

Testimony of Nafeesah Ali Ismail
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for

The U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations
Hearing: “The Goldman Act Turns 10: Holding Hague Convention Violators Accountable and
Bringing Abducted American Children Home”

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Good Afternoon, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wilds, and members of this distinguished committee. My name is Nafeesah Ali Ismail. I am an adult survivor of International Parental Child Abduction. I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to share story, and to relate the lived experiences of other children and youth survivors— those who have come home, like me, and those who still suffer and remain abducted in foreign lands when they should be home, like me. I earnestly hope that my experiences, and my call to action and accountability for my government, place a renewed focus on those who matter most, children who are victims of International Parental Child Abduction.

I am 20 years old. Only three years ago, I came home from a 10-year abduction to Egypt. At the age of 7, my father took me to Egypt from my birthplace in Newark, New Jersey. I was only seven, and I didn't really understand that when I left New Jersey, I was leaving my family, my language, and all that I had known in my young life. My father then decided to move to Egypt and we never came back. Instead, I remember settling in a small village in Northern Egypt where everything was foreign to me.

My dad and I did not have our own home in Egypt, so we lived with family and friends. My expectation as a child was that everything was going to be okay because I was with my dad. But it was not okay, at all. I was a seven-year-old American in an Egyptian village surrounded by people who did not want to understand me; people who saw and treated me as “less than” simply because I did not have the same skin color and hair texture.

In the early days, I was not directly taught the Arabic language, but I was able to pick up the Egyptian dialect pretty quickly. So, with the acquisition of basic language, I was able to hear how people viewed me, and I was able to comprehend how they spoke about me. It was challenging and confusing for me as a child to try to understand why I was the child with the horrible skin tone that relatives slathered with whitening cream, and hair that was continuously straightened.

My father was able to enroll me in a language school in the village, and as even as a third grader, I was able to pick up on the poor quality of education offered to me. Yes, the school helped me improve my Arabic, but the academic quality was lacking in many other aspects. Regularly, on my way to school, people in the village stared at me, loudly asking “*why is she so dark?*” I can never forget those days. I was too young to understand, yet I understood perfectly that I didn't belong there.

As time passed, I gradually became accustomed to life in the village, and growing up and living alone with my father. I had to become the woman in the household from an early age, which took away my childhood and teenage years inside the home. Outside the home, the village was a male-dominated environment, and being assaulted was a common experience for me. At home, my father frequently abused me out of frustration over our quality of life, so I did not dare to confide in him all that I was experiencing.

When I wasn't in school, I mainly stayed in my room— imagining someone from the United States government would knock on the door and ask for me. I know other survivors like me also had this silly dream. I became depressed, lost hope that I would return to the United States, and attempted suicide multiple times.

As the years dragged on, altercations between my father and I grew more frequent. After one serious altercation, I decided that I had enough and reached out to my mother, whom I was able to maintain contact with over the decade, usually when she would send my father money. So, my mother was sending money to my father to support us, even though he refused to send me home.

In the beginning, my mother tried to bring me home. She appealed to the State Department but was told only that she had to get an attorney and court orders, and also work with the Egyptian officials and my father to resolve the matter. She didn't know how to do that, and I know now that many parents don't know how and have to figure it out on their own.

Thankfully, my mother introduced me to Dr. Noelle Hunter and iStand Parent Network. We communicated over several months, while she understood my situation and we planned on how I could get out of Egypt. Honestly, at this point, I had lost hope that I could come home to the US, but I went along with the process.

Then, in December 2020, our plan gradually turned into action. First, I arranged for my mother to send money for me to one of friends since I had no bank account and no Egyptian identification. I also took a chance by arranging for my online boyfriend, whom I had never met, to come to the nearby city and take me to a safe house in Cairo. Immediately after I received the money, I told my father that I had tutoring classes. In reality, I went to buy a new SIM card so that no one could track me. I brought a new outfit so no one would recognize my clothes. After packing my backpack and getting ready to leave, I asked my father for a hug before I left, and he told me to wait until I returned from class because he had a surprise. This broke my heart and made me feel guilty. After all, I was leaving.

I got on a microbus that took me to Mansoura. By the time I arrived to meet up with my online friend, we'd missed the last bus that was supposed to take us to Cairo. We took a taxi instead, and after three hours, I arrived at the safehouse in Cairo. I still remember the fear and relief I felt that day. I also believed that in just a few more days, I'd be going back home to America. I thought I'd be returning with Dr. Hunter in early January 2021.

But this was not the case. To begin, we went to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to request an emergency passport. It took two weeks, two trips to the Embassy, and special forms from me and my mother to get the passport issued. During this time, my father started calling the Embassy, making threats and demanding to know my whereabouts. To their credit, the Embassy declined to offer any information about a U.S. citizen--- me. I was still so scared that he would find me. We soon learned that having my emergency passport was not enough for me to exit Egypt, because I did not have proof of being an Egyptian resident.

It was arranged for me to go to the Ministry of Interior Administration of Passports, Immigration, and Nationality in Cairo to obtain a foreign residence card. I visited the location on four separate occasions, and the staff was uncooperative, leading me in circles and ultimately denying my eligibility to obtain a foreign residence card. Essentially, since in Egypt such residency determinations are based on the father's lineage, I refused to offer any information about my father, so I was denied.

During this time, we repeatedly asked the U.S. Embassy to intervene. They said they made some calls to explain my situation, but they only kept referring us back to the Ministry, and to a special

office for women and children's issues. For the longest time, we got nowhere, and I was so disillusioned.

There was the consideration that I stay in the safe house until I turned 18 to leave, which sounded like a nightmare, and I lost hope that I'd ever be able to leave. Finally, the woman who operated the safehouse, a Canadian expat who understood and could navigate the complex Egyptian system, found a loophole for me to obtain my Egyptian identification.

It was arranged for me to go back to the Ministry, and shockingly, I was able to get a foreign residency card in February 2021. Dr. Hunter immediately booked me a one-way flight to New York City. I'd like to point out that in the end, I exited my abduction with the help of brave women, with only very limited support from my government. In the end, I saved myself, with the help of others. But, what about abducted American children who are much younger than me? The ones that don't have advocates or a "safe house" to get to?

Returning to the United States as a 17-year-old who lived most of her life overseas was, and still is, challenging. For me, returning was like starting from zero, and not having the necessary support made it even more difficult. Being on the verge of turning into an adult was terrifying because my family did not show much support and guidance when I returned. They really didn't know how to do that, because no one had ever been internationally kidnapped before, and they didn't know of any resources specifically for families like us. My older brother helped me to enroll at Saint Benedict's Preparatory Academy for my last high school years, and my experience there helped me to prepare for life after graduation. I'm now a college student, and I'm learning how to navigate life. It's not easy.

It has been three years since my return, and I am grateful to be back home in the United States. I have experienced a lot, learned many things, and grown tremendously, but the way I returned home still makes me feel out of place. When I was in Egypt, I needed the support of my government to come home, but I didn't really get it. When I came home, my family and I really struggled to connect. My return was both wonderful and painful at the same time. Thankfully, I had the support of iStand Parent Network, and now the iStand Survivor Network. Through them, I discovered that there are many, many survivors like me who are still hurting, but are healing together in our special community.

This brings me to my recommendations of what needs to happen, how our government needs to be more proactive in preventing children like me from being abducted, in prioritizing our return from foreign countries, and in providing a support system for us when we do come home.

As I said, I used to daydream that someone from the U.S. government was going to come and take me home. I understand now that it's not that easy for our government to make such demands from another country, but I know from my own experience that more can be done. Our embassies can be more responsive to parents seeking help to locate and return their abducted children. Not just in issuing passports, but in working with other nations in very specific ways to find children and to remove legal or systematic barriers to their return.

When we do come home, please help us to have a soft landing after such a long and painful time of separation from our other family members by funding a comprehensive aftercare program from the moment we step off the airplane. An aftercare program that involves counseling, temporary financial supports, educational supports, and opportunities for connecting and healing with other

survivors. I know for a fact that such aftercare support works, because I have experienced them through programs like iStand Survivor Network. They have helped ease my transition back into normalcy, introduced me to other youth survivors, took me to Washington DC, invited me to summer camp, and now, have appointed me as a youth ambassador.

At our summer Survivor Camp, I met other survivors like Dexter, Miyu and Amane, Maayi, and Liam. We hiked, swam, and ate our meals together. We laughed and cried and shared our experiences in a therapeutic community. And, we stay in touch through Whatsapp and regular check-ins.

As the oldest among all the youth survivors in our group, I feel a special obligation to speak on their behalf, as I'm doing today. In a sense, I rescued myself from abduction, with the help of others. Now, I want to help rescue other abducted children and help them have the soft landing and long-term reunification support that they need when they come home. I am asking Congress, and especially members of this committee, to fund a long-term aftercare initiative for abduction survivors, and to turn oversight into action to require our U.S. State Department to put abducted American children first, and to bring them home.

Thank you.

