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## Al-Arian says federal probe is all about politics

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A lawyer for University of South Florida professor Sami Al-Arian says announcement of a federal investigation into his activities indicates a cozy relationship between the school and law enforcement.

"It appears ... law enforcement is trying to ride to the rescue," said Robert F. McKee about the case of Al-Arian, who is fighting to keep his job.

Al-Arian's problems began last fall after his alleged ties to terrorists were aired on a national television show. A backlash followed, aimed at him and USF. USF President Judy Genshaft is considering whether to fire the tenured computer engineering professor. She says he is a security risk and has disrupted campus.

"This is all about politics," Al-Arian said Friday after learning he was the subject of the federal probe. "And it's a sad day in America when politics is used to manipulate justice."

The university said it received several death threats and hate mail and experienced a drop in financial donations. Al-Arian was suspended with pay and barred from campus.

During winter break, the Board of Trustees - appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush - voted 12-1 to fire him. Genshaft then notified Al-Arian of her intent to dismiss him. She has not indicated when she will decide whether to do so.

Genshaft maintains the issue centers on contract violations by Al-Arian.

However, the professor's plight has received widespread national attention as a matter of academic freedom.

Some academics think firing Al-Arian could paint Genshaft as a pawn of political pressure and keep her from being picked to run a more prestigious university.

On Thursday, U.S. Attorney Mac Cauley took a rare step in announcing an ongoing federal probe into Al-Arian's conduct and activities, saying he did so because of intense community concern.

McKee questioned what the government could be looking into. The FBI investigated Al-Arian in the mid 1990s when they suspected that an Islamic think tank he operated at USF was a front for Middle Eastern terrorists.

A former head of the think tank, Ramadan Abdulah Shallah, left Tampa in 1995 and soon resurfaced as head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization. Al-Arian also was accused of raising money for Palestinian groups with ties to terrorists.

The government never formally closed its investigation.

"They've had their eye on him for years," McKee said. "What kind of crime could he have perpetrated under all that scrutiny?"

Cauley's announcement should not influence Genshaft's decision, according to Thor Halvorssen, spokesman for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a nonprofit group dedicated to free speech and academic freedom.

Genshaft has said Al-Arian violated his contract, disrupted campus and failed to make it clear he spoke only for himself and not the university.

Halvorssen called Genshaft's reasoning "bogus," but said she can't fire Al-Arian now simply because he's under investigation.

"You cannot fire him for being under suspicion," he said. "History shows that she will lose that battle, and in the long run, taint the university."