

# ARABIAN NIGHTMARE: THE PATRICIA ROUSH CASE

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PATRICIA ROUSH'S 17-YEAR CAMPAIGN TO GET HER DAUGHTERS BACK FROM SAUDI ARABIA HAS RECEIVED A LOT OF PUBLICITY AND HIGH-LEVEL CONGRESSIONAL ATTENTION, BUT TO NO AVAIL. SHE BLAMES THE STATE DEPARTMENT FOR NOT DOING MORE TO HELP.

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BY GEORGE GEDDA

**I**t was Jan. 25, 1986, a night to remember for Chicagoans. Their beloved Bears, habitual losers, won the Super Bowl. For different, less joyful reasons, it was also a memorable night for Patricia Roush, who was living on the outskirts of the city.

Her daughters, Alia, 7, and Aisha, 3, were spending the evening with Roush's former husband, a Saudi Arabian named Khalid al-Gheshayan, whom she had divorced a month earlier. The two had met at a party in San Francisco in 1975. They wed three years later, but the marriage soon foundered, partly because of his excessive drinking.

As Roush glanced at Alia's Brownie handbook on a nightstand, something told her that all was not well with her daughters. When she tried to call Gheshayan, there was no answer. She rushed over to his residence and was told by a neighborhood child that Gheshayan had taken the girls away in a taxi over their vigorous protests. Days later, he informed her by telephone that he and the girls were in Saudi Arabia.

One of Roush's first calls was to the State Department's Office of Overseas Citizens Emergency Center. Roush says she was told there was nothing they could do for her. But she was not about to give up. She had been given court-ordered custody rights. So to her, Gheshayan's act was an outright kidnapping. Her grief was compounded by the fact that her daughters had been taken to Saudi Arabia, a country known for the subservient role it assigns to anyone who doesn't happen to be male. Beyond that, Gheshayan had a long history of psychiatric and alcohol problems.

Roush's campaign to get back her daughters has now

lasted 17 years. She has written to every member of Congress, asking them to plead her case with the Saudis. She has arranged for the hand-delivery of letters to three U.S. presidents. Her lobbying of the State Department has persisted through four secretaries of State and included frequent contact with consular affairs officials.

In 1989, she even employed a private investigator, Ed Ciriello, to find her daughters and bring them back to her. Ciriello, a veteran of Middle East intrigue, hired four Saudis. They made their move on Jan. 18, 1991, just as the Gulf war against Iraq was getting under way. The plotters had the awful misfortune of crossing paths with police in Riyadh who were chasing a traffic violator; Ciriello thought he and his companions were being pursued. Shots were fired, two of Ciriello's accomplices were killed and the mission was aborted.

Since her daughters were whisked away to Saudi Arabia, Roush has seen them only once, during a two-hour meeting at a Riyadh hotel on June 13, 1995, sponsored by a wealthy Saudi sympathizer. The Washington Center of Peace and Justice gives the following account of the meeting:

"They were now young women, clad completely in black draping. They removed their veils, and stood perfectly still. Roush searched their faces, trying to determine which daughter was which. The eyes, of course, provided the answer.

"Is that Alia?" the mother asked. 'Yes,' was the murmured reply. Roush was overcome with emotion. She ran to the girls sobbing, grabbed them, touching their hair and kissing their faces. They sat on a sofa, Roush in the middle. She showed them photos of themselves when they were small, she told them repeatedly in Arabic that she loved them.

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*George Gedda is the State Department correspondent for the Associated Press.*

"Alia spoke English with an Arabic accent, while Aisha spoke no English at all. Alia told her: 'He (her ex-husband) said you left us here.'

"Roush said, 'Alia, you know that isn't true.' She continued, 'I am going to get you out of here; I am working with the embassy. I will never stop until I bring you home.'

"Gheshayan waited outside the room. But unable to resist a look at his former spouse, he stepped inside for one moment. 'Hello, Patricia,' he said. 'Hello, Khalid,' she answered."

Eight years later, Roush's children, now 24 and 20, are married to Saudis. Aisha has a child. In almost any other country, the sisters, given their respective ages, would be able to pack up and leave if they wished, but under Saudi law a woman cannot depart without the permission of her husband, father or brother. So far as is known, they have never been in a setting in which they have been allowed to voice their true feelings about their situation.

### **Help From the Hill**

By now, Roush's story is known to many Americans, thanks to the visibility the media has given to her plight. But her quest has cost her and her family hundreds of thousands of dollars, much of it in lost time at work, airline tickets, phone bills, attorneys' fees and detective fees.

It has also been for naught. Neither the U.S. nor the Saudi government seems willing or able to do much to help her. The State Department might have more leverage in the case if Saudi Arabia were a member of the Hague Convention, an international agreement that requires signatory countries "to secure the prompt return of children wrongfully removed to

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or retained in" another member country and "to ensure that rights of custody are effectively respected." The United States ratified the convention in 1988.

In her attempts to reclaim her children from Saudi Arabia, Roush is far from alone: there are at least 10 other current abduction cases involving Saudi parents and American children. But the Roush case is perhaps the most prominent.

Patricia Roush vented her frustrations about her ordeal at a June 2002 hearing of the House Government Reform Committee. The panel was chaired by then-Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., perhaps Roush's strongest supporter on Capitol Hill. Roush told the committee: "My daughters have been stolen and kept in captivity for 16 years — incommunicado with the entire world.

"They have no knowledge of the rest of the world except by way of Saudi Arabian-censored television and the males that are their masters. Saudi Arabia is a totalitarian state where my daughters are locked up, wrapped up and shut up."

Burton, who has a way of getting

the media's attention, voiced his own indignation toward the Saudis at a hearing of his committee on Oct. 3. He said he would find ways to increase pressure on the Saudis. "The drumbeat is going to get louder and louder and louder," he said. At one point, he took aim at what he described as Saudi Arabia's male-dominated culture. "If a man tells a woman, 'Don't go to the bathroom,' she doesn't go to the bathroom," he said.

Burton pointed out that Saudi oil imports have declined sharply as a percentage of total U.S. imports and are now in the 15-percent range. He suggested a U.S. embargo on Saudi oil might be appropriate. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., signaling agreement, replied, "If we have to stand in line for oil, so be it."

Indeed, of the dozen or so lawmakers who attended the hearing, none spoke of Saudi Arabia as an energy, security and trade partner of the United States. All seemed to agree that pressure on Saudi Arabia was entirely appropriate, given the injustices committed against American children.

Burton has never been a favorite among State Department officials who, not surprisingly, believe it would be a mistake to follow his advice and allow the future of U.S. relations with one of the Arab world's most important countries to be determined by its policy on child abduction issues. Nor is it likely that Burton's threats to pressure the Saudis into submission will get very far.

This past fall, Burton's committee tried to subpoena documents from some of the Saudi Embassy's U.S. lobbyists and lawyers, as well as Qorvis Communications, a public relations firm that Burton said is paid \$200,000 per month by the Saudis. The Saudi government refused to hand over the documents, contending that internation-

al law gives it immunity from surrendering documents related to its diplomatic mission. Burton maintains that these records could shed light on child custody cases and accusations that the embassy aided the abductors.

### The Saudi Perspective

For their part, the Saudis are mystified as to why they are getting far more attention than other countries that have a higher incidence of custody fights that involve international abduction.

"If there is concern with the issue of child custody, the focus should be on the most egregious violators," said Adel al-Jubeir, a spokesman for the Saudi Embassy, speaking at a December news conference. "And the focus should be on the countries that have the largest number of cases, not a country that has less than 1 percent." As

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examples of countries with worse records, he cited Germany, Austria, Mexico, Canada and England. He said the Saudi Foreign Ministry has established a task force with a view toward setting up mechanisms to resolve child custody cases. However, State Department offi-

cial doubt this approach will make a difference.

Al-Jubeir suggested the problem may not have a solution. "At the end of the day, these are strictly personal matters between parents [who] happen to be in two different countries, protected and subjected to two different laws." Al-Jubeir had noted previously that while a U.S. court may have decreed that Roush has a right to custody of her daughters, Gheshayan can also claim custody rights, based on an order from a Saudi court that was handed down after he returned to his homeland with his daughters.

Ryan Crocker, a deputy assistant secretary of State in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, told Burton's committee last October that the administration, as well as left-behind parents, have difficulty getting around Saudi law.

Crocker pointed out that the

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Saudi government does not consider it illegal for the children of Saudi citizens to be removed from the United States and taken to the kingdom, regardless of their place of habitual residence or lack of consent by the other parent. In addition, the absence of a U.S.-Saudi extradition treaty has rendered meaningless U.S. arrest warrants that have been issued against Saudi abductors who have returned to their homeland.

Crocker also noted that Saudi children must have permission from their father to leave the country. Indeed, it is a crime in Saudi Arabia for women to remove their children from the country without the father's permission.

In some instances, a Saudi parent has allowed a U.S. consular official to check on the well-being of an American child. But only rarely have Saudi parents allowed American-citizen parents to visit their American children.

Crocker testified at the October hearing that abduction cases "are some of the most daunting we deal with ... Let me be perfectly clear: there are no easy answers. We understand the human tragedies involved for the parents as well as the children, and view continued engagement, no matter how disheartening and difficult, as a major priority."

### A Trip to London

The Roush case took a bizarre twist last summer when Burton led a delegation to Saudi Arabia to discuss the abduction of Alia and Aisha, as well as other kidnapping cases. As the delegation was flying to Saudi Arabia in late August, the Saudi government flew the Roush sisters and their husbands to London, where Alia and Aisha issued a statement condemning their mother and saying they had no

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desire to return to the U.S. They reaffirmed that view in a meeting with a State Department consular official and in an off-camera interview with a producer from the Fox network's widely watched show, "The O'Reilly Factor," hosted by Bill O'Reilly.

Joining the producer were a Saudi public relations official and a Fox translator. The sisters' husbands were not present. O'Reilly interviewed the producer, Stacey Hocheiser, and Roush on camera a few days after the London meeting.

O'Reilly said he believed the London trip offered the girls the opportunity to make a "run for freedom," which they passed up. Hocheiser said the sisters, in addition to denouncing their mother, discussed other issues. According to Hocheiser, Aisha, the younger sister, thought that Osama bin Laden was a "peaceful" person. Alia, he said, believed the United States was a violent country. Both acknowledged, however, that they knew no Westerners. There is no way of corroborating Hocheiser's account of the meeting.

Roush insisted on the program that the London trip proved nothing. "You've got Saudi Arabian men

on the grounds, relatives, their husbands — God knows who else was there behind the scene,” she said. “My daughters had no chance to say what they wanted to say,” she said.

Burton wrote a memo in late September to other members of the Government Reform Committee in which he sided with Roush. He said the only person who might be able to communicate effectively with the sisters was their mother, who was not informed of the London visit until afterward. The trip, euphemistically described as a “vacation,” was paid for by the Saudi government. Burton wrote that the trip seemed intended to undermine his mission to Saudi Arabia before their plane had even landed in Riyadh.

William McGurn, the *Wall Street Journal's* chief editorial writer, agreed with Burton. He said the London trip should not be construed as the last word because all it did was bring the sisters “out of one controlled environment into another.”

### Enter Maura Harty

Roush, no great admirer of the State Department, was an outspoken critic of President Bush's choice this past summer of career diplomat Maura Harty to replace Mary Ryan as assistant secretary for the Consular Affairs Bureau. Rightly or wrongly, Ryan had been a lightning rod for criticism following the disclosure that her bureau had issued visas to the Sept. 11 terrorists.

The opposition of Roush and other parents of abducted children to Harty's nomination was based mostly on Harty's role in creating and overseeing the Office of Children's Issues in the Consular Affairs bureau in the mid-1990s. Abductions are a prime responsibility of that office. Roush told the

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*Washington Times* that Harty's record "was one of indifference bordering on hostility toward the interests of parents of abducted children."

Officials say the State Department is taking a far more active role as an advocate for these parents. The abduction unit of the office now employs 17 officers and staff devoted exclusively to working with left-behind parents to resolve their cases. The office currently handles approximately 1,100 international parental child abduction cases — including abductions to the United States.

Responding to Roush and other critics, Secretary of State Colin Powell defended the selection of Harty in a statement on Nov. 1, calling her "an experienced leader and a firm decision-maker." Her talents have been evident to at least three secretaries of State — Powell, Warren Christopher and George Shultz; she served each either as special assistant or executive assistant.

U.S. officials also say it is unseemly for Roush and other parents of abducted children to take their wrath out on Harty, a 21-year veteran of the Foreign Service. For one thing, they point out that Consular Affairs and all other bureaus take their cues on policy from higher-ups. On cases involving Saudi Arabia, officials say that however regrettable such cases may be, they must not be allowed to dominate one of the most important U.S. relationships in the Arab world.

### **Friends or Foes?**

The extensive criticism of Saudi Arabia growing out of these cases is part of a larger sequence of events, mostly related to terrorism, that have roiled U.S.-Saudi relations for well over a year.

Nowadays, the kingdom is perhaps known less for its role as a U.S. ally in the Middle East than as the

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place that produced Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 Sept. 11 bombers. There are believed to be about 100 Saudis among the 600 suspected foreign terrorists being detained at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Allegations persist that Saudi-based individuals and charities provided financing for al-Qaida.

The Bush administration continues to tout Saudi cooperation in the war on terrorism but acknowledges that more can be done. Saudi officials say that as of October, the kingdom had questioned 2,800 individuals and detained more than 200 suspects, including those involved with al-Qaida. They say intelligence sharing has resulted in the freezing of more than \$70 million linked to terrorist organization financial accounts.

But the relationship seems much more vulnerable now than it did a year and a half ago, when Saudi Arabia was best known as a reliable energy supplier to the United States, boasting 25 percent of total oil reserves worldwide. It could be counted on, and still is, to jack up production when prices rose too high, thereby helping to bring them down. Almost forgotten amid the criticism nowadays is the Saudi role as a major market for the United

States, vying with Israel as the chief purchaser of American products.

Total U.S. sales to Saudi Arabia in 2000 were \$6.2 billion. In the fall of 2001, the Bush administration welcomed a Saudi proposal for settling Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. The United States has reciprocated Saudi friendship by serving as a guarantor of Saudi security. Thousands of U.S. troops are stationed outside Riyadh, guarding the kingdom against would-be predators, including Iraq.

So is the United States doing enough to help Roush and other American parents in a similar situation? The State Department says it is doing all it can, but getting around Saudi law has proved an insurmountable problem.

However, Daniel Pipes, author of five books on the Middle East, says the administration is not applying enough pressure on the Saudis. Writing in the winter 2002 edition of *National Interest* magazine, Pipes says that in cases involving the abduction of American children by Saudi parents, "the State Department has behaved with a weakness bordering on sycophancy." Specifically, he says that the State Department "has accepted the Saudi law that gives the father near-absolute control over the movement and activities of his children and wife (or wives)."

Pipes says that State's obsequiousness is not limited to the issues of child abduction. "The Saudis routinely set the terms of this bilateral relationship," he writes. "For decades, U.S. government agencies have engaged in a persistent pattern of deference to Saudi wishes, making so many unwonted and unnecessary concessions that one gets the impression that a switch has taken place, with both sides forgetting which of them is the great power and which the minor one." ■