Maher Arar Case

Maher Arar is a Syrian-born Canadian. In 2002 he was sent by the United States to Syria as an accused terrorist, based on faulty information supplied to US agents by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Arar was tortured in Syria before being released and returned to Canada. The federal government paid him $10.5 million in compensation for the wrongs done to him.

Earlier Life

Arar, a Sunni Muslim, was born in Syria on 15 September 1970. He came to Canada with his parents in 1987 without doing Syrian military service. He became a Canadian citizen in 1991 and went on to become a telecommunications software engineer. He married Monia Mazigh in 1994 in Montréal and the couple had two children. In December 1997, the family moved to Ottawa. Arar became a "person of interest" to Canadian authorities by socializing with Abdullah Almalki, another Ottawa resident and someone authorities suspected had terrorist ties.

Interception and Rendition

Arar was returning from a vacation in Tunis, traveling to Montréal via Zurich on 26 Sept. 2002, when American agents detained him during a stopover at JFK international airport in New York. US authorities, apparently acting on information from the RCMP, suspected Arar of being a member of the al-Qaedaterrorist organization, that carried out the 9/11 attacks on the US the previous year.

Arar was held all but incommunicado for two weeks while being subject to repeated interrogations about his ties to Almalki and terrorism. A Canadian consular official, Maureen Girvan, was allowed to visit him. She said she believed the Americans would send him to Canada.

Despite his repeated requests to return to Canada, the Americans instead secretly sent Arar via Jordan to Syria – in a process known as extraordinary rendition. Arar was still a citizen in Syria. Authorities there took him into custody.

Torture in Syria

Syrian military intelligence agents held Arar for 10 months in what he described as a “grave” – a dark, rat-infested one-by-two metre cell. Arar said that during his initial weeks in captivity he was whipped with electrical cable for hours at a stretch. The physical attacks were later replaced with psychological torture.

He said his torturers wanted, among other things, for him to confess that he had been to an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. He would later say he was willing to do anything to stop the torture and said as much to his interrogators. “I asked [the torturer] what he wanted to hear,” Arar later said. "I was terrified, and I did not want to be tortured. I would say anything to avoid torture.”

The questions the Syrians asked him, Arar said, were the same as those that US authorities in New York had posed. In September 2003, a haggard Almalki arrived at the Syrian prison where Arar was being held and said that he, too, had been tortured.

During his time in prison, senior Canadian intelligence agents opposed Canadian diplomatic efforts to get Arar freed. In the end, however, the Syrians declared Arar “completely innocent.” He was released on 5 Oct. 2003, and allowed to return to Canada, where he began a quest to clear his name and find out the reasons for his mistreatment.
Arar and the Media

On 4 November 2003, Arar recounted what he called his “nightmare” to the Canadian news media. “I am not a terrorist. I am not a member of al-Qaeda and I do not know anyone who belongs to this group,” he said. “I have never been to Afghanistan. I have never been anywhere near Afghanistan.” Arar also thanked his wife for her tireless efforts at helping secure his release. The Arar case garnered extensive media interest.

Arar and his wife, however, were harshly critical of some journalists for printing information leaked from security sources that portrayed him as having ties to al-Qaeda. In one case, in January 2004, police raided the home and office of an Ottawa journalist, alleging she had violated provisions of the Security of Information Act, which makes it a crime to communicate, receive or possess leaked secret government documents. The case went nowhere.

Public Inquiry

In February 2004, the federal government set up a judicial inquiry under Dennis O’Connor, associate chief justice of the Ontario Court of Appeal. The inquiry heard from 85 witnesses – Arar was not among them – before wrapping up in September 2005. Ultimately, the inquiry exonerated Arar completely.

“I am able to say categorically that there is no evidence to indicate that Mr. Arar has committed any offence, or that his activities constitute a threat to the security of Canada,” O’Connor said in his report that ran to more than 1,000 pages.

The commission faulted the RCMP for sharing suspicions and intelligence about Arar with the Americans, without any assurances as to how the information would be used, and without proper caveats about the possibility that the information could be wrong.

“The RCMP provided American authorities with information about Mr. Arar which was inaccurate, portrayed him in an unfair fashion, and overstated his importance to the investigation (involving Almalki),” O’Connor said.

In sum, the inquiry concluded that Canadian officials had played a pivotal role in what had happened to Arar. The inquiry also recommended much stricter oversight of the RCMP.

Fallout and Apology

In December 2006, RCMP Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli, who had earlier apologized to Arar, resigned after admitting to giving false information about him to a House of Commons committee. The federal government also set up an internal inquiry into the cases of three other men with similar stories to Arar: Almalki, Ahmad Abou-Elmaati and Muayyed Nureddin. Former Supreme Court of Canada judge Frank Iacobucci, who conducted the internal inquiry, concluded the men were tortured in Syria and Egypt. He also found that Canadian officials had contributed to the human-rights violations inflicted on the three, and denounced the Canadian government conduct as “deficient” and as demonstrating “institutional deficiency.”

Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologized to Arar for Canada's role in what the prime minister described as his “terrible ordeal.” In January 2007, the federal government awarded Arar $10.5 million in compensation, and another $1 million to cover his legal costs.

“On behalf of the government of Canada, I wish to apologize to you, Monia Mazigh and your family for any role Canadian officials may have played in the terrible ordeal that all of you experienced in 2002 and 2003,” Harper said. “I trust that, having arrived at a negotiated settlement, we have ensured that fair compensation will be paid to you and your family. I sincerely hope that these words and actions will assist you and your family in your efforts to begin a new and hopeful chapter in your lives.”

“The government of Canada and the prime minister have acknowledged my innocence,” Arar said in response. “This means the world to me.”
Supposed Omar Khadr Connection

Years after Arar's name had been cleared, it was mentioned during the “war crimes” trial of Canadian Omar Khadr at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay in 2009. An FBI special agent, Robert Fuller, testified that Khadr had told interrogators at Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2002 that he had spotted Arar at an al-Qaeda safehouse in Kabul, Afghanistan. Khadr also said he might have seen Arar at a terrorist training camp in the fall of 2001.

On 8 Oct. 2002, a day after that interrogation, American agents sent the detained Arar to Syria. A former Arar lawyer, and another lawyer for the O'Connor inquiry, dismissed Fuller’s testimony as having zero credibility. They said any statement Khadr had made about Arar was likely the result of torture. Arar, who has never been in Afghanistan and had never met Khadr, said he was shocked and depressed that the Americans had again dragged his name up in connection with terrorism.

Aftermath

Since his return to Canada, Arar has been a prominent activist, awarded several human rights awards and honours as well as a doctorate in recent years. Time Magazine named him Canadian Newsmaker of the Year in 2004. His ordeal has inspired movies and books. He is also said to have developed severe post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

“My suffering and the suffering of my family did not end when I was released,” he has said. Arar attempted without success to sue the US government, which still keeps him on a terrorist watch list. US authorities have consistently defended their actions on the grounds that Arar was a suspected terrorist and that they legally “deported” him to Syria under American immigration laws. Some American lawmakers, however, have apologized to him.

In April 2015, John Kiriakou, a former agent with the US Central Intelligence Agency, told The Canadian Press that several colleagues had warned against sending Arar to Syria on the grounds that he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Kiriakou – who also blew the whistle on the waterboarding torture of terror suspects and went to jail for publicly identifying colleagues – said he was disgusted with America’s role in the Arar case and its failure to apologize to him.

In September 2015, the RCMP charged former Syrian military intelligence officer George Salloum in absentia with Arar’s torture. In January 2016, the RCMP watchdog, the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission, said it would examine what the RCMP had learned from the Arar case.

As of 2016, Arar was CEO of the Ottawa-based business CauseSquare, which had developed a mobile platform aimed at connecting millennials with registered charities and non-profits. He is also active on social media and has been especially vocal about the devastating war in his Syrian homeland.
This is who I am': the reinvention of Maher Arar

'I'm a victim of rendition, I'm a victim of torture ... I would like to be branded as an entrepreneur'

Julie Ireton · CBC News · Posted: Apr 22, 2016 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: April 25, 2016

Maher Arar sits hunched over a laptop in a sparsely furnished basement office — the no-frills headquarters of a new social enterprise he started with three co-founders. The fledgling business has all the hallmarks of a bootstrap startup. In fact, Arar owns the entire Ottawa office building.

"We have actually one nice office upstairs, we just don't use it. When you have unlimited resources, you become lazy," laughs Arar, 45. "I'm trying to simulate the situation as if I don't have money to put into this." In reality, Maher Arar is a multimillionaire, those "unlimited resources" earned in a way no one should have to accumulate wealth.

10 months and 10 days
In September 2002, Maher Arar was returning to Canada from a family holiday in Tunisia. On a stopover at JFK Airport in New York, Arar was detained by U.S. authorities who accused him of being an al-Qaeda operative. Arar was spirited away to Syria where he was imprisoned in a filthy, rat-infested, grave-sized cell. He was tortured repeatedly.

Back home in Ottawa, Arar’s wife Monia Mazigh campaigned for his release alongside a dedicated support network of human rights advocates and sympathetic politicians. The couple's daughter Baraa was only five at the time. Their son Houd just a toddler.

Arar was held in Syria for 10 months and 10 days, during which time he told his captors he'd attended a training camp in Afghanistan, even though it wasn't true.

"I was ready to confess to anything if it would stop the torture," said Arar during a news conference shortly after his return to Canada in 2003. "I've never been anywhere near Afghanistan."

In 2007, after a lengthy public inquiry, Arar got an apology — and $10.5 million — from the Canadian government for its role in his mistreatment.
Arar and Mazigh began focusing their attention on human rights advocacy, while continuing to seek justice from the U.S. administration, a campaign which has so far failed to yield results.

Now, 14 years after his rendition, Arar is putting himself back in the spotlight. But now the circumstances are very different, so this time he's controlling the narrative.

'I never wanted to work for someone else'
Arar can trace his entrepreneurial bent back to his childhood in Damascus.

"I opened up a popcorn stand, you know, during the summer," recalls Arar. "From that age I never wanted to work for someone else."

After graduating with an engineering degree from McGill, Arar became drawn to startup culture, diving deep into technology and spending sleepless nights solving problems.

"Yeaha, this is who I am. A lot of people don't know that when I was arrested, I was actually working on a software prototype. I wrote a business plan, a very huge business plan," Arar says, leaning back in his chair, looking relaxed.

"I still keep it. We did present it to the government when I was settling my case."
In those dark days in a Syrian cell, Arar says his entrepreneurial instincts actually helped him keep it together.

"Entrepreneurship teaches you resilience and that helped me," he says. "Everything feeds each other, right? My prior entrepreneur experience fed in to help me survive my ordeal, and my ordeal is helping me back into my entrepreneurship."

'Something that is useful for the world'
Arar says whereas his earlier business ideas were about creating technology and making money, he now has a different angle. His experience in Syria changed his goals, he says.

"I think, yes, my ordeal made me want to create something that is useful for the world. I want to help improve the situation we are in."

Last fall, Arar started out as an advisor to the three guys he's teamed up with. He said it was important that they all have good technical skills, but just as important that they like each other. His multimillion-dollar payout from the government was national news. He knows he's perceived as having deep pockets.

"Obviously, yes, but not with the people I'm working with. I really try to hand-pick whoever I befriend these days. I just hate when people think of me just as money."

'Go-to app' for good causes
Their new company, CauseSquare, has developed a mobile platform aimed at getting millennials to connect with, volunteer for and donate to charities.
"We feel that people should easily connect to their favourite causes … a one-click solution. It should be fun and rewarding. That's how we came up with the idea," Arar says. "We want to be recognized as the go-to app for engaging good causes."

The team provides an example. One of the founders wanted to donate to help Syrian refugees last fall, but with so many agencies involved in the effort, he didn't know where to start. He figured there should be an app for that.

CauseSquare allows users to choose from a menu of causes including education, human rights, justice and independent media. It then narrows the choices to individual charities and non-profits, helping users find the best fit for them.

"We've made our solutions so easy, to the point where we take advantage of short-duration, altruistic impulse. Research shows this altruistic impulse only lasts for eight seconds," Arar says.

The non-profit organizations themselves provide the content: short, edgy videos designed to draw in potential young donors. CauseSquare has added entertaining gaming features to get 20-somethings to pay attention — and come back.

**Millennial beta-testers**

But when you're in your mid-40s, inventing a software application that will attract millennials is no easy feat. That's why Arar harnessed the advice of his daughter Baraa, now in her second year at Carleton University.

"I do ask Baraa. I trust her opinion and I ask her a lot of questions about what she thinks about the app." Arar has also called on a group of Baraa's 20-something friends to act as the beta-testers.
Baraa, a slam poet who majors in humanities and art history, calls herself CauseSquare's "poster child," though she doesn't see herself a typical millennial.

"It's a bit weird, because I think that I'm different in some ways than people my age and so I might not be the perfect kind of prototype," Baraa says without a hint of self-consciousness.

But then few children have their fathers accused of terrorism, whisked away, tortured, returned home, forced to fight to clear his name — then one day win vindication, turning his family into instant millionaires.

"She's been very much affected by what happened to me," says Arar, taking a deep breath. "She doesn't say it, but I can feel it." Seeing them together, the mutual admiration is obvious.

"I think that when someone goes through something very life-altering, I think that's much more amplified, that desire to search for something meaningful," Baraa says. "I think my father wants to live a life of meaning and purpose. He wants to be a father, a creator, an engineer and a constructive, contributing person."

**Name still elicits mixed response**

Arar's business partners share Baraa's admiration for him. But they also recognize Arar's name elicits a mixed response from the outside world. There remain those who associate Arar with alleged terrorism, even after his very public — and thorough — exoneration. In their early conversations, the founders openly discussed whether it was a good idea to have Arar as the company's frontman.

Like Arar, Mohamed Maamoun, CauseSquare's chief operating officer, also immigrated to Canada with his parents from the Middle East.

"It's a pro and con. I think everyone knows," Maamoun says.

Arar nods and weighs in. "There'll be some negative aspect to it. Maybe some people will not want to talk to me."

Among the complications is the fact that for now, Arar won't fly to the United States. He assumes he's still on that country's no-fly list, which rules out travel to visit customers or attend conferences. Maamoun says, in the end, they all agreed the advantages of having Arar on board outweigh the disadvantages. Of course there is the money he's bringing to the project, but Arar's ongoing relationships with several human rights and justice organizations — potential customers — is also a big plus.

"He was able to get organizations involved, so we're launching with customers versus launching and hoping to get customers," Maamoun says.
'Closing the circle'
One of those customers is Amnesty International, already hosted on the CauseSquare app. Alex Neve, Amnesty International Canada's secretary general, has been a friend and supporter since the early days of Arar's rendition, working closely with Mazigh and campaigning for Arar's release. Neve isn't surprised that both Arar the innovator and Arar the human rights advocate have chosen to focus energy on a social enterprise.

"He's now been able to marry the two together. I don't know if it's so much a reinvention of Maher, but it's sort of closing the circle in some respects," Neve says.

It's a circle that takes Arar back to his entrepreneurial roots, and while his involvement in CauseSquare can't erase what happened, those who know him can see the effect it's having.

"One of my friends leaned over and said, 'I don't think I've ever seen your father this excited,'" Arar's daughter Baraa says.

Arar attributes that to the fact that now, instead of looking back, he's constantly looking ahead, making plans and setting important goals.

"We have a vision here. We're creating a future. We want to become the next Shopify," he says, referring to the Ottawa e-commerce software company that launched on the public markets last year with a valuation of more than $1 billion.

His reinvention well underway, Arar says his rendition to Syria has in a strange way made him the person he's become — the entrepreneur he is again.

"I'm a victim of rendition, I'm a victim of torture, but I would like to now do what I'm passionate about. I would like to contribute towards the solutions and, yeah, I would like to be branded as an entrepreneur."