

Canada-US row over targeting of Middle Eastern visitors

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5 November 2002

The Canadian government is claiming victory in a row over new US border rules that require foreign visitors born in specified Middle Eastern countries to undergo special screening, including providing their photographs and fingerprints. However, US officials deny agreeing to an exemption for Canadian citizens.

According to a Justice Department spokesman, “there are no countries exempted from the program.” US border guards have simply been instructed “to minimize the impact on Canadian citizens.” Apparently this means that not all Canadians born in the five specified countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Syria—will automatically have to be fingerprinted and photographed as part of their screening prior to admission to the US.

In mid-September, shortly after the US’s new National Security Entry-Exit Registration System came into effect, Canada’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted an advisory on its web site urging both naturalized Canadian citizens and landed-immigrants born in the five countries “to consider carefully whether they should attempt to enter the United States for any reason.” Traditionally, such travel advisories have been issued only when the country in question has been hit by a natural disaster, is at war or on the brink of war, or is wracked by civil strife.

Nonetheless, the ministry’s warning went largely unnoticed until last week. Only after meetings between top Canadian officials and US Secretary of State Colin Powell and White House Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge failed to win any special consideration for Canadian citizens did the Liberal government draw the media’s attention to the advisory.

As a result, the issue was headline news in Canada last Thursday and Friday. All parties in Canada’s House of Commons denounced the US’s new

humiliating, arrest-type screening regime, although all limited their complaints to its application to Canadian citizens, ignoring the discriminatory and politically motivated character of the new US regulations.

There was much relief and back-slapping when Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham rose in the House of Commons to announce that US Ambassador Paul Cellucci had telephoned him to say that “Canadians carrying Canadian passports will not be treated any differently depending on where they were born or for any reason whatsoever.”

Since September 11, 2001 Canadian authorities have repeatedly complained, even if only meekly, about the failure of US authorities to adhere to international protocols concerning the treatment of foreign nationals taken into detention. For weeks and in some cases months, Ottawa was not informed of the names and whereabouts of Canadians caught up in the post-September 11 mass arrests of persons of Middle Eastern origin, let alone allowed to interview them. To date, none of the Canadians so detained have been charged with anything more serious than routine violations of the US’s often arcane immigration laws.

On September 26, 2002, US authorities arrested a Syrian-born Canadian citizen, Maher Arar, at New York’s JFK Airport, where he was changing planes en route to Canada from a vacation in Tunisia. After almost two weeks of interrogation, and without ever-informing the Canadian government, Arar was declared by US authorities to have terrorist ties and deported to Syria. Despite official Canadian protests, the US has to date given no explanation as to why Arar was not deported to Canada, where he resides.

Undoubtedly, the Canadian government has come under pressure from Canadians of Middle Eastern origin and other Canadians singled out by US

authorities for special scrutiny because of their ethnicity to protest against the new discriminatory visitor-screening process. On Friday, Rohinton Mistry, the celebrated Canadian-born novelist of Indian descent, issued through his publisher a statement that he was discontinuing his US tour to promote his new Booker Prize short-listed novel, *Family Matters*, because he and his wife had been repeatedly subjected to humiliating interrogations at airports.

A memo distributed by Mistry's publishers stated: "As a person of color he was stopped repeatedly and rudely at each airport along the way—to the point where the humiliation for both he and his wife is unbearable." Subsequently, in an interview with Canadian television, Mistry said that the interrogations were far from random: "Not when they happen to have it at every single stop, every single airport. The random process becomes 100 percent certitude."

But the Canadian government's challenge to the new US screening process has been motivated by more than simply the complaints of outraged citizens. It is part of a push by the Liberal government to maintain and formalize a special relationship with the US based on Canada's geographical proximity and its position as the US's largest trading partner.

Spooked by the post-September 11 disruption in border traffic, Canadian big business has determined that it must ensure that Canada falls within Washington's Fortress America. To this end, the Liberal government has introduced a battery of anti-terrorism laws, further restricted the rights of refugees, introduced a bill that will make it easier to deny and strip persons of their citizenship, and negotiated a series of new security and military pacts with the US, including for eventual Canadian participation in the US military's new Northern Command.

Yet, despite these accommodating steps, the US government appears to be increasingly indifferent to the concerns of the Canadian elite, whether it be on trade or international affairs. With its complaints about subjecting Canadian citizens to the new visitor screening process, Canada's political and economic elite tried to stake claim to at least some sops from Washington for these efforts.

Significantly, the very same day Graham was trumpeting the fact that Canadian citizens will be treated somewhat more gingerly under the new US

visitor screening process, he for the first time said Canada could join the US in a war against Iraq mounted without express United Nations authorization. Speaking before the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Graham said that if the UN did not pass a "strong" resolution threatening Iraq with war, Canada might be compelled to support unilateral US action, commenting: "Doing nothing about Iraqi defiance poses great risks."



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