

Doctor freed from Egyptian jail no extremist: colleagues

Colleagues of Dr. Tarek Loubani, a Canadian emergency physician recently freed from prison in Egypt, are calling for his speedy return and decrying mounting media backlash against the man.

Friends say their initial relief over Loubani's Oct. 5 release, with filmmaker John Greyson, was crushed when they learned Egyptian officials had placed the pair on a no-fly list. Loubani and Greyson were arrested Aug. 16 during violent antigovernment protests in Cairo and held seven weeks without charge. Now recovering in a safe house, it's unclear when the pair will be able to leave Egypt. An investigation into potential charges continues.

"We are told that they will wait in Cairo until the fate of all 602 protesters is determined," says Dr. Benjamin Thomson, a nephrologist at London Health Sciences Centre in Ontario.

Support for Loubani and Greyson has remained strong, both among the public and among Canada's medical leaders. "We remain concerned that the Egyptian authorities still won't let them out of the country and we call on these authorities to expedite their safe passage," Canadian Medical Association President Dr. Louis Hugo Francescutti urged in an email.

However, there's also been growing criticism of the men and their motivations for travelling to the region. Margaret Wente of *The Globe and Mail* wrote in a column that Loubani and Greyson are "troublemakers who knowingly stepped into a volatile situation." Sun Media's Ezra Levant referred to them in a column as "left-wing extremists" and "serial, professional protestors who engage in anti-Israel protest tourism."

Loubani has run afoul of authorities in Canada for protesting against federal cuts to refugee health care and in the West Bank over Israel's presence in the region, but colleagues say he's not a hot-head or grandstander.

and I think the proof of that is even while in prison he was doctor to his cellmates, organizing antibiotics and making sure every man got food."

In London's medical community, Loubani is known for his commitment to improving care for refugees and other marginalized groups. Colleagues share stories of Loubani's dedication, from small acts of compassion, such as buying lunch for a cash-strapped patient, to his willingness to shoulder tasks others avoid, such as hitting the streets to conduct check-ups on homeless patients.

"Tarek relates to people in this remarkable way across the whole spectrum, from people in positions of a lot of power to those in positions of no power," says Dr. Kate Hayman, an emergency medicine resident who also worked with Loubani to train physicians in Gaza. "He recognizes humanity across the board in a way that's tremendously unique and rare to see in action."

Even during medical school, Loubani was "quite passionate about making the world a better place," says Dr. Neil Arya, founding director of the Office of Global Health at Western University and Loubani's former instructor.

Arya says that Loubani's imprisonment and recent tarring by some members of the Canadian media speaks to the shrinking space in which physician advocates operate. "Such targeting has increased in the last two decades, and while health workers try to be impartial to get access, the very act of providing care to some populations has become a political act." — Lauren Vogel, *CMAJ*

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Courtesy of Cecilia Greyson

Egyptian officials held Canadian humanitarian Dr. Tarek Loubani for seven weeks without charge.

"Tarek has a history of principled opposition and peaceful protest for causes he believes in," says Dr. Amit Shah, a fellow medical professor at Western University in London, Ontario, who volunteered with Loubani to train physicians in Gaza. "Rather than being spun into something negative, if more people spoke out in a peaceful, rational way for those who don't have a voice, we'd have a better world overall."

Thomson, who has also accompanied Loubani to Gaza, says allegations of a hidden agenda are "patently false" to anyone who knows the man. "He's the first person to step up to care and be compassionate for anybody [regardless of the circumstance],