

# **Senders of Islam movie tied to Jewish charity**

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A nonprofit group that has shipped out 28-million copies of a controversial film on radical Islam refuses to reveal the source of its funding, but numerous ties connect it to a well-known Jewish education group that vehemently denies any involvement with the film.

The backing for *Obsession: Radical Islam's War with the West* and the intent of its distributor, the Clarion Fund, has been the subject of speculation since the DVDs were distributed beginning Sept. 14.

Clarion Fund, which was incorporated in 2006, distributed *Obsession* in 14 states, including the key presidential battlegrounds of Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The DVDs were distributed by mail and as an advertising supplement in 58 Sunday newspapers, including the *St. Petersburg Times*.

"We don't have to say who its directors are or give financial information until Nov. 6, 2008," said Clarion spokesperson Gregory Ross.

Not good enough, says the Council on American Islamic Relations, which filed a complaint Tuesday with the Federal Election Commission.

"American voters deserve to know whether they are targets of a multimillion-dollar campaign funded and directed by a foreign group seeking to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria as a way to influence the outcome of our presidential election," Nihad Awad, executive director of CAIR, said in a statement.

There are a number of connections between the Clarion Fund and a well-known organization called Aish HaTorah, an international charity founded in Israel in the 1970s.

Ronn Torossian, spokesman for Aish HaTorah, said that his group would in "no way be involved with Clarion Fund or *Obsession* because Aish HaTorah is a charity and must remain apolitical."

Ross, the Clarion spokesman, was listed as an Aish HaTorah international fundraiser on a federal election donation form in June 2007.

Elke Bronstein is the name written on the mail permit for the bulk mailing of *Obsession* DVDs in mid September from Freeport, N.Y. Reached on her cell phone, Bronstein said she worked for Clarion, but would not provide more information.

The receptionist at Aish HaTorah in New York said Bronstein worked for Aish Discovery, which produces high-tech programs and films for Aish HaTorah. Torossian said Bronstein could easily have separate jobs.

"What? You're going to find four, five or six people who work for Clarion and Aish and claim a worldwide conspiracy? I don't think so," he said.

Clarion's address, according to Manhattan directory assistance, is the same address as Aish HaTorah International, a fundraising arm of Aish HaTorah. The Clarion Fund and Aish HaTorah International are also connected to a group called HonestReporting, which produced *Obsession*. HonestReporting's 2006 tax return uses the same address.

"It's news to me," Torossian said.

Two of the three Clarion Fund directors at the time of its incorporation in November 2006 appeared as Aish employees on Aish Web sites at the same time. The third appeared on the Aish executive committee. Torossian said the overlap meant nothing.

Aish HaTorah's main purpose is to "broaden the knowledge of individuals to their Jewish heritage." Barbara Walters, Steven Spielberg and Bill Clinton have praised the charity.

A June 15, 2001, article in the *Jerusalem Post* said that Aish HaTorah provided \$150,000 in "seed money" to create an organization called Media Watch International that took over HonestReporting, the group that made *Obsession* four years later.

"This is true," said Torossian, "but that association ended" before *Obsession* was made.

The Aish Web site offers information on Jewish heritage and religious issues, as well as links to numerous videos on Mideast politics. One of the links is to *Obsession*.

"Aish also tells about a woman meeting Paul McCartney. Does that mean we're connected to him?" Torossian asked.

Washington tax attorney Marc Owens, who was IRS director of the Exempt Organizations Division for 10 years, says that if IRS investigates and finds a link between the film and Aish, it will ask: Was the film designed or distributed to have an impact on the election? Is this film an inflammatory hate message instead of a charitable, educational message?

"If the answer is 'yes' to either question," said Owens, "the involved charities could lose their tax-exempt status."

Despite a disclaimer by the filmmakers that *Obsession* does not represent all Muslims, the 2005 film has been criticized for unfairly portraying the religion as violent.

In the film, men in traditional Middle Eastern dress burn an American flag. The planes fly into the twin towers. Peaceful scenes of Muslims at market and prayer are interspersed with violent scenes and commentators critical of Islam.

Clarion disputes there is any political motivation for distributing the film now. However, about a week ago, a Clarion Web site linked the film to the presidential candidates.

"McCain's policies seek to confront radical Islamic extremism and terrorism and roll it back while Obama's, although intending to do the same, could make it worse," said the site. This statement was later removed.

"We are not telling people who to vote for," Ross, the Clarion spokesman, said in an Associated Press story. "We're just saying no matter who gets in office, the American people should know radical Islam is a real threat to America."

It is not clear who paid for the extensive mailing of the DVD from Freeport, N.Y. The permit number belongs to Clarion Fund, but Clarion Fund had no money in its bulk-mail account, according to postal administrators.

"The bulk mailing of this was made possible by a third party, other than Clarion," said U.S. Postal Inspector Debbie Waller. "We're looking into it."

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