

Florida college grapples with Islamic Jihad ties<P>Group's newleader taught at university; professor has denied running terrorist front

By Steve McGonigle / Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Published 06-04-1996

TAMPA, Fla. - These are uneasy times at the University of South Florida. Ties to an alleged front for Islamic terrorism are to blame.

An award-winning professor is barred from his classes, accused of smuggling terrorists. The FBI recently searched a dormitory for evidence of a bomb plot. The nickname "Jihad University" has stuck.

Administrators of Florida's second-largest state university are being asked how the school spent three years in the embrace of a think tank that produced the new leader of Islamic Jihad.

"It's been painful," said Mark Orr, chairman of a university committee that forged the ties with Ramadan Abdullah Shallah and his research institute, the World & Islam Studies Enterprise.

Dr. Shallah, 38, taught Middle East studies for two semesters at the Tampa commuter school. In October, he was named the leader of Islamic Jihad, one of the Middle East's most violent terrorist groups.

Dr. Orr, a retired Air Force colonel who spent several years in counterintelligence, struggled to explain what has happened.

"I was always the one looking for the bad guys," he said. "I don't know how to describe it . . . how I was so completely taken in."

A fellow professor, Sami Al-Arian, is under federal investigation for alleged immigration fraud and running a terrorist front.

Dr. Al-Arian, who has denied any wrongdoing, also led an Islamic charity with ties to an Islamic information center based in Richardson, that Israel has linked to the Hamas terrorist group.

The Texas group, the Islamic Association For Palestine, also has denied any connection to terrorism.

Last week, William Reece Smith, a Tampa lawyer commissioned by the university to investigate its relationship with the think tank, said he could not establish that anyone associated with the school was involved in terrorism. He said it was for law enforcement to determine whether any crimes had been committed.

University president Betty Castor called the report "an affirmation that the university acted appropriately and promptly" once learning of allegations against the research center and Dr. Shallah.

Among the items FBI agents seized from Dr. Al-Arian's Tampa home last November was a copy of a sealed complaint on a requested extradition of Hamas' political chief, Mousa Abu Marzook, to face terrorism charges. In May, a federal judge in New York City ordered Mr. Marzook - a former graduate student in Ruston, La. - sent to Israel.

Dr. Al-Arian has not been charged with a crime. On May 3, University of South Florida officials notified him that he will remain on paid leave until the accusations against him are resolved.

"It was determined it was in the best interest of the university for him not to return to the classroom at this time," said Harry Battson, associate vice president for public affairs.

The same day, officials at Villanova University in Philadelphia canceled a panel discussion that included Dr. Al-Arian, saying they feared his appearance might pose a safety threat.

Also that week, the Tampa university resembled an armed camp because a group called "The War Purgers" threatened to wreak havoc unless the news media apologized for what it termed bigoted reporting on Dr. Shallah.

No violence occurred, and no arrests have been made.

School reaction

Doug Buel, editor of The Oracle, the campus newspaper, said students are more likely to be talking about attempts to start a football program than about the university's alleged ties to terrorism.

"I think it probably resonates strongly with a few students and not a whole lot with the majority," said Mr. Buel, who graduated this spring with a degree in mass communications.

Dr. Shallah left Tampa last June. He lives in Damascus, Syria, where he has made speeches calling for Israel's destruction.

The World and Islam Studies Enterprise office overlooking a McDonald's is dark now, its contents in FBI hands. The town house near campus where Dr. Shallah and his family lived sports a fraternity decal on the door.

Former colleagues still puzzle over the dramatic turn in the life of the genial, religious man whom they described as a serious scholar.

Art Lowrie, a retired Foreign Service officer, part-time professor and founding member of Dr. Orr's Committee For Middle Eastern Studies, said he feels betrayed by the man he knew as Ramadan Abdullah.

"He did a great disservice to his own cause, his own people, not to mention what he's done to us," Mr. Lowrie said.

Tyseer Kurdi, a Tampa travel agent who regularly spoke at the same mosque where Dr. Shallah prayed and lectured, said the professor's interpretations of the Koran could bring tears to the eyes.

"He was a good man. He was a very outspoken man. We learned a lot from him," said Mr. Kurdi, a USF graduate whose teenage daughter, Najia, just completed her second year at the university.

The only complaints about Dr. Shallah came from two Jewish students who said he never referred to Israel by name, Dr. Orr said.

When he left the school last summer, he told friends he was going home to Gaza to visit his dying father and do research.

Then, Dr. Shallah surfaced in Syria in late October as successor to the newly assassinated leader of Islamic Jihad, Fathi Shikaki. He blamed Israel for Mr. Shikaki's slaying and vowed revenge.

[Arab and Israeli news agencies have reported that Dr. Shallah founded Islamic Jihad with Mr. Shikaki in 1980. His brother told Israeli officials that Dr. Shallah coordinated Islamic Jihad activities while pursuing his doctorate at the University of Durham in England.]

[Islamic Jihad is dedicated to replacing Israel with an Islamic state.] The group has carried out dozens of suicide bombings and other attacks on Jewish soldiers and civilians.

Doing research

Dr. Shallah arrived in Tampa in September 1991, a year after Dr. Al-Arian started the WISE group to conduct scholarly research on Islamic issues.

Dr. Al-Arian declined through family members to be interviewed. His attorney, Robert Cannella, did not return several phone calls.

Several times during the past year, Dr. Al-Arian has described himself to reporters as a devout Muslim who actively supports the Palestinian resistance movement and reveres the United States.

"I am a seriously religious person, never extreme," he told the university's student newspaper last June. "My concern for understanding is one of my top priorities."

Accusations that he has aided terrorism are the product of religious bigotry, Dr. Al-Arian has said. He has said he was as surprised as anyone at Dr. Shallah's ties to Islamic Jihad.

An FBI affidavit used to gain search warrants for Dr. Al-Arian's home, campus office, a storage shed and the research institute's office allege that Dr. Al-Arian used the center to smuggle terrorists into the United States.

The affidavit also states Dr. Al-Arian made numerous phone calls from his Tampa home to "alien terrorist suspects," including two associates of men convicted in the World Trade Center bombing.

That revelation, made public in April, was not the first time that Dr. Al-Arian had been linked to figures in the 1993 New York bombing.

In November 1994, PBS broadcast a controversial documentary, Jihad in America, produced by journalist Steven Emerson.

The documentary noted that Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind Egyptian cleric convicted with more than a dozen followers in the trade center bombing, spoke at Chicago conferences sponsored by the Islamic Committee for Palestine, a charity led by Dr. Al-Arian.

Other speakers at committee conferences included Sheik Abdel Aziz Odeh, spiritual leader of Islamic Jihad, and Dr. Shallah, then identified as a professor at Islamic University in Gaza.

Dr. Al-Arian denied Mr. Emerson's charges that the conferences were fund-raisers for Islamic Jihad. He has said he met Dr. Shallah for the first time in Tampa.

Dr. Shallah arrived in Florida as the Islamic research institute was finalizing an agreement with the Committee For Middle Eastern Studies, a special university panel created to promote broader understanding of Islamic issues.

Dr. Al-Arian and two other WISE officers had proposed the joint venture a few

months earlier, Dr. Orr said. One negotiator was Khalil Shikaki, a scholar known to be the estranged brother of Islamic Jihad's leader, Fathi Shikaki.

The agreement, signed in March 1992, called for WISE and the university to share libraries, co-sponsor conferences, train graduate students and exchange staff. Dr. Shallah signed for the research institute.

Dr. Orr said the committee was persuaded that the institute was reputable because of its officers' academic credentials, its association with Dr. Al-Arian and financial backing from the International Institute for Islamic Thought, a scholarly center in Herndon, Va.

Abdelwahab Hechiche, another founding member of the Middle East committee, said the panel was seduced by the center's offers to bring internationally known Islamic figures to the university and pay expenses.

"It's clear in my mind that the money issue was very attractive," said Dr. Hechiche, a professor of international studies at USF.

Dr. Hechiche, a Tunisian Muslim, said he resigned from the committee last year because he believed it had been "skyjacked" by the research institute.

"We had become propagandists for one issue, and that was Islamic fundamentalism," he said.

During its three-year relationship with the university, the institute co-sponsored two round-table discussions featuring fundamentalist Islamic intellectuals Hassan Turabi of Sudan and Rashid Ghanoushi of Tunisia.

Dr. Turabi is considered the power behind a regime the United States has labeled a supporter of terrorism. Dr. Ghanoushi has been convicted in Tunisia of trying to overthrow its government.

The two also were invited speakers at annual conferences of Dr. Al-Arian's Islamic Committee for Palestine.

Dr. Ghanoushi's invitation became controversial after the Tampa Tribune published several articles linking him to terrorism.

Six months after the PBS documentary, the Tampa newspaper published a series of stories that repeated Mr. Emerson's charges about the Islamic Committee for Palestine and contended the group and the research institute were virtually inseparable.

Dr. Al-Arian denounced the newspaper reports as Zionist propaganda intended to intimidate activist Palestinians.

Dr. Orr and Mr. Lowrie said they were not persuaded by the media reports linking Dr. Al-Arian and the research institute to terrorism. The two professors also said they did not investigate the allegations themselves.

Mr. Lowrie said he asked Dr. Al-Arian about the charges and was told they were false. He also said he heard nothing to confirm the allegations from his contacts in the State Department.

Breaking ties

After the newspaper articles appeared, university administrators suspended the relationship with the research institute. Last September, they terminated the affiliation, saying they had never approved it.

"We will strive to prevent our institution from being used in any way by individuals who do not share the principles of the University of South Florida," Ms. Castor said.

Dr. Orr said he worried that the controversy swirling around the university may chill the ability of scholars to study unpopular topics.

Dr. Hechiche, who said he has extensive contacts in the Islamic world, fears that the mantle of academic freedom will continue to be used on college campuses to shelter extremists.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I can say what's happened at USF is only a branch, is only part of a large network in the U.S. and overseas."

PHOTO(S): 1. (Associated Press) The University of South Florida in Tampa forged ties with Ramadan Abdullah Shallah's research institute,

the World & Islam Studies Enterprise. 2. Ramadan Abdullah Shallah . . .

was named the leader of the terrorist group Islamic Jihad in October.

He taught Middle East studies for two semesters at the University of

South Florida. 3. Sami Al-Arian . . . is under federal investigation for

alleged immigration fraud and running a terrorist front. He is on paid

leave from the school until the accusations against him are resolved. ;

Unfortunately, too many senior INS managers do not recognize the critically important role INS enforcement branches, particularly the Investigations Division, can and should play in the counter-terrorism and national security arena. These are officials at both the HQ and field levels. INS has but a small contingent of agents dedicated to this work - and, often those do not receive the recognition and support from higher management they should. INS should have at least a hundred field agents assigned to these missions - at least the same it has assigned to Organized Crime Drug Task Force efforts - but in fact INS has less than half that assigned to counter-terrorist efforts in the field. I have been told that it is not unusual for very senior INS officials - especially at headquarters (who should know otherwise), when the topic of counter-terrorism arises in senior staff meetings, to state, "that's the FBI's responsibility" and "what does INS have to do with that"! Certain key, senior INS managers fail to even understand and recognize the very statutes within the Immigration and Nationality Act they are charged with enforcing!

New information on the Algerian and Jordanian terrorist plots:

Last fall, a stateless Mauritanian flew from Germany to Montreal. Within days before and after his visit to a group of Algerian nationals living in Montreal, several members of that group flew to Chechnya; another group traveled to Vancouver and another headed for the Vermont border.

According to a superceding federal indictment released last week, Ressam and a still fugitive accomplice Abdelmajid Dahoumane plotted "to destroy or damage structures, conveyances or other real or personal property within the United States." The plot, which stretches back to at least 1998, according to federal authorities, called for compartmentalized cells to be activated in the United States. No one cell would know about the others, in the event that any of the participants got arrested. Members of another cell belonging to the same group and entering the United States through Vermont border crossings were to rendezvous in a still undisclosed location in the northeast. Ressam was to be met in Seattle by a Brooklyn based Algerian Abdel Ghani Meskini. While Ressam had planned to fly to London after leaving the explosives laden car for someone else to pick up, Meskini was to fly from Seattle to Chicago to help secure additional funding for the Islamic terrorist group. Telephone toll records, released by prosecutors, show that the Seattle cell was in contact with the Vermont-based cell through third party numbers.