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ISLAM-OPED: SAMI AL-ARIAN MUST BE FREED

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SAMI AL-ARIAN MUST BE FREED

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[Prof. Parvez Ahmed is chairman of the board of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). Dr. Agha Saeed is national chair of the American Muslim Alliance (AMA).]

Are there any political prisoners in the United States? Just to pose this question may startle many Americans but the fact is that indeed there are political prisoners in this country. Dr. Sami Al-Arian is one of them.

Dr. Sami Al-Arian sits today in a Virginia prison, despite the fact that he long ago served out a sentence that many people believe resulted from a politically-motivated government prosecution.

Since March 3rd, Al-Arian has been on a hunger strike to protest his treatment by the government, causing him to lose more than 30 pounds and resulting in severe dehydration, headaches and weakness.

Throughout Dr. Al-Arians five-year ordeal, it has been clear that he was being targeted not for his actions, but for his political views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His outspokenness about Israels brutal occupation policies became a political hot potato in the post-9/11 climate of extreme suspicion of Muslims and Arabs.

Since his arrest on Feb. 20, 2003, Al-Arian has proclaimed his innocence and until today maintains that the charges were purely political. Almost three years after his arrest, and after government prosecutors spent some \$50 million taxpayer dollars, a federal jury reached the same conclusion.

The Bush administrations evidence in the six-month trial consisted largely of speeches Al-Arian gave, magazines he edited, lectures he presented, articles he wrote, books he owned, conferences he organized, rallies he attended, and news he heard. In one particularly bizarre instance, the evidence consisted of a conversation a co-defendant had with Dr. Al-Arian in a dream.

Because the government failed to prove its case, Al-Arians lawyers rested their case without presenting a single witness. They simply pointed to the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as their defense.

In December 2005, Dr. Al-Arian was acquitted of 8 of the 17 charges against him, though the jury voted 10 to 2 for full acquittal. Two of Dr. Al-Arians co-defendants were fully acquitted. The jury did not return a single guilty verdict in over 100 charges. Time magazine called Dr. Al-Arians acquittal the biggest defeat for the Bush Administration to date.

See: [No Convictions Against Al-Arian](#) (Tampa Tribune)

Following the trial, the government had the option of dropping the charges but chose not to, once again revealing the political nature of his case.

Facing the prospect of a new trial that would drain his family emotionally and financially, Dr. Al-Arian decided to sign a plea agreement admitting to one charge of helping associates of a terrorist group with immigration and legal matters.

In return, the government reportedly promised to drop the remaining charges, recommend the minimum sentence and allow him to leave the country. But his release date, scheduled for last April, has since been postponed indefinitely.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Gordon Kromberg is now trying to force Al-Arian to testify before a grand jury in Virginia in an unrelated case. This relentless effort by the government to force Al-Arian to testify is a violation of the spirit of the plea agreement and appears to be a ploy to prolong his torturous prison time.

We believe the saga of Dr. Sami Al-Arian is a repeat of past incidents in American history in which our government targeted individuals using unconstitutional and un-American tactics.

Just as it took an act of Congress to reverse the excesses of the past, so too must Congress now initiate oversight hearings on the actions of the Bush administration in this case.

It is time for Congress or the courts to put an end to the torture of an outspoken critic of those have invaded and taken away his homeland. Anything less perpetrates the perception that the war on terror is being used to silence those who dare to criticize American complicity in Israels brutal treatment of the Palestinian people.

It is time for the American people to demand an end to the abuse of the Constitution. It is time for Sami Al-Arian to go free and to join his family overseas.

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