spent on disaster relief.⁴

Despite being thoroughly warned, IARA administrators in Missouri nevertheless adamantly waved off any suggestions that the IHH was connected to terrorism. Interviewed by the Daily Missourian, IARA project coordinator Omar Yunus insisted the allegations were "a PR thing for the government... We'll get the money there one way or another... We want to put it into an Islamic agency"—in other words, beyond the reach of what Yunus termed undesirable "government interference."

Contrary to Yunus' assertions, Turkish authorities had good reason to be concerned about IHH and had already begun their own criminal investigation 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."

During the later Seattle trial of would-be Al-Qaida Millennium 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 Millennium 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

⁴ Montgomery, Lori. "Muslims say Turkey impeding aid effort." The Orange County Register. August 29, 1999.



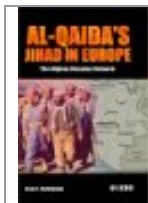
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also to go and gather[recruit] these Mujahideens. And finally, one of the last responsibilities that they had was also to be implicated or involved in weapons trafficking.”⁵

Whether foreign Islamic charities like the Islamic African Relief Agency were aware or not, the IHH was explicitly laundering thousands of their tax-exempt “humanitarian relief” dollars during the late 1990s in order to provide cash, false identification documents, and even weapons to North African members of the Millennium terror cell distributed across Europe and Canada. Allegedly, Zoheir Choulah—a veteran Arab-Afghan fighter and a key figure in the larger Ahmed Ressam network—even received personal package deliveries care of IHH’s office in Istanbul (the same office in direct contact with IARA’s administrators in Missouri).

IARA has, at a minimum, exercised terribly poor judgment in parceling out hundreds of thousands of dollars meant to feed starving widows and orphans in the developing world. However, given repeated IARA connections to terrorists and their international sponsors, the Islamic African Relief Agency’s generous support of IHH seems more likely part of deliberate pattern. The IARA case should also serve as a reminder that the battle to stop terrorist financing is still ongoing, and that despite regulatory efforts, certain Islamic charitable front groups continue to be manipulated as mechanisms to support international terrorism. Government investigators must take care to ensure that these unusually persistent financiers of terror—hidden within America itself—do not simply rename themselves or relocate to new sleepy corners of the Midwest in order to resume their prohibited activities.

Evan Kohlmann is an NBC terrorism analyst and author of the book, Al-Qaida’s Jihad in Europe: the Afghan-Bosnian Network (Available November 4 in U.S. bookstores).



[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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