

Center for Constitutional Rights

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/press-center/press-releases/ccr-investigates-case-torture-survivor-maher-arar>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

CCR has launched an investigation into the rendition and torture of Maher Arar, a Syrian born Canadian citizen. Mr. Arar, who was arrested by U.S. officials while in transit at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, was intensively interrogated and then deported to Syria, where he endured 10 months of torture at the hands of Syrian intelligence officials. By knowingly placing Mr. Arar in the custody of a nation that regularly practices torture, the U.S. has violated the International Convention Against Torture, of which it is a signatory.

November 5, 2003 The Center for Constitutional Rights, as part of an ongoing struggle to protect the basic human and due process rights of individuals who are suspected of terrorism, has launched an investigation into the case of Maher Arar, a Syrian born Canadian citizen who survived 10 months of torture at the hands of Syrian intelligence officials, despite never being formally charged with any crime.

While in transit at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York in September 2002, Mr. Arar was taken into custody by U.S. officials and shackled. Officials repeatedly questioned Mr. Arar about his connection to certain members of Al-Qaeda, the global terrorist network. Mr. Arar repeatedly denied that he had any connections whatsoever to the named individuals. Mr. Arar's requests for a lawyer were dismissed on the basis that he was not an American citizen, therefore he did not have the right to receive counsel. Despite his denials, he remained in custody and eventually boarded on a small jet which first landed in Washington, DC, and then Amman, Jordan.

Once in Amman, Mr. Arar was blindfolded, shackled and put in a van. *They made me bend my head down in the back seat*, Mr. Arar recalled. *Then these men started beating me. Every time I tried to talk, they beat me."*

Mr. Arar was deported to Syria despite the fact that he is a Canadian citizen and has resided in the country for 17 years. He pleaded with officials to allow him to go to Canada; those pleas were ignored. The fact that officials did not place Mr. Arar in Canadian custody is extremely troubling and call into question the US governments motives.

Upon reaching Syria, Mr. Arar was transferred to a prison, where he was beaten for several hours and forced to falsely confess that he had attended a training camp in Afghanistan, fighting against the United States. *I was willing to do anything to stop the torture*, he says.

The conditions in which Mr. Arar was held were nearly inhuman: his cell was a *grave . . . there was no light . . . it was three feet wide, six feet deep and seven feet high*. He was frequently visited by rats and cats, who urinated on him as he lay in the cell. He was the victim of periodic beatings with shredded cables. Through the walls of his cell, Mr. Arar could hear the screams of other prisoners who were also being tortured.

Mr. Arar was released by Syrian authorities last month and is still considered a terrorism suspect by the U.S. government despite the lack of any substantial evidence. The Syrian government made no statement about his status upon Mr. Arar's release. Since his release, Mr. Arar has become outspoken about his own experience and the injustices committed under the guise of countering terrorism around the world. CCR Attorney Steven Macpherson Watt believes that a case like Mr. Arar's only reveals *the willingness of U.S. officials to trample on the most fundamental principles of due process and human rights in their scorched earth approach to counterterrorism.*" Mr. Watt has stated that the U.S., as a signatory of the International Convention Against Torture, has an obligation to avoid sending detainees to a nation that regularly practices torture against prisoners.

Several senior U.S. intelligence officials have readily admitted that they have repeatedly violated this statute as secret renditions of suspected terrorists following September 11th have become common. They argue that it is a reasonable action to commit against terrorists, and that they have been very effective in preventing further attacks, as nations who use torture can elicit information from detainees not otherwise obtainable.

CCR condemns the use of torture in any forum, and is committed to thoroughly investigating all circumstances regarding Mr. Arar's arrest and detention. The U.S. government should be held accountable for its role in enabling and endorsing torture and reaping the fruits thereof. While Mr. Arar's case is particularly egregious, he is by no means the only subject of this kind of treatment. *This is merely the first in an entire cycle of cases that we expect to challenge*, says Barbara Olshansky, assistant legal director at the Center. CCR hopes to file a lawsuit on Mr. Arar's behalf against the government using the Alien Tort Claims Act by the end of this year.

The Center for Constitutional Rights works with communities under threat to fight for justice and liberation through litigation, advocacy, and strategic communications. Since 1966, the Center for Constitutional Rights has taken on oppressive systems of power, including structural racism, gender oppression, economic inequity, and governmental overreach. Learn more at ccrjustice.org.

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