

My Country: Free But Not For Every Citizen

The most certain test by which we can judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.

- Lord Acton (John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton), historian (1834-1902)

Canadians have viewed the claim by US President George W. Bush that the US is fighting the war in Iraq for "freedom" with skepticism. For one thing, Canadians are not certain what the measure of freedom would be when Mr. Bush achieves it.

However, we Canadians are confident that we live in a free country. Unless, of course, you happen to be of Middle Eastern origin.

Maher Arar, a naturalized Canadian citizen born in Syria, travelled to various countries as part of his business. With his Canadian passport, he felt confident that he could move freely, even into and out of his native country.

On one trip back to Canada from Syria, Arar was stopped at Canada Customs and held on suspicion of terrorist activities or connections. When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (the national police of Canada) and the Canadian Security and Investigation Service (spy agency) could get nothing of interest from Arar, they sent him to the USA.

When their equivalent agencies in the US could also not get any worthwhile information from Arar, they deported him to Syria where he spent a year in prison being tortured every day. The Syrian authorities also got nothing from him.

It had never occurred to these agencies that Arar had nothing to tell them because he had nothing to do with terrorism, terrorist cells or with arranging finances for terrorist organizations. He was born in Syria (an "Axis of Evil country"), he visited Syria and he phoned people in Syria. That was enough for them.

Arar did, however, have a beard (as all Muslim men do), olive coloured skin and Syrian heritage, which seemed to be enough to make him guilty in the eyes of Canadian and US security agencies.

Neither Canadian nor US agencies had the legal right to send Arar to another country, least of all Canada because he was a Canadian citizen. The US deported him to Syria without even telling Canada about it.

Maher Arar survived, returned to Canada, suffered through successive thorough investigations and eventually was given about 10 million dollars to go away and shut up by the Canadian government. He was removed from the Canadian list of suspects relating to terrorism.

The Canadian government, pressured by the media who were now firm Arar supporters, asked the US to also remove Arar from its watch list. The US refused, declining to give any reason. After all, that would be tantamount to admitting they broke their own and international laws.

Maher Arar continues to live in Canada with his wife and family, trying to cobble together a life after a year of torture and daily expectations of death in a Syrian prison. Nights, for him, are the worst time of the day.

Meanwhile, three other naturalized Canadian citizens in situations amazingly similar to that of Maher Arar want to be absolved of any accusation of association with terrorism, receive compensation and build new lives after their own extensive bouts with torture abroad.

These four men have a right to wonder where in the world they could live now where their lives and those of their families would not be at risk.

Certainly not in any country that is fighting in Iraq. Or in any country whose government knows how to find Iraq on a map of the world.

Free countries, yes. But how free when the national police break the law and destroy people's lives without fear of being held accountable?

Are we in the "free world" fighting for freedom for everyone or just for those with the same skin colour, religion and nationality as us?

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