



INTRODUCTION TO MR. MAHER ARAR

By

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It is a great honour for me to introduce Mr. Maher Arar, who will deliver the 11th Annual Political Science Distinguished Lecture on “Civil Liberties and National Security”.

Most Canadians are familiar with bits and pieces of Mr Arar’s remarkable experiences and struggles of the past five years— in fact, Mr. Arar’s story is now deeply embedded in Canada’s national story. It is a story that raises increasingly critical questions for all citizens in liberal democracies, especially those that label themselves as beacons of freedom and justice. It clarifies why certain values and principles are fundamental to the proper functioning of democratic societies, such as the rule of law, and civil rights for all citizens, without discrimination on the grounds of race, national origin, creed or religious conviction. Mr Arar’s story exposes the dangers and costs to us all when our governments equivocate on



fundamental citizenship rights. As important, it challenges each and every one of us to ask ourselves: what would we do in similar circumstances?

There are, in other words, many stories embedded in Mr. Arar's story. I am pleased that he agreed to come to Edmonton to tell us his story, in his own words.

As most of you are probably aware, 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. Like most of us, his life was not the stuff of national or international headlines. However, all of this changed unexpectedly, inalterably, and unjustly, when 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 appointed Ontario’s Associate Chief Justice to head a Commission of Inquiry into the Actions of Canadian Officials in Relation to Maher Arar. Issuing its report in September 2006, the Commission cleared Mr. Arar of all terrorism allegations. Justice O’Connor stated explicitly and 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 Canadian government officials. The



United States Immigration and Naturalization Service agents acted on information supplied by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), and this troubling collaboration in deportation to torture exposed the paradoxes for democracies in the aftermath of September 11, when our highest law officer – RCMP Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli – had to resign because he could not properly account for the role of Canadian officials in what is variously called “extraordinary rendition” and “deportation to torture”. But there are many other scars, hidden scars of torture and officials who continue to sully the good name of Mr Arar and his family with innuendos and a refusal to be accountable – to admit they were wrong.

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, hers and their daughter and son's name in the U.S., and to remove them from that country's no-fly list.

A central thread running through the Department of Political Science Speakers Series has been to underline how and why as citizens, public intellectuals, teachers, learners and activists, we are constantly challenged to "speak the truth to power," and to take personal responsibility for the health of our democracy. There are few of us who are more qualified to speak on these themes as tonight's distinguished lecturer.

Please join me in welcoming our 2007 11th Annual Political Science Distinguished lecturer, Mr. Maher Arar.

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