

Canada: RCMP chief “accepts” Arar commission findings, the better to reject them

Richard Dufour
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Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli told a parliamentary committee last Thursday that he accepts the conclusions of the government-appointed Commission of Inquiry into the Case of Maher Arar—the Canadian citizen whom US authorities, acting on “intelligence” supplied by the RCMP, rendered to Syria, where he was brutally tortured.

But this acceptance was a subterfuge. Zaccardelli denied that the intelligence—actually a series of amalgams and falsehoods—the RCMP supplied to US authorities was at the root of Arar’s ordeal. He announced that no one in the force would be disciplined for any of the injustices done to Arar, including the smear campaign that the RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) mounted against Arar through “leaks” to the press long after Canadian and Syrian government officials had concluded there was no basis whatsoever to the claims he was part of a terrorist network. Confronted with evidence that the RCMP had tried to prevent Arar’s release and lied to the government about its role in the Arar affair, Zaccardelli bobbed and weaved so as to minimize, if not outright disclaim, RCMP culpability.

Zaccardelli began his statement by tendering an apology to Maher Arar and his family “for whatever part the actions of the RCMP may have contributed to the terrible injustices you experienced.”

This twisted formulation, which Zaccardelli mouthed in an unrepentant tone, reading from a prepared text and without raising his eyes, set the tone for his entire testimony. Just as Zaccardelli’s “apology” with its use of the conditional “may” and ambiguous “whatever part” suggested that the RCMP hadn’t in fact wronged and victimized Arar, so his “acceptance” of the “recommendations” made by inquiry head Justice O’Connor was but a ploy to dismiss and avoid their essential content.

The RCMP chief downplayed the role that Canada’s

national police had played in the decision of US authorities to detain Maher Arar in September 2002 while he changed planes in New York en route to Montreal, and then to deport him Syria where he was detained and tortured for a year.

Conceding that his agency transmitted to US authorities information falsely accusing Arar of terrorist links, Zaccardelli maintained that Judge O’Connor, in his report, had said that the RCMP was not implicated in Arar’s illegal deportation.

In fact, O’Connor wrote: “In this report, I have concluded that information supplied by the RCMP very likely played a role in the American decisions to detain and remove Mr. Arar to Syria. In that sense, those actions did ‘cause or contribute to’ Mr. Arar’s fate.”

The RCMP chief followed his testimony with an extraordinary admission: he had been personally convinced of Arar’s innocence since the very first days of his detention in New York, even before he was dispatched to a Syrian jail.

Zaccardelli insisted that his agency had immediately advised its American counterparts that the information sent by the RCMP was false. But the report of the commission of inquiry gives another version of events: the RCMP had only indicated to their US counterparts that it was not possible to establish a link between Arar and al Qaeda. It “did not go further and correct the inaccurate information already provided to the American agencies about Mr. Arar, including the label of Islamic extremist.”

More serious, in any case, is the fact that the head of the RCMP, knowing that Maher Arar was innocent, subsequently did everything to keep him in the hands of his Syrian torturers, intimating to the population and to his own government that Arar was associated with terrorist activities, allowing leaks to this effect to appear in the mass media and forwarding to Syrian authorities

questions for their interrogators to ask Arar..

“You let him rot in prison for one year!” accused Serge Ménard, a Bloc Québécois Member of Parliament. “Why weren’t the facts corrected in public?” demanded Liberal MP Irwin Cotler. Incapable of giving a proper response, Zaccardelli contented himself with saying that mistakes had been made and that a better job could have been done.

In fact, Judge O’Connor revealed in his report that in November of 2003, after Arar’s return to Canada, the RCMP continued to hide crucial information from the federal government. The federal police did not say that they had transmitted a “look-out” order to the United States concerning Arar and his spouse, nor that the couple had been characterized as Islamic extremists. Challenged to explain this omission, the RCMP chief invoked the lack of time and the “complexity of the file.”

Only a few weeks before, both the RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) had refused to put their signatures on a letter from the minister of Foreign Affairs to the Syrian authorities seeking Arar’s release.

None of these deeply troubling facts prevented the RCMP chief from affirming in a defiant tone, throughout his testimony, that his agency had acted in good faith and that he had no intention of resigning.

Zaccardelli also indicated that no RCMP agent involved with the Arar affair had been or will be sanctioned. In fact media sources have reported that various individuals involved in the victimization of Arar have been promoted. This was the case with Mike Cabana, who was responsible for the project A-O Canada (the group charged with the surveillance of Arar) and who, since then, has been named the lead officer for national security operations in Québec. Two other agents centrally involved in the Arar affair, Richard Proulx and Garry Loeppky, have received the Order of Merit of the Police Forces from the Governor General of Canada.

Appearing before the same parliamentary committee later the same day, Minister of Public Safety Stockwell Day reiterated the full support of the Conservative government for the work of the federal police under Zaccardelli’s direction. In so doing, he mentioned the government’s plan to hire a thousand new RCMP personnel, thus giving support to Zaccardelli’s claims that that targeting of Arar was the product of a lack of police resources—not excessive police powers and a “war on terrorism” that the ruling class in the US and Canada have manufactured as a smokescreen for pursuing their predatory global ambitions and strengthening the

repressive powers of the state.

Day refused to tender an official apology to Arar and his family on behalf of the government of Canada, using negotiations underway about possible compensation as a pretext.

While Day, echoing Zaccardelli, affirmed that the Conservative government will follow all the recommendations of Justice O’Connor’s report, he refused to specify whether that would include lodging official diplomatic complaints with the United States and Syria for the treatment meted out to Arar. That question, he said, should be referred to Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay.

Subsequently, Mackay revealed that no official complaint has been made to Washington, but that a “complaint” will be made at some point. In his next breath Mackay voiced full confidence in US authorities, no matter that they continue to deny that they did anything wrong in delivering Arar to be tortured and that the US Congress, at the behest of the Bush administration, has just passed legislation legalizing the use of torture and indefinite detentions against anyone designated by the US president as an “enemy combatant.”

Said Mackay: “I think [US authorities] ... have the same objectives and the same concerns. They want to prevent this from happening just as they would if an American citizen found themselves in a similar situation.”

Like Zaccardelli, the Conservative government is seeking to downplay the complicity of the national-security establishment in the seizure and torture of an innocent man and to cover up the RCMP’s subsequent victimization of Arar, and its readiness, in lying to the government, to flout key democratic principles regarding civilian government oversight of the police and military apparatus. Nor does it intend to make a serious protest over the US authorities’ deportation of a Canadian citizen to a third country for torture, in defiance of international law. This is a clear signal that, in the pursuit of their program of militarism and social reaction, the Harper government and Canada’s corporate elite, which is strongly supportive of the current Conservative regime, will not hesitate to ride roughshod over the most elementary democratic rights.



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