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Sami Al-Arian

Florida witch hunt

When a tenured professor loses his job for vocally backing the Palestinian cause, Jeb Bush applauds, Bill O'Reilly boos and academics say it's the worst threat to free speech since Sept. 11.

By Bruce Shapiro

Jan. 8, 2002 | When Sami Al-Arian, a computer science professor at the University of South Florida and a Muslim community leader in this Tampa suburb, agreed to go on Fox News' popular "O'Reilly Factor" Sept. 28, he thought he'd be discussing American Muslims' reaction to Sept. 11. Instead he found himself denounced by host Bill O'Reilly as a patron of terrorists for his work on behalf of Palestinian statehood, with O'Reilly demanding an explanation for incendiary anti-Israel remarks Al-Arian made 15 years ago.

And that was only the beginning of what has become the most intense debate anywhere in the

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nation about academic freedom in the wake of Sept. 11. Al-Arian's "O'Reilly" appearance triggered hundreds of phone calls and e-mails (as well as death threats) from critics outraged that USF would employ the supposed "terrorist." Three days after his Fox appearance, university president Judy Genshaft suspended the Palestinian-born Al-Arian with pay, ostensibly for his safety and that of the university community; just before Christmas, she fired him.

Genshaft made no pretext that Al-Arian's academic performance was at issue; he is both tenured and popular with his students. Al-Arian was terminated, she said, for failing to make clear he was speaking for himself and not the university when he appeared on Fox, thus making USF the vortex of right-wing fury about his views. "We are experiencing a level of disruption that no university anywhere is set up to deal with on an ongoing basis."

The question raised by Al-Arian's firing -- Can a university punish controversial speech by one of its professors? -- is not only polarizing Tampa Bay, it is sounding alarm bells throughout academe; and the story of how this local spat caught fire like autumn leaves suggests how fragile the national psyche remains four months after the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. The firestorm has pulled in Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who personally appoints USF's trustees and has praised Genshaft's move, and Fox attack-dog Bill O'Reilly himself, who has defended the Palestinian academic's right to his views and denounced the university president for firing him.

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The firing has been criticized by the American Association of University Professors and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. On Thursday, Al-Arian will get a chance to defend himself to the university's administration in an appeal required under his union contract.

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The Al-Arian story, like so much about Sept. 11, did not begin with the hijacking of those four airplanes. Instead, it goes back nearly a decade. In the early 1990s, Al-Arian, along with other Palestinian exiles in the Tampa area, founded an Islamic studies center at USF, inviting speakers ranging from mainstream to radical. "What we were trying to do," Al-Arian recalls, "was foster dialogue" across the broad range of Islamic political opinion. Al-Arian himself -- who taught in the university's engineering school since 1986, and also serves as the imam of the Islamic Community of Tampa, where he founded a well-regarded parochial school attended by over 200 children -- emerged as a passionate defender of the Palestinian intifada, occasionally given to the kind of hotheaded rhetoric familiar from liberation movements the world over. And he helped establish a charity to raise money for the families of Palestinians killed in the uprising.

USF first caught heat for its professor's political commitments in 1994. That year, terrorism maven Steve Emerson produced a controversial PBS documentary called "Jihad in America." It interspersed video footage of one of Al-Arian's anti-Israel speeches with images of Sheik Abdul Rahman, the blind cleric convicted in the first World Trade Center bombing, who had once appeared at one of the USF center's conferences. Emerson, citing anonymous sources, labeled Al-Arian's center "the primary support group in the United States" for Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Emerson, it should be noted, is no neutral observer of the Islamic scene; a New York Times review of his 1991 book "Terrorist" found it "marred by factual errors and by a pervasive anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian bias." He lost much of his credibility as a journalist when he rushed to proclaim Timothy McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing the work of Muslim terrorists, but his stock recently rose again thanks to the insatiable hunger for "terrorism experts" post-Sept. 11, and he regularly appears on cable news shows. Al-Arian considers his 1994 documentary "a classic example of guilt by association," and traces his present plight to Emerson's never-proven

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allegations.

Controversy returned a year later when the former co-editor of the USF center's journal, who had disappeared after just six months' work, turned up in Syria as general secretary of Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The FBI, apparently convinced the center was a front for terrorism, seized its computers, videotapes and files and froze its accounts; USF, painted by the media as "Jihad U," suspended Al-Arian with pay and hired a prominent Tampa lawyer to conduct its own independent investigation. After 15 months the FBI and the university both cleared the center of any connection to terrorism or Palestinian Islamic Jihad. A federal judge later affirmed their findings, calling Al-Arian's enterprise -- which by then had folded its tent -- "a reputable and scholarly research center."

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