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Speakers at Academy Said to Make False Claims

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

The [Air Force Academy](#) was criticized by Muslim and religious freedom organizations for playing host on Wednesday to three speakers who critics say are evangelical Christians falsely claiming to be former Muslim terrorists.

The three men were invited as part of a weeklong conference on terrorism organized by cadets at the academy's Colorado Springs campus under the auspices of the political science department.

The three will be paid a total of \$13,000 for their appearance, some of it from private donors, said Maj. Brett Ashworth, a spokesman for the academy.

The three were invited because "they offered a unique perspective from inside terrorism," Major Ashworth said. The conference is to result in a report on methods to combat terrorism that will be sent to the Pentagon, members of Congress and other influential officials, he added.

Members of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a group suing the federal government to combat what it calls creeping evangelism in the armed forces, said it was typical of the Air Force Academy to invite born-again Christians to address cadets on terrorism rather than experts who could teach students about the Middle East.

"This stuff going on at the academy today is part of the endemic evangelical infiltration that continues," said David Antoon, a 1970 academy graduate and a foundation member.

The three men were invited to talk about being recruited and trained as terrorists, not religion, although one of them, Zak Anani, did tell students that converting to Christianity from Islam saved his life, said John Van Winkle, another spokesman for the academy.

Muslim organizations objected to the fact that no other perspective about Islam was offered, saying that the three speakers — Mr. Anani, Kamal Saleem and Walid Shoebat — habitually paint Muslims as inherently violent. All were born in the Middle East but Mr. Saleem and Mr. Shoebat are now American citizens, while Mr. Anani has Canadian citizenship.

"Their entire world view is based on the idea that Islam is evil," said Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on Islamic American Relations. "We want to provide a balancing perspective to their hate speech."

Academic professors and others who have heard the three men speak in the United States and Canada said some of their stories border on the fantastic, like Mr. Saleem's account of how, as a child, he infiltrated Israel to plant bombs via a network of tunnels underneath the Golan Heights. No such incidents have been reported, the academic experts said. They also question how three middle-aged men who claim they were recruited as teenagers or younger could have been steeped in the violent religious ideology that only became prevalent in the late 1980s.

Prof. Douglas Howard, who teaches the history of the modern Middle East at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., heard Mr. Saleem speak last November at the college and said he thought the three were connected to several major Christian evangelical organizations.

"It was just an old time gospel hour — 'Jesus can change your life, he changed mine,' " Mr. Howard said. "That is mixed in with 'Watch out America, wake up America, the danger of Islam is here.' "

Mr. Howard said his doubts about their authenticity grew after stories like the Golan Heights saga as well as something on Mr. Saleem's Web site along the lines that he was descended from the grand wazir of Islam. "The grand wazir of Islam is a

nonsensical term,” Mr. Howard said.

Keith Davies, the director of the Walid Shoebat Foundation, which organizes their appearances, said critics tried to undermine the speakers’ reputation because “they can’t argue with the message.”

Arab-American civil rights organizations question why, at a time when the United States government has vigorously moved to jail or at least deport anyone with a known terrorist connection, the three men, if they are telling the truth, are allowed to circulate freely. A spokesman for the [F.B.I.](#) said there were no warrants for their arrest.

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