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Muslim group seeks probe of 'radical Islam' DVD

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A U.S. Muslim advocacy group Tuesday asked the Federal Election Commission to investigate whether a nonprofit group that distributed a controversial DVD about Islam in newspapers nationwide is a "front" for an Israel-based group with a stealth goal of helping Republican presidential candidate John McCain.

The promoters of "Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West" denied trying to promote any presidential campaign. They said it's also incorrect to tie the DVD campaign to Jerusalem-based educational group Aish HaTorah International, although current and former employees are involved with the project.

The Council for American-Islamic Relations asked the FEC to investigate the DVD distribution, which targeted about 28 million households mostly in battleground election states.

The DVDs _ which critics call anti-Muslim propaganda _ were inserted this month into more than 70 newspapers and paid for by the Clarion Fund, a nonprofit founded in 2006. The group's focus is "the most urgent threat of radical Islam." It has declined to identify board members or its funding.

Never picked up for traditional distribution, "Obsession" features scenes of Muslim children being urged to become suicide bombers, 9/11 carnage and interviews with critics of Islam.

Another organization, the Endowment for Middle East Truth, is a partner with the Clarion Fund in "The Obsession Project," which will also include research publications and issue forums.

Ari Morgenstern, a spokesman for that group, said targeting swing states was designed to attract media attention, but is not meant to influence the election result. He said the film "makes a very clear and upfront distinction between the majority of peaceful followers of Islam and those people who subscribe to a radical Islamic ideology."

In its complaint, CAIR cites New York Secretary of State records showing that three people who incorporated Clarion Fund also are employees or have been employees of Aish HaTorah International, a Jerusalem-based Jewish educational organization that has offices around the world.

"American voters deserve to know whether they are the 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.

As evidence of a McCain bias, CAIR cites a story in the Patriot News of Harrisburg, Pa., which reported that a Clarion Fund Web site ran a pro-McCain article before it attracted notice and was taken down.

"If you heighten the hysteria over national security or terrorism or do anything to make people more fearful, it's clear they would trend toward McCain because that's been his mantra throughout the campaign," said Ibrahim Hooper, a CAIR spokesman.

Under federal election law and the tax code, nonprofit groups are restricted from getting involved in candidate races and foreign nationals may not contribute to American campaigns. The DVD's distributors say their efforts are issue-based and don't break election laws.

The Canadian producer of the film, Raphael Shore, is a full-time employee of Aish HaTorah International, an educational group that avoids politics, said Ronn Torossian, a New York-based spokesman for the group. Shore's work on the DVD project was not done under the banner of Aish HaTorah, Torossian said.

"These are independent activities of individuals," he said.

Gregory Ross, spokesman for the New York-based Clarion Fund, declined to discuss the complaint's specifics. He pointed out that it's normal for nonprofits to keep donors' identities private. He said the group has "thousands of donors that span the political spectrum."

"We are not telling people who to vote for," said Ross, a former employee of Aish HaTorah International. "We're just saying no matter who gets in office, the American people should know radical Islam is a real threat to America. We don't feel radical Islam is getting its fair share of press."

The group is preparing to release another film, "Third Jihad," but has no plans for mass distribution, Ross said.

On the Net:

Council on American-Islamic Relations: <http://www.cair.net>

The Clarion Fund: <http://clarionfund.org/>

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