

No Justice, No Peace

If you talk to Maher Arar long enough, even on the telephone, you'll get the disturbing sense that you are speaking with someone whose life has been shattered like a pane of glass.

"Sometimes I have the feeling that I want to go and live on another planet," he told me. "A completely different planet than planet Earth. You know?"

Mr. Arar, thanks to the United States government, went through the almost incomprehensible agony of being tortured. Now he is trying to live with the aftermath of torture, which is its own form of agony.

On Sept. 26, 2002, Mr. Arar, a Canadian citizen born in Syria, was taken into custody by American authorities at Kennedy Airport in New York. He was locked in chains and shackles and accused of being "a member of a known terrorist organization."

There was no evidence to support the accusation, and no evidence has ever come to light. Nevertheless, as part of the hideous U.S. policy known as extraordinary rendition, Mr. Arar was shipped off to Syria, where he was kept in an underground rat-infested, grave-like cell, and tortured. (When I visited him in Ottawa last year, he told me how he had screamed and wept and begged both God and his captors for mercy.)

After 10 months, he was released. No charges against him were ever filed.

I called Mr. Arar last week after a federal judge in Brooklyn threw out a lawsuit in which Mr. Arar had sought

damages from the U.S. government for his ordeal.

"I don't feel like I am the same person," he said. "I feel that my brain or my inner soul does not want to think about what's going on. My soul is trying to distract itself from reality."

The reality, he said, is that his life has been all but completely destroyed. He is fearful. He has become psychologically and emotionally distant from his wife and two young children. He has nightmares. He can't find a job. He spins dizzily from one bout with depression to another. And some former friends who are Muslim will no longer associate with him because "they're afraid to be the next target."

"I mean, you can tell, no one wants to hear about me," he said. "After 9/11, everyone branded with the terrorism label — they're doomed."

Mr. Arar, now 35, made a comfortable living as a software engineer before he fell into the demonic embrace of the rendition program. Now no one will hire him. "They put it in a nice way," he said. "They've said to people: 'Listen, we believe he's innocent. But, you know, we don't want to hire him.'"

Mr. Arar's own psychological difficulties have compounded the external challenges he faces. "I was invited to go and speak in Vancouver, which is west of here," he said. "But I can't take the plane anymore. Psychologically I am so scared to fly. So I couldn't go."

He said he frequently lacks the confidence or motivation to perform even minor tasks, and often feels overwhelmed by the thought of something as ordinary as a scheduled meeting with the principal at his 9-year-old daughter's school.

He said his 4-year-old son, Houd, panics whenever he thinks his father is about to go out. "He always wants to come with me," said Mr. Arar. "He insists, and he cries if I can't take him. He's afraid that if I go, I won't ever come back."

So the nightmare that began with rendition continues with no end in sight. Mr. Arar is grateful that his wife was able to land a job last year with a political party. "It's not much money," he said, "but had she not found a job we would be in a very, very miserable situation. We're just barely surviving."

Unexpected emotional support has come from ordinary Canadians; strangers frequently come up to Mr. Arar on the street and shake his hand. "They might say, 'We're behind you,' or, 'We support you,'" he said. "It means a lot to me."

The rendition program is one more example of the way the United States, using the threat of terror as an excuse, has locked its ideals away in a drawer somewhere. We don't even give them lip service anymore. A person like Mr. Arar is not seen as having any rights. He's not even seen as human. He was carted away in accordance with official U.S. policy, and treated like an animal.

"They are doing this to people and it is wrong, wrong, wrong," said Mr. Arar. "This is an evil practice, and I want them to acknowledge it. I want them to acknowledge that what they did to me was wrong." □

A victim wants the
U.S. to admit his
torture was wrong.
