

Ottawa wants terrorism suspect taken off watch list

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Canada wants Abousfian Abdelrazik taken off the UN Security Council blacklist of suspected terrorists and al-Qaeda members, a senior Foreign Affairs official says.

But "delisting" Mr. Abdelrazik could take months and may be opposed by the United States and France, whose counterterrorism agencies have pegged him as a key al-Qaeda figure and a close associate of Abu Zubaydah, the brains behind the Sept. 11, 2001, suicide hijackings that destroyed New York's World Trade Center towers and damaged the Pentagon.

Even within the Harper government, there are clashes over delisting, with some agencies saying Mr. Abdelrazik remains a serious security risk.

Mr. Abdelrazik, 46, has been marooned in Sudan for nearly five years by a combination of the Canadian government's refusal to issue him a new passport, his inclusion on the "no-fly" list as a terrorist suspect and his designation as an al-Qaeda member. A secret Canadian document acknowledges that his incarceration in Sudan was "at our request," and his passport expired while he was in prison in Sudan in 2004.

Canada has "transmitted our support for Mr. Abdelrazik's delisting request to the 1267 Committee," Sean Robertson, the senior official responsible for handling his file at Foreign Affairs, wrote in an April 18 letter to Yavar Hameed, the Ottawa lawyer representing Mr. Abdelrazik.

The 1267 Committee refers to the United Nations Security Council resolution bearing that number that blacklists al-Qaeda suspects, freezing their assets, effectively denying them travel and alerting police in member states to their identities.

But it wasn't clear that the Harper government had endorsed, or perhaps was even aware of, the efforts by some senior bureaucrats to have Mr. Abdelrazik "delisted."

Officials in Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier's office declined comment when the letter was brought to their attention. Mr. Bernier has publicly said only that the case was "under review," and as recently as Wednesday was repeating the claim that the UN considered Mr. Abdelrazik an associate of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

That the Foreign Minister seemed unaware of the conclusion apparently reached by his department that Mr. Abdelrazik had been wrongly labelled a terrorist suspect was especially odd. In late March, when Mr. Bernier visited Khartoum, his chief of staff, Aaron Gairdner, and Calgary MP Deepak Obhrai, the parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs, had given Mr. Abdelrazik an audience, an unlikely meeting had the government still regarded him as an al-Qaeda member and terrorist suspect.

Meanwhile, Mr. Abdelrazik settled in for the weekend at the Canadian embassy in Khartoum, where the Harper government has granted him "temporary safe haven" while it considers whether to bring him home to Montreal after five years.

"They told me I should be ready for a long stay," Mr. Abdelrazik told his lawyer in a telephone call, recounting a conversation he had with a consular officer yesterday. That time estimate was in stark contrast to the suggestion, made by the same diplomat only a day earlier, that he would be there "only for a few days."

Mr. Hameed said he was pleased that Foreign Affairs had decided to support Mr. Abdelrazik's "delisting" but added that different agencies seemed to be at odds over whether Mr. Abdelrazik was a terrorist suspect: "There's confusion, some seem to still think he is a security concern; ... it's not clear there is a coherent position."

Mr. Abdelrazik flatly denies ever being an al-Qaeda member, training at jihadist camps in Afghanistan or being part of a terrorist sleeper cell in Montreal, all allegations filed with the UN by the U.S. government and echoed by CSIS and French counterterrorist agencies to some extent.

Meanwhile, a senior government official, speaking on condition that he not be identified by name or agency, told The Globe and Mail that the CSIS tag on the document saying Mr. Abdelrazik had been held in a Sudanese prison "at our request" was not an indication that the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service had initiated the document. Although the document was genuine, the source said, the CSIS tag referred to a subsequent acknowledgment that CSIS had seen the document during its redaction.

He declined to identify the agency that originated the document, which suggests that its incendiary admission – that a Canadian entity had arranged to have a Canadian, who had not been charged, imprisoned in a Sudanese jail for nearly a year – was an embarrassment to at least some parts of the government.