

Canadian authorities complicit in Arar's illegal detention and torture

Keith Jones**18 November 2003**

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has condemned US authorities for their treatment of Maher Arar—the Syrian-born Canadian citizen whom the US deported to Syria so he could be detained without charge and tortured. “It is completely unacceptable and deplorable,” declared Chrétien the day after Arar had held a press conference to explain how US officials had deported him to Syria over his vehement objections and how in Syria he had been held in a tiny cell and savagely beaten.

Washington’s treatment of Arar was abhorrent and criminal. (See Washington’s practice of torture by proxy: the Maher Arar Case.) Chrétien’s denunciation of the conduct of US immigration and security officials, however, fits to a tee the old adage, “he doth protest too much.” Especially since Chrétien has categorically refused to call a public inquiry into the role Canadian authorities played in Arar’s ordeal.

US officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, have said that the US only detained Arar because Canadian police and security agencies—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and probably also the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)—had identified him as a terrorist suspect. Yet Chrétien has brushed this aside, saying anything that happened to Arar was the fault of US immigration, police and intelligence agencies.

Arar became suspicious that he had been fingered by Canadian authorities when his US interrogators revealed an extensive knowledge of his life in Canada. “They were consulting a report while they were questioning me,” Arar told a November 4 news conference, “and the information was so private, I thought this must come from Canada.”

Arar’s US interrogators confronted him with a copy of the lease he took out on an Ottawa house in 1997

that had been co-signed by another Syrian-born Canadian, Abdullah Almalki. They also told him that he had been observed eating a meal in an Ottawa fast-food restaurant with Almalki.

The subsequent conduct of Canadian authorities indicates that Canada’s security and diplomatic establishment, or at the very least important elements of it, condoned, if not actively sought, Arar’s deportation to Syria.

* Although the Canadian government ultimately protested against Arar’s detention in Syria, CSIS agents reportedly travelled to Damascus to obtain information from the Syrian regime about the “confession” its interrogators had beaten out of him.

* In recent weeks, information about Arar’s forced confession has been leaked to the Canadian media. The source of the leak has not been identified, but undoubtedly it can be traced back to elements within the RCMP and/or CSIS who are anxious to discredit Arar, the better to defend their own role in fingering him.

* According to the *Toronto Star*, the US Ambassador to Canada, Paul Cellucci, reportedly told a private audience that Canada wanted Arar detained in Syria.

* The Canadian consular official who met with Arar while he was being detained in New York dismissed his warning that he was in danger of being deported to Syria.

* In August, Canadian Foreign Minister Bill Graham reported that a Canadian representative had met with Arar in Syria and Arar had rejected suggestions he had been tortured. Arar says this is utterly untrue. In fact, he put himself in extreme danger by screaming to the Canadian representative that he was being abused and had been tortured. Graham has ordered an internal inquiry to determine why Arar’s account differs so

radically from that of the representative who met with him.

Further questions about Canada's role are raised by the fate of the aforementioned Abdullah Almalki. An engineer and Canadian citizen, he was arrested in May 2002 while visiting his family in Syria and has been held without charge by Syria ever since. Arar encountered Almalki while in detention in Syria and reports that he has been subjected to even worse treatment than he was.

There is every reason to believe that Almalki was arrested on the basis of suspicions raised by the Canadian intelligence authorities—suspicions the Canadian government now concedes were unwarranted. Writes *Toronto Star* columnist Thomas Walkom, “Abdullah Almalki, a Canadian citizen, is being tortured in a Syrian prison because the security services of his own country passes on unproven suspicions to Damascus—either directly or, more likely, through the US. ... If this is what intelligence sharing means, it must stop right now.”

Chrétien has tried to justify his refusal to call a public inquiry by saying that the Arar case has been referred to the RCMP's Public Complaints Commissioner. Yet the Commissioner, Shirley Heafey, herself recently complained that the RCMP is not co-operating with her on terror-related enquiries, hiding behind the sweeping, new Anti-Terrorism Act.



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