

Testimony of Sara Edwards
May 24, 2011
House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights

My name is Sara Edwards and I am the mother of an adorable 3 year old boy, named Abdullah Eli. Thank you all for the opportunity today to share Eli's story. I miss my boy so much every day, but the chance to speak to you about my pain and struggle gives me the hope that someday very soon I will have him back in my arms. Eli loves to play race with his toy cars and trucks. He is a beautiful blonde-headed smile-factory of a boy. He also gives the most wonderful bear hugs, but I have not held him since March 4th 2010. That day, more than fourteen months ago Eli's father, my husband, Muhammed Kiraz, took Eli to Turkey for a family visit.

Muhammed and I met while we were both in college and we married in Kent, Ohio in 2003. Our son was born five years later in 2008, while I was in graduate school at The Pennsylvania State University. My family and parts of Muhammed's family lived in Northeast Ohio, so when Eli was 6 months old, we moved back there.

In January of 2010, after seven years of marriage, Muhammed and I separated. We drafted an informal shared parenting agreement to outline our intentions for raising Eli. I believed this document was a framework for us to work together as separated parents to achieve the best interests of our son. We acted under the plan, which called for equal custodial time of alternating weeks with Muhammed and I each visiting Eli two days a week during the other parents' visitation. We made bedtime phone calls every night regardless of which parents' week it was. I fully believed that Muhammed's participation meant he was committed to shared parenting like I was.

Therefore, when Muhammed wanted to go forward with a visit with Eli to see his family in Turkey, I did not object. I thought it would be good for Muhammed to have the support of his family during the separation. Muhammed provided me with the round trip travel itinerary of their tickets and also a signed, notarized statement promising to return with Eli. Muhammed and Eli were supposed to spend only two months in Turkey. But now 14 months later, Eli has still not come home.

Hindsight is 20/20. I now know that my husband felt he could not get what he wanted in the U.S. so he took our son to Turkey. There secured an unlawful custody ruling and divorce, and he did all he could to ensure that my side of the story would never be heard. I am here today to share my side of the story, and to speak for Eli.

I certainly did not want to be without my son for two months; I knew that I would miss him more than I had ever missed anything else, but I have always felt that it is important for our son to know his Turkish family and to have exposure to that half of his culture. I wanted to be fair. I myself had traveled to Turkey five times before Muhammed abducted Eli. I took Eli two of those times and each time we were there we stayed for two months. It all seemed routine. I drove them to the airport for their visit and I was there as they went through ticketing and security. I blew kisses and waved to Eli as Eli waved bye-bye from Muhammed shoulders. As I hold on to

that happy last look at him, I now realize that Muhammed actively deceived me and preyed on my trust from the moment we decided to separate.

For the first two weeks of their trip, I visited with Eli daily by web cam. While anxiously counting down the days to his return, I actually remember being glad to know that Eli would learn some Turkish words during his trip. Muhammed, however, had plans for something altogether different and on March 22, 2010, my nightmare began. Muhammed began making threats that he would only bring Eli back to Ohio if I would declare myself an unfit parent and give full custody of our son to him. I was in hell. He told me that he had already divorced me and that there was nothing I could do. I was shocked and devastated, but I thought his out bursts were just scare tactics to make me relinquish custody. On March 23, 2010, I contacted the Department of State, Office of Children's Issues; the American Embassy in Ankara, Turkey; and the Turkish Consulate in Chicago. I also began seeking advice from attorneys in Turkey and all over the United States.

It is now clear to me that Muhammed never intended to bring Eli home. Muhammed arrived in Turkey on March 6, 2010, and attended a divorce hearing on March 10, 2010. The domestic court of Nevsehir, Turkey granted full custody of our son to Muhammed on March 11, 2010. Muhammed got full custody and divorce in a domestic court in a country where we never resided. According to Turkish law, I should have been physically present for the divorce hearing. Not only was I not present, I was never informed of the case in any way, and I never had contact at all with the attorney, Hasan Unal, who supposedly represented me. I did not even have hard evidence that a divorce occurred until Muhammed filed the Turkish court's divorce and custody ruling through his Ohio attorney as evidence in the Ohio custody case.

To date, Muhammed continues to ignore the Summit County court order to return Eli to Ohio. The judge signed the order adopting our original Shared Parenting Plan in June of 2010, and Muhammed and I are still legally married in Ohio. My Turkish attorney submitted my Hague petition to the Turkish Central Authority on January 24, 2011. I learned that the Turkish authorities have investigated Muhammed and Eli's whereabouts and, just this month the Turkish Central Authority has opened a case on my behalf in Kayseri, Turkey domestic court for the return of my son. I await updates daily. I await updates desperately.

Over the past fourteen months, Muhammed has permitted me to visit with Eli by web cam, sometimes on a regular basis, but he also abruptly cuts off access for long periods with no warning. I schedule my daily life around the chance to speak to my only child, and my despair or elation turns upon Muhammed's whim. Eli no longer understands or speaks English and I struggle to keep up with him in Turkish, but I am so grateful to still have contact with him and maintain our bond. Eli was only 2 when Muhammed took him, and now at age 3 I see him growing and changing drastically with each visit. Every day I wonder if he is thinking about me and missing his mother the same way I am thinking about him and missing him. Muhammed threatens to take Eli to Syria, torturing me with the reality that each web cam visit could be the last time that I ever see Eli. My greatest fear is the real possibility that Eli will one day believe the lies that Muhammed has told; that I am a bad mother, that I abandoned him, that I did not want him.

The obstacles I face fighting the abduction of my son are great. I am essentially on my own to fight a court battle in a foreign country where I do not know the language or understand the culture. I have to be continually vigilant as I learn to maneuver this nightmare of uncertainty that accompanies fighting for my son. To date, I still do not know whether Eli has been issued a Turkish passport. No one can give me confirmation that Muhammed can be questioned if he tries to abscond with Eli from Turkey while the Hague investigation case is pending. No one can give me confirmation that Muhammed would be questioned if he returns to the US to renew his Legal Resident Status.

I love my son more than anything in this world and I am ready every minute to welcome Eli home. Thank you for this opportunity to share Eli's story. I personally ask each of you to commit now to do all that is in your power to restore the right of our children to have relationships with both of their parents.

Thank you.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

"TRUTH IN TESTIMONY" DISCLOSURE FORM

Clause 2(g) of rule XI of the Rules of the House of Representatives and the Rules of the Committee require the disclosure of the following information. A copy of this form should be attached to your written testimony and will be made publicly available in electronic format, per House Rules.

1. Name: Sara Edwards	2. Organization or organizations you are representing: myself
3. Date of Committee hearing: Tuesday May 24, 2011	
4. Have <u>you</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	5. Have any of the <u>organizations you are representing</u> received any Federal grants or contracts (including any subgrants and subcontracts) since October 1, 2008 related to the subject on which you have been invited to testify? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
6. If you answered yes to either item 4 or 5, please list the source and amount of each grant or contract, and indicate whether the recipient of such grant was you or the organization(s) you are representing. You may list additional grants or contracts on additional sheets.	
7. Signature: 	

Please attach a copy of this form to your written testimony.