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Professor's terrorist links divide university in Tampa

By **Scott Powers** | Sentinel Staff Writer
Posted January 12, 2002

TAMPA -- Anger, fear, charges of terrorism support, death threats and cries of trampled liberties are tearing at the University of South Florida as administrators there try to fire a tenured professor.

Sami Al-Arian, a 43-year-old Palestinian and associate computer-science professor, has been investigated by the FBI and the university on suspicions that he once supported Islamic extremists who may be involved in terrorism. He steadfastly denies any wrongdoing, insisting such accusations are based on old reports that have been investigated and dropped and are misunderstood when discussed out of the context.

He has never been charged with a crime or -- until now -- with breaking university rules.

But Al-Arian's alleged ties to terrorists nonetheless have caused havoc and fear on the USF campus. The climate has led school officials to conclude Al-Arian must go. And they're forcing him to fight for his job. Further aggravating USF leaders, Al-Arian has continued, against their wishes, to speak out about allegations of his past. And every time he does, the university fields more death threats.

Community frayed

The fight over his job has split the university. And it has gained national notoriety, becoming a touchstone for two causes that now clash at USF since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks: campus safety concerns and freedom of speech.

"I did not chose to be the poster child for the debate about academic freedom in the post-September 11 world," Al-Arian said Wednesday night when he telephoned a USF Faculty Senate member to ask for the Senate's support. "But now that I am, I'd like to remind you that all of us are being scrutinized, not just I."

On Dec. 19, the USF Board of Trustees voted to urge his dismissal, and President Judy Genshaft officially notified Al-Arian of her intention to fire him. Al-Arian's response, required by Monday, will be the second step in a complex, lengthy process that universities must follow to fire tenured professors.

Genshaft and other USF officials insist the accusations about terrorism support, charges the university investigated for two years in the mid-1990s, are no longer an issue. The charges in her notice to him do not mention them.

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Refusal to cooperate

She insisted she is fighting to restore a sense of safety on the 37,000-student campus. The sense was lost, she said, after Al-Arian appeared on the combative Fox News cable talk show The O'Reilly Factor on Sept. 26, and his past was dredged up. Al-Arian contends he went onto the show as a peaceful spokesman for the Muslim community, but university officials think he appeared in order to engage in a hot political debate.

Genshaft said she was frustrated that Al-Arian kept ignoring her instructions to disassociate his views from the university, or better yet, to stay out of the media limelight, especially after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"You cannot take it out of the context of September 11," she said. "This is a very complicated, tough decision."

Since Sept. 26, USF officials have fielded scores of death threats against Al-Arian and others at the school, including a handful of threats that police think are credible and still active. Genshaft said the case has dominated her time and energy, as well as that of other top officials.

"I can't wait for someone to be hurt or killed at this university before I take action," she said.

"The university has given Professor Al-Arian academic freedom and liberty, and he has not been responsible," she said. "This is about disruption of the university and the safety of the university."

First Amendment rights

However, on Wednesday, the USF Faculty Senate voted not to support Genshaft's action. On Thursday, the faculty union, United Faculty of Florida, went further, voting to condemn her action.

Noted civil-rights attorney Jonathan Katz of Washington, D.C., has offered to help Al-Arian. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education in Philadelphia and other state and national groups also are offering to help.

"This is not about Sami Al-Arian," said Thor Halvorssen, the foundation's executive director. "This is about the First Amendment at USF being imperiled for all students and faculty."

"If we let this decision stand, and those of us who care about free universities do nothing, we are essentially saying it is all right to silence and fire a professor because his freedom-of -speech rights are too much trouble to defend," he said.

Al-Arian has stopped talking to the media.

"I just think in their view they believe Dr. Al-Arian is a liability. We disagree," said his attorney, Robert McKee. "He's a great professor. He does his job well. And I think they'll be hard-pressed to prove in whatever forum we end up in that there's any justification for taking his livelihood away."

Some professors sympathize, worrying what it might take to provoke enough campus disruption, especially in an unpredictably violent world.

"This is the troubling part about the decision," said social work Professor Gregory Paveza, who is president of the USF Faculty Senate. "I could be giving a lecture and make a comment that makes someone angry, or I could give someone an F, and three days later that person could come back to the campus and say, 'I'm going to shoot Professor Paveza.' At that point, I've created a disruption."

Unique case

Al-Arian's case is not the only one in which academic freedom and post-Sept. 11 security are clashing. Others have arisen this fall at Orange Coast College in California, the University of New Mexico, California State University at Chico and Saint Olaf College in Minnesota. But no one at those campuses is being fired.

None of those cases involves a professor accused of terrorist links. USF's first

investigation of Al-Arian and an organization he founded at the university concluded with a 100-page report in 1996. It was sparked partly by an FBI probe, begun in early 1995, investigating whether USF computers were being used for communication with Middle East and Islamic fundamentalists. The probe led federal officials to Al-Arian; USF officials say it is still active.

Al-Arian was born in Kuwait. He came to the United States in 1975 as a 17-year-old college student and stayed. He earned three college degrees, including a doctorate in engineering from North Carolina State University in 1985. USF then hired him as an assistant professor of computer science. He was promoted to associate professor and granted tenure in 1992. He and his wife have five children.

He has received high marks for his USF work, won several teaching awards and published more than 50 articles.

The 1996 report states that his professional work "appears to have been outstanding" and "appears to have been entirely apolitical."

His off-campus activities have been the issue. During the late '80s and early '90s, he helped organize and spoke at a series of controversial Islamic conferences held in Chicago and other Midwestern cities. At those, according to the 1996 USF report, he and other speakers made speeches in Arabic that some translators have reported as hate-filled statements about Israel, Jews and Christians and in support of the intifada, the violent Palestinian uprising of that time, and of an Islamic jihad, or holy war.

Al-Arian's off-campus activities now seem to focus on religious, education, civil rights and social support for area Muslims. He calls himself a leader in the American Muslim community and a civil-rights activist. No one has publicly accused him of making any recent inflammatory remarks or supporting Middle Eastern violence or terrorism.

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