

Court Expert Links Saudi Charities to Chechen War

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EUGENE, Oregon — Islamic charities based in Saudi Arabia, including the one an Iranian-born tree surgeon is accused of smuggling money for, were regular conduits of funding to Islamist militants in Chechnya, an expert witness testified at a U.S. trial.

But under cross-examination, international terrorism consultant Evan Kohlmann conceded that he had never interviewed anyone directly involved with the Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation about providing aid to Chechnya, and had not included Al-Haramain in the chapter on Islamic charities in his book on terrorism, "Al-Qaida's Jihad in Europe."

Kohlmann's testimony on Tuesday came during the trial of Pete Seda, also known as Pirouz Sedaghaty. The Iranian-born naturalized U.S. citizen is accused of smuggling \$150,000 to Saudi Arabia so it could go to militants in Chechnya, and filing a false tax return to cover his tracks. The defense counters that the money was meant for refugees and the mistakes in the tax return were made by an accountant, not Seda.

"A significant portion of the aid from these charities almost certainly does go to good causes

— widows, orphans and refugee camps," Kohlmann said under cross-examination by defense attorney Bernie Casey. "Up to a third of the money is skimmed off and diverted to other causes, including paying the salaries of foreign fighters."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Charles Gordon went through a long list of e-mails, web sites and images recovered by government experts from computers seized by Internal Revenue Service agents in a 2004 search of the Al-Haramain prayer house in Ashland, Oregon.

Kohlmann said they included religious edicts instructing Muslims to support holy war in Chechnya, images from web sites that supported Islamist militants in Chechnya, and photos of well-known Arab fighters who helped Afghans drive out the Soviet Army and went on to fight in Chechnya.

Kohlmann explained that Chechens have been trying to throw off control by Russia and the Soviet Union for centuries, and that after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in the late 1990s, foreign militants moved into the conflict in Chechnya, where they infused the local revolutionaries with their own brand of radical Islam. Atrocities were committed by both sides in the war.

Gordon played excerpts from a video taken from the prayer house showing Muslim fighters training at the Kavkaz Institute in Chechnya, as well as scenes of fighting, children playing with assault rifles, a downed helicopter, and explosives blowing up a railroad.

Kohlmann said the video was designed to raise money for the Kavkaz Institute.

With no stable banking system in Chechnya, money had to come in as cash, which was broken into small amounts and carried on smuggling routes through the rugged mountains, Kohlmann said.

Barbara Cabral, a stylist, testified that she and her late husband adopted Islam as their religion and attended services and dinners at the prayer house in Ashland starting in 1991. They also went on the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca with the group, and at the end were given a refund for some travel expenses and asked by Seda to donate it to buy food and blankets for mujahedin in Chechnya.

Cabral also said she took part in a jewelry sale to raise money for Chechen mujahedin and confirmed that she had received an e-mail saying that \$1,763 had been sent to support them.

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