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Yemeni Cleric, Aide Convicted

Leader Is Found Guilty Of Conspiring to Help Al Qaeda and Hamas

By *Michelle Garcia*
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NEW YORK, March 10 -- A Yemeni cleric and his assistant were convicted Thursday in federal court here of conspiring to funnel money to al Qaeda and the Islamic Resistance Movement, or Hamas, in a dramatic case involving a government informant who set himself on fire outside the White House last year.

The Justice Department had once hailed the case as a major strike against a global terrorism financing network that connected Brooklyn shop owners to al Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan and Bosnia and to Palestinian suicide bombers.

Sheik Mohammed Ali Hassan Moayad, 56, a high-ranking political leader in Yemen, was convicted of conspiracy, providing material support to Hamas and attempting to support al Qaeda. He was acquitted of providing support to al Qaeda.

His assistant, Mohammed Mohsen Yahya Zayed, 31, was convicted of attempting to provide material support to Hamas but acquitted on a charge of attempting to give aid to al Qaeda.

Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales hailed the verdict. "Those who conspire to support and finance the terrorist actions of al Qaeda and other enemies will be found and they will face justice," he said in a written statement.

German officials arrested Moayad and Zayed in January 2003 in a Frankfurt hotel as part of a U.S. government sting operation involving an undercover FBI agent offering to donate \$2.5 million to terrorism causes.

The five-week trial had focused mainly on secretly recorded conversations in the German hotel that showed the defendants discussing their plans to deliver the money to Hamas, a Palestinian militant group that has not carried out attacks on the United States.

Moayad was seen in recorded video boasting that he had once tutored Osama bin Laden in Islamic law and that the al Qaeda

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Mohammed Ali Hassan Moayad is a top political leader in Yemen. (File Photo)

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leader had called him "my sheik" before they parted ways two decades ago.

Defense attorneys argued that their clients had fallen victim to government entrapment orchestrated by Mohamed Alanssi, the prosecution's star witness, who arranged the meeting in Germany and later set himself on fire outside the White House in an attempt to gain attention from the FBI, which he believed should pay him for his work on the case.

The incident prompted prosecutors to drop Alanssi as their star witness, dealing the government's case an initial setback. In a last-minute decision, however, U.S. District Judge Sterling Johnson Jr. allowed prosecutors to introduce key pieces of evidence linking the cleric to al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan, including an application form to an al Qaeda training camp that listed Moayad as the fighter's sponsor.

Defense attorneys said they will appeal. William H. Goodman, who represented Moayad, said, "Given the terrorist context, the jury was unable to view the evidence with the skepticism that this was a frame-up and a setup."

The lawyers had called Alanssi as a witness in an effort to undermine the government's case by portraying him as unstable and deceitful. Alanssi testified that he had sought to pressure the FBI to give him more money.

Jurors who spoke with reporters said they reached a decision largely on the weight of the recorded conversations during the four-day meeting in Germany.

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Justice Department has charged 113 people under federal terrorism-financing laws, which include violations of economic sanctions.

Moayad faces 60 years in prison, and Zayed could receive 30 years.

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