

Palestinian professor victimized in Florida

Elisa Brehm**6 February 2002**

The University of South Florida (USF), with the backing of Governor Jeb Bush, is trying to fire a Palestinian professor for his political views. Sami Al-Arian is a tenured professor in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering at USF. His criticisms of American foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly US support for Israeli attacks on Palestinians, have made him a target of an ever-widening assault organized by right-wing elements to intimidate and suppress opposition to the war policies of the Bush administration.

Dr. Al-Arian has continually denied being involved with terrorist organizations. He has been investigated by the FBI over a period of 10 years, and to this day has never been arrested or charged with a crime.

In September, Al-Arian, a professor at USF for 16 years, was placed on indefinite leave by the university administration after he appeared on the right-wing FOX News program, "The O'Reilly Factor," following the attack on the World Trade Center. Despite the fact that Al-Arian condemned the September 11 attacks, the host accused him of having ties to terrorism.

O'Reilly reintroduced unproven allegations against the now defunct World and Islam Studies Enterprise (WISE), which was founded by Al-Arian. O'Reilly also brought up other unfounded claims by the FBI that had been thrown out of court.

Al-Arian appeared on the TV program to promote his and his wife's efforts to ban the use of secret evidence against immigrants who are being detained by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). His wife's brother, Dr. Mazen Al-Najjar, was kept in jail on the basis of secret evidence allegedly linking him to terrorist organizations. Al-Arian is currently a leader of the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedoms.

In 1996 the American government charged that WISE was a front for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and imprisoned Dr. Al-Najjar, Al-Arian's brother-in law, for more than three and half years. Throughout this time the government refused to furnish Al-Najjar or anyone else with the evidence against him or allow him to challenge his accusers. This flagrant disregard for civil liberties was condoned under the Anti-

Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, signed into law by Bill Clinton in 1996 after the Oklahoma City bombing.

Also a former adjunct professor at the University of South Florida, Al-Najjar, a 43-year-old father of three, was finally released in December 2000. At the time of his release Immigration Judge Kevin McHugh ruled there was insufficient evidence to prove that he had raised money for terrorist organizations or engaged in any unlawful activities. The judge said that evidence showed WISE was a "reputable and scholarly research center and the Islamic Concern Project (ICP) was highly regarded."

Fox News's O'Reilly prevented Al-Arian from speaking on these issues on his program and closed the interview with a provocative and chilling incitement of violence against the Palestinian immigrant: "If I was the CIA, I'd follow you wherever you went. I'd follow you 24 hours ... I'd still shadow you. I'd go to Denny's [restaurant] with you, and I'd go everywhere you went."

Following the television appearance, the university received angry phone calls and email messages, including death threats. University officials never questioned the insidious role of Fox News. Instead, Al-Arian was put on paid leave and banned from campus. Almost immediately there were calls from alumni and prominent donors for his dismissal.

Meanwhile, by the end of November, Federal INS agents rearrested Al-Najjar on a deportation order based on overstaying his student visa. He is now being held in maximum security and in solitary confinement on a 23-hour lockdown. Under the USA Patriot Act, passed by Congress in the wake of September 11, the Justice Department has been granted unprecedented powers to incarcerate immigrants.

At an emergency session on December 19, with much of the campus shut down for winter break, the USF Board of Trustees recommended firing Al-Arian. The professor was not permitted to attend the meeting, having been barred from campus. USF President Judy Genshaft sent him a notice of her intent to fire him, claiming that he had become a security risk by failing to distance himself from his outspoken views about Israel and the Palestinians.

Al-Arian has pledged to fight in court, if necessary, and has called on the Board of Trustees to review his case again. The United Faculty of Florida, which represents professors, said it would back Al-Arian with legal and financial assistance. Last week a body of USF graduate students voted 28-1 against Al-Arian's planned dismissal.

The American Association of University Professors has threatened to censure USF should the firing go through. Many professors will not accept a position at a censured university, making it more difficult to attract quality faculty. According to Jordan E. Kurland, associate general secretary of the AAUP, "Central among the issues ... is Prof. Al-Arian having the academic freedom as a citizen to speak out on controversial topics."

Al-Arian's case is perhaps the most egregious of several examples of efforts to suppress dissent on US campuses since September 11. Well aware there are no voices of opposition to Bush's war within the Democratic Party or the media, the Republican Right, including its supporters on the *Wall Street Journal* editorial board and the Murdoch-owned media, have attempted to silence any academics who dare so much as raise that there is connection between US policy in the Middle East and the September 11 terror attacks.

The attack on academic freedom takes place under conditions of a significant shift to the left among many college students concerned over the eruption of US militarism, the attack on civil liberties and the worsening economic crisis, which has dimmed their own prospects after graduation. A recent study from the University of California at Los Angeles, for example, found nearly 30 percent of students entering four-year colleges and universities characterize their political views as "liberal" or "far left," the highest percentage in two decades, and substantially higher than those who consider themselves "conservative" or "far right."

Last November the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)—a right-wing academic group founded by Lynne Cheney, the vice-president's wife, and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman—issued a report aimed at rallying support for a McCarthy-type witch-hunt on the campuses. The report, entitled, "Defending Civilization: How Our Universities are Failing America," complained about teach-ins and rallies on 146 campuses in 36 states, which opposed US military action after September 11.

Based on press accounts, the report reproduced statements from 115 college and university faculty members, as well as students, who raised questions, encouraged critical thought or dared voice opposition to Bush's so-called war on terrorism.

"While America's elected officials from both parties and media commentators from across the spectrum condemned

the attacks and followed the President in calling evil by its rightful name, many faculty demurred," the document states. "Some refused to make judgments. Many invoked tolerance and diversity as antidotes to evil. Some even pointed accusatory fingers, not at the terrorists, but at America itself."

In the style of a blacklist, the ACTA report names more than 40 professors, including the president of Wesleyan University, who suggested in an open letter that "disparities and injustices" in American society and the world can lead to hatred and violence. Calling the campuses "the weak link in America's response to terrorism," the report asserted, "when a nation's intellectuals are unwilling to defend its civilization, they give comfort to its adversaries."

The ACTA demands universities expand courses on Western civilization and American history, because, in the words of Lynne Cheney, "We need to know, in a war, exactly what is at stake." If institutions fail to do so, the group calls on college trustees and wealthy alumni to send their money elsewhere.

The ACTA—which contributed \$3.4 billion to colleges and universities last year, making the organization "the largest private source of support for higher education"—no doubt hopes the threat of withholding funds will be enough to convince college administrations to force academics to toe the line, or fire those who resist.

In the case of Dr. Al-Arian, USF President Genshaft admitted that the professor's continued employment has prompted alumni and university donors to withdraw support. The ACTA played a significant role in Florida during the state's transition from the Board of Regents-run system to the one now under the control of separate Boards of Trustees, a shift away from a more educational and academic axis to one more influenced by corporate money.

The victimization of Al-Arian is an alarming attack on democratic rights and civil liberties. The proclaimed aim of the war against terrorism—ostensibly the defense of freedom—is being conducted by implementing a brutal assault on freedom at home. In fact, the methods used against Al-Arian and countless others of Middle Eastern descent reveal the real character of the war, which has nothing to do with the defense of freedom, and everything to do with suppressing opposition to the predations of US imperialism.



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