

Extraordinary Rendition Case Study I

Maher Arar's story

Maher Arar was born in Syria. He came to Canada with his family when he was seventeen years old, and became a Canadian citizen in 1991.

On 26 September 2002, while in transit at New York's John F Kennedy Airport, he was detained by US officials and interrogated about alleged links to al Qaeda. Twelve days later, he was chained, shackled and flown to Jordan aboard a private plane and from there transferred to a Syrian prison. In Syria, he was held in a tiny 'grave-like' cell for ten months and ten days before he was moved to a different prison. He was beaten, tortured and forced to make a false confession.

On 28 January 2004, the Canadian Government announced a Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian officials in relation to Maher Arar.

This is Mr Arar's statement to the media on 4 November 2003.

There have been many allegations made about me in the media, all of them by people who refuse to be named or come forward. So 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. All I know about al Qaeda is what I have seen in the media. I have never been to Afghanistan. I have never been anywhere near Afghanistan, and I do not have any desire ever to go to Afghanistan.

Now, let me tell you who I am.

I am a Syrian-born Canadian. I moved here with my parents when I was seventeen years old. I went 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 had our first child, a daughter named Barâa, in February 1997. She is six years old now. In December 1997, we moved to Ottawa from Montreal. I took a job with a high tech firm, called The MathWorks, in Boston in 1999, and my job involved a lot of travel within the United States.

Then, in 2001, I decided to come back to Ottawa to start my own consulting company. We had our second child, Houd, in February 2002. He is twenty months old now.

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 MathWorks saying that they might need me soon to assess potential consulting work for one of their customers. I said goodbye to my wife and family, and headed back home to prepare for work.

I was using my air-miles to travel, and the best flight I could get went from Tunis, to Zurich, to New York, to Montreal. My flight arrived in New York at 2pm on September 26th 2002. I had a few hours to wait until my connecting flight to Montreal.

This is when my nightmare began. I was pulled aside at immigration and taken to another area. Two hours later, some officials came and told me this was regular procedure and they took my fingerprints and photographs.

Then some police came and searched my bags and copied my Canadian passport. I was getting worried, and I asked what was going on, and they would not answer. I asked to make a phone call, and they would not let me.

Then a team of people came and told me they wanted to ask me some questions. One man was from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and another was from the New York Police Department. I was scared and did not know what was going on. I told them I wanted a lawyer. They told me I had no right to a lawyer, because I was not an American citizen.

They asked me where I worked and how much money I made. They swore at me, and insulted me. It was very humiliating. They wanted me to answer every question quickly. They were consulting a report while they were questioning me, and the information they had was so private, I thought this must be from Canada.

I told them everything I knew. They asked me about my travel in the United States. I told them about my work permits, and my business there. They asked about information on my computer and whether I was willing to share it. I welcomed the idea, but I don't know if they did.

They asked me about different people, some I know, and most I do not. They asked me about Abdullah Almalki, and I told them I worked with his brother at high tech firms in Ottawa, and that the Almalki family had come from Syria about the same time as mine. I told them I did not know Abdullah well, but had seen him a few times and I described the times I could remember. I told them I had a casual relationship with him.

They were so rude with me, yelling at me that I had a selective memory.

Then they pulled out a copy of my rental lease from 1997. I could not believe they had this. I was completely shocked. They pointed out that Abdullah had signed the lease as a witness. I had completely forgotten that he had signed it for me. When we moved to Ottawa in 1997, we needed someone to witness our lease, and I phoned Abdullah's brother, and he could not come, so he sent Abdullah.

But they thought I was hiding this. I told them the truth. I had nothing to hide. I had never had problems in the United States before, and I could not believe what was happening to me.

This interrogation continued until midnight. I was very, very worried, and asked for a lawyer again and again. They just ignored me. Then they put me in chains, on my wrists and ankles, and took me in a van to a place where many

people were being held at another building by the airport. They would not tell me what was happening.

At one in the morning they put me in a room with metal benches in it. I could not sleep. I was very, very scared and disoriented. The next morning they started questioning me again. They asked me about what I think about Bin Laden, Palestine, Iraq. They also asked me about the mosques I pray in, my bank accounts, my e-mail addresses, my relatives, about everything.

This continued on and off for eight hours.

Then a man from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service came in and told me they wanted me to volunteer to go to Syria. I said no way. I said I wanted to go home to Canada or sent back to Switzerland. He said to me 'you are a special interest'.

They asked me to sign a form. They would not let me read it, but I just signed it. I was exhausted and confused and disoriented. I had not slept or eaten since I was in the plane.

At about six in the evening they brought me a cold McDonalds meal to eat. This was the first food I had eaten since the last meal I had on the plane.

At about eight o'clock they put all the shackles and chains back on, and put me in a van, and drove me to a prison. I later learned this was the Metropolitan Detention Centre. They would not tell me what was happening, or where I was going.

They strip-searched me. It was humiliating. They put me in an orange suit, and took me to a doctor, where they made me sign forms, and gave me a vaccination. I asked what it was, and they would not tell me. My arm was red for almost two weeks from that.

They took me to a cell. I had never seen a prison before in my life, and I was terrified. I asked again for a phone call, and a lawyer. They just ignored me. They treated me differently to the other prisoners. They would not give me a toothbrush or toothpaste, or reading material. I did get a copy of the Koran about two days later.

After five days, they let me make a phone call. I called Monia's mother, who was here in Ottawa, and told her I was scared they might send me to Syria, and asked her to help find me a lawyer. They would only let me talk for two minutes.

On the seventh or eighth day they brought me a document, saying they had decided to deport me, and I had a choice of where to be deported. I wrote that I wanted to go to Canada. It asked if I had concerns about going to Canada. I wrote no, and signed it.

The Canadian consul came on October 4, and I told her I was scared of being deported to Syria. She told me that would not happen. She told me that a lawyer was being arranged. I was very upset, and scared. I could barely talk.

The next day, a lawyer came. She told me not to sign any document unless she was present. We could only talk for 30 minutes. She said she would try to help me. That was a Saturday.

On Sunday night at about 9pm, the guards came to my cell and told me my lawyer was there to see me. I thought it was a strange time, and they took me into a room with seven or eight people in it. I asked where my lawyer was. They told

me he had refused to come and started questioning me again. They said they wanted to know why I did not want to go back to Syria. I told them I would be tortured there. I told them I had not done my military service; I am a Sunni Muslim; my mother's cousin had been accused of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and was put in prison for nine years.

They asked me to sign a document and I refused. I told them they could not send me to Syria. I would be tortured. I asked again for a lawyer. At three in the morning they took me back to my cell.

At three in the morning on Tuesday, October 8, a prison guard woke me up and told me I was leaving. They took me to another room and stripped and searched me again. Then they again chained and shackled me. Then two officials took me inside a room and read me what they said was a decision by the Immigration Director.

They told me that, based on classified information that they could not reveal to me, I would be deported to Syria. I said again that I would be tortured there. Then they read part of the document where it explained that the Immigration Service was not the body that deals with the Geneva Convention regarding torture.

Then they took me outside into a car and drove me to an airport in New Jersey. They put me on a small private jet. I was the only person on the plane with them. I was still chained and shackled. We flew first to Washington. A new team of people got on the plane and the others left. I overheard them talking on the phone, saying that Syria was refusing to take me directly, but Jordan would take me.

Then we flew to Portland, to Rome, and then to Amman, Jordan. All the time I was on the plane I was thinking how to avoid being tortured. I was very scared. We landed in Amman at three in the morning local time on October 9.

They took me out of plane and there were six or seven Jordanian men waiting for us. They blindfolded and chained me, and put me in a van.

They made me bend my head down in the back seat. Then, these men started beating me. Every time I tried to talk they beat me. For the first few minutes it was very intense.

Thirty minutes later we arrived at a building where they took off my blindfold and asked routine questions, before taking me to a cell. It was around 4:30 in the morning on October 9. Later that day, they took my fingerprints, and blindfolded me and put me in a van. I asked where I was going, and they told me I was going back to Montreal.

About forty-five minutes later, I was put into a different car. These men started beating me again. They made me keep my head down, and it was very uncomfortable, but every time I moved, they beat me again. Over an hour later we arrived at what I think was the border with Syria. I was put in another car and we drove for another three hours.

I was taken into a building, where some guards went through my bags and took some chocolates I bought in Zurich. I asked one of the people where I was and he told me I was in the Palestine branch of the Syrian military intelligence. It was now about six in the evening on October 9.

Three men came and took me into a room. I was very, very scared. They put me on a chair, and one of the men started asking me questions. I later learned this man was a colonel. He asked me about my brothers, and why we had left Syria. I answered all the questions.

If I did not answer quickly enough, he would point to a metal chair in the corner and ask 'Do you want me to use this?' I did not know then what that chair was for. I learned later it was used to torture people.

I asked him what he wanted to hear. I was terrified, and I did not want to be tortured. I would say anything to avoid torture. This lasted for four hours. There was no violence, only threats this day. At about one in the morning, the guards came to take me to my cell downstairs.

We went into the basement, and 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. He 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 deep. It was seven feet high. It had a metal door, with a small opening in the door, which did not let in light because there was a piece of metal on the outside for sliding things into the cell.

There was a small opening in the ceiling, about one foot by two feet with iron bars. Over that was another ceiling, so only a little light came through this. There were cats and rats up there, and from time to time the cats peed through the opening into the cell. There were two blankets, two dishes and two bottles. One bottle was for water and the other one was used for urinating during the night. Nothing else. No light.

I spent ten months and ten days inside that grave.

The next day I was taken upstairs again. The beating started that day and was very intense for a week, and then less intense for another week. The second and the third days were the worst. I could hear other prisoners being tortured, and screaming and screaming. Interrogations are carried out in different rooms.

One tactic they use is to question prisoners for two hours, and then put them in a waiting room, so they can hear the others screaming, and then bring them back to continue the interrogation.

The cable is a black electrical cable, about two inches thick. They hit me with it everywhere on my body. They mostly aimed for my palms, but sometimes missed and hit my wrists. They were sore and red for three weeks. They also struck me on my hips, and lower back. Interrogators constantly threatened me with the metal chair, tyre and electric shocks.

The tyre is used to restrain prisoners while they torture them with beating on the soles of their feet. I guess I was lucky, because they put me in the tyre, but only as a threat. I was not beaten while in the tyre.

They used the cable on the second and third day, and after that mostly beat me with their hands, hitting me in the stomach and on the back of my neck, and slapping me on the face. Where they hit me with the cables, my skin turned blue for two or three weeks, but there was no bleeding. At the end of the day they told me tomorrow would be worse. So I could not sleep.

Then, on the third day, the interrogation lasted about eighteen hours.

They beat me from time to time and made me wait in the waiting room for one to two hours before resuming the interrogation. While in the waiting room I heard a lot of people screaming. They wanted me to say I went to Afghanistan. This was a surprise to me. They had not asked about this in the United States.

They kept beating me so I had to falsely confess and told them I did go to Afghanistan. I was ready to confess to anything if it would stop the torture. They wanted me to say I went to a training camp. I was so scared I urinated on myself twice. The beating was less severe each of the following days.

At the end of each day, they would always say, 'Tomorrow will be harder for you.' So each night, I could not sleep – I did not sleep for the first four days, and slept no more than two hours a day for about two months. Most of the time I was not taken back to my cell, but to the waiting room where I could hear all the prisoners being tortured and screaming.

One time, I heard them banging a man's head repeatedly on a desk really hard.

Around October 17, the beatings subsided. Their next tactic was to take me in a room, blindfolded, and people would talk about me. I could hear them saying, 'He knows lots of people who are terrorists'; 'We will get their numbers'; 'He is a liar'; 'He has been out of the country for long.' Then they would say, 'Let's be frank, let's be friends, tell us the truth,' and come around the desk, and slap me on the face. They played lots of mind games.

The interrogation and beating ended three days before I had my first consular visit, on October 23. I was taken from my cell and my beard was shaved. I was taken to another building, and there was the colonel in the hallway with some other men and they all seemed very nervous and agitated.

I did not know what was happening and they would not tell me. They never say what is happening. You never know what will happen next. I was told not to tell anything about the beating. Then I was taken into a room for a ten minute meeting with the consul. The colonel was there, and three other Syrian officials including an interpreter. I cried a lot at that meeting. I could not say anything about the torture. I thought if I did, I would not get any more visits, or I might be beaten again.

After that visit, about a month after I arrived, they called me up to sign and place my thumb print on a document about seven pages long. They would not let me read it, but I had to put my thumb print and signature on the bottom of each page. It was handwritten.

Another document was about three pages long, with questions: Who are your friends? How long have you been out of the country? The last question was empty lines. They answered the questions with their own handwriting, except for the last one, where I was forced to write that I had been to Afghanistan.

The consular visits were my lifeline, but I also found them very frustrating. There were seven consular visits, and one visit from members of parliament. After the visits I would bang my head and my fist on the wall in frustration. I needed the visits, but I could not say anything there.

I got new clothes after the December 10th consular visit. Until then, I had been

wearing the same clothes since being on the jet from the United States.

On three different occasions in December I had a very hard time. 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 felt very dizzy.

I was not exposed to sunlight for six months. The only times I left the grave was for interrogation, and for the visits. Daily life in that place was hell. When I was detained in New York I weighed about 180 pounds. I think I lost about 40 pounds while I was at the Palestine Branch.

On August 19, I was taken upstairs to see the investigator, and I was given a paper and asked to write what he dictated. If I protested, he kicked me. I was forced to write that I went to a training camp in Afghanistan. They made me sign and put my thumbprint on the last page.

The same day I was transferred to a different place, which I learnt later was the Investigation Branch. I was placed there in a 12 feet by 20 feet collective cell. We were about 50 people in that place.

The next day I was taken to the Sednaya prison. I was very lucky that I was not tortured when I arrived there. All the other prisoners were tortured when they arrived.

Sednaya prison was like heaven for me. I could move around, and talk with other prisoners. I could buy food to eat and I gained a lot of weight there. I was only beaten once there.

On around September 19 or 20, I heard the other prisoners saying that another Canadian had arrived there. I looked up, and saw a man, but I did not recognise him. His head was shaved, and he was very, very thin and pale. He was very weak. When I looked closer, I recognised him. It was Abdullah Almalki. He told me he had also been at the Palestine Branch, and that he had also been in a grave like I had been, except he had been in it longer.

He told me he had been severely tortured with the tyre, and the cable. He was also hanged upside down. He was tortured much worse than me. He had also been tortured when he was brought to Sednaya, so that was only two weeks before.

I do not know why they have Abdullah there. What I can say for sure is that no human deserves to be treated the way he was, and I hope that Canada does all they can to help him.

On September 28 I was taken out and blindfolded and put in what felt like a bus and taken back to the Palestine Branch. They would not tell me what was happening, and I was scared I was going back to the grave. Instead, I was put in one of the waiting rooms where they torture people. I could hear the prisoners being tortured, and screaming, again.

The same day I was called in to an office to answer more questions, about what I would say if I came back to Canada. They did not tell me I would be released. I was put back in the waiting room, and I was kept there for one week, listening to all the prisoners screaming. It was awful.

On Sunday October 5, I was taken out and into a car and driven to a court. I was put in a room with a prosecutor. I asked for a lawyer and he said I did not need

one. I asked what was going on and he read from my confession. I tried to argue I was beaten and did not go to Afghanistan, but he did not listen. He did not tell me what I was charged with, but told me to stamp my fingerprint and sign on a document he would not let me see. Then he said I would be released.

Then I was taken back to the Palestine Branch where I met the head of the Syrian Military Intelligence and officials from the Canadian Embassy. And then I was released.

I want to conclude by thanking all of the people who worked for my release, especially my wife Monia, and human rights groups, and all the people who wrote letters, and all the members of parliament who stood up for justice. Of course, I thank all of the journalists for covering my story.

The past year has been a nightmare, and I have spent the past few weeks at home trying to learn how to live with what happened to me. I know that the only way I will ever be able to move on in my life and have a future is if I can find out why this happened to me.

What is at stake here is the future of our country, the interests of Canadian citizens, and most importantly Canada's international reputation for being a leader in human rights where citizens from different ethnic groups are treated no different than other Canadians.

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President

***Free trade = Poverty +
Environmental Degradation***



Time for Trade Justice

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