
Maher Arar: Chronology of events

September 26, 2002 to October 5, 2003

The following is a chronology of events as told by Maher Arar, beginning with his arrival at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York on September 26, 2002, and ending with his October 5, 2003 release from Syrian prison.

September 26, 2002

Arar boards an American Airlines flight from Zurich to JFK airport in New York, en route to Montreal. He arrives in New York at 2:00 p.m., and lines up at the immigration counter. **When his name is entered into the computer he is pulled aside.** Two hours later he is fingerprinted and photographed. He is told this is regular procedure. Airport police search his bag and wallet and photocopy his passport. **They refuse to answer Arar's questions, and will not let him make a phone call.**

Officials from the New York Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigations say they will question him and then let him catch his connecting flight to Montreal. **Arar asks for a lawyer, and is told he has no right to a lawyer because he is not an American citizen.** An intense interrogation continues until midnight. Arar is questioned about his work, his salary, his travel in the US, and about different people.

He is questioned in particular about Abdullah Almalki. Arar tells them that he only knows him very casually, but that he worked with his brother at two high tech firms in Ottawa and Hull. He tells them that the Almalki family came from Syria about the same time as his, so the families know of each other. Arar does not know why they are questioning him so much about Abdullah. He tells them he has seen Abdullah a few times and he describes, in detail, the times he can remember. **Arar is shocked when they show him the rental lease he signed when he moved to Ottawa in 1997.** It was witnessed by Abdullah Almalki. Arar remembers this and explains he had asked Abdullah's brother to sign it, but that he was busy and sent Abdullah instead.

Arar describes the questioning as intense, and says he was pressured to answer all questions quickly. He says they were humiliating and rude. **He tells them he has nothing to hide, and tells them everything he knows. He asks repeatedly for a lawyer, but the request is ignored. Arar's wrists and ankles are chained** and he is taken in a van to a nearby building where others are being held and put in a cell.

September 27, 2002

At 9:00 a.m. Maher is taken for more questioning. He has not eaten or slept since he was on the flight from Zurich.

He is **interrogated for eight hours** and is asked many questions including what he thinks about Bin Laden, Palestine and Iraq. He is also asked about the mosques he prays in, his bank accounts, his email addresses and his relatives.

An INS official informs him they would like him to voluntarily return to Syria. Arar says no, he would like to return to Canada. He asks again for a lawyer, and is refused.

Arar is asked to sign an immigration form, but they do not show him the contents. Arar, exhausted, signs the form.

At about 8:00 p.m. he is shackled and put in a van and driven to the **Metropolitan Detention Centre**. Arar continues to ask why this is happening, and they continue to refuse to answer him or tell him where he is being taken. He is strip searched, and asked to sign more forms for a doctor, and vaccinated. **He asks what the vaccine is, but they will not tell him.**

Arar continues to ask for a lawyer and a phone call, and is ignored.

Sept. 28 to Oct. 5, 2002

Arar is not able to sleep until early in the morning, and wakes up at 11:00 a.m. on September 28. This is the first time he has slept since leaving Zurich two days earlier.

Arar notices he is being treated differently than other prisoners at the MDC – for example, guards will not give him toothpaste or a toothbrush or newspapers.

On the second or third day at the MDC, Arar is given a document saying that he is inadmissible to the United States under Section 235C of the Immigration and Nationality Act, because he is not a citizen of the United States; he is a native of Syria and is a citizen of Syria and Canada; he arrived in the United States on September 26, 2002 and applied for admission as a non-immigrant in transit through the United States, destined to Canada; and he is a member of an organization that has been designated by the Secretary of State as a Foreign Terrorist organization, to wit **Al Qaeda** aka Al Qa'ida.

Arar **continues to ask for a lawyer and phone call, and his requests are denied** until October 2 when he is permitted to make a two minute telephone call to his mother-in-law in

Ottawa. He tells her he is frightened and he might be deported to Syria, and asks her to get him a lawyer.

On October 3 or 4, Arar is asked to fill out a form asking where he would like to be deported to. He writes that **he chooses to be sent to Canada**, and that he has no concerns about going there. He signs the document.

On October 4 Arar receives a visit from Canadian consul Maureen Girvan. Arar shows her the document he has been given, and she notes the contents. He tells her he is frightened of being deported to Syria, and she reassures him that this will not happen.

On October 5 Arar is visited by lawyer Amal Oummih. They talk for 30 minutes, and he relates his fears to her, and asks her to help. She advises him not to sign anything without her being present.

October 6, 2002

At 9:00 p.m. on Sunday night, guards come to take Arar from his cell, saying that his attorney is there to see him.

Arar is taken to a room where about seven officials are waiting. His attorney is not there. He is told that they contacted his attorney and that "he" refused to come (this is strange because Arar's lawyer is a woman).

They ask why Arar does not want to go to Syria, and **Arar tells them he is afraid he will be tortured there.** He says he did not do his military service before leaving Syria, he is a Sunni Muslim, and his mother's cousin was accused of being part of the Muslim Brotherhood and imprisoned. **They ask him to sign a document, and he refuses.**

This session continues until 3:00 a.m., when he is taken back to his cell.

October 08, 2002

Arar is **woken at 3:00 a.m. and is told he is leaving.** He is given food, and then taken from his cell. A woman reads to him from a document, saying that based on classified information that they could not reveal to him, and because he knows a number of men, including – Abdullah Almalki and Ahmad Abou-el-Maati, the INS Director has decided to deport him to Syria.

Arar protests, saying he will be tortured there. He is ignored. He is chained and taken to a waiting car, and driven to an airport in New Jersey.

Arar is placed on a private jet. He is the only passenger.

They fly to Washington, and the people with him disembark, and a new team gets on the plane.

Arar overhears the men talking on the phone saying that **Syria is refusing to take him directly, but Jordan will take him.**

They fly to Portland, to Rome, and then to Amman, Jordan.

On the trip to Amman Arar is given a sweater and jeans to wear. He does not know then that he will wear these clothes until the end of December.

October 9, 2002

The jet lands in Amman, Jordan at 3:00 a.m. There are six or seven Jordanians waiting for him. **Arar is blindfolded and chained and put into a van. He is forced to bend his head down in the back seat. He is beaten intensely every time he tries to move or talk.**

Thirty minutes later they arrive at a building where they remove his blindfold and ask him routine questions, before taking him to a cell.

In the afternoon they take his fingerprints and photographs and he is **blindfolded and put in another van. He is told he is going back to Montreal.**

About forty-five minutes later, they stop and he is put in a different car. He is forced to keep his head down, and **he is beaten again.**

Over an hour later they **arrive at what Arar believes was the Syrian border. He is handed over to a new team of men**, and put in a new car which travels for another three hours to Damascus.

At about 6:00 p.m. he is taken into a building which he later finds out is the "**Far Falestin**" or the Palestine Branch of the Syrian military intelligence.

He is taken into a room for interrogation. There are three men in the room. Arar later learns that one of the men is a colonel.

They put him on a chair, and the colonel begins the interrogation.

Arar is asked about his family and why they left Syria. Arar answers the questions but is **threatened with a metal chair in the corner.** He later learns that this chair is used to torture people.

Arar decides he will confess to anything they want in order to stop the torture.

The interrogation lasts for four hours without any violence – only the threat of violence is used.

October 10, 2002

Early in the morning on October 10 Arar is taken downstairs to a basement. The guard opens the door and **Arar sees for the first time the cell he will live in for the following ten months and ten days.**

Arar calls the cell a “grave.” It is **three feet wide, six feet deep and seven feet high.** It has a metal door, with a small opening which does not let in light because of a piece of metal on the outside for sliding things into the cell. There is a one by two foot opening in the ceiling with iron bars. This opening is below another ceiling and lets in just a tiny shaft of light. **Cats urinate through the ceiling traps of these cells, often onto the prisoners.** Rats wander there too.

There is **no light source in the cell.** The only things in the cell are two blankets, two plastic bowls and two bottles. Arar later uses two small empty boxes – one as a toilet when he is not allowed to the washroom, and one for prayer water.

October 11 to 16, 2002

Early the next morning Arar is taken upstairs for intense interrogation. He is **beaten on his palms, wrists, lower back and hips with a shredded black electrical cable which is about two inches in diameter. He is threatened with the metal chair, electric shocks, and with the tire, into which prisoners are stuffed, immobilized and beaten.**

The next day Arar is **interrogated and beaten on and off for eighteen hours.** Arar begs them to stop. He is **asked if he received military training in Afghanistan, and he falsely confesses and says yes. This is the first time Arar is ever questioned about Afghanistan.** They ask at which camp, and provide him with a list, and he picks one of the camps listed.

Arar urinated on himself twice during the interrogation.

Throughout this period of intense interrogation Arar was not taken back to his cell, but to a **waiting room where he could hear other prisoners being tortured and screaming.** One time, he heard them repeatedly slam a man’s head on a desk really hard.

- October 17 to 22, 2002 During the second week of the interrogation, Arar is forced into a car tire so he is immobilized. This was used to scare him, but he is not beaten while in the tire, as with other prisoners.
- The **intensity of the beating and interrogation subsides after October 17**. Interrogators start using a new tactic, taking Arar into a room blindfolded so he can hear people talking about him, saying, " He knows lots of people who are terrorists," " We will get their numbers," " He is a liar," " He has been out of the country." They occasionally slap him on the face.
- October 23, 2002 Arar is taken from his cell and his beard is shaved. He is taken to another building where his interrogators and other investigators are waiting for him. They seem nervous. Arar is warned not to say he has been beaten, and is then taken into a room where he **meets with a Canadian consul. He is accompanied by his interrogator, a colonel and two other Syrian officials at all times**. The meeting lasts for ten minutes and Arar cries throughout.
- October 29, 2002 Arar receives his **second visit from Canadian consul**. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator throughout the meeting.
- Early November, 2002 In early November 2002, Arar is taken up from his cell to **sign and place his thumbprint on every page of a hand-written document** about seven pages long. He is not allowed to read it.
- He is shown another document about three pages long, with questions: Who are your friends? How long have you been out of the country? The last question is followed by empty lines. The first questions were already answered by his captors, but Arar is made to answer the last in his own handwriting as they dictate to him. He is told to write that he has been to Afghanistan. He is **forced to sign and place his thumb print** on the last page of that document.
- November 12, 2002 Arar receives his **third visit from Canadian consul**. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator throughout the meeting. Arar asks for money so he can purchase clothing and supplies. After the meeting, his captors are angry that he made that request, but he is not beaten.
- December 10, 2002 Arar receives his **fourth visit from Canadian consul**. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator throughout the meeting. The consul delivers money and two

weeks after the meeting, Arar is able to get new clothes and change for the first time since the flight from the US.

December, 2002

Some time in December Arar experiences a **nervous crisis**. His mind is crowded with memories, and he loses control and starts screaming. This happens three times. The second time a guard notices and takes him to wash his face.

January 7, 2003

Arar receives his **fifth visit from Canadian consul**. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator throughout the meeting.

February 18, 2003

Arar receives his **sixth visit** from Canadian consul. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator throughout the meeting. During the visit the **Syrian officials question why these visits are necessary**, saying they will take care of Arar.

Early April, 2003

Arar is taken from his cell and placed in an outdoor court. This is the **first time he has seen sunlight in six months**.

April 23, 2002

Arar is taken from his cell and his beard is shaved. He is told to comb his hair and wash his face well. He is taken outside, put in a car, and driven to another building. He is taken into the building and given tea. The Syrian officials seem very agitated and nervous. Arar is taken into a room to meet with the **Canadian Ambassador to Syria and MPs Marlene Catterall and Sarkis Assadourian**. He is accompanied by his interrogator and other Syrian officials throughout the meeting. After he is taken from the room he **overhears officials talking about media coverage** of his case.

June, 2003

Arar is taken outside into the **sunshine twice in June**.

He asks to meet with an investigator and his request is eventually granted. He **asks to be moved to a cell fit for human beings**. The Syrian official responds they are very busy because of the situation in Iraq and orders him back to his cell.

July, 2003

Arar asks again for a meeting with an investigator and his request is eventually granted. He tells him he has nothing to do with Al Qaeda. The **Syrian official asks Arar why he is accused of this, why they sent a delegation, and why these people hate him so much**. Arar says he does not know.

Arar notices his skin is turning yellow, and feels he is at the brink of a nervous breakdown.

July, 2003

Arar is taken from his cell and **questioned about William Sampson**. He does not know who this is, and says he does not. After the questioning **Arar wonders if this is a journalist**.

August 14, 2003

Arar receives his **seventh visit from the Canadian consul**. He is again accompanied by Syrian officials and his interrogator, and the head Syrian military intelligence is also there. **Arar has decided he cannot survive living in these conditions anymore, and that it is worth risking more physical torture to stop the ongoing psychological torture of remaining in the "grave."** He bursts and tells the Canadian consul, in English, in front of the Syrian officials, about his cell and the conditions he is living in. The consul asks if he has been tortured, and Arar replies yes, of course – at the beginning. After the meeting, Arar can see that his captors are very angry, and he is terrified that he will be physically tortured again, but he is not.

August 19, 2003

Arar is taken upstairs and made to sit on the floor. He is given a piece of paper to write on. He is **told to write, among other things, that he went to a training camp in Afghanistan**. The official kicks him every time he objects. He also threatens to put Arar in the tire. Arar is **forced to sign and put his thumb print on the last page**.

Arar is then taken to the Investigation Branch and placed in a collective cell, which is about six by four metres in size. There are about forty-six people crammed into the space – **the door is difficult to open because of the crowding**. The prisoners ask him who he is and where he has been and they are shocked to learn he has been in the "grave" for so long. Arar spends that night there.

August 20, 2003

Arar is blindfolded, put in a vehicle and driven to **Sednaya prison**. Once again Syrian officials will not tell him where he is going. He has heard from the other prisoners at the Investigation Branch that prisoners are tortured when they arrive there, so he tells officials there he had been recently visited by a Canadian consular official. This seems to have an impact – Arar is not tortured when he arrives at Sednaya prison.

He is placed in a collective cell and is able to talk with other prisoners and move around. Arar says **this was like heaven compared to where he was at the Palestine Branch**.

September 19 or 20, 2003 Arar is teaching English to some other prisoners in his cell when he hears others saying that another Canadian has arrived. He looks up and sees a thin man with a shaved head looking very weak. After some time he realizes this is **Abdullah Almalki**.

Almalki tells Arar he has also been at the Palestine Branch, and that he was in a cell like Arar's for even longer. He tells Arar he has been **severely tortured – with the tire and the cable. He says he was also hung upside down.** Almalki also says he was tortured at Sednaya prison just weeks before.

Sept. 28 to Oct. 4, 2003 Arar is called from his cell and told to collect his things. He is blindfolded, put in a van, and **driven back to the Palestine Branch.** He is put in one of the interrogation waiting rooms and **kept there for seven days. The entire time he is there he hears prisoners being tortured and screaming.** Arar is devastated and does not know what is happening to him.

At 9:00 p.m. on Saturday, October 4 he is **told that he will be going to Canada.** Arar does not believe this.

October 5, 2003 On Sunday morning Arar is told by the colonel to wash his face. The colonel seems very unhappy. They put chains on his wrists and legs, and put him in a car. He is driven to a court.

Arar still does not believe he is going to Canada. He is taken to meet with a prosecutor and asks again for a lawyer. He is told he will not need one.

The prosecutor reads from Arar's confession and **Arar tries to protest, saying he was beaten and forced to say he went to Afghanistan.** The prosecutor ignores him and tells him he must **sign and put his finger print on the document.** Arar does as he is told. Arar is not permitted to see the document. The prosecutor does not lay out any charges and tells him that he will be released.

Arar is taken outside and put in a car and driven back to the Palestine Branch where he meets with the head of the Syrian Military Intelligence and officials from the Canadian embassy. Arar believes, at last, that he is being released. The colonel escorts them out of the building into a waiting embassy car. Arar is driven to the Canadian embassy, and later taken to the Canadian Consul's home for a shower before taking his flight out of Syria.