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Canadian Chronicle – Algerian Islamist Sheikh Mahfoud Nahna Addresses ISNA Conference

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No Comment

By **Faisal Kutty** – Sheikh Mahfoud Nahna of Algeria was the main speaker at the 24th Annual Islamic Society of North America (ISNA-Canada) Conference held from May 15 to May 18.



The conference, titled “Capturing the Muslim Mind: Faith & Action,” was held at the University of Toronto campus in the core of the city. Sheikh Nahna, founder and president of the Algerian Islamic party, Harakat Mujtamaa As-Silm (HAMAS), which has no affiliation with the Palestinian organization with the same acronym (which means “zeal” in Arabic), addressed a number of conference sessions.

The charismatic leader was born Jan. 28, 1942, in the small Algerian village of Blida. While pursuing Arabic literature and Islamic studies at the University of Algeria, he became one of the leading critics of the socialist regime which took power after Algeria obtained its independence. He was sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment as a result. Nevertheless, he has fought long and hard for freedom of speech and political freedoms and has continued to channel his opposition through the new party which has become a leading Islamic party in Algeria. During the 1995 elections, HAMAS was the only legal Islamic party. It obtained more than three million votes and succeeded in having 69 representatives elected to the National Assembly. The party presently has seven ministers in the government.

At the conference, Sheikh Nahna spoke on topics ranging from “*Jihad and Taqlid*” to “Muslim Struggle in the Changing Global Context.” A deep understanding of both Islam and the modern world was clearly evident from his presentations. During the panel discussion on *jihad* (re-interpretation of religious doctrine in light of new circumstances and evidence) and *taqlid* (blind imitation) along with Sheikh Muzammil Siddiqui, president of ISNA, and Sheikh Ahmed Kutty, a local scholar, Sheikh Nahna reiterated the importance of exercising *jihad* in areas of significance and importance to modern times. Sheikh Nahna, who also served as chair of *Tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur’an) at the Islamic Studies Department of the University of Algeria, called for a reactivation of *jihad* in order to preserve and promote the well-being of the Muslim *ummah* (community).

The 56-year-old leader also told the audience that he was in favor of freedom, democracy, moderation, tolerance, co-existence and respect for human rights and rejection of violence in whatever form or from whatever source. He introduced his concept of “*Shuracracy*,” which in his words is “a Catholic marriage between *shura* [an Islamic concept of consultative government] and democracy.” He justified the use of the “Catholic marriage” analogy in this context to stress the fact that there can be no divorce from such a union. His controversial ideas have earned him powerful enemies. In fact, there have been more than 27 assassination attempts against him.

Sheikh Nahna’s last session was titled “Islam as the Ideology of the 21st Century.” His co-panelist, Dr. Aslam Parvaiz, visiting professor at Harvard University, presented an academic assessment with a focus on India. Sheikh Nahna’s speech turned into a powerful and emotional discourse on the present situation in Algeria. Members of the audience were stunned by his explicit description of the indiscriminate killing, raping and dismemberment that continues in his homeland. He also drove home the idea that the *ummah* (Muslim community) has to get beyond the petty politics of ethnicity, race, *madhabs* (schools of thought), sectarianism, organizational differences, etc., and work toward continuously refocusing on global realities facing the *ummah* and the ultimate goal of living within the bounds of Islam.

Responding to questions as to who is responsible for the heinous crimes and continuing massacres in Algeria, Sheikh Nahna responded that there must be an end to the finger-pointing. He said that regardless of who is behind it, the actual perpetrators are Muslims—be they soldiers or Islamists. He argued that the cycle of violence has to end and efforts must be undertaken toward national reconciliation and removing the impact of the carnage on the psychological well-being of future generations.

Other speakers at the four-day conference included Dr. Aslam Parvaiz from India, Abdul Karim Grimm and Fatima Grimm from Germany, ISNA vice president Imam Siraj Wahaj, Syed Imtiaz Ahmed, Sheikh Abdul-Hamid ISNA secretary, Sheikh Muzammil Siddiqui, president of the Islamic Society of North America.

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The Muslim Students' Association and Muslim Youth of North America also held parallel sessions.

Canada Denies Visa to Tunisian Islamic Activist

Canadian Immigration authorities denied a visitors' visa to the head of Tunisia's Islamic opposition group Hizb al-Nahdah (Renaissance Party), Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi. Sheikh Ghannouchi had applied for a visa through the Canadian High Commission in London, where he currently lives in exile.

The 59-year-old philosopher had been invited to address the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) annual conference in Toronto. In a letter dated April 30th, the immigration department wrote that he was not admissible to Canada because there was reason to believe that his organization had links to terrorism. He was also accused of "treason" for trying to replace the present Tunisian government. Immigration Canada was unable to comment when contacted by the *Washington Report*.

Sheikh Ghannouchi was detained on a number of occasions by the regime of President Habib Bourguiba, whom John Esposito calls the most secularized Muslim leader after the late Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founder of modern Turkey. Sheikh Ghannouchi was jailed between 1981 and 1984 and arrested and charged again in 1987 with plotting to overthrow the government. He was released after the November 1987 coup which brought to power President Zeine Abedine Ben Ali, who had been serving as minister of the interior under the increasingly unpredictable Bourguiba. Upon assuming power, Ben Ali promised to allow Islamic parties to participate in national politics. Sheikh Ghannouchi's party had captured 18 percent of the votes in 1989 when, along with some of his supporters, he was sentenced to life imprisonment by a military court on charges of instigating terrorism aimed at overthrowing the Ben Ali government.

Sheikh Ghannouchi, who was recently granted political asylum in the United Kingdom, told the *Toronto Star* that he was astonished by the Canadian decision. He said that "Only Canada considers me as a terrorist. I don't know why. Using violence to achieve political goals is refused in our view of Islam."

Ibrahim Malabari, director of the Islamic Center of Toronto, questioned how "a person granted political asylum in another Commonwealth country could be an inadmissible person in Canada." His sentiments

are echoed by many Canadian Muslims who remain disturbed over mistreatment of visiting Egyptian Islamic scholar Sheikh Abdul Hamid Mohamed Ghoniem at the Detroit/Windsor border by Canadian Immigration and Security officials (see story in the March 1998 issue of the *Washington Report*).

Sheikh Ghannouchi, born in the southeastern Tunisian town of al-Hama in 1939, is a founding member and head of the Renaissance Party of Tunisia. The group advocates an Islamic system with majority rule, free elections, a free press, protection of minorities, full women's rights and co-existence with the West. For instance he has written:

"Internationally, we strive for the freedom of cultural pluralism.... We must recognize that the human destiny is a joint one. Locally, there is no acceptable alternative other than democracy, one that is not exclusive, recognizing all perspectives."

It is hard to understand what kind of threat the Canadian government perceived from the activist who has openly renounced violence in any form. Even experts can't understand Canada's position. George Joffe, with the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London, told the *Toronto Star* that "he [Ghannouchi] has publicly renounced violence and has espoused the idea of multi-party political systems." In fact, according to Joffe, the only thing extreme about Sheikh Ghannouchi is that he "is considered by all commentators to be extremely moderate."

Canadian Jewish Congress Elects Its Youngest President

Moshe Ronen, a 39-year-old activist, was elected the youngest president in the 79-year-old history of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Ronen, considered a radical by many observers, was acclaimed at the 25th Plenary Assembly on May 24 and 25 in Winnipeg.

The Israeli-born son of an Auschwitz survivor is no stranger to the limelight. He first gained international attention when he brought the plight of Soviet Jewish dissident Natan Sharansky to the attention of prime-time TV news through Dan Rather on CBS. Ronen, then a 26-year-old law student, and four fellow activists staged a stunt for journalists by walking into the Aeroflot office in Geneva to buy a one-way ticket for Sharansky from the Soviet Union to Israel.

Ronen became a political activist during his years at York University, which has a large and active community of Jewish students and faculty. He continued his activism through law school and eventually became president of the Jewish Students' Network and a member of the World Jewish Congress. He most recently served as chair of the Canadian Jewish Congress—Ontario region.

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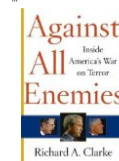
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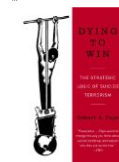
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Gunther Plaut, rabbi emeritus of Toronto's largest synagogue, the Holy Blossom Temple, told the *Toronto Star* that "He was young. He was a bit brash, considered radical by many people, and he had very strong opinions." In fact, many in the Jewish community found his theatrics radical. For instance, in 1985 Ronen and some fellow activists took part in a protest at Bitburg, Germany, where Ronald Reagan had gone to place a wreath to honor Germany's war dead as a gesture of reconciliation. "Reagan had called this an act of reconciliation between victims," Ronen told the *Toronto Star*. "But one cannot whitewash the Holocaust," he added, "and one should be very careful not to do that by turning victim and victimizer into the same category of remembrance." Whether he applies the same judgmental standards to Israel and the Palestinians will be revealed during his three-year tenure.

At the Assembly Ronen pledged as follows:

"During my presidency, Congress will not fudge the issues. We will continue to speak out boldly, exposing hypocrisy and confronting others on what is just. We will continue to speak out on the Holocaust, on anti-Semitism and all forms of racism, on multiculturalism and religious pluralism, on the social safety net, on terrorism, on Israel and Jerusalem. We will continue to promote positive and vibrant intergroup relations and provide humanitarian relief for communities in distress both at home and abroad, foster Canadian unity and strengthen Jewish communal cohesion."

Faisal Kutty is a Toronto-based writer and free-lance writer.

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