

Kids Held Captive in Saudi Arabia

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By Timothy W. Maier



Media Credit: Roger Wollenberg/UPI
President Bush failed to ask al-Faisal about the kids.

After a recent emotionally charged congressional hearing Rep. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), chairman of the House Government Reform Committee, vowed to persuade President George W. Bush to take action against Saudi Arabian kidnappers who have held U.S. children captive in some cases as long as 16 years.

Burton's pledge came after gut-wrenching testimony from three American mothers who painfully described how their children became victims of international parental kidnapping in Saudi Arabia. The stories of Pat Roush, Monica Stowers and Miriam Hernandez-Davis have been detailed in *Insight* since this magazine began reporting on the issue in 1999 [see "Stolen Kids Become Pawns in Terror War," Dec. 17, 2001; "All Talk, No Action on Stolen Children," June 18, 2001; "Double Standard for American Children," March 6, 2000; and "Kids Held Hostage," March 8, 1999]. But they are not alone. The State Department has revealed that there are 46 known cases concerning 92 children being held captive in Saudi Arabia.

After the June 12 hearing, Burton fired off two strongly worded letters to Bush, since obtained by *Insight*. Burton urged the president to instruct the State Department to withhold the visas of the kidnappers and their extended family members who are holding U.S. citizens against their will. The policy had been in place briefly in 1996, after a deal apparently was struck to free Roush's daughters in exchange for allowing one of her ex-husband's relatives to receive cancer treatment in the United States. That deal ended when Ray Mabus, U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia, resigned and was replaced by former senator Wyche Fowler (D-Ga.), who lifted the ban on the relative.

"If Saudi Arabia is not willing to recognize the importance of American law and the rights of American citizens, it is difficult to see how Saudi Arabia will fully cooperate with the U.S. in the war on terror," Burton charged in one of his letters to Bush. In addition, Burton asked the president personally to intervene in the Roush and Stowers cases. (Hernandez-Davis' daughter, Dria, escaped Saudi Arabia in a dramatic incident reported by *Insight* [see "A Great Escape," Feb. 14, 2000] and now lives in Miami.) Burton also has requested a meeting with Saudi Arabia's minister of foreign affairs. At press time the chairman had not received a response from either the White House or the Saudis.

Before the hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Bill Burns raised the matter with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. But after the hearing Bush missed a golden opportunity to pursue the issue with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer tried to provide an excuse for Bush when pressed about the issue. "It's a heartbreaking, difficult issue that the State Department

works very hard on in a very individual way to do what's best for the interests of the child," Fleischer stated. "It's just as complicated and just as sad as any domestic case here where you have parents who are fighting for the custody of a child, and it's compounded and made more difficult by the fact that it involves laws of a sovereign nation that the United States cannot control, whether it's Saudi Arabia or any other nation."

But as the Wall Street Journal recently pointed out, it's quite the contrary when the shoe is on the other foot. Last January, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayif told the Arab News that the United States should send back the captured Saudi nationals being held in Guantanamo, Cuba. "We'll demand that the Saudi detainees be handed over, because they are subject to the kingdom's rules," Prince Nayif stated.

Upon learning of Fleischer's response to the Burton hearings, a frustrated Roush called it a "Bush kiss-off," considering that in her case an international-fugitive arrest warrant has been issued for her ex-husband. "How can they continue to refer to this criminal destruction of my daughters' lives as a child-custody issue — a private-citizen matter?" Roush asks Insight. "They are grown women who have been stripped of all their rights as human beings for 16 years and now have been sold into arranged marriages and impregnated by Saudi men. It amazes me to see the lengths to which Washington will go to protect the Saudis and disavow my American daughters."

Roush told the committee, "If members of Congress are so concerned about human rights and fair treatment of Saudi al-Qaeda prisoners held in Cuba, and even make special trips to inspect that facility at Guantanamo, why aren't they outraged about what has happened to my daughters? Why don't they make an exchange — innocent daughters for the Saudi al-Qaeda killers?"

Roush, trained as a nurse, has fought for 16 years to bring home her daughters, Alia and Aisha, who were taken from her when they were ages 7 and 3, respectively. Her husband, Khalid al-Gheshayan, has been arrested repeatedly and was diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic while in the United States. The daughters are forbidden to leave Saudi Arabia because, under Saudi law, female "citizens" cannot leave the country without written permission of a father or husband. Roush was allowed to see her daughters once for two hours in 1995. At that time Alia begged her not to leave and to take her and her sister home to America.

Roush says the State Department informed her on the eve of the Burton hearing that her youngest daughter, Aisha, will be sold and married off in retaliation for her testimony to the House Government Reform Committee. "My daughters have been taken hostage by a medieval, totalitarian system, and the central authority of our government — the U.S. Department of State — has done everything to enable that system to destroy the lives of my beloved daughters," Roush told the committee.

After the hearing State Department spokesman Richard Boucher referred to the Roush and other international parental-kidnapping cases as "civil matters" and further argued that Roush's daughters now are adults old enough to make up their own minds. The only problem is that in Saudi Arabia they neither are free to speak their own minds nor to leave without permission of their father or (now) husbands.

"They languish in a medieval madness filled with superstition and religious fanaticism," Roush testified. "The country is ruled by a single family of corrupt, degenerative, greedy princes. The prize, of course, is the oil, and the stakes are high. High enough for the government of the United States to sacrifice any ideals and scruples they might have to keep this totalitarian regime operating."

Perhaps the most heartbreaking moment during the hearing came from Stowers. She testified via videotape from Saudi Arabia about how the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh ordered

two U.S. Marines forcibly to remove her and her children, Rasheed and Amjad Radwan, from the embassy when they went there begging to be taken back to the United States. (The Pentagon, now under Donald Rumsfeld, says the U.S. Marines no longer will be doing that.) "One of them apologized and said they were only doing their job," she recalled tearfully.

Stowers' children, as Insight previously reported, were both physically and emotionally abused. Rasheed was raped by a relative of his father at age 7 but eventually managed to escape. He courageously returned at age 19 to help his mother, who chose to remain behind to be near her daughter, Amjad.

The grandmother, Ethel Stowers, told Burton's committee that her daughter needs cancer treatment but refuses to leave Amjad behind. "We have no help," she sobbed. "They want to kill us. Our family has been destroyed. We begged the State Department, senators and Congress for help. We got nothing but silence. ... Why can't the U.S. help our children? Can anyone tell me? Can someone help me, please!"

Hernandez-Davis knows exactly how the Stowers family feels. Her daughter Dria was held for two years in Saudi Arabia. When Dria secretly called her mother collect from Saudi, the mother taped her heartbreaking phone calls depicting how the father beat her and forced her to eat off the floor because she refused to denounce her Christian faith. The tapes were sent to senators, representatives and the White House. When no help came, brave little Dria engineered her own escape at age 13.

The State Department had little to say at the hearing other than that this indeed was a "crisis." Diana Aundruch, deputy assistant secretary of state for overseas citizen services did not even prepare a statement. Ryan Cocker, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, testified that U.S. policy is to "work with the legal structure of the country in which the child is located" but admitted American children often never are returned home.

When Burton pressed the State Department on its plan of action to help these families, he was met with silence. "There is no plan," Burton declared. He then chastised the State Department for taking the view that the U.S. Embassy is a guest on Saudi soil. "That's ridiculous," Burton said between clenched teeth. "Our embassy is on American soil. They can kick us out, but I guarantee you there will be retribution if they did."

Burton also vowed that these hearings are not over. "This is not going to stop," he promised. "If I have to hold 10 hearings and use the remainder of my time, then we're going to do it."

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