

# Ashcroft defends US victimization and abuse of Maher Arar

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**4 December 2003**

US Attorney General John Ashcroft has unequivocally defended the US government's treatment of Maher Arar—the Syrian-born Canadian whom US authorities seized, then delivered to Syria, where he was held without trial and repeatedly tortured.

At a November 19 meeting with Canadian Solicitor-General Wayne Easter, Ashcroft said US authorities have no reason to apologize to either Arar or Canada. Arar's seizure—he was effectively kidnapped while transferring planes at New York's JFK Airport during a return trip from Tunisia to Canada—and his deportation to Syria were, insisted Ashcroft, a necessary element in the Bush administration's war on terrorism.

Ashcroft himself refused to meet with reporters at the conclusion of the meeting with his Canadian counterpart. Instead, he left it to Easter to explain the US position to the press: "Mr. Ashcroft assured us that, from his perspective ... there were no laws broken. He feels that they [US authorities] were operating under their mandate in the interests of their laws and national security."

In keeping with the role played by Canadian police and intelligence agencies throughout the Arar affair, Easter painted the actions of US authorities in the best light. While saying it was unfortunate that Arar's rights as a Canadian citizen had been violated, he added, "I just wonder what kind of decision one would make given all the facts and information" the US authorities "had before them."

The next day Ashcroft told reporters that prior to transferring Arar to Syria via Jordan, the US had obtained assurances from the Syrian government that Arar would not be mistreated. This is a transparent lie meant to cover up the abuse of Arar's most elementary human rights and the Bush administration's complicity in torture and its wanton disregard for the law.

Unnamed senior US officials have repeatedly told the *Washington Post* that since September 11, 2001, the US is routinely "rendering" terrorist suspects to countries that practice torture, including Egypt, Syria and Jordan, so as to obtain information that could not be elicited through less aggressive interrogation methods.

Such a practice is a flagrant violation of both international and US law, which expressly prohibits delivering someone into the hands of a government that practices torture. Yet shortly after Arar gave a press conference at which he detailed the torture to which he was subjected in Syria and charged the US with complicity, the *Post* again cited US officials defending the practice of "rendering." According to a "senior intelligence official" the practice of torture by proxy has "been very productive."

As proof of his claims that the US was in no way party to Arar's torture, Ashcroft pointed to a statement by the chargé d'affaires at Syria's US embassy denying Arar was in any way mistreated during his almost year-long incarceration in Syria.

That Ashcroft should tout this as evidence is extraordinary given the US government's routine denunciations of the Syrian regime for lying and torture. Just two weeks prior, President Bush had derided the Syrian regime for "a legacy of torture, oppression, misery and ruin."

Moreover Ashcroft's is a case of highly selective citation, since in the very same interview the Syrian chargé d'affaires said that the US had repeatedly promised but failed to provide information tying Arar to Al Qaeda or any other terrorist group. Nonetheless, Ashcroft and US authorities continue to insist that their suspicions of Arar were well founded and to insinuate that he is an Al Qaeda operative.

If Ashcroft is now trying to disclaim any

responsibility for Arar's abuse it is because of a growing public outcry over the Bush administration's flagrant disregard for elementary legal procedures and human rights in its purported anti-terrorist war and fears senior officials, possibly himself included, could be implicated in criminal wrongdoing.

Given the character of US-Syrian relations, the decision to transfer Arar necessarily had to involve senior members of the Bush administration. The order to deport Arar to Syria—rather than to Canada, the country on whose passport he was traveling and where his wife and children reside—was signed on Ashcroft's behalf by the then deputy attorney general, Larry Thompson.



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