

Warning, this film could make you very angry

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At university, we male students used to say that it was impossible to take a beautiful young woman to the cinema and concentrate on the film. But in Canada, I've at last proved this to be untrue. Familiar with the Middle East and its abuses – and with the vicious policies of George Bush – we both sat absorbed by Rendition, Gavin Hood's powerful, appalling testimony of the torture of a "terrorist suspect" in an unidentified Arab capital after he was shipped there by CIA thugs in Washington.

Why did an Arab "terrorist" telephone an Egyptian chemical engineer – holder of a green card and living in Chicago with a pregnant American wife while he was attending an international conference in Johannesburg? Did he have knowledge of how to make bombs? (Unfortunately, yes – he was a chemical engineer – but the phone calls were mistakenly made to his number.)

He steps off his plane at Dulles International Airport and is immediately shipped off on a CIA jet to what looks suspiciously like Morocco – where, of course, the local cops don't pussyfoot about Queensberry rules during interrogation. A CIA operative from the local US embassy – played by a nervous Jake Gyllenhaal – has to witness the captive's torture while his wife pleads with congressmen in Washington to find him.

The Arab interrogator – who starts with muttered questions to the naked Egyptian in an underground prison – works his way up from beatings to a "black hole", to the notorious "waterboarding" and then to electricity charges through the captive's body. The senior Muhabarat questioner is, in fact, played by an Israeli and was so good that when he demanded to know how the al-Jazeera channel got exclusive footage of a suicide bombing before his own cops, my companion and I burst into laughter.

Well, suffice it to say that the CIA guy turns soft, rightly believes the Egyptian is innocent, forces his release by the local minister of interior, while the senior interrogator loses his daughter in the suicide bombing – there is a mind-numbing reversal of time sequences so that the bomb explodes both at the start and at the end of the film – while Meryl Streep as the catty, uncaring CIA boss is exposed for her wrong-doing. Not very realistic?

Well, think again. For in Canada lives Maher Arar, a totally harmless software engineer – originally from Damascus – who was picked up at JFK airport in New York and underwent an almost identical "rendition" to the fictional Egyptian in the movie. Suspected of being a member of al-Qa'ida – the Canadian Mounties had a hand in passing on this nonsense to the FBI – he was put on a CIA plane to Syria where he was held in an underground prison and tortured. The Canadian government later awarded Arar \$10m in compensation and he received a public apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

But Bush's thugs didn't get fazed like Streep's CIA boss. They still claim that Arar is a "terrorist suspect"; which is why, when he testified to a special US congressional meeting on 18 October, he had to appear on a giant video screen in Washington. He's still, you see, not allowed to enter the US. Personally, I'd stay in Canada – in case the FBI decided to ship him back to Syria for another round of torture. But save for the US congressmen – "let me personally give you what our government has not: an apology," Democratic congressman Bill Delahunt said humbly – there hasn't been a whimper from the Bush administration.

Even worse, it refused to reveal the "secret evidence" which it claimed it had on Arar – until the Canadian press got its claws on these "secret" papers and discovered they were hearsay evidence of an Arar visit to Afghanistan from an Arab prisoner in Minneapolis, Mohamed Elzahabi, whose brother, according to Arar, once repaired Arar's car in Montreal.

There was a lovely quote from America's Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff and Alberto Gonzales, the US attorney general at the time, that the evidence against Arar was "supported by information developed by US law enforcement agencies". Don't you just love that word "developed"? Doesn't it smell rotten? Doesn't it mean "fabricated"?

And what, one wonders, were Bush's toughs doing sending Arar off to Syria, a country that they themselves claim to be a "terrorist" state which supports "terrorist" organisations like Hizbollah. President Bush, it seems, wants to threaten Damascus, but is happy to rely on his brutal Syrian chums if they'll be obliging enough to plug in the electricity and attach the wires in an underground prison on Washington's behalf.

But then again, what can you expect of a president whose nominee for Alberto Gonzales's old job of attorney general, Michael Mukasey, tells senators that he doesn't "know what is involved" in the near-drowning "waterboarding" torture used by US forces during interrogations. "If waterboarding is torture, torture is not constitutional," the luckless Mukasey bleated.

Yes, and I suppose if electric shocks to the body constitute torture – if, mind you – that would be unconstitutional. Right? The New York Times readers at least spotted the immorality of Mukasey's remarks. A former US assistant attorney asked "how the United States could hope to regain its position as a respected world leader on the great issues of human rights if its chief law enforcement officer cannot even bring himself to acknowledge the undeniable verity that waterboarding constitutes torture...". As another reader pointed out, "Like pornography, torture doesn't require a definition."

Yet all is not lost for the torture lovers in America. Here's what Republican senator Arlen Specter – a firm friend of Israel – had to say about Mukasey's shameful remarks: "We're glad to see somebody who is strong, with a strong record, take over this department."

So is truth stranger than fiction? Or is Hollywood waking up – after Syriana and Munich – to the gross injustices of the Middle East and the shameless and illegal policies of the US in the region? Go and see Rendition – it will make you angry – and remember Arar. And you can take a beautiful woman along to share your fury.

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