

## Kids Held Hostage

By Timothy W. Maier

**When it comes to international abductions by foreign spouses, the government often places diplomacy above the needs of American children and their parents.**

There was a glimmer of hope in the form of a Boston man -- a former member of the U.S. Special Forces whose Rambo-like assignments during the Vietnam War made his reputation. "I kidnap people for a living," Ed Ciriello tells *Insight*. That's exactly what Pat Roush, a San Francisco mother, needed. Ciriello was Roush's last hope when her daughters were kidnapped to Saudi Arabia by an international fugitive -- her former husband Khalid Al-Gheshayan.

After an abusive marriage, Al-Gheshayan defied a California custody order 13 years ago and kidnapped Roush's daughters Alia, now 20, and Aisha, 17. Roush pleaded with the State Department and successive U.S. ambassadors to Saudi Arabia, law-enforcement agencies and foreign governments to help recover her daughters. She even obtained an international warrant against her husband, but all to no avail: The daughters remained in Saudi Arabia. Under Saudi law the only way they could leave would be for Al-Gheshayan to grant permission. He refused.

With nowhere to turn, Roush prayed for a hero. What she found was Ciriello -- at a bargain price of \$30,000. The 64-year-old international sleuth sees himself as a character out of *The Equalizer* or *The Pretender*, two popular TV series in which the hero seeks private justice. "I am the last court of hope," Ciriello says. . . . The Boston detective came highly recommended. He knew the Middle East, had led successful missions to rescue children in Iran and Egypt, and in February he rescued children from Russia. But risks in the Roush mission were great. If caught, Ciriello might spend a year in a Saudi jail or, worse, be beheaded. But he charged ahead. First he moved into the heart of Saudi Arabia, where he got a job working undercover as an electrical inspector for a construction company just 50 miles from where the children were living outside the Saudi capital of Riyadh.

Once in the country, Ciriello formed a trusted team of Saudis willing to take the risk for the right price. But first he asked an intermediary to see if the children would leave voluntarily. The eldest, Alia, sent word she was afraid to go. Her father had told her, "Allah would punish the family if she ever left," Ciriello says.

On to Plan B. After two years of meticulously planning every detail, the date for action was set for Jan. 18, 1991. The timing seemed perfect: The Persian Gulf War had cast an uneasiness over the region and provided just the right distraction to recover the children -- or so Ciriello thought.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, Roush waited by the phone in her San Francisco home for word from Ciriello about the success of the mission. In her basement, tucked away in boxes, were Barbie dolls and stuffed animals, evidence of her children's childhood lost forever. "I never gave them away because they are like sealed in time," she tells *Insight*, sobbing. "My heart is sealed in time. It's a symbol of how much I love them."

On the crowded Saudi streets, Ciriello's heavily armed team drove off in a van, a truck and a Chevy Blazer. He drove the Blazer, trailing the other two vehicles at a safe distance, when out of nowhere Saudi police who had been chasing an unrelated vehicle spotted the convoy of rescuers. The coincidence was strange, but Ciriello's locals were a trigger-happy bunch and opened fire on the police. "It all erupted so fast," he recalls

In the crossfire, police shot and killed Ciriello's lead driver. Then the translator for his Saudi group, a drug and whiskey dealer nicknamed "Ali Baba" who had been brought in to get the girls across the border, ran to Ciriello's car to try to escape. The detective pulled out his six-shooter and shot Ali Baba dead. "If he'd got in the car I would have been jailed in 10 seconds," Ciriello says. "He was the weak link. He would have told the

police I organized it."

The Saudi police detained Ciriello and grilled him in the good-cop/bad-cop routine, but eventually released him. Bittersweet freedom. "I failed," he says. "That's the bottom line and that's tough."

Ciriello's wife called Roush to give her the bad news. The girls remained with Al-Gheshayan -- whose medical records obtained by Insight show he has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. There would be no more rescues.

Four years after the failed rescue attempt, Roush saw her girls for the first time in 10 years during an arranged visit in Saudi Arabia. It was one two-hour visit -- not the daily visits promised by the Saudi government during a two-month period. "I turned around and there they were," Roush says. "They took their veils off their faces and I didn't recognize them. I kept kissing them and telling them, 'I love you. I'm your mother. I love you.' I said it in Arabic and English. I kept saying, 'I'm going to get you out of here.'"

Bursting into tears, Roush recalls Alia telling her, "They never let me do anything. No one is allowed to come to the house. Don't leave me Mama. Take me home." And Aisha, who no longer speaks English, told her, "I don't remember you. How old am I?" Recalling the pleas of her youngest, Roush sobs, "My God, she didn't know her own date of birth!"

The last opportunity to bargain for the freedom of the captive girls came in 1996, when then-U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Ray Mabus tried to deny her ex-husband and his relatives visas to the United States. One of Al-Gheshayan's relatives desperately needed medical treatment in the United States and was denied entry unless the girls were released. But when Mabus resigned and was replaced by liberal Democratic former senator Wyche Fowler of Georgia, Fowler called the deal illegal and lifted the hold on the visas.

So the daughters remain captive of their alleged mentally ill father in a state of feudal subservience. "This government is not going to risk its relationship with a rich foreign government for a couple of kidnapped American kids unless someone steals Chelsea and one of the Kennedy kids," Ciriello says. "Who is going to rescue them?"

Roush's experience is not uncommon. Since the 1970s, the State Department says it has been contacted for help in about 11,000 international child abductions where a parent was involved. The Justice Department reports some 354,100 cases of parental abductions a year, but fails to identify how many are international. The State Department estimates an average of 400 to 500 new international cases per year -- a number critics charge is a vast underestimate.

"It is important not to get lost in statistics," says Paula Fass, a historian at the University of California at Berkeley and author of *Kidnapped: Child Abduction in America*. Fass tells Insight, "What is important is that each and every one of these children matters. The statistics game is being played out there. Keep an eye on the fact that the lives and well-being of children are being sacrificed. They are being held private hostage. The foreign government blinks at it; the government here blinks at it."

Not anymore, perhaps. Faced with a bombardment of complaints from parents, Insight has learned that House International Relations Committee Chairman Benjamin Gilman of New York requested the General Accounting Office to launch an investigation into how these cases are handled. Gilman wants an accurate statistical report, is concerned about whether the State Department is doing its job in these abduction cases and has asked whether more money and tougher legislation are needed.

Current legal authority to which officials turn on these issues include the International Parental Child

Abduction Act, or IPCA, and laws prohibiting unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. Since IPCA was enacted in 1993, about 50 cases have been brought -- with as few as 10 convictions -- and about 165 unlawful-flight cases, says FBI Special Agent Mark Miller, who works in the FBI'S Washington office of crimes against children. "The prosecution isn't very high either because countries don't honor extradition laws or don't recognize parental kidnapping as a crime," he says.

Parents have learned that all too well, says Fred Rooney, a Bethlehem, Pa., attorney who specializes in child-abduction cases. "Everyone hits a wall. That's the reality of these cases. All laws working in your favor stops at our border. Look, if the United States put in some muscle to do treaties such as military agreements with issues involving children these kids would be home."

Roush's case alerted Congress and was instrumental in securing the recent passage of two new laws -- the International Religious Persecution Act, which focuses on the kidnapping for forced religious conversion of minors taken abroad, and an amendment Democratic Sen. Diane Feinstein of California attached to an omnibus spending bill (HR4328) denying U.S. visas to family members of child kidnappers. While it has yet to be seen how these laws will affect offending countries such as Saudi Arabia, it has offered hope to victim families. So did Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms of North Carolina, when he held hearings on the issue last year. Gilman, Helms' counterpart in the House, headed a workshop on the problem.

The Helms hearings made clear that parental abduction has exploded in the United States. "It has become a sign of family disorder," Fass says. "It's a symbol of the terrible state of family. Even the courts can't trust some fathers and mothers with their own children."

And the real victims are the children. A recent study by the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law shows that in 60 percent of international abduction cases the children never are returned even though their whereabouts are known. The study says what many parents told Insight -- that is, judges often don't take preventive measures, even ignoring threats to flee the country.

In the last few years the State Department has acknowledged the severity of the problem by establishing a special office called the Child Custody Unit -- created as a result of Roush's persistence. The FBI added an allied special unit in 1997. But Insight has learned that some parents whose children have been kidnapped to foreign countries by spouses are being dismissed as annoyances by State Department and law-enforcement personnel exasperated by their pleas. Some report having the telephone receiver slapped down in their ear.

Maureen Dabbagh's daughter, Nadia, was kidnapped six years ago to Syria. She formed an advocacy group called PARENTS, which plans a conference May 13 in Virginia to help parents of internationally kidnapped children who have received no assistance from the State Department. "I feel like I am a pain in the State Department's butt," she says. "I don't even deal with the [Child Custody] office. I urge parents to get their files under Freedom of Information [Act requests] because I know the most horrendous stuff is written in those [case] files. The mother is said to be crazy or they make fun of their names."

Dave Thelon, president of the Georgia-based nonprofit Missing Children Committee, is collecting State Department case files that support Dabbagh's charges and providing them to the Government Accounting Office. "They show a pattern," Thelon says. For example, a file provided to Insight says, "Can't get along with anyone"; another letter characterized a distraught mother as "unusually combative and de-manding" who gives an "impression of being mentally unbalanced" and "vulgar and abusive."

In other cases, when grieving parents asked for help, the State Department replied it couldn't find where the estranged spouse was living with the child. Margaret McClain, whose 6-year-old daughter Heidi was kidnapped by her ex-husband to Saudi Arabia in 1997, was told by the State Department that they couldn't find

where her ex-husband was living. She then found him herself by calling directory assistance, she says.

When Insight asked State to respond to the concerns of some of these parents, officials faxed their 26-page guide to help parents guard against international abduction, emphasizing that State will not interfere to bring a kidnapped child home. Asked directly about hostile memos written for the files, officials at the State Department said they would get back with a response. They never did.

Fass says that in the larger political picture the State Department views the stolen children as "expendable." State no doubt thinks it has bigger game to hunt. It doesn't want to spend capital on a kid, says Fass. Perhaps so: The big news from the State Department in February was the potential for developing oil contracts with Saudi Arabia -- not bringing back the kidnapped children.

Dabbagh, who spent \$200,000 in unsuccessful attempts to recover her daughter, agrees. In fact, documents obtained by Insight show that the State Department sometimes refers to parental abduction cases as "private custody disputes between two parents. Not for us to take sides." Often participation by State is a "detriment to the case" because it is understaffed and repeatedly loses documentation, Dabbagh says. "They're a great hindrance."

Dabbagh not only has suffered, she has become an expert and is the author of *The Comprehensive Guide to the Recovery of Internationally Abducted Children*. She tells how her ex-husband abandoned their daughter about three years ago to a Middle East terrorist group. After it appeared that the group might return the child to the mother, the ex-husband reclaimed her.

In many ways Dabbagh's case is typical. She married Mohammed Kinshep, a Muslim student from the Middle East who told her he needed to marry for a green card. She said she found his accent "sexy" and became pregnant six months after their wedding. While they were married, his family arranged for him to marry another woman in Saudi Arabia. "He was making marriage plans in front of me," she says.

Dabbagh filed for divorce in 1992 after her husband's physical abuse escalated into abuse of her daughter. Although she was granted custody of the child, the courts ruled Kinshep could have unsupervised visitation. "My ex had made it perfectly clear that he would abduct the child if I divorced him," she says. "His payback was to take the thing I love most, which was my daughter."

This case caught the eye of Sen. Charles S. Robb, a Virginia Democrat who sponsored a successful resolution to bring Nadia home -- the one and only such resolution ever approved. Recently the ex-husband took the child to Saudi Arabia. Kinshep is not a Saudi citizen so, under pressure from the senator, the Saudi government forced him to turn over the child to the U.S. Embassy in that country. Nadia now awaits a possible trip home.

Saudi Arabia is perhaps the hardest country from which to recover a child. Like most Middle Eastern countries it is not a party to the Hague Convention -- an international agreement which requires that children wrongly removed from the country where they belong must be returned. So far 52 nations and Hong Kong are signatories to the agreement. Mexico (158 cases) and Canada (42 cases) are parties that frequently violate the treaty. Saudi Arabia, though not a signatory, is responsible for stonewalling at least 52 cases.

Adel Al-Jubier, the Saudi embassy's first secretary in Washington, says his country must follow its own laws which, under Muslim guidelines, regard child custody as a paternal prerogative. "We cannot take Saudi children who are legally Saudi citizens, irrespective of the fact that they have an American passport, and remove them from their father who has a court order from a Saudi court and deliver them to their non-Saudi parent, period," he told the San Francisco Examiner.

That's why Dabbagh says "we need an alternative source for non-Hague countries. I'm not a diplomat or law-enforcement officer. I am just a mom. But I had to learn how to talk to foreign authorities. It becomes an obsession. You want to know your child is safe, especially with a female child in Saudi Arabia. Your child could be forced to marry at 9 years of age or suffer genital mutilation."

"Even when the country is a signatory to the Hague agreement, so what?" asks Tom Sylvester, an Ohio man whose ex-wife abducted his 13-month-old daughter, Carina, to Austria in 1995. For Sylvester it has been a nightmare to get Austria's government to follow the Hague rules even though the Austrian courts granted him custody. The State Department and U.S. law enforcement have brushed him off, saying that in international affairs criminal cases take a back seat to civil cases. "There is no enforcement of law at the Department of Justice," he says of his efforts to recover his child. "The DOJ is more hostile than helpful."

The Hague treaty often fails in poorer nations because of financial constraints, adds attorney Rooney. The study by the American Bar Association Center on Children and Law shows parents spent an average of \$33,500 in search and recovery of their children, and a quarter of left-behind parents spent \$75,000 or more. Rooney says attorneys contribute to the problem by demanding \$10,000 retainers to handle such cases. "If you are poor or working class you have virtually no way to work the system to get your child back," he says. Though this is not the case in the United Kingdom where the government provides free legal representation for parents whose children are abducted. "The issue of economics is a nonissue [in the U.K.]. In the U.S., the richest country in the world, we do not provide parents with representation unless they can pay for it or find someone to do it for free."

Rooney says attorneys can look for other funding to help victims meet the costs, such as the courts. He points to one of his cases in which a mother from Germany who lacked funds to get her children back contacted Rooney and his associate, Linda Gardner, for help. Christine Lops' children, Carmen and Claire, had been kidnapped in a custody dispute by her ex-husband Michael, who took them from Germany to Georgia in 1995. A federal judge settled the score recently by awarding \$102,500 to Rooney and his team and granting legal custody to the German mother. The children now live in Germany

In that case the FBI couldn't find, or didn't want to find, the children when they should have traced the husband's family property to locate them, says child advocate Thelon. The FBI is the first to admit that parental-abduction cases do not get high priority compared to the 114,000 stranger abductions that occur each year. "There isn't going to be a massive manhunt unless the circumstances dictate it," says FBI Agent Frank Scafidi, a public-information officer who used to work on kidnapping cases. "Because the degree of safety is not the same when compared to stranger abduction."

Kimmery Mackie, whose baby, Alex, has been abducted twice in the last three years by an ex-boyfriend, advises victims not to tell police at first that the kidnapper is a parent. When she told the FBI the first time who abducted Alex, there was no rush to solve the case and no callbacks. The second time, when she called 911 and did not say who took Alex, she got an immediate response. "The agent I tried to work with on the first case said he doesn't call people back. He wouldn't listen. I feel Alex was at a high risk of ending up dead!" Alex was recovered and returned to his mother. "I'm one of the lucky ones," says Mackie.

Nancy Hammer is director of the international division of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, or NCMEC, the clearinghouse that works closely with the State Department on these cases. Hammer agrees that some law-enforcement officers do not prioritize parental kidnappings. "The mind-set is that the child is with a parent. How bad can it be? We are just now getting studies on how bad it can be." At a minimum, Hammer says, children stolen away under these circumstances are denied knowing one parent, lied to and told that the victim-parent didn't want or love them. Often they are abused and forced into a life on the run in which they cannot even use their real name.

In his research on parental abductions Geoffrey Greif, a professor of social work at the University of Maryland, found that about a third of the children who have been recovered still are suffering. "It is a significant emotional marker in their lives," he says. A 1990 Justice Department study found that 16 percent of all family-abduction cases result in serious mental harm to a child. In 4 percent of the cases, a child experienced physical abuse and in 1 percent of the cases the child suffered sexual abuse.

Monica Stowers, a Houston mother, knows about abuse. Her children were abducted by their Saudi father. A former kindergarten teacher, Stowers has been fighting to return to the United States with her children since being refused refuge in the U.S. Embassy in 1990. Both of the children, Amjad, 15, and Rasheed, 22, were born in the United States and hold dual U.S.-Saudi citizenship. The Muslim father was awarded custody in a 1984 Saudi divorce, at which time Stowers' Saudi citizenship was revoked and she was thrown out of the country.

She saw her children again in 1988 when her son, who had turned 14, reached an age at which he could sponsor her for a visa -- a requirement under Saudi law. When she saw her children again in 1990, she learned her daughter had been sexually abused by a "stepmother," and a forced marriage was planned according to documents obtained by Insight. She says she photographed her daughter's bruises and her bloody underwear, and provided the evidence to the U.S. Embassy. The State Department later told Congress that no such evidence existed.

Rasheed, Stowers' son, escaped five years ago and now lives in Houston, but Monica refuses to leave Saudi Arabia without her daughter. She has been jailed repeatedly, survived an assassination plot and faces deportation. In the first week of February, her mother, Ethel, said Stowers was told by the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia that when Amjad is 18 she will be free to leave.

"But I don't believe anything they say," the grandmother tells Insight. "Amjad says if they deport her mother, she will kill herself. She hates them all!"