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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Colloquy Live

Sami Al-Arian: Victim of Intolerance or Threat to a University's Stability?

Wednesday, February 6, at 2 p.m., U.S. Eastern time

Should Sami Al-Arian be dismissed from his tenured job at the University of South Florida?

The Topic

Since September 11, there have been numerous incidents in which faculty members have been criticized for their comments about terrorism, U.S. foreign policy, and the Middle East. But only one tenured professor -- Sami Al-Arian of the University of South Florida -- faces the prospect of losing his job for his public comments. Mr. Al-Arian has been the source of controversy at the university for several years, with his critics saying that his comments about Israel promote hate and his defenders saying that he is a caring professor whose comments -- however controversial -- must be defended as part of free speech and academic freedom. After some statements that Mr. Al-Arian made in 1991 were discussed, post-September 11, on a national television show, the university was bombarded with criticism, threats to revoke donations, and some death threats for Mr. Al-Arian. The university's Board of Trustees has authorized his dismissal -- and the university's president, while not making a final decision, has said his dismissal would be appropriate -- because of the disruptions Mr. Al-Arian's statements have caused at the university. Many faculty groups say that the move against Mr. Al-Arian is a serious violation of free speech and academic freedom.

» [Blaming the Victim?](#) (2/8/2001)

The Guest

Mr. Al-Arian is a professor of computer engineering at the University of South Florida, in Tampa. A Palestinian refugee born in Kuwait in 1958, Mr. Al-Arian has lived in the United States since 1975. He earned a Ph.D. at North Carolina State University in 1985 and has taught at South Florida since 1986. He won an award for outstanding teaching in 1993. He is the founder and leader of the Islamic Academy of Florida, where more than 200 elementary- and secondary-school children are educated. Mr. Al-Arian will respond to comments and questions about his situation at South Florida on Wednesday, February 6, at 2 p.m. U.S. Eastern time. Advance questions are encouraged and may be posted now.

A transcript of the chat follows.

Sharon Walsh (Moderator):

Hello. I'm Sharon Walsh, senior editor of The Faculty section for *The Chronicle*. I'll be the moderator today. We'll be talking with Sami Al-Arian, a tenured professor of computer sciences and engineering at the University of South Florida. The board of trustees of USF has recommended that the university's president, Judy L. Genshaft, fire Mr. Al-Arian. Their reason: Some of Mr. Al-Arian's comments--which were made more than a decade ago--have caused disruption to the campus after Mr. Al-Arian appeared on a Fox talk show, "The

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O'Reilly Factor." It's nice to have you with us, Mr. Al-Arian.

Sami Al-Arian:

Thank you very much for inviting me. I'd like to state from the start, that as I've always said before, I only represent myself and not the University of South Florida.

Question from Sharon Walsh:

I'd like to begin with a general question that lots of people seem interested in: What is your position with USF right now? Have you actually been fired? And what are you planning to do in response to the situation?

Sami Al-Arian:

On December 19, I received a "letter of intent to terminate" my employment at USF. It was based on four reasons, which I'll state briefly. First, that I did not make it clear that my views are not those of USF. Second, that I came to campus once after my paid leave suspension. Third, that I disrupted the USF campus, and finally that there was a conflict of interest based on my comments over a decade ago and the university's interests.

We filed our response on January 14th. We totally refuted these reasons based on the facts as well the law. For instance, I was never told not to come to campus. When I was on campus I was addressing a student organization that I advise. Moreover, the police were never advised of this ban since they did not ask me to leave on that day. In fact, the police asked me to come to campus three days later to pick up the letter from the provost that said that I wasn't supposed to come to campus. As for the disruptions on campus, of course it was caused by others who threatened the campus, not me.

At this point President Genshaft has not terminated my employment as she says she is seeking the advice and input of others.

Question from Bruce Hadburg, Saint Leo University:

Dr. Al-Arian: To better enable the academic community to understand your professional reputation, could you please tell me what the most recent three "student evaluations" of you as a professor were?

Sami Al-Arian:

I'm very proud of my accomplishment at USF. I've always maintained my professionalism and never discussed any political matter with my students or even other faculty. I have also twice received best teacher awards. As for the evaluations, I received an outstanding evaluation (the highest one can receive) from the faculty peer evaluation committee and the department's chairman the last two years. The most recent students' evaluations I believe were 5.0 out of 5.0 in my graduate course and 4.74 and 4.55 out of 5.0 in my undergraduate courses.

Question from Sharon Walsh:

The response to the O'Reilly Factor involved the reaction to some things you said some time ago. Can you explain what they were and when they were said? Have you made any of these statements in your classroom?

Sami Al-Arian:

The statement that Mr. O'Reilly referred to was said in 1988 during the first and mainly non-violent Palestinian uprising (intifada) between 1987 and 1993. All the statements that the media has been circulating date back to 1991 or before. It's important to note that the statement in question "death to Israel" means the end to occupation, to oppression and to the apartheid-like system that the Palestinians have been living under for over 34 years. It certainly did not mean "death to Jews" as some tried to portray it. I have many Jewish friends whom I admire, respect and value their friendship. I believe that when President Reagan called the Soviet Union "the evil empire," did not mean that every Russian and Soviet citizen is an evil person. He most certainly was referring to the communist totalitarian system and definitely not the people. I have condemned in the strongest possible language the criminal acts of Sept. 11th. Also, I have always condemned the targeting of innocent civilians regardless of their religion or ethnicity not simply based on political considerations but on moral and religious grounds.

Question from Dr. Mrabet's Arab Qatari Students, Higher Education of Academic Bridge:

You are a computer engineer and so we are wondering why you spoke about politics? Do you think now that it is better to speak out and jeopardize your job, or is it better to avoid political discussion in world of academe?

Sami Al-Arian:

As a concerned citizen, we speak about public matters. I think that is every person's right. The speeches that are in question were given in the late 80s and early 90s when the first Palestinian uprising was taking place. I do not think that commenting on political and international events is only the subject of politicians or the so-called experts within the Washington D.C. beltway. In addition, I think it is the obligation and duty for any person to speak up on issues of justice and national concerns.

I don't believe that any person should feel threatened to lose their jobs for the fear of speaking out. This is the United States of America, and it's a constitutional right for people to speak their mind.

Question from Sharon Walsh:

The university president wrote to *The New York Times* that your outside activities have led to the "endangerment of students, faculty and staff, and the disruption of academic programs." What is your response to her concerns?

Sami Al-Arian:

I'm sorry to say that the USF president is mistaken, because the so-called outside activities took place over a decade ago. There is absolutely nothing that I have said recently, or since Sept. 11 in particular, that has been cited as a reason for the threats and the hate e-mail against the university. Even what happened a decade ago are protected First Amendment activities that did not in any way, shape, or form threaten the function of the university. In fact, a USF investigation led by former American Bar Association president William Reece Smith Jr. has concluded that neither I nor the organizations in question did anything wrong. Moreover, former USF president Betty Castor said in 1996 that there was no illegal activity, subversive activity, or terrorist activity ever found by the investigation.

Question from **barry augenbraun, st. petersburg, fl:**

Was the "think tank" that you organized at USF in fact a vehicle for dissemination of terrorist propaganda and activity?

Sami Al-Arian:

The World and Islam Studies Enterprise (WISE) was a research and academic institute established to foster a dialogue between Western academics and Muslim academics and intellectuals. In five years, between 1990 and its closing in 1995, WISE produced over 4,000 pages of journals and proceedings. In these journals and proceedings, over 100 professors, academics, and intellectuals participated. They were among the top university professors in the country in the areas of Islam, the Middle East, and International Studies.

This allegation was presented to INS judge R. Kevin McHugh, in which he said the following: "Although there were allegations that the ICP and WISE were fronts for Palestinian political causes, there is no evidence before the court that demonstrated that either organization was a front for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. To the contrary, there is evidence in the record to support the conclusion that WISE was a reputable and scholarly research center and the ICP was highly regarded." (p. 48 of the judge's ruling).

I would like to note that the judge said "no evidence." He didn't say "some evidence" or "little evidence" or "vague evidence" or "not so convincing evidence," but "no evidence." In addition, the judge's ruling was appealed to a three-judge panel in Washington, D.C., which did not overturn his ruling. Then it was appealed to then-attorney general Janet Reno, who did not overturn the judge's ruling. Then the government appealed the ruling to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals, but shortly before the 11th Circuit was about to take it, the government withdrew its appeal.

Question from **Kristin Lems, National-Louis University:**

What initiatives have been taken by academics to support you so far? We decry the witchhunts of McCarthyism during the cold war, defend the critics of the Vietnam War and their right to speak out, yet your story is right up there with them.

Sami Al-Arian:

I'm very grateful for the outpouring of support I received from many professors and academics from USF as well as from around the nation. The USF faculty senate voted 4 to 1 against the dismissal. The USF faculty union as well as the union's state chapter voted unanimously to support my case. Other labor unions have also provided their support. FIRE (The Foundation of Individual Rights in Education), a prominent private foundation defending the rights of higher education professors, has also given its support and is mobilizing its resources. Most important of course is the position of the AAUP, which said that it's extremely concerned about the situation. It has also warned USF about a possible censure. It would be very tragic if that happens. I'm truly humbled and gratified by the tremendous show of support and would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every person and organization who sent a letter to the president or lent their support.

Question from **Judith M Stevens, American citizen:**

You have been in this country taking advantage of its educational system to acquire your

degrees and your position. Why have you not yet become an American citizen?

Sami Al-Arian:

I got my green card in 1989, through my employment. I was eligible to apply for citizenship in 1994, which I did. I have taken the exam and passed it, and was waiting for my other ceremony. I have been waiting ever since.

In addition, all of my family members, including my wife, 5 children, as well as my father and brother, are all American citizens. I'm proud to have lived in this country, and I'll be proud to become a citizen.

Question from **Qtaria, Qatar:**

-Do you think it is better to keep silence about what had happened in 11th Sept. or what is happening in Palastine and just try to fix the wrong idea that was spread about Islam or should we talk and say what we really think? -Do you advise Arabs in America not to talk about political issues because America is not a free country any more?

Sami Al-Arian:

I believe that we should freely talk about what happened on Sept. 11th. I have condemned it in the strongest possible terms. What happened on Sept. 11 is a criminal act against humanity and I have supported the efforts to bring these criminals to justice. I also condemn the terrorism that the Palestinians have been subjected to for the past 3 decades or more. I also believe it is the duty of every peace-loving and justice-seeking person to speak up on behalf of the weak and the helpless.

I believe that Amercian citizens of Arab or Muslim decent have the right, like everyone else in the country, under the Constitution, to voice their opinion. I believe that the overwhelming majority of Americans and Muslim Americans are law-abiding, tax-paying, peaceful people. They would like to raise their families in peace. They love this country and they should never be made scapegoats for extremist agendas of special interest groups. The Arab viewpoint as well as the Islamic viewpoint on national issues should have the opportunity to be represented in our national dialogue without fear or intimidation.

Question from **Jay, Florida community college:**

Was Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman ever invited to speak at conferences of the Islamic Committee for Palestine (which you organized as the President of that organization)?

Sami Al-Arian:

Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman received his visa by U.S. Consulate in Africa. Someone allowed him into the country at the border. Someone in the government interviewed him and gave him a green card later on. I have nothing to do with all that. As a Muslim scholar, he was going from conference to conference across the United States. In 1990, he stopped by one of our conferences and requested to speak to the participants. He gave a religious sermon.

Comment from **Jamal En-nehas, UMI (ennehasj@hotmail.com):**

To dismiss a faculty member on political grounds or just to please a growing intolerant intellectual mob is, by universal standards, unacceptable. It is preposterous to allow hate and racist groups across the American academic spectrum to make injurious comments in the

name of freedom of speech (I can cite hundreds of examples), while taking the real freedom of speech from Sami just because of the values he stands for. I appeal to all academics to resist the move to dismiss Sami, for by defending his rights we are defending ours, no matter where we are.

Question from **Amy, lecturer at USF**:

Do you condemn the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization as a terrorist organization?

Sami Al-Arian:

I have said many times before that I condemn all organizations and states that target innocent civilians, regardless of their religion and ethnicity, whether these organizations or countries pretend to be religious or secular.

Question from **John K. Wilson, Illinois State University**:

USF officials claim that death threats against you entitle them to fire you. Have you seen any documentation of how many death threats were made, and how many occurred immediately before your firing to cause an ongoing danger?

Sami Al-Arian:

When the provost and the dean of my college met with me on Sept. 27, 2001 they told me that that day there had been credible death threat for which they had to evacuate the floor. What I didn't know is that the same person who phoned in the death threat called back 25 minutes later to retract the death threat, apologize, and say that he meant no harm. The police officer who took the first report also took the second report from the department secretary exactly at the same time. In addition, according to the university police, none of the death threats rose to the level of criminal prosecution. According to them, the last one came at the end of October. I personally have not been briefed on any of these threats or given a full account of what actually transpired.

Question from **Brian, writing tutor at Temple University**:

Dr. Al-Arian, do you feel that you were misrepresented on The O'Reilly Factor? Will you be more selective in choosing who you will talk to in the media?

Sami Al-Arian:

Definitely. Unfortunately, I was misled by the producer of the show. Right now I am very distrustful of TV news magazines and talk-show programs.

Question from **Tareque Rabbu, student at the University of Chicago**:

Due to the political nature of your firing, are you considering or have you begun legal action against the University of South Florida?

Sami Al-Arian:

Actually, I haven't been formally fired yet. I was given a notice to terminate, and if the firing becomes final, then I will seek all legal means to rectify the situation.

Question from **Katie, human rights NGO**:

So, the committee seeking to fire you is claiming that statements you made approximately

10 years ago are currently "disruptive?"

Sami Al-Arian:

Yes. That's exactly what they're saying.

Question from **Robert, a USF professor:**

Did you ever use your office address at the University of South Florida as a return address for your Islamic Committee for Palestine when organizing conferences for that organization? If so, what were your reasons for doing so?

Sami Al-Arian:

I don't recall ever using my office as a return address.

Question from **Nicole Fotovat, USF:**

What reasons does the administration give for not allowing you to teach your students through 'distance-learning' before putting you on paid leave?

Sami Al-Arian:

They refuse to give a reason. The only reason they gave me for not being on campus is safety, but they refuse to discuss other possibilities.

Question from **S. Sussman, PBCC, IRCC:**

Yes, even the most hateful speech should be protected by the First Amendment. However, the Court has held to time, place and manner restrictions. Should a university professor be able to use his campus to express ideas that can be construed as hateful? Can you understand why some are concerned? Should a person in your position - a respected professor, who molds young minds - be held to a higher standard?

Sami Al-Arian:

I have never said anything on campus that is considered objectionable. I have never discussed politics with my students, or even faculty members. If people have been misled by some news outlets about the contents of some speeches given in a foreign language over a decade ago, then these outlets should bear the responsibility for inciting others in the wake of Sept. 11th. One must understand that the rhetoric of the Palestinians in the 80s during the first uprisings (Intafada) is similar to the rhetoric that Americans used in the 60s during the Vietnam era. Can we say that people who objected to the government policy in the 60s should be held responsible for that rhetoric 20 years later?

Comment from **Juli Kirkpatrick, Soka University of America:**

Are we also going to start sacking other tenured professors who may espouse views that are not politically correct or go against the mainstream? If so that means that white supremacist, or pro-choice, or anti-capitalism, or anti-artic oil-drilling, or even anti-globalism view are grounds for dismissal from a university teaching position. Where do you draw the line?

Question from **S. Sussman:**

Do you also condemn the terrorism that the Israelis have been subjected to for the past 54 years?

Sami Al-Arian:

I condemn the targeting of all innocent people of all ethnicities, religions, and creeds. In addition, I support the right as given in international law of people to resist against occupation and oppression. As I condemn bombing buses and pizza parlors, I also condemn the house demolitions, the seige of Palestinian towns and villages, the assassination of Palestinian civilians, and the use of military hardware by air, sea, and land, in terrorizing and subjugating the Palestinian people. Peace in the holy land cannot be dictated. The Palestinian Authority has given the historical compromise by recognizing Israel on 78% of historical Palestine. Unless Israel withdraws from the remaining 22%, and acknowledges the right of return, unfortunately, peace will not be acheived. Hence, it is extremely important for people of Arab descent, as well as other Muslims and Jews, who live in America, to make a difference by calling for justice and peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis, Arabs, and Jews.

Question from Tanya Feddern, USF alumni:

I've heard the USF concern about losing donor contributions if they didn't fire you. Has anyone heard of donors who will withdraw their support if you are fired from USF?

Sami Al-Arian:

That's an interesting question, because I did get a letter from a grant agency whose name I don't recall. They sent a letter to the USF president, in which they said that if I was fired, the university would not be eligible for grants in the future. I believe that many institutions will refrain from giving any grants to any university that restricts academic freedom or punishes its professors for exercising their constitutional First Amendment right. As I understand it, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is about to conduct an investigation into the matter. This is a very serious situation for USF. I certainly hope that the matter will be resolved so that censure could be avoided.

Comment from Bob England, Northwest-Shoals Community College:

In light of the history of dissent in this country, I cannot see how punishing a professor for what, at worst, is idiotic speech, serves any good purpose. Before the Civil War, the president and half the faculty at the University of Alabama were run out of town for speaking out in favor of the abolition of slavery. Unpopular ideas need to be judged within the entire context of our history and not in the passion of a moment, regardless of how tragic or dramatic.

Question from Michael D. Fellows, USF:

What will the first thing you do when you get hired back?

Sami Al-Arian:

The first thing that I'm going to do is thank all my friends and supporters for the tremendous campaign to restore justice and rationality into this situation, especially USF professors and students. I would like to of course resume my teaching responsibilities and to work with my students.

Question from Muhammad Nasiem, USF Student:

Dr. Al-Arian, after the Muslim Student Association at USF had called you to advise some of the students who were angry because you were put on paid leave, it was claimed that you

were not allowed to be present on campus. What can you tell us about this?

Sami Al-Arian:

When the provost and the dean met with me on Sept. 27th, I was never told not to come on campus. In fact, I asked the provost when he told me that I was put on paid leave about my graduate students. I was told that I could meet with them on nights and weekends. I also asked a question about my participation the following week in a teach-in at the St. Pete campus. The provost told me that he would get back to me on that. If I had been told that I am banned from campus, the answer to these questions would have been "You're not supposed to be on campus, why are you asking these questions?" When the police officer came and spoke with me during the Muslim Student Association's meeting on campus on Oct. 5, he did not tell me to leave because I was violating the instruction of being banned from campus. He asked me if everything was all right, and when I told him yes, he simply left. So obviously the police were not informed that I was supposedly banned from campus. Three days later a police officer came to my house and left me a message to go on campus to pick up a letter from the provost. If I were banned from campus, why would the police ask me to go on campus? Since that letter, I did not set foot on campus. It's been 4 months.

Sharon Walsh (Moderator):

That's all the time we have. Mr. Al-Arian, thank you very much for your time and comments today. We're glad to have had you with us.

Sami Al-Arian:

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to chat with all those who are concerned about this very important issue facing academia. I never thought that I would be the poster child of academic freedom. But now that I am, I would like to urge everyone who cares about the issues of free speech, academic freedom, and tenure to take an active role in preserving these very important constitutional and historical rights. Once again, I'd like to thank *The Chronicle* for giving me this opportunity.

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