

In the new age of terror, no one is innocent

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Abousfian Abdelrazik has come home to Canada. But he has not yet been able to clear his name. He might never be able to. The war on terror just wasn't set up to allow that.

The sad truth about the era in which we live is that no one can be completely free -- no matter which country he calls home -- until he convinces the U.S. intelligence establishment that he is not a terrorist.

That is not easy to do.

This Canadian citizen, who spent six years stuck in Sudan, flew home on Saturday after a Federal Court judge forced the government to let him do so. The RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service have said they have no reason to believe Abdelrazik is connected to terrorism. Nonetheless, he's still being treated as a terrorist, even within Canada. He wasn't even allowed to fly from Toronto to Montreal; he had to drive. Abdelrazik's lawyer says the man has been tailed and videotaped since his return.

Abdelrazik is still on a United Nations terrorism blacklist, almost certainly at the request of the U.S. Because of that, his assets have been frozen and no one can give him money.

Even if Abdelrazik manages to convince Canadian society beyond a shadow of doubt that he is an innocent victim, the U.S. will still be watching him and, possibly, restricting his activities. Look at Maher Arar -- a hero and a victim in Canada, but still considered a terrorist in the U.S.

As Federal Court Judge Russel Zinn pointed out in his ruling demanding the return of Abdelrazik, when it comes to security watchlists, the onus is on the accused to prove he isn't a terrorist. This is difficult.

What makes it even more difficult is that the American intelligence establishment is stubborn. It really, really doesn't want to change its mind about anything.

There are two main reasons for the lingering suspicion against Abdelrazik. First, he knew the so-called Millennium Bomber, Ahmed Ressay, in Montreal. Abdelrazik acknowledges this; he testified for the prosecution at Ressay's trial.

Second, the UN listing accuses him of being "closely associated" with Abu Zubaydah, who the American government regards as a high-ranking al-Qaeda member. The evidence for this is very likely to have come from Abu Zubaydah himself.

This week, CBC Radio's The Current interviewed Neil Livingstone, CEO of the American security consulting firm ExecutiveAction. "In this case, it is believed, although there is not any public confirmation of this, that Mr. Abdelrazik was incriminated by Abu Zubaydah, who was a very senior al-Qaeda operative who

was captured by the United States, and it is believed that the information that Mr. Abu Zubaydah gave to the authorities has a lot to do with Mr. Abdelrazik's dilemma today," Livingstone said. "Mr. Zubaydah's information has been seen as very credible and very consistent."

Abu Zubaydah has certainly been a one-man information factory. But is he really credible and consistent? Journalist Ron Suskind wrote at length about the interrogation of Abu Zubaydah in his 2006 book *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of its Enemies Since 9/11*. The Abu Zubaydah that emerges in Suskind's book is far from the high-ranking "lieutenant" described in the UN listing. Instead, he's an expendable middleman with serious mental-health problems.

Abu Zubaydah had, as a young man, received a head wound. Suskind quotes Dan Coleman, an FBI expert on al-Qaeda, describing Abu Zubaydah as "insane, certifiable, split personality." He called him al-Qaeda's "travel agent" and said he "knew very little about real operations."

Whether Abu Zubaydah was insane, or merely highly imaginative and narcissistic, any information that comes from him is suspect. In 2002, once he had recovered sufficiently from gunshot wounds to the leg, groin and abdomen, the CIA waterboarded him -- at least 83 times.

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure I'd say anything that made my captors happy after just one waterboarding, never mind 83.

Because of Abu Zubaydah, the U.S. put Abdelrazik on the watchlist. Because of the watchlist, the Canadian government wouldn't let him come home. Because of the watchlist, Abdelrazik is still less free than you or me.

It is almost unbelievable that the U.S. government and the UN would continue to smear the character of Abdelrazik, or anyone else, based on the testimony of Abu Zubaydah. Yet it seems there is no other real evidence against Abdelrazik -- nothing that the RCMP and CSIS have been able to find, anyway.

That leaves us with the very scary possibility that a Canadian citizen is still having his rights curtailed because of the ramblings of a tortured, possibly delusional man, ramblings that were discredited years ago.

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