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The CIA Kidnaps Suspects and Sends Them to Third Countries to Be Tortured

Stephen Grey

Stephen Grey is a Great Britain-based freelance journalist. He is also the author of Ghost Plane: The True Story of the CIA Torture Program.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been seizing people around the world and sending them to third countries, where they are often tortured. Both the arrests themselves and the transfers to countries where torture is known to occur are illegal under international law.

8 October 2002. Over the Atlantic, at 30,000 feet, on board a Gulfstream jet, Maher Arar looked out through the portholes of the private plane at the clouds beneath and the red glow of dawn. Stretching out on the wide, upholstered leather seat, he glanced across at the large video screen on which was displayed the path of the plane from its departure point near New York, onwards to Washington, DC and then to its final refuelling point at Portland, Maine, before heading across the ocean. A telecommunications engineer in Ottawa, Canada, Maher was used to air travel—but not to such luxury.

His companions—specialists attached to the CIA—were preparing to switch on another in-flight film, an action movie.

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Maher could think only of what fate lay ahead of him when he reached the country to where the United States was now sending him for interrogation and from where his family had once fled—Syria.

He recalls: “I knew that Syria was a country that tortured its prisoners. I was silent and submissive; just asking myself over and over again: ‘How did I end up in this situation? What is going to happen to me now?’”

The Case of Maher Arar

Maher had been arrested after arriving at New York’s JFK Airport at 2 pm on 26 September to change planes. He’d been returning home from a holiday in Tunisia. He was accused of membership of [terrorist] Osama Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda organisation and of knowing two other Syrian-Canadians who were said to be terrorists. Maher was baffled; he hardly knew the pair. They both seemed ordinary Muslims like him—hardly extremists.

Though Maher was a Canadian citizen, after interrogation in New York he was told he would be deported to Syria, not his adopted country. It petrified him.

Hundreds [of prisoners] have been transferred [by the CIA] from one Middle Eastern or Asian country to another—countries where prisoners can be more easily interrogated.

One of the CIA agents, who called himself Mr. Khoury, had explained that he, too, was originally from Syria. Unlike Maher, Khoury was wearing a grey lounge suit. Maher was still wearing an orange boiler suit and was shackled with steel handcuffs and chains. During the flight, Khoury lent him a turquoise polo shirt, made in Canada. Maher would be wearing that shirt and nothing else for the next three months. He