

Where there's smoke, be careful: There may be a smoke machine.

“No,” says Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby, “there's a real fire.” At issue is the relationship between the Islamic Society of Boston and one Abdurahman Alamoudi who, in 2004, pleaded guilty to terrorism-related crimes and is now serving a 23-year sentence in federal prison. Alamoudi was, in 1982, a founder of the Islamic Society of Boston. He went on in later to years to become one of America's best connected Moslems, a highly-regarded businessman who represented himself as a moderate. That representation won him both friends and prominence. He was a consultant to the Pentagon for over a decade, until 1998 advising on the selection of Muslim chaplains for the U.S. military; he spoke at a Washington National Cathedral prayer service after 9/11; he made six trips to Muslim nations as a goodwill ambassador for the State Department. He met with both President and Mrs. Clinton, with then president-elect George W. Bush, with Senator Joseph Lieberman, and there is reason to believe that all these thought well of him -- until his arrest in 1993.

Comes the question: Why call attention now, in 2007, to the 1982 action of a man who only 20+ years later was revealed to be a two-faced supporter of terrorism?

Because, Jacoby asserts, the ISB and its representatives have repeatedly claimed that their organization has had no contact whatsoever with Alamoudi since he left Boston in 1984 – and that, Jacoby goes on to say, is a demonstrable lie.

The evidence of the lie? In 2000, Jacoby asserts, the ISB wrote a check to cover Alamoudi's travel costs in connection with a speaking engagement. That's it, the whole of it – and even on this matter, Jacoby fudges: He speaks of “apparent” evidence that such a check was written, and says of the travel agency to which it was written that it is part of a group that is “under suspicion” by federal agents for terrorist-related activities. And there you have Jacoby's smoking gun.

Jacoby feigns innocent curiosity: “There may, of course, be an innocuous explanation for this payment,” he writes. “Or the Islamic Society of Boston may no longer stand by its claim to have

had ‘absolutely no connection’ with Alamoudi for many years.” (Or, one surmises based on Jacoby’s hedged language, the check he describes may not exist.) But the more obvious question is why, even if the facts as cited by Jacoby are accurate, Jacoby regards them as a mountain rather than a molehill. If this one check for travel expenses represents the entirety of the ISB-Alamoudi connection since 1984 – and were there any more noteworthy connection, Jacoby would surely have cited it – then Jacoby’s “gotcha” tone seems, to put the matter delicately, inflated.

“Ah,” Jacoby might say; “it is not the check itself but the ISB misrepresentation of the truth. He quotes the ISB website which says that “Alamoudi left Boston in 1984 and has had no contact with the Islamic Society of Boston since that time.” In other words, 16 years after Alamoudi left Boston the treasurer of the ISB wrote one check covering his travel expenses. Not an honorarium, not a consulting fee; a check (of unstated amount), followed by seven more years of no contact.

This is less a smoking gun than a teapot. Jacoby’s tempest is gratuitous.