

Possible terrorist ties re-emerge at hearing

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Body

Mazen Al-Najjar, a quiet man in a plain gray suit, sat before a judge to explain how he had overstayed his U.S. student visa by more than a decade.

It could have been just another day in immigration court.

Instead, Al-Najjar's deportation hearing Thursday revived the controversy that has swirled around the University of South Florida for more than a year, since federal agents began investigating whether an organization that once collaborated with the university was actually a front for Palestinian terrorists.

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An Immigration and Naturalization Service agent described Al-Najjar as a "midlevel operative" for two Tampa organizations whose real purpose was to supply funds to groups such as the Islamic Jihad.

"That was the primary purpose for the (organizations') existence," INS Special Agent Bill West testified.

Al-Najjar, a co-creator and executive director of the World and Islam Studies Enterprise (WISE), personally signed checks made out to at least two people who turned out to be terrorists, West alleged.

Al-Najjar's lawyer, meanwhile, painted an entirely different picture of his client. Al-Najjar, a 39-year-old doctorate student in industrial engineering, was dedicated to WISE for its academic studies and intellectual conferences about policies and politics in the Middle East, attorney Luis Coton said.

Al-Najjar, who was born in the Gaza Strip and came to the United States in the 1980s to attend college, is also a family man with three young children, as well as a community booster who helped found a Mosque and school in his Tampa neighborhood, Coton claimed.

"I will lose my humanity," Al-Najjar said when asked what will happen to him if he is deported. Al-Najjar said he is stateless. "I will be wandering around airports in the world."

Al-Najjar's 31-year-old wife, Fedaa, also is under consideration for deportation. The couple and their three American-born daughters - Yara, 7, Sara, 5, and Safa, 1 - want U.S. Immigration Judge J. Daniel Dowell to grant them permanent resident status in this country. Dowell will not make a decision until he hears three more days of testimony later this summer.

Coton acknowledged that Al-Najjar's student visa status in this country ran out more than a decade ago, but complained that federal officials have demonstrated "selective" prosecution in pursuing Al-Najjar. If not for publicity

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about WISE and its former alliance to USF, he said, Al-Najjar probably would have been granted permanent status in this country.

But government allegations about Al-Najjar's links to other characters in the WISE controversy raised doubts about that claim. Among the government allegations made public Thursday:

Al-Najjar once signed a check from the account of a group related to WISE, known as ICP, made out to Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, a former WISE administrator and part-time USF professor, agent West testified. Shallah **emerged** last year in Syria as the new leader of the Islamic Jihad.

Al-Najjar admits he was given or loaned thousands of dollars by his brother-in-law, USF engineering professor Sami Al-Arian. Federal agents have said they are investigating Al-Arian and WISE for **possible** criminal violations. So far, there are no charges. On Thursday, West revealed that agents also are investigating Al-Najjar as part of the probe.

Al-Najjar signed checks on ICP's bank account made out to Basheer Nafi, a former WISE participant who left the country earlier this month after a deportation order was finalized against him, West said. In 1995, Nafi was identified in an Arabic newspaper as "leading member" of the Islamic Jihad movement, West said.

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