

By M A Shaikh

On August 8 hundreds of angry Somalis demonstrated in Mogadishu, the capital, and in the adjacent town of Afgoi, to demand the release of two Somali aid-workers (both women) who were indicted in the US two days earlier for allegedly giving support to al-Shabaab, Somalia's main Islamic group. Shouting "Free our two sisters", the demonstrators emphasised that they are aid-workers from Afgoi, where ten thousand people who have fled the violence in the capital are temporarily housed. The women were collecting funds to feed them, not to fund al-Shabaab.

One of the demonstrators, Farhia Ali, told reports that she personally knows one of the two arrested women, giving her name as Amina Farah Ali, 33. She added that "Amina was helping us send money to displaced families, and not to terrorists." In fact both Amina Farah Ali and her companion pleaded not guilty when they appeared in a packed courtroom on August 5. "We are not terrorists," Amina said. As she is an American citizen and lives, like her colleague, in the city of Rochester (southern Minnesota), there is little doubt that the authorities know (and knew) that both are genuine charity workers, and not connected with terrorism.

Yet the document outlining specific charges against Amina insists that she transferred funds to "terrorist organisations" through various hawalas (business means used frequently in the Muslim world to send money). She is accused of sending \$8,600 (£5400) to al-Shabaab on 123 occasions between September 2008 and July 2009. In addition, the document claims that wiretap-recordings confirm that after the FBI searched her home in 2009, she contacted a Shabaab leader (on 12 occasions) in southern Somalia, and said to him: "I was questioned by the enemy here... they took all my stuff and are investigating it... Do not accept calls from anyone."

Moreover, the fact is that the only evidence that the prosecutors have so far presented does not connect either woman with al-Shabaab. The mere claim that Amina sent money through hawalas is no proof that whatever funds she sent did not go to charity groups. Apart from the fact that the wiretap recording could have been forged, the mere claim that she contacted a Shabaab leader to tell him not to accept phone-calls from anyone does not establish that she was taking cover. It is quite natural for anyone, harassed to the extent that Amina and her colleague were harassed, to try to protect themselves against those spying on them to collect false evidence. Nor is the fact that anyone as busy with charity work as these women have been has the telephone-numbers of many groups — including possibly al-Shabaab — proof that one is a member or supporter of any of them.

Add to all this the fact that the two have been charged with 12 other American citizens, all believed to be living abroad and accused of helping to smuggle money, fighters and weapons to al-Shabaab. That Eric Holder, the US attorney general, himself filed the indictment against all 14 "highlights the administration's growing concern about the threat of homegrown Islamic terrorists, fuelled by last year's bomb attacks," as one newspaper report put it.

Actually, the US government's real concern is not about terrorism or terrorists in the US or elsewhere. It is about the fact that few people anywhere believe its claims about the dangers posed by Islamic terrorism, in the US or in other places. Its treatment of the large number of

Muslim detainees in the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba has destroyed what little credibility it ever had. As a leading article in the Independent of London explained on August 13, “there are still 176 men held in custody in open defiance of the rule of law at the US naval base in Cuba, where they have little hope of release... Their continuing detention, eight months after Barak Obama’s self-imposed deadline for closing the camps, is an ongoing affront to international law and critical of America’s moral authority.”



Hawa Mohamed Hassan, left, and Amira Farah Ali, both of Rochester, Minnesota, leave the US District Court after appearing at a hearing 8-5-2010. Muslims in America are being increasingly attacked, for no other reason than the fact they are Muslims, not only by extremists but also by government agencies and the government controlled media.

But the US government and security forces are not only hostile to the detainees in the Guantanamo Bay camps, but also generally to American Muslims in the US, who are estimated to number about 7 million, or 2% of the population. However, despite their small proportion in the country, American Muslims have begun to pay more attention to their Islamic roots and interests (applying, for example, to build more mosques), only to meet with hostility at every step.

The bitterness with which the request to build a mosque in New York has been treated is astonishing, even to the extent of accusing president Obama of supporting Islamic terrorism because he had backed the application, on the grounds that Muslims have the right to build one. In fact, Obama is regularly described as a “secret Muslim born abroad” by conspiracy theorists who get a hearing via talkshows and television news-bulletins.

The speed with which anti-Islamic activists exploited the mosque issue and Obama’s backing of it, was shown when rightwing politicians, jumped into the public arena to express their views. John Boehner, the Republican party’s House minority leader, and John Cornyn, a senator from Texas, were only two of the many who expressed their anger about the mosque application.

John Boehner said that his party’s position was that the idea of a mosque in New York was disrespectful. “The fact that someone has the right to do something doesn’t necessarily make it the right thing to do. That is the essence of tolerance, peace and understanding,” he said. John Cornyn, for his part, warned that Obama would pay for his support of the mosque at the mid-term elections in November. He emphasised that the president was “disconnected from the mainstream of America.” Nor was it only politicians and commentators who criticized American Muslims on this issue; even churchmen jumped in. A church in Florida, for instance, announced a plan to oppose the mosque with a Qur’an-burning event on September 11.

When president Obama is accused of being a supporter of Islamic causes and a church openly plans to burn at least one mushaf (copy) of the Qur’an in public, it is not surprising that 14 American Muslims are being put on trial for supporting al-Shabaab, a group that the US government and security forces describe as “terrorist”, claiming regularly and vociferously that it

is connected with al-Qaeda. Yet it is well known that the US supports the unpopular Somali transitional government, which has no control in the country and wages war on al-Shabaab, despite the fact that al-Shabaab enjoys widespread support and controls large areas of the country, including most of the capital. Not surprisingly, the government's propaganda claims are little taken seriously; this explains why it insists on staging regular trials of American Muslims, accusing them of backing terrorists, particularly in Somalia. But the scheme is too obvious to mislead anyone, and the trial of these 14 for supplying al-Shabaab with funds and arms will not change the situation.

Another reason for the harassment is that an increasing number of American Muslims are converts from Christianity. One of the 14, for instance, is Omar Hammami, who changed his name to Abu Mansour. The Church and rightwing Americans are particularly upset about those who, like Abu Mansour, choose Islam over Christianity. That one-fifth of American Muslims are converts explains the widespread anger. California, New York, Illinois, New Jersey, Indiana, Michigan, Virginia, Texas and Ohio are the states which have the highest concentrations of followers of Islam.

Abu Mansour's small home town does not have a mosque, yet he accepted Islam at a young age despite attending a Baptist Church as a child. It is not, therefore, surprising that the Attorney General felt it necessary to make a public speech after his indictment of the 14, and to single out Abu Mansour for comment. He told reporters that Hammami (i.e. Abu Mansour) "had appeared in several propaganda videos for al-Shabaab" and "has assumed an operational role in that organisation".

It is of course true that it is the government and security forces and anti-Islamic leaders in churches and other organisations that concentrate on accusing American Muslims of "terrorism", but even the Western media publicise their anti-Muslim propaganda, mostly uncritically and unquestioningly. For example, the recent prosecution of an Iranian woman for adultery in Tehran was widely criticised in the Western media, while the recent indictment of 14 American Muslims on flimsy or non-existent evidence is being ignored. If the same charges had been made in similar circumstances in a Muslim country with an Islamic government (or a serious attempt to set up and run one), such as Iran, the issue would have been widely publicised. The authorities of the Muslim country in question would have been accused of committing undemocratic practices by concentrating on punishing women.

But despite this clear anti-Islam and anti-Muslim bias in the West, Muslim governments of Muslim countries ignore the bias and continue to support the West's so-called war on terror, which is in reality against Islamic activists and groups. The pressure against anyone of any ilk who supports the Muslims for anything at all is so great that many take care not to provoke it in any way at all. Even president Obama has openly retreated from his backing for an application to build a mosque.

"I was not commenting and I will not comment on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there," he claimed. "I was commenting very specifically on the rights that people have that go back to our founding. That is what our country is about. In America, we treat everybody equally and in accordance with the law, regardless of race, regardless of religion."

Obama should be ashamed of making such a statement, particularly his claim of racial and religious equality. As a black American he should know that the opposite is true. Moreover, in his capacity as president he should step in and stop the baseless prosecution of Muslim Americans for terrorist acts that they have most probably not committed. Unfortunately that is extremely unlikely to happen.