

University of Alberta
Department of Political Science

**THE 2007 MAHER ARAR ESSAY COMPETITION
& AWARD GUIDELINES**

THEME: *The Challenges of Torture for Contemporary Democracies*

The experience of Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen who endured both extradition to and torture in Syria, raises critical questions about democracy and torture, particularly the relationship between democratic citizenship, the rule of law and state-sanctioned torture. Some commentaries suggest torture is an illegitimate and abhorrent practice engaged in by rogue regimes. When torture is deployed by democratic countries, as at Abu Ghraib, a common claim is that the torture was not planned or systemic but, instead, the actions of a ‘few bad apples.’ Or efforts are made to distinguish between physical and psychological torture. Others are less convinced that democracies are innocents in the growing use of torture, that torture is the result of idiosyncratic factors, or that it is possible to easily distinguish between the scars of different types of torture. Sherene Razack in *Dark Threats & White Knights* argues that torture is a gendered and racialized practice. Some liberal scholars, such as Alan Dershowitz in *The Lesser Evil*, have suggested that in exceptional cases democracies may need to engage in torture and, thus, “the issue then becomes not whether torture can be prevented, but whether it can be regulated.” In *Democracy and Torture*, Darius Rejali argues that torture is not a practice that occurs only in exceptional circumstances. Rather, many common tortures today, both physical and psychological, either originated in or achieve their most characteristic form in a democratic context.

Regardless of perspective, it is imperative that citizens within contemporary democracies face the fact of torture. The important question that the 2007 Maher Arar Essay Competition invites you to contemplate is the following: ***Should democracies ever condone torture?***

ESSAY SUBMISSION RULES

1. Eligibility: This essay competition is open to all full-time, continuing undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Alberta.
2. Essays must be a maximum of 2000 words (not including references).
3. Essays must be written in English, typed in, 12-point font, and doubled-spaced with one-inch margins.
4. Every essay entry must be an original, single-authored contribution, written solely by the University of Alberta student submitting it.
5. All quotes, paraphrased passages, data, etc. must be properly attributed and must consistently follow either the APA-style or MLA-style citation format. Attach a bibliography of cited sources.
6. Essays previously published, or under consideration for publication, in any format (including online), are not eligible for submission.
7. All final entries must include a single cover page, which contains the following information: (i) essay title; (ii) student’s name and University of Alberta ID number; (iii) Department & Faculty; and (iv) essay word count. On a separate page include the following: (a) a 50-word biographical sketch of the author; (b) a brief statement by the author verifying that the submission is written solely by the author and follows the rules of the essay competition; and (c) full contact information: mailing address, University of Alberta email, and local telephone number.
8. The deadline for submission is 4:30 p.m. on **Thursday, 5th April 2007**.
9. All essays must be submitted *electronically* in a Word document (cover page, Bio, essay & references) to the: **maheraraessay@ualberta.ca**.
10. Essays will be assessed for originality and quality of argumentation by a panel comprised of representatives from professor emeriti, continuing faculty and the broader community. All panel decisions will be final.

THE MAHER ARAR ESSAY AWARD

The Maher Arar Essay Competition aims to enhance the student experience by encouraging critical thinking and writing on the topic of democracy and torture. The winning essayist will receive a **\$1,500 prize**. The winner will be invited to attend the Political Science Annual Lecture to be delivered by Mr. Maher Arar at the Winspear Centre on 18 April, 2007, at which the Award will be given by Mr. Arar.

The Political Science Annual Lecture coincides with the 25th Anniversary of the Charter of Rights & Freedoms.

ABOUT MAHER ARAR

Mr. Maher Arar is a 36-year-old wireless technology consultant. He was born in Syria and came to Canada with his family at the age of 17. He became a Canadian citizen in 1991. On 26 September, 2002, while in transit in New York's John F. Kennedy's airport on his way home to Canada from a vacation, Mr. Arar was detained and interrogated by United States officials about alleged links to al-Qaeda. Twelve days later, Mr. Arar was chained, shackled and flown to Syria, where he was held in a tiny 'grave-like' cell for over ten months before he was moved to a better cell in a different prison. In Syria, Mr. Arar was beaten, tortured and forced to make a false confession.

During his imprisonment, Mr. Arar's wife, Monia Mazigh, campaigned tirelessly on his behalf. Mr. Arar finally was released by Syrian authorities and returned to Canada in October 2003, where he joined his wife and supporters in a campaign to clear his name. According to Mr. Arar, "What is at stake here is the future of our country, the interests of Canadian citizens, and most importantly Canada's international reputation for being a leader in human rights where citizens from different ethnic groups are treated no different than other Canadians."

On 28 January, 2004, under pressure from Canadian human rights organizations and a growing number of concerned citizens, the federal Government announced a Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar. The Inquiry was headed by Ontario's Associate Chief Justice, Mr. Dennis O'Connor. The Commissioner of the Inquiry reported on 18 September 2006. Mr. Justice O'Connor cleared Mr. Arar of all terrorism allegations, and stated that "[he was] 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." The Inquiry also found that the suffering experienced by Mr. Arar and his family was due, in part, to the actions of some government officials. The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service agents acted on information supplied by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and this contributed to the resignation of RCMP Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli.

On 26 January, 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledged that Mr. Arar had experienced a "tremendous injustice" and issued a formal apology to Mr. Arar and his family: "On behalf of the government of Canada, I wish to apologize to you [Maher Arar], 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." On the same day, the Canadian government announced that a settlement was reached regarding the lawsuit brought by Mr. Maher against the Canadian government.

Currently Mr. Arar is pursuing a Doctorate degree in wireless engineering. He and Monia Mazigh continue their struggle to clear his name in the U.S., and to remove them from that country's no-fly list. Among other things, Mr. Arar's case in the U.S. draws attention to the role of democracies in practices of 'extraordinary rendition' and 'deportation to torture.' Mr. Arar's wish, to "make sure this does not happen to any other Canadian citizens in the future," requires all Canadians to reflect on the challenges of torture for democracies, governmental accountability, and our roles and responsibilities as citizens.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the Maher Arar Essay Competition & Award, please contact: Dr. Malinda S. Smith, Department of Political Science, 10-23 H.M. Tory Building, University of Alberta; Telephone: 780.492.5380 / 780.492.3429 or by Email: Malinda.smith@ualberta.ca; or research assistant, Nisha Nath: nnath@ualberta.ca; or visit our web site at: <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/polisci/index.cfm>

SPONSORS

The Maher Arar Essay Competition is co-sponsored by the University of Alberta's Department of Political Science, the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Gateway*, and the Graduate Students Association (GSA).