

Sami Al-Arian and the attack on democratic rights in the US: an interview with Laila Al-Arian

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On February 20 of this year, University of South Florida Professor Sami Amin Al-Arian and three other men were arrested on charges of conspiring to commit acts of terrorism. The charges are the culmination of a decade-long slander campaign to discredit Al-Arian. This campaign has been motivated by his outspoken criticism of the Israeli government and the growing attack on democratic rights in the United States, of which his confinement is one telling example. [See "A monstrous attack on democratic rights: US government mounts conspiracy frame-up of Palestinian activists"].

On March 12 the World Socialist Web Site spoke to Laila Al-Arian, professor Al-Arian's daughter and a senior at Georgetown University. Since that time, Sami Al-Arian continues to be held in solitary confinement. His lawyers charge that he has been denied basic comforts and access to legal counsel.

WSWS: What is the current status of your father and what has happened over the past two-and-a-half weeks?

Laila Al-Arian: As you know, he was arrested on February 20, and since then he has been in a jail in Tampa, Florida, where we have lived for the past 16 years. He has been on a hunger strike since being arrested and has lost about 20 pounds. But his faith is strong and we are confident that with enough support from the community we can get through this.

WSWS: Could you explain the history of the case, and the process by which he has been charged and arrested?

LA: He was first investigated around 1994-95 after Zionist journalist or pseudo-journalist Steve Emerson and his friend in Tampa, Michael Fechter, who writes for the Tampa Tribune, first raised allegations of ties to terror. That was when the government started investigating. Our home was raided in November of 1995, I believe. Since then, the government has been trying to come up with anything to charge him with. It is really telling that it has taken this long to get something to indict him with. The case is really weak, and it wasn't until after September 11 and the Patriot Act was passed that they were able to use illegal means of obtaining foreign surveillance, which God knows where it came from and how accurate it is.

Before that, he was an advocate for civil rights. My uncle [Mazen Al-Najjar] was jailed under secret evidence for three years. My father worked day and night fighting against the unconstitutional use of secret evidence against Muslim and Arab immigrants. I think that also made him a target, because he was so outspoken. We were victorious in the end. There was a bill passed in the House of Representatives called the 1999 Secret Evidence Repeal Act. It didn't end up passing the Senate, so it was a symbolic victory in that sense. In October of 2000, my uncle was finally released, and the judge in that case said that the government failed to prove that the organizations he worked with were associated with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as the government was claiming. That was also

a victory.

The government was very eager to get back at us, and September 11 unfortunately gave them the opportunity because there is this atmosphere of hysteria and fear. People who want to pass their agendas really got an opportunity to do so.

WSWS: The act used to jail your uncle, this was the Clinton Administration's legislation, passed after the Oklahoma City bombing. And the journalists you mentioned, I believe they were involved in promoting the idea that the Oklahoma City bombings were likely the product of Muslim extremists?

LA: Yes, both of them were. Emerson was on CBS News the next morning saying that the bombing must have been done by Arabs, and Michael Fechter wrote articles trying to tie my father to the Oklahoma City bombing and then the World Trade Center bombings. They were just preposterous claims, not backed up by any evidence.

WSWS: As it turned out, the Oklahoma City bombing was carried out by right-wing fascist elements within the United States. There has been no "war on terrorism" against this element, in large part because they are closely allied with high-ranking officials in the Bush administration. One can see the same phenomenon with the anthrax investigations. Once it was clear that it was not Arabs or Iraqis who had carried out the attacks, once the attacks could not be employed for the purpose of justifying war because they were carried out by individuals either within or closely tied to the military establishment, the investigation was dropped.

LA: And it is interesting to note that those who have been accused of carrying out the anthrax attacks, their universities have stood by them. On the other hand, my father's university has taken action against him, ignoring the fact that it is a bunch of Republican right-wing corporate figures that are carrying out the attack. The indictment has helped the university administration, because they really wanted to fire my father, but they were worried that they would be censured. It is no coincidence that Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who appointed these corporate figures to the board of trustees of the university, also has connections to the Justice Department, as well as, of course, the president. It is really not a conspiracy theory. I strongly believe that all of these elements came into play when the indictment was handed down.

WSWS: You said that after September 11, an atmosphere of fear and hysteria has been encouraged in order to allow certain people to push an agenda. What is this agenda that you speak of?

LA: I think there is more than one agenda which is being passed, but one of them is forces within the US seeking to silence any voice that speaks about oppression of Palestinians, about the brutality of the state of Israel. On the other hand, another agenda that is being passed is by members of the Bush administration, who are allied with these Zionists, because of their own right-wing beliefs and their own Christian fundamentalism.

They believe that Jesus will only return if the Jews control the land of Israel. The two groups have right now a very strong unholy alliance. There are people in the administration who look at all Muslims as the enemy. They say that they are not at war with Islam, but I don't believe it. Part of their mission is to convert people and Islam is a fast-growing religion.

Part of the attack on Muslims, in particular, is that the forces carrying out the attack always need an enemy. It was communists before Muslims; it was Jews in the past, Catholics, African-Americans.

WSWS: Do you feel the preparations for war in Iraq play into this?

LA: Definitely. I think that it is all connected. The indictment came at the onset of the war drive, and Ashcroft is trying to give the message that here we are catching these terrorists and we need to catch the big bad terrorist Saddam Hussein. The timing definitely should be questioned. Now they are not even distinguishing which alleged terrorist is being caught. How many people from Al Qaeda have actually been caught? I think they are going after the wrong people. They are going after the people that they truly need to ally with in order to tell the Muslim people that we are not against Muslims in general.

WSWS: You said in an interview in the *Michigan Daily*, "It is really sad because the ideals that this nation was founded on are slowly being shelved in the name of national security." Later you say that the US is "looking a lot more like a police state than a democracy." We have talked a bit about the attack on democratic rights in the United States. Why do you think these processes are taking place?

LA: I think that people like John Ashcroft want to silence any voice that doesn't agree with theirs. They want democracy only if it means that everyone agrees with their line of thinking. It is not only Muslims that are being targeted. It's antiwar activists; it's secular or Christian pro-Palestinian activists. I think that we are turning into a fascist regime. All these things going on now, and especially the vast extension of federal powers, indicate this. Even on the university campus, they are now asking campus police to spy on international students, to spy on anyone who may be questionable, without any evidence. It is all very unconstitutional and contrary to what has always been taught about America being the land of the free and a place where we have certain rights. People like John Ashcroft have always wanted to pass this agenda, and they have only been able to do so recently, because of this atmosphere now.

WSWS: Do you see any hope for the defense of democratic rights?

LA: I think it has to come from the masses. People have to realize the Justice Department does not have our rights in mind, our best interests in mind. It has to come from a grassroots effort. We need to lobby our representatives to not pass the Patriot Act II, which threatens to take away even more of our civil liberties. Not only lobbying, but supporting those who have been detained by these unconstitutional policies, people like my father, whether in the media or through financial support. When the truth is on your side, you are confident that at least that will help.

WSWS: You speak of lobbying congress. The Secret Evidence Act that was used against your uncle and father was passed under the Clinton administration, and the Patriot Act was passed with the overwhelming support of both political parties.

LA: I think that happened because it was immediately after the attacks of September 11, and I am very skeptical as to how many people actually read the Patriot Act. I am sure that if these representatives read it today they would be very shocked at what they voted for.

WSWS: I would disagree with you on this point. I think, in general, the people who voted for these measures knew what was happening, but that there is really no constituency within the political establishment for the defense of the most basic democratic rights. The record of the Democratic Party demonstrates this, going back to the impeachment crisis, where there was really no serious opposition within the party to what amounted to an attempt at a political coup by the Republican right. Then the 2000

election, when the opposition to the Democratic Party to the stolen election was virtually nonexistent. And then going through its record over the past couple years, during the so-called "war on terrorism."

LA: Yes, well I wouldn't really rely on any specific party to take up the fight for civil liberties. We have obviously found more support within the Democratic Party than the Republican, but there were very good representatives within the Republican Party. I would look at it more on an individual basis. But I definitely believe that the movement has to come from the people. I wouldn't rely on the government.

WSWS: What do you think are the causes of the war in Iraq?

LA: I think the war is about President Bush finishing what his father started. It is about oil and it is about money. It is about control in the region by occupying Iraq. It is about instilling fear in the hearts of all the Arab countries surrounding Iraq, in order to bring them to their knees. This morning I saw a report on what they called the "mother of all bombs." I find it disgusting that we are using all these scare tactics.

No Arab or Muslim will come to the defense of Saddam Hussein. We all think that he is a horrible dictator who has done so much to hurt his own people. But at the same time, he has not posed any threat to the United States. The attempt to connect Hussein and Al Qaeda is completely ridiculous. The international community is against this war and the majority of Americans are against this war, because we can see through President Bush and we know the real reason he is doing this is to assert control and get oil. The people who will suffer most are the Iraqi civilians, who have been living in such shambles, enduring sanctions for the past 12 years.

WSWS: Prime Minister Sharon has formed an extreme right-wing government in Israel including parties that advocate the expulsion of all Palestinians. How do you think the war will affect the Palestinian population?

LA: I wouldn't be surprised if when the war starts Sharon has a mass genocide or starts expelling Palestinians by the thousands. It is really a scary thought. Israel has been very successful in convincing at least America that its war on terrorism is similar to the one here. Of course that is ridiculous. But when the war starts, Israel can very well use the line that what they are doing is similar to the war in Iraq, that they are trying to liberate their people or are trying to get rid of terrorist elements.



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