

## ***Al-Najjar's backers demand an end to FBI's 'harassment'***

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### **Body**

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The FBI is accused of harassing and intimidating the associates of the man held more than three years on secret evidence.

The community of Muslims, civil rights activists and church members who tirelessly fought for Mazen **Al-Najjar's** freedom want the government to stop harassing him and his friends, leaders said at a news conference Monday.

Al-Najjar, accused as a terrorist but charged with no crime, returned home to his wife and three daughters Friday after spending more than three years in detention in Bradenton.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service says he is dangerous. But an immigration judge found the government failed to prove it, and Attorney General Janet Reno Friday lifted a stay on his release.

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Critics charge that the detention of Al-Najjar on secret evidence, and another dozen cases like his across the country, are examples of people being targeted for unpopular politics.

The FBI has "intentionally intimidated and harassed many of our community members," **Al-Najjar's** brother-in-law, Sami Al-Arian, said in a news conference Monday at the Al-Qassam Mosque.

Since **Al-Najjar's** arrest in May 1997, agents have made unannounced visits to people's homes and workplaces, Al-Arian said. In one instance, two FBI agents flashed their badges in the waiting room of a physician, frightening his patients.

At a federal court hearing for Al-Najjar in Miami in May, supporters on the sidewalk carrying signs protesting **Al-Najjar's** detention were openly photographed by an FBI agent.

"We are a community that is peaceful, a community that is active, a community that would like to speak its mind," Al-Arian said. "The way they have treated (us) is reprehensible."

Calls to the FBI Monday seeking comment were not returned.

In **Al-Najjar's** case and others, the FBI typically works with INS, then classifies the evidence as too sensitive to release - to the accused, his attorneys or the public.

When the immigrants gain access to secret material, either through government review or court action, they overwhelmingly win their cases. Since 1987, 18 immigrants known to be detained on secret evidence have been freed.

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Al-Najjar will fight his ordered deportation in the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in January.

Al-Arian, a University of South Florida professor, was one of several speakers Monday in what became a public thank you to those who worked for **Al-Najjar's** release. They include the Hillsborough Organization for Progress and Equality, or HOPE, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

"America has been my home for the major portion of my life," the 43-year-old Palestinian said, calling himself an "international orphan."

He was ordered deported in 1997 for overstaying a student visa, then denied bail while he appealed after secret evidence accused him of ties to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. He won a rehearing when a federal judge in May found his due process rights had been violated.

Immigration Judge R. Kevin McHugh on Dec. 6 ordered Al-Najjar released. The government failed to prove a single allegation in its public case **ended** in October, McHugh ruled, then provided a summary of its secret evidence that was inadequate for Al-Najjar to defend himself.

Federal agents called Al-Najjar a "covert manager" for the Damascus-based group, which claims bombings in the Middle East. Al-Najjar worked at a USF-affiliated think tank in the early 1990s with an academic named Ramadan Abdullah Shallah. Shallah became head of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in October 1995, a few months after leaving Tampa.

That connection still worries many.

Members of the Greater Tampa B'nai B'rith on Sunday unanimously approved a "statement of concern" about the Tampa teacher.

"We think Al-Najjar has been made a martyr in this case. We feel, with all his suffering in jail, he is still not entitled to asylum," said Norman Gross, chairperson of the anti-hate committee of the Greater Florida Region B'nai B'rith.

"While we understand the due process issues involved," the statement reads, "he certainly is guilty in association with some of the world's leading terrorists."

## Graphic

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BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, STEFANIE BOYAR; BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO, (2); Mazen Al-Najjar speaks out at a news conference Monday about efforts to ban the use of secret evidence to imprison people. (ran Tampa & State); USF professor Sami Al-Arian; Mazen Al-Najjar (ran City & State, Metro & State)

## Classification

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