

INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

U.S. claims Maher Arar still considered a threat to U.S.; will remain on watch list

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TORONTO

A Canadian engineer who is suing the U.S. government after having been sent to Syria for interrogation on links to terrorism remains a threat to the United States and will remain on a security watchlist, the U.S. ambassador to Canada said Friday.

Maher Arar, who was recently cleared by the Canadian government of any ties to terrorism, has become the best-known case of "extraordinary rendition," the CIA practice to send foreign terror suspects to a third countries for interrogation.

The Ottawa engineer was detained at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport in 2002 during a stopover on his way home to Canada from a vacation in Tunisia. The United States turned him over to Syria, where he says he was tortured and kept in a dark cell for nearly a year.

After his release, the Syrians did not charge him with any crimes and Arar made detailed allegations about torture that Canadian authorities determined were credible.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in September called on the United States to "come clean with its version of events" and demanded the White House apology for his rendition.

U.S. Ambassador David Wilkins said in a statement Friday that Arar still poses a threat.

"The decision to remove Mr. Arar from the United States in 2002 was made by U.S. officials based on our own independent assessment of the threat to the United States," Wilkins said.

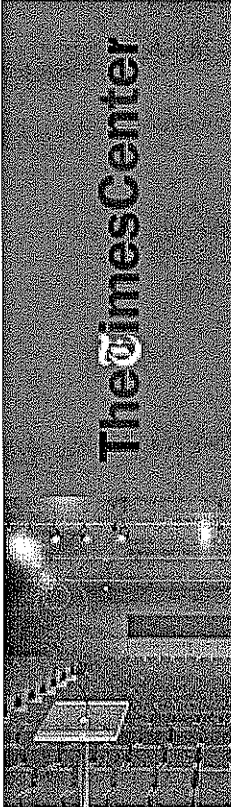
American officials had other sources of information about Arar, beyond that provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and continue to regard Arar as a potential threat, Wilkins said.

It was the first formal acknowledgment from Washington that the U.S. government remains suspicious of Arar, based on what it says are their own independent sources.

Arar, who graduated from McGill University in Montreal and also has a master's degree in telecommunications, is suing the U.S. government and seeking undisclosed damages.

The U.S. District Court of Appeals dismissed in February his lawsuit against former Attorney General John Ashcroft and other U.S. government officials, claiming the government's deportation of the dual Syrian-Canadian citizen was protected on national security grounds. His attorneys with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights filed an appeal on Tuesday.

Maria LaHood, one of those attorneys, said Wilkins' comments are part of the continued refusal by the United States to own up to errors.



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"I think that's typical of the way the U.S. has treated many of its mistakes in the so-called war on terror, so it's not surprising," she said.

LaHood said she found it curious that Wilkins would make his comments just after Arar's appeal was filed in the United State and while mediation in under way between Arar and the Canadian government over the C\$37 (US\$32) million in compensation that he is demanding.

"It seems to me, especially from the timing, that the governments are trying to protect themselves and each other," she said.

Canadian Justice Dennis O'Connor headed an inquiry that determined in September the RCMP had given the Americans false information about Arar, which encouraged his rendition.

Canada's national police force has come under intense criticism over its handling of the case, culminating last week in the resignation of Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli last week.

O'Connor's inquiry found no evidence linking Arar to terrorism, but the Americans continue to deny him clearance to enter the country or even fly over U.S. airspace.

Wilkins noted that O'Connor did not have access to everything in Arar's U.S. file.

"Mr. Arar's original removal from the United States in 2002 was based on information from a variety of sources, as is his current watchlist status," Wilkins said in his statement.

Wilkins did not elaborate on the evidence U.S. authorities may have, citing the lawsuit.

Sean McCormack, a spokesman for the U.S. State Department, said Friday that whatever evidence the United State has against Arar, it didn't come from State.

"The terror watchlist is managed here by the U.S. government. There's a lot of different inputs to it," McCormack said during the department's daily briefing. "I can tell you, it's not a State Department input that has resulted in his still being on the list."

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