

British academic accused of planning terrorism by US

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Dr Bashir Musa Mohammed Nafim, an Egyptian-born British academic, is the latest individual to appear on a list of eight “terrorism suspects” drawn up by the US authorities and announced by Attorney General John Ashcroft.

The suspects are accused of belonging to the Palestinian organisation Islamic Jihad and of helping to mastermind a “terror network.” Nafi has denied the allegations, saying they were “absurd” and “fabricated.”

Dr Nafi lives in Oxfordshire and is a part-time lecturer at Birkbeck College, part of the University of London, where he teaches on the postgraduate diploma course in Islamic studies and for the certificate/diploma programme, as well as two courses run jointly by Birkbeck’s faculty of continuing education and the independent Muslim College.

The director of Islamic studies at Birkbeck, Dr Gwen Griffith-Dickson, said, “Mr Nafi is a highly respected, valuable member of the academic team. He is a specialist in the Islamic history of ideas, covering a broad range of thinkers from all traditions in Islam. His work on Palestinian issues is part of a much wider scholarly research on the issues of state and society in Islam.”

Responding to the accusations of “fundamentalism” levelled at Nafi, Griffith-Dickson added, “Mr Nafi has always taken an analytical and scholarly approach to the study of Islam. He has also sought, with energy and commitment, to encourage critical thinking about religious issues and academic balance in his students, and thus to encourage social responsibility.”

Dr Nafi, who is accused of being the British head of Islamic Jihad in the Ashcroft indictment, has stated that he will fight the charges. Denying any links with the Palestinian organisation, he told BBC Radio 4’s *Today*

programme on February 22, “I support the Palestinian people’s rights—those rights which are recognised by the United Nations and the international community... But I have nothing to do with organised politics whatsoever.”

He said he had both an Irish and an Egyptian passport and could “leave this island now if I want,” but intended to stay on in Oxfordshire where he has lived for 20 years and “fight them to the bitter end”. “What is being said against me is absolutely untrue,” he continued. “I have nothing to hide and nothing to fear.”

Dr Nafi is a frequent contributor to Arab newspapers. Abdul Bari Atwan, editor of the London-based Arabic newspaper *Al Quds*, knows Dr Nafi, and described the indictments as a US “witch-hunt” against the Palestinian community.

In the mid-1990s Dr Nafi worked briefly in America and had an “academic involvement” with Palestinian professor, Sami al-Arian, another suspect on Ashcroft’s list. Dr Al-Arian, who taught at the University of South Florida (USF), is described by the indictment as the US leader of Islamic Jihad and was arrested early on February 20 together with three other US residents.

Al-Arian, who used to run an Islamic charity, has been subject of lengthy FBI investigation that accused him of funneling money to Palestinian groups. He has continually denied being involved with terrorist organisations.

Last 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 Centre. Despite the fact that Al-Arian condemned the September 11 attacks, O’Reilly accused him of having ties to terrorism. O’Reilly regurgitated 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 *O'Reilly Factor* to promote his and his wife's efforts to oppose the use of secret evidence against immigrants who are being detained by the US Immigration and Naturalisation 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 organisations. Al-Arian is currently a leader of the National Coalition to Protect Political Freedoms. He has denied any links to terrorists and told reporters "it's all about politics," as he was led away in handcuffs.

Mr Nafi has defended his colleague, saying he is sure he was going to win his case as well. If convicted, both men face life imprisonment.

The British Home Office has refused to comment on Ashcroft's allegations against Nafi. Although there have been no moves as yet to extradite him, the US Justice department told the BBC they may be forthcoming.

Scholars in the US have warned that the Bush administration and the media are creating a "chilling effect of secrecy and intimidation" on campuses around the country. A statement by the American Studies Association (ASA), which has 5,000 members made up of teachers and lecturers in disciplines relating to American studies, speaks of a "deep concern" about a "storm of attacks" on intellectual freedoms.

The ASA is calling for universities to resist pressures to silence staff that take "unpopular political decisions." The statement goes on to condemn organisations that "monitor" academic views, and names *Campus Watch*, a website set up by rightwing ideologue Daniel Pipes, which publishes details of faculties and academics critical of US foreign policy. *Campus Watch* has been prominent in backing the accusations levelled against Nafi, Al-Arian and others.



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