

Political prisoner Sami Al-Arian's hunger strike enters third month

Tom Carter
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As Palestinian activist Sami Al-Arian's hunger strike reaches its 62nd day, family members and friends have expressed grave concerns for his health. A University of South Florida professor of computer science and engineering and outspoken critic of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Dr. Al-Arian was arrested with three other men shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks on sensational terrorism charges, and he has remained in US prison ever since. None of the charges against him has resulted in conviction.

Al-Arian's water-only strike has resulted in the loss of approximately 25 percent of his body weight, and he exhibits symptoms of severe undernourishment. Life-threatening health problems can arise after a loss of more than 18 percent body mass in trim, healthy individuals, according to the *British Medical Journal*.

On the web site freesamialarian.com, family members described a recent visit to the Butner, North Carolina, medical prison where Dr. Al-Arian is being held. He met his wife and children there in a wheelchair, pale and gaunt, and his ears were in pain.

"I was shocked when I saw my husband," his wife, Nahla, told freesamialarian.com. "In spirit, he is the same loving husband and father we know, but his physical state has deteriorated rapidly. He is rail thin, but thank God his faith remains strong." Nahla has been trying to convince her husband to end his strike, explaining that she understands why he is conducting it, but that "we are extremely worried for his life."

Al-Arian's son Abdullah commented on the strict code of silence about his father's situation and ongoing hunger strike maintained by the official media. "I couldn't help but feel that there is a concerted effort to keep this tragic situation from reaching the American people," he said.

"When I first saw my father, I couldn't believe how

weak and thin he had gotten," said his daughter Laila. "Throughout our visit, he was shivering from low body temperature, and his voice was low and weak. He was in considerable pain and discomfort just sitting there with us. He is a fraction of his former vibrant, lively, and exuberant self."

The circumstances surrounding the arrests of Dr. Al-Arian and three others in February 2003 were characterized by lurid accusations of terrorism in the media by right-wing journalists and talk-show hosts, as well as the spineless decision by the University of South Florida to seek to dismiss Al-Arian, who had worked at the university for 16 years.

The government finally took Al-Arian to court in June of 2005, but after a defense based entirely on Al-Arian's constitutional right to free speech, the jury acquitted him on 8 of 17 terrorism and conspiracy charges, deadlocking on the rest. In a major embarrassment for the government, juries also failed to convict any of Al-Arian's alleged co-conspirators with any crime.

The charges against Al-Arian were based on more than 21,000 hours of taped phone conversations, intercepted faxes and e-mails, as well as the fruits of two separate FBI raids. However, despite the mountain of evidence, the government's could prove only that Al-Arian had made statements critical of Israel and had given money to certain Palestinian charities—both of which were legal and constitutionally protected actions.

While the terror and conspiracy charges held no water in court, they were hysterically repeated in the media, which took every opportunity to demonize Al-Arian and congratulate the government—and then Attorney General John Ashcroft in particular—for foiling an insidious terrorist plot.

In reality, Al-Arian is behind bars for his criticism of

the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli regime, which enjoys the full backing of the US government. His incarceration is intended to intimidate those who oppose the murderous policies of the Israeli government, as well as Washington's complicity in those crimes.

His incarceration also highlights the breakdown of democratic rights and civil liberties in the US that has characterized the so-called "war on terror," which is being conducted not in defense of freedom and democracy, but in order to crack down on opposition, both domestic and foreign, to the predations of US imperialism.

Despite having been convicted of no crime, Dr. Al-Arian remained behind bars following the conclusion of the trial in 2005 while the Department of Homeland Security sought to overturn his permanent residency status and deport him.

The campaign against Al-Arian began in 1995, when the notorious anti-Arab journalist and self-styled "terror expert" Steve Emerson of NBC, as well as Michael Fletcher of the *Tampa Tribune*, began issuing McCarthy-style assertions that Al-Arian had been channeling resources to Islamic Jihad.

Emerson later claimed that Muslim terrorists were behind the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing—a claim with no substantiation that has been thoroughly disproved. In a feeble effort to back up his allegation, Emerson commented in an interview that the goal of the bombing was "to inflict as many casualties as possible—that's a Middle Eastern trait."

Despite a subsequent government investigation and even an FBI raid, no charges were brought against Al-Arian at the time—presumably for lack of evidence. Al-Arian has consistently denied any involvement in terrorism.

Meanwhile, Mazen Al-Najjar, Al-Arian's brother-in-law and an adjunct professor at the University of South Florida, was arrested and held for three and a half years on a minor immigration charge while the government insisted that it had "secret evidence" connecting him to terrorism. Al-Najjar was finally released in 2000 after a judge ruled that he could not be held on secret evidence.

The secret evidence, as it turned out, was centered on the claim that the World and Islam Studies Enterprise (WISE), established by Al-Najjar and Al-Arian at the

University of South Florida, was a front for Islamic Jihad. Immigration Judge Kevin McHugh threw out the charge, saying that all evidence pointed to WISE as a "reputable and scholarly research center."

Following the passage of the Patriot Act in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the government redoubled its efforts to convict Al-Arian, using largely the same evidence obtained during the period from 1994 to 2001 that was insufficient to convict him at the time.

In January of this year, Dr. Al-Arian was subpoenaed by a federal prosecutor in Virginia to testify again on the same terror and conspiracy charges. Al-Arian refused to testify, since he had already been tried and acquitted, and was placed in civil contempt of court, which can prolong his incarceration by up to 18 months. Since that time, he has been on hunger strike.



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