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Friday October 19, 2001

Freedom of speech is being curtailed in universities across the US in light of the September 11 atrocities, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

Thor Halvorssen, head of the foundation, which provides free legal help for staff, said various academics have been punished or rebuked for expressing opinions about American foreign policy or the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

The most high profile case is that of Jonnie Hargis, an assistant librarian at the University of California, who was suspended for five days for questioning America's policy towards Israel.

Mr Hargis claims he was infuriated by a jingoistic email sent to him. He sent one back saying US taxpayers "fund and arm an apartheid state called Israel, which is responsible for untold thousands upon thousands of deaths of Muslim Palestinian children and civilians. So, who are the 'terrorists' anyway?"

He was suspended from his duties. The university employees' union

is championing his case, arguing that libraries, of all places, should be havens for free speech. The university will not comment on personnel issues.

In an unrelated case at Orange Coast College in California, a political science professor was put on leave because of comments made during a seminar. Ken Hearlson told the Los Angeles Times he started his lecture on September 18 with an intentionally provocative question, 'why do Muslims condemn the terrorist attacks in New York and at the Pentagon but never denounce terrorist attacks in Israel?'

Four Muslim students made formal complaints, which led to Professor Hearlson's temporary suspension.

At the University of New Mexico, Professor Richard Berthold agreed to leave for a week for his own safety, after he allegedly told his class on September 11: "Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote."

At the University of South Florida, Professor Sami Al-Arian is still suspended after being asked on television about family ties to terrorists.



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