

# OBAMA'S FIRST RENDITION LOOKS VERY QUESTIONABLE

If his first publicly known rendition case is any indication, there may well be a legitimate question as to whether Obama's rendition program is even more repulsive than that of George Bush. More evidence will be required for an informed answer, but Obama is off to a very inauspicious beginning. From Scott Horton in an exclusive for Huffington Post:

[I]n a federal court in suburban Washington, a case is unfolding that gives us a practical sense of what an Obama-era rendition looks like.

Raymond Azar, a 45-year-old Lebanese construction manager with a grade school education, is employed by Sima International, a Lebanon-based contractor that does work for the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also has the unlikely distinction of being the first target of a rendition carried out on the Obama watch.

According to court papers, on April 7, 2009, Azar and a Lebanese-American colleague, Dinorah Cobos, were seized by "at least eight" heavily armed FBI agents in Kabul, Afghanistan, where they had traveled for a meeting to discuss the status of one of his company's U.S. government contracts. The trip ended with Azar alighting in manacles from a Gulfstream V executive jet in Manassas, Virginia, where he was formally arrested and charged in a federal antitrust probe.

This rendition involved no black sites and was clearly driven by a desire to get the target quickly before a court. Also unlike renditions of the Bush-era,

the target wasn't even a terror suspect; rather, he was suspected of fraud. But in a troubling intimation of the last administration, accusations of torture hover menacingly over the case. According to papers filed by his lawyers, Azar was threatened, subjected to coercive interrogation techniques and induced to sign a confession. Azar claims he was hooded, stripped naked (while being photographed) and subjected to a "body cavity search."

I would say that the evidence of torture is an allegation at this point; but the optics of forced rendition for simple contracting fraud are disturbing. No terrorism, no deaths, and it does not even appear that Azar is a principal in the company, Sima International.

But in all three previous administrations, renditions have been considered a rare technique reserved for dangerous terrorists and violent drug kingpins. Azar is at worst a secondary figure in a small-time contract fraud case and is not accused in any way of terrorism. Why such aggressive and dramatic techniques were used in connection with the apprehension of a man suspected of a small-scale white collar crime remains entirely unclear.

Afghanistan is a sovereign country that, by all accounts, Azar was in legally and properly. The Afghan government further appears to have no knowledge of nor participation in, at least that it will admit, the forced removal of Azar at gunpoint by US agents. There are international extradition norms and, although there will certainly be a lot of facts being added to the picture as the case goes forward, the US actions do not seem to comport with them. While the government under Barack Obama seems to remain up to its old (and some new) egregious tricks, the one check and balance left in this country, the

Federal Judiciary, seems to be on the ball already:

Azar's allegations will now go before United States District Court Judge Gerald Bruce Lee, who must test Azar's claims to have been tortured and act on his motion to dismiss the charges and suppress his confession. Motions of this sort are generally reckoned a long shot, as most judges prefer to have everything fully developed at trial. But at a 90-minute hearing held on July 17, Judge Lee indicated his discomfort with the prosecutors' conduct, and specifically with their failure to supply the defendants with background information about the capture and interrogation of Azar and Cobos in Afghanistan. He asked three government prosecutors who were present if they were familiar with the Stevens case before Federal Judge Emmet G. Sullivan, in which a special prosecutor has been appointed to investigate potential criminal misconduct by the prosecutors. He insisted that the prosecutors immediately turn over to the defendants their records, including interview notes and any exculpatory materials.

Judge G. Bruce Lee. Sounds like a guy not to be messed with. Good.

Amazing isn't it that the US government can snatch Azar at gunpoint, bag him, tag him and fly him to Virginia for minor contracting fraud by his employer, yet they cannot seem to do so much as stop giving bonuses to KBR who kills American soldiers through their reckless disregard. Nor have they bagged and sensory deprived anybody from DynCorp, who has engaged in major fraud on defense contracts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Go figure.