

**Hearing: Reviewing International Child Abduction**  
**Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and**  
**International Organizations**

**Testimony by Michelle Littleton**

Mother of Ascila, Leilah, and Yousef Abducted to Lebanon

December 10, 2018

Chairman Chris Smith and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for holding this important and urgent hearing on International Child Abduction. My name is Michelle Littleton, and my three beautiful children, Ascila, Leilah, and Yousef were kidnapped from their hometown of Mission Viejo, California by their father Mazen Fawzi Matar on January 4, 2017. It was the middle of the school year on what was supposed to be a ten-day vacation over Christmas break. While most children were returning to school, my children were boarding a plane and being kidnapped to war-torn Lebanon.

For one year prior to the abduction, my family fought to prevent this nightmare from happening by pleading with Judge James Waltz of Orange County to prevent the trip. Eventually, Judge Waltz felt I was just being difficult and took my custody away so my ex could obtain passports without my consent. After he obtained the passports, I had to agree to the trip to have partial custody back. Judge Waltz should have listened to my desperate warnings. By not researching the Lebanese history of non-returns, he failed to protect the very United States citizens he serves. All judges should have awareness of IPCA and strongly consider the risks involved when approving international vacations, especially when one parent is communicating fears of abduction and the data is available to show that return from a particular country is extremely difficult or impossible.

My worst fears for both of my daughters' safety and well-being became real when I requested the State Department perform a Welfare and Whereabouts Visit. During the visit the grandfather stated that my girls are almost

of age to be married. They were 12 and 13 at the time. There have been times when the Embassy could not visit the children either because it was not safe for the staff to travel to Tripoli or because my ex-husband denied access. I have gone several months at a time without being able to contact my children. I cannot imagine the heartache my children must be feeling, especially my son Yousef who was only five years old when he was abducted.

With the help of my Lebanese lawyer, Mhomad Ayoubi, I have been able to slowly but successfully navigate through the foreign and complex Lebanese court system. However, two years into my fight and I am still up against my ex-husband's delay tactics and Lebanon enabling my ex-husband's tricks. He has filed appeals to every victory I have won. I have even won full custody in Lebanon. The Lebanese Civil and Execution courts have ordered the children to be returned to me in the United States immediately. Not surprisingly, my ex filed an objection to the execution enforcement order based on what he calls "no jurisdiction" for the Lebanese authorities to enforce the return order. It has been three weeks since he filed the objection to enforcement, and he may be able to run the clock for 8 weeks or more with frivolous delay appeals.

I am grateful that Lebanon has recognized this situation for what it is, a kidnapping, and issued orders for my children's return to their home, here in the United States. But my ex, who is a US citizen, is making a mockery of Lebanese courts, U.S. courts, and, worst of all, putting at risk the lives of our children.

This should not be tolerated by the government of Lebanon or the United States. I have not been able to see my children in 2 long years. I have asked if I could travel to see my children, but am told it is too dangerous. This is my painful

reality and hell that I have been living for two years. I want my children home for the holiday more than anything in this world, and me and my children have the right to be together right now, right here on American soil. It must end at once, with my children at home with me. This could be a watershed moment in U.S.-Lebanon relations. Although the United States has had dozens of children abducted to Lebanon, I do not know of any cases before mine with a court order for return from a Lebanese court. In fact, there have not been any court-ordered returns ever reported to the State Department. With the current court orders in place in my case, Lebanon could for the first time return an abducted child to the United States. It would be a timely and welcome gesture of cooperation between Lebanon and the United States as we seek justice for children abducted or wrongfully retained in either country.

The State Department and law enforcement have been so helpful in my case and I am thankful that they have even more tools at their disposal in the Goldman Act if Lebanon fails to enforce the return orders they have issued. Almost \$200 million dollars and so much more is provided in aid to keep Lebanon safe and strong. So much is at stake. Isn't it time for Lebanon to enforce the return orders that they have already acknowledged and send my children home?

I call on the State Department to use every tool at its disposal to bring these American citizen children home immediately. And I appeal to Lebanon to please, quickly, enforce the return orders Lebanon has justly upheld. Set the example so that any parent now considering the child abuse that is child abduction will know that Lebanon does not aid kidnappers.