

Detained and Tortured

Maher Arar

Before I tell you who I am and what happened to me, I will tell you who I am not.

I am not a terrorist. I am not a member of Al Qaeda and I do not know any one who belongs to this group.

Now, let me tell you who I am.

I am a Syrian-born Canadian. I moved here with my parents when I was 17 years old. I went

My flight to Montreal had a connection in New York, and this is when my nightmare began.

to university and studied hard, and eventually obtained a Masters degree in telecommunications. I met my wife, Monia, at McGill University. We fell in love and eventually married in

1994. I knew then that she was special, but I had no idea how special she would turn out to be. If it were not for her I believe I would still be in prison.

We have two children, a daughter named

Barâa and a son named Houd.

So this is who I am. I am a father and a husband. I am a telecommunications engineer and entrepreneur. I have never

had trouble with the police and have always been a good citizen. So I still cannot believe what has happened to me, and how my life and career have been destroyed.

In September 2002, I was with my wife and children, and her family, vacationing in Tunis. I got an email from work saying they needed me

to come back. I said goodbye to my wife and family and headed back home.

My flight to Montreal had a connection in New York, and this is when my nightmare began. I was pulled aside at Immigration. From that moment I was interrogated, held in prison, chained and blindfolded until I was finally told by the authorities that I would be deported to Syria. I told them that I would be tortured there. They said that that was not their responsibility.

In Syria, I was very, very scared. My prison guards took me to the basement. They opened a

door, and I looked in. I could not believe what I saw. I asked how long I would be kept in this place. They did not answer, but put me in and closed the door. It was like a grave. It had no light. It was three feet wide. It was six feet long.

I spent ten months, and ten days inside that grave. During this time they interrogated me for many hours. They beat me. They put me in a room where I could hear other prisoners being tortured.

They beat me with a black electri-



Maher Arar and his wife, Monia.

It was like a grave. It had no light. It was three feet wide. It was six feet deep.



Maher with his children.



Maher pauses during a press conference in Ottawa.

cal cable, about two inches thick. At the end of the day they told me tomorrow would be worse. So I could not sleep.

Sometimes, I felt like I would break down. Memories crowded my mind and I thought I was going to lose control, and I just screamed and screamed. I could not breathe well after, and I felt very dizzy. I told them whatever they wanted to hear so that they would stop torturing me.

On October 5, 2003, I was put in a room with a prosecutor. He read from my “confession,” and said I would be released. I was finally sent home

to Canada thanks to the efforts of my wife, Monia, and others who stood up for justice.

Sources: Adapted by Cynthia Peters from <maherarar.net>.

Maher Arar is a telecommunications engineer and editor of <prism-magazine.com>, which monitors security practices. Portrait (right) by Bud Schultz.



What Happened Next?

After being released, Maher Arar returned to Canada and has been working to clear his name and hold the Canadian and U.S. governments responsible for its actions. On September 18, 2006, the Canadian Commission of Inquiry, issued a report exonerating Arar. It states that there is no evidence linking Arar to terrorist activity. On January 26, 2007, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology to Arar on behalf of the Canadian government and announced that Arar would receive a \$10.5 million settlement for his ordeal.

On November 2, 2009, a U.S. federal Court of Appeals dismissed Arar’s case against U.S. officials for their role in sending him to Syria to be tortured and interrogated for a year. Arar was represented by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR). The court concluded that Arar’s case raised too many sensitive foreign policy and secrecy issues to permit relief. It leaves the federal officials involved free of any legal accountability for what they did.

Georgetown law professor and CCR cooperating attorney David Cole, who argued the case, said: “This decision says that U.S. officials can intentionally send a man to be tortured abroad, bar him from any access to the courts while doing so, and then avoid any legal accountability

thereafter. It effectively places executive officials above the law, even when accused of a conscious conspiracy to torture.”

CCR
Senior Staff
Attorney

Maria LaHood said, “With this decision, we have lost much more than Maher Arar’s case against torture – we have lost the rule of law, the moral high ground, our independent judiciary, and our commitment to the Constitution of the United States.”

Sources: <pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1509>, <ccrjustice.org>.



Supporters of Maher Arar demonstrated before a court hearing on his right to sue the U.S. for damages.

For You to Investigate

Attorney Maria LaHood says in the above quote that we have lost “the rule of law.” Work with others to write a definition of “rule of law.” See pp. 48-49 for more on this topic.