

## Nation

# U.S. hunts 'terrorist money men'

## Arrests made as Justice Dept. tries to disrupt groups' funding

By Toni Locy  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — A top official of a Palestinian militant group and five employees of a Richardson, Texas, computer company have been charged with violating a ban on financial dealings with U.S.-designated terrorists.

"The war against terrorism is a war of accountants and auditors, as well as a war of weaponry and soldiers," Attorney General John Ashcroft said Wednesday in announcing a 33-count indictment by a grand jury in Dallas.

The Dallas indictment was accompanied by a flurry of arrests this week in Detroit and Lackawanna, N.Y. Although unrelated, the cases are incremental steps in a government effort to disrupt the complex system of terrorism financing.

In Texas, five brothers were accused of paying dividends on a \$250,000 investment in their company, InfoCom, by Mousa Abu Marzook, leader of the political wing of the Islamic Resistance Movement, also known as Hamas. They also were charged with selling computer parts to Libya and Syria, which the State Department says are sponsors of terrorism.

In Detroit, seven people were arrested Wednesday for allegedly being part of an illegal money-transfer operation that sent as much as \$50 million a year to Yemen, the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden.

Three relatives of a man accused of belonging to an al-Qaeda cell in Lackawanna were freed Wednesday on bond after being charged with illegally sending \$480,000 to Yemen. One of the men, Mohamed Albanna, 51, is a leader in the area's Yemeni community.

In none of the cases did authorities allege that the money went to al-Qaeda.

The U.S. Treasury Department is leading efforts to investigate the global, largely unregulated and difficult-to-trace



MSNBC via AP

**In Dallas:** Federal agents arrest Ghassan Elashi in an image from new video. He and four brothers are accused of aiding terrorism.

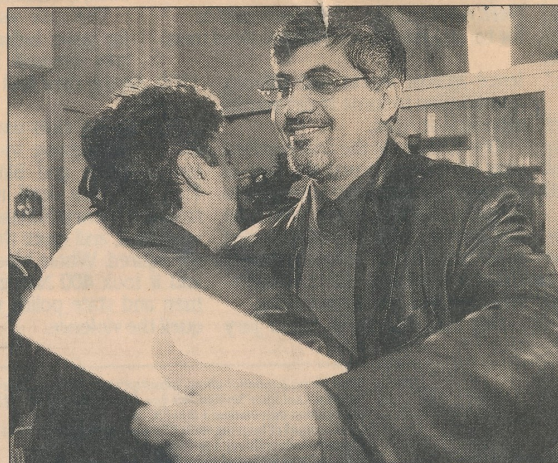
system of financing terrorism that officials say al-Qaeda and other groups tap.

As part of that effort, investigators are focusing on Muslim charities as a major source of terrorism funds. Sometimes, as in the case of the Texas-based Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, U.S. officials believe the charity is a knowing conspirator.

In other cases, U.S. officials say terrorists are taking advantage of charities that receive money from Muslims around the world who must, as a basic tenet of their faith, give at least 2.5% of their income to humanitarian causes.

The crackdown on terrorism financing also is aimed at the underground *hawala* banking system, in which trusted brokers transfer money without using electronic networks or leaving a paper trail. It is common in the Middle East.

Politically, Ashcroft's news conference had broader significance. It signaled stepped-up efforts by the Justice Department to resist calls by mem-



By Harry Scull Jr., The Buffalo News, via AP

**In Buffalo:** Mohamed Albanna, right, embraces a friend after his release on bond. Albanna, his brother and his nephew pleaded innocent to charges of sending \$480,000 to Yemen illegally.

bers of Congress to strip the FBI of its intelligence-gathering duties and create an agency for that purpose.

FBI Director Robert Mueller said the Dallas case "is proof again that the FBI is committed

to aggressively pursuing terrorists and disrupting terrorist networks."

The Dallas case revolves around Marzook, who was deported to Jordan from the USA in 1997. He is a fugitive, along

with his wife, Nadia, who is also charged.

In 1995, President Clinton designated Marzook as a terrorist because of the threat he posed to the Middle East peace process. Under federal law, InfoCom should have ceased financial dealings with Marzook at that time. Instead, the firm allegedly continued to renew a *Murabaha* agreement — an Islamic contract — to pay Marzook 40% of its profits.

The Elashi brothers are cousins of Nadia Marzook. Ghassan Elashi, InfoCom's vice president, also is chairman of the Holy Land Foundation, which U.S. officials designated as a terrorist organization last year.

Ashcroft said Holy Land and InfoCom were located in the same office complex, shared employees and "received their seed money" from Marzook.

"Terrorist money men should know this," Ashcroft said. "Just as we prosecute the terrorist who plants the bombs, we will prosecute the terrorist supporter who writes the check."