

Stolen Kids Become Pawns in Terror War

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By Timothy W. Maier

As the war in Afghanistan continued, many of America's forgotten children remained trapped in Middle Eastern countries that soon could be pulled into war as the United States considers strikes against other states that sponsor terrorism. These stolen children — perhaps as many as 11,000 U.S. citizens — were stripped of their civil rights the day they became victims of international parental kidnapping.

Insight has learned that some of these kidnapped children already are being used as pawns by abductors hoping to negotiate a deal to flee their war-torn countries. Their stories and pleas, revealed in a series of investigative reports by Insight, have been all but ignored by both the State and Justice departments (see "All Talk, No Action on Stolen Children," June 18). But that appears to be changing as the FBI has taken another look at some of these cases because the kidnapers may have ties to terrorist groups or be terrorists themselves. In fact, Insight has learned, a series of Syrian international parental-abduction cases are under investigation by the FBI. In one case a New York father threatened to kidnap his children, join Osama bin Laden and become a martyr for Islam.

For years, however, the FBI and State Department have had little interest in cases that they historically have referred to as custody disputes. For example, prior to Sept. 11, two dozen U.S. senators wrote to Secretary of State Colin Powell and asked for his personal involvement with Saudi Arabian authorities to secure the release of California mother Pat Roush's two daughters, Alia, 19, and Aisha, 23, who have been held for 16 years. Even though Robert Jordan, the U.S. ambassador in Riyadh, promised to make the case a priority, the State Department has done nothing. While the FBI has an international warrant for the arrest of Roush's ex-husband, Khalid Al-Gheshayan, the warrants in many cases have proved useless.

Now, law-enforcement authorities appear to be more interested in abductors who may be terrorists than the children themselves, parents charge. "I suggest that this is backward," Roush says. "I suggest that if our government will not make the Saudis behave reasonably and humanely in a small matter — namely, allowing a couple of young American women to return to the land of their birth, from which they were criminally abducted — they will hardly be successful in getting the Saudis to stop their support for terrorism. President [George W.] Bush has said the world must choose sides — for the terrorists or against them. The Saudis can start to choose the right side by letting my daughters come home."

Roush points to a double standard. The Bush administration blasts the Taliban for its abominable human-rights record and harsh treatment of women while closing its eyes to how Saudi Arabia treats its women. And, just as in Afghanistan under the Taliban, there is no freedom of religion or so much as a single church or synagogue in Saudi Arabia. By law, Saudi converts to Christianity are beheaded. As in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, Saudi women may not work outside the home or drive a car. They can't even travel without permission of their father or husband.

Left-behind parents of children kidnapped to Saudi Arabia also are concerned about what they call brainwashing, in which efforts are made to turn their children against the United States. Mothers express concern that teen-age sons are being indoctrinated to become a threat to the United States. "I know one mother who got her 16-year-old son back and he swore a jihad against her," says Maureen Dabbagh, president of PARENT, an organization that assists parents whose children become victims of international parental kidnapping. "She was in utter fear for her life. The police did not know what to do

because they had no idea what this meant. She could not even go to sleep at night."

Roush has been particularly critical of Saudi Arabia's ties to terrorist organizations. Not surprisingly, 15 of the 19 hijackers on Sept. 11 were Saudi, and the Riyadh regime has continued "to drag its feet on cutting funds available to Osama bin Laden's terrorist network," Roush says. "The Saudis subsidize Muslim radicals worldwide, including radical Wahabi clerics in the United States and the United Kingdom. Riyadh has been the largest donor to the Taliban, as well as Pakistan's militant madrassa religious schools where the Taliban were created."

While there have been about 11,000 cases of international child abduction from the United States in the last decade, it is unclear how many cases concern the Middle East, although parental groups that network with many of the grieving families suggest the number could be as high as 1,000. Since Middle Eastern countries are not parties to The Hague Convention, an international agreement that requires the return of children wrongly removed from the country where they belong, the children rarely are recovered unless they make a daring escape with the help of an independent rescue team. Because of the risk and high cost of these rescues, parents are reduced to putting their faith in the FBI and State Department and hoping an international warrant will do the job.

While these warrants are issued in too few cases and have been all but useless in the past, that may change as the war moves closer to some of the kidnapers. "Some of these cowards are trying to negotiate deals with the mothers they have emotionally terrorized, requesting the warrants be dropped so they can leave the Middle East for fear they may be caught in the fighting," Dabbagh says.

One such kidnapper, Abdulbaset al-Omary, suspiciously contacted the State Department a week before Sept. 11 in an effort to cut a deal to get out of Saudi Arabia, says Margaret McClain, whose 9-year-old daughter, Heidi, was abducted to that country in 1997. "Apparently he walked into a U.S. facility in Saudi Arabia and offered to negotiate a deal where I would drop charges a week before the New York bombing," McClain tells Insight. "It was very suspicious. He was scared. He must have known something was going to happen there or here and he wanted to get out of the country."

McClain was told by the State Department of al-Omary's offer. But the deal would have had to be approved by the U.S. attorney general, she says. In the meantime, a bomb had gone off close to where her ex-husband and daughter are living, the mother says.

The FBI contacted McClain in the aftermath of Sept. 11 because one of the dead hijackers had a last name similar to that of her ex-husband. Abdulaziz al-Omari, who helped crash American Airlines Flight 11 into the World Trade Center, may be a brother or close relative of her former husband, McClain says. She reminded FBI agents that she had told the bureau earlier that she saw him in a 1994 PBS film called Jihad in America, filmed unknowingly while attending an alleged secret terrorist meeting.

All attempts by McClain since the kidnapping to arrange a visit to see her daughter have failed. The State Department recently attempted to do a welfare check but that too failed when the former husband simply refused to take Heidi to be interviewed by U.S. authorities. "Saudi parents are on high alerts. They don't want to be associated with Americans right now," McClain says.

McClain is not the only American whose daughter may be in the hands of terrorists. Dabbagh started PARENT after her daughter, Nadia, was abducted to Saudi Arabia nearly eight years ago by her ex-husband, Mohamad Hisham Dabbagh. Wanted for crimes in Saudi Arabia, he abandoned her to a Middle East terrorist group in Syria, where she remains. Dabbagh, who is hoping to negotiate a visitation arrangement, already had received a custody order from an Islamic court but has been told she must

pay still more money to a Syrian lawyer before she will be allowed to visit her daughter. It is money she does not have. "I don't understand," Dabbagh says. "They free hostages in Kabul by armed force but won't lift a finger for an American child who is caught in the crossfire. This is emotional terrorism."

The FBI has shown no interest in Dabbagh's case, but she says the bureau actively is pursuing other cases where some of the kidnappers have sworn to seek revenge upon the United States. Parents who for years have demanded U.S. law-enforcement agencies take a hard look at the kidnappers say they feel both vindicated and violated. Janet Greer, whose 3-year-old daughter, Sarah, was kidnapped by the child's father and taken to Egypt in 1997, put it this way during an Insightmag.com discussion forum:

"While the media report that the CIA and intelligence community do not have enough people, spies or snitches to give them information, the mothers of children abducted to Middle East countries wonder why their information was never considered important. American children are being abducted by terrorists, but no one is crying for these children. Mothers begged FBI agents to examine [their information] in the hope they would recover their children. Since the FBI, CIA and other law-enforcement agencies did not feel the information and evidence they had was vital to national security, perhaps the press should examine this evidence. After all, we are at war."

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