

extraordinary rendition *the story of maher arar*

In 2002, Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen, was detained at a U.S. airport on his way home from a family trip. He was interrogated by U.S. officials about alleged links to al-Qaeda and was repeatedly denied the right to contact his family or a lawyer. He was then sent against his will to Syria, a country renowned for torture. Mr. Arar was interrogated, tortured and held in a grave-like cell in Syria during most of his year long detention. No country, including the U.S., has ever charged him with any crime.



what is extraordinary rendition?

Extraordinary rendition is the forced transfer of a person from one country to another for arbitrary detention and interrogation under torture. Since 9/11, the Bush administration has used extraordinary rendition to covertly transport an estimated 150 persons—and possibly more—for detention and interrogation without judicial oversight as part of the so-called “war on terror.”

Extraordinary rendition is illegal. The Convention against Torture (CAT) and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both signed and ratified by the U.S., prohibit torture and require states to prevent, investigate and punish acts of torture. CAT Article 3 explicitly prohibits the transfer of a person to a country where there are “substantial grounds” for believing the person would be in danger of torture. Additionally, the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 obligates the U.S. to comply with CAT Article 3 and take extra measures to prevent the involuntary return, removal or extradition of a person to a country where he or she fears torture.

who is maher arar?

Maher Arar, 37, is a wireless systems engineer. He was born in Syria and moved to Canada at 17 years old, becoming a citizen in 1991. After attending McGill University and obtaining a Master’s degree in telecommunications, he moved to Ottawa with his wife Monia and daughter Barâa. Maher and Monia had their second child, Houd, in February 2002.

On September 26, 2002, on his way home from a family trip, Mr. Arar was pulled aside while transferring planes at JFK Airport in New York and questioned by INS officials, FBI agents, and New York police. When Mr. Arar asked for a lawyer, he was repeatedly told he had no right to a lawyer, because he was not a U.S. citizen. Mr. Arar was interrogated and held in solitary confinement for 13 days, initially denied food and routinely shackled and denied sleep. During his interrogations, U.S. officials asked Mr. Arar to “voluntarily” return to Syria, a country known for torturing prisoners. Mr. Arar told them repeatedly that he wanted to go home to Canada.

On October 3, 2002 the Canadian Consulate visited Mr. Arar, although she had not been contacted by U.S. officials, as required. Maher expressed his fear that he might be sent to Syria, and she assured him that he could not, since he was a Canadian citizen.

On October 5, 2002, Maher was finally allowed a short visit with a lawyer. But the day after the meeting, he was again interrogated alone despite his repeated requests for his attorney. He was then taken in shackles to a private airport in New Jersey and flown by private jet to Amman, Jordan via Rome, Italy. He was beaten in Amman and then taken to Syria, where he spent the next year in unspeakably horrific conditions.

In Syria, Maher spent more than 10 months in a grave-like underground cell, 3 feet wide and six feet long. He was beaten and interrogated, and whipped with an electrical cable. He was regularly threatened with more torture, and forced to hear others being tortured. He was forced to “confess” to having trained in Afghanistan, although he has never been there.

On October 5, 2003, Syria released Maher. The Syrian Ambassador to the U.S., Imad Moustapha, said, “We did our investigations. We traced links. We traced relations. We tried to find anything. We couldn’t.”

