

Eerie echoes of Maher Arar; Guest editorial from The Ottawa Citizen (Vancouver Sun, A16)

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The shadows surrounding the case of Abousfian Abdelrazik are deep and dark, but it's hard to shake the sense that there's something familiar — and disturbing — about it.

Once again, Canadians are learning about a suspected terrorist who is alleged to be an acquaintance of the highly unreliable al-Qaida informant, Abu Zubaydah.

Zubaydah is being held at Guantanamo Bay. His interrogation yielded all kinds of information about all kinds of people — including Mohamad Harkat and Adil Charkaoui, who are being held in Canada on security certificates.

In a recent book, U.S. journalist Ron Suskind wrote that Zubaydah was not the intelligence gold mine he seemed to be. Suskind portrays Zubaydah as a mentally disturbed, low-level operative, speaking under the effects of an interrogation that included waterboarding.

There's little doubt that Zubaydah moved in terrorist circles and knew a lot of people. Still, any specific information that originates with him is suspect. One of the accusations against Abdelrazik is that he associated with Abu Zubaydah. Incidentally, one of the accusations against Charkaoui is that he knows Abdelrazik.

Abdelrazik's case is a little different than those of Harkat and Charkaoui. In some respects, it bears more similarity to that of Maher Arar. Abdelrazik is a Canadian citizen. In 2003, he went to Sudan to visit his mother. He was arrested and thrown in jail. According to press reports, a Canadian document says Sudan jailed Abdelrazik "at our request," which, if true, is troubling — not just because Sudan's is a genocidal government but because, again, it seems likely that some of the intelligence implicating Abdelrazik originated with Abu Zubaydah, and is therefore nearly worthless.

This doesn't mean, however, that Abdelrazik poses no security threat. He has admitted to knowing Ahmed Ressam, the so-called Millennium Bomber (although he denies having any knowledge of Ressam's plot.) But between wariness and a Sudanese jail there is a vast gulf — or at least, there should be. Even if there is evidence against Abdelrazik, it would be immoral for Canada to respond to that evidence by helping to lock a Canadian citizen up in a Sudanese jail.

Abdelrazik is out of jail now, but he hasn't been able to come home. He's still on the United Nations terrorism blacklist, and hasn't been able to get a new Canadian passport. But the Canadian government has lately given him refuge in its embassy in Sudan. It's difficult to ascertain the government's position on Abdelrazik — if it even has one.

Canadian citizens are Canada's responsibility, and in the post–Arar era, the government must realize that that responsibility doesn't end at the border. Yes, national and global security require that Canada talk to unsavoury people and governments. But Canada should not act on unreliable evidence, or allow one of the world's worst rights abusers to lock up Canadians. That's no way to get to the truth.v