

INTERNATIONAL PARENTAL CHILD ABDUCTION IN ARAB COUNTRIES

A Comprehensive Analysis and Strategic
Recommendations

2025 Strategic Report

Prepared by:



This report is dedicated to children who have experienced parental separation, to parents navigating the challenges of cross-border custody disputes, and to all those working toward family reunification and child protection.

Addressing international parental child abduction remains a shared responsibility requiring sustained collaborative effort across all sectors and stakeholders.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International parental child abduction represents one of the most complex humanitarian and legal challenges of the 21st century. This comprehensive report provides an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon across 22 Arab countries, examining the intersection of legal systems, cultural values, and political realities that shape the landscape of child protection in the region.

KEY FINDINGS:

Scale and Scope

- The Arab region faces unique challenges due to non-accession to the 1980 Hague Convention by all countries except Morocco and Tunisia
- iHOPE has documented over 220 cases across the region since 2021, with Lebanon and Syria representing the highest concentrations
- Recent political transformations, particularly in Syria (2024), have triggered unprecedented waves of return-linked abductions

Legal Landscape

- 18 of 22 Arab countries lack codified frameworks for addressing international parental child abduction
- Multiple court systems operate within single countries (Lebanon has 18 distinct personal status judicial systems)
- Custody provisions vary dramatically: mothers' custody rights range from 2 years (Shia jurisprudence in some countries) to 15 years (Egypt, Kuwait, Bahrain)
- Foreign court rulings are rarely recognized, creating de facto legal immunity for abducting parents

Political and Security Context

- Syria's 2024 political transition generated 40+ new abduction cases as diaspora families returned
- Lebanon's security crisis paradoxically facilitated child returns, with fathers agreeing to relocate children to safer countries
- Conflict zones (Yemen, Libya) present worst-case scenarios where children remain outside international protection

Cultural Dimensions

- Extended family involvement is a defining characteristic, with grandparents and



relatives often active participants or instigators

- Honor-based decision-making sometimes supersedes child welfare considerations
- Gender bias in legal systems creates asymmetric outcomes, particularly affecting foreign mothers

Institutional Response

- iHOPE represents the only specialized regional organization addressing this phenomenon
- The Three-Front Strategy (contextual analysis, advocacy, strategic litigation) has achieved an 82% success rate when methods are combined
- Five embassies (US, Canada, Netherlands, Poland, Sweden) officially list iHOPE as accredited service provider
- International coordination remains fragmented, with significant gaps in funding and attention

Successful Interventions

- Mediation-based approaches demonstrate 68% success rates, rising to 82% when combined with legal strategies
- Cultural competency and trilingual mediation prove essential for sustainable solutions
- Security crises can create windows of opportunity for diplomatic intervention

CRITICAL GAPS:

1. Data Infrastructure: Systematic documentation of cases is virtually non-existent across the region
2. Funding: Specialized local organizations remain chronically underfunded despite proven effectiveness
3. Legal Harmonization: No regional framework exists for cross-border cooperation
4. Prevention: Pre-marriage education and risk awareness programs are absent
5. Enforcement Mechanisms: Court rulings frequently remain unimplemented

STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES:

For International Community:

- Develop flexible alternatives to Hague Convention that respect Islamic jurisprudence
- Increase investment in specialized local organizations with cultural competency
- Establish bilateral agreements where multilateral treaties face resistance



For Arab Governments:

- Reform personal status laws to prioritize child's best interests over predetermined gender/age criteria
- Create specialized family courts with trained judges and support staff
- Develop effective enforcement mechanisms for custody rulings

For Civil Society:

- Scale proven models (like iHOPE's HOPE methodology) across multiple countries
- Build regional networks for information sharing and coordinated response
- Invest in prevention through education and awareness

CONCLUSION:

This report documents both the severity of challenges and the tangible potential for progress. iHOPE's experience demonstrates that even in the absence of binding international frameworks, culturally-informed interventions can achieve meaningful outcomes. The 2025 strategic moment—with heightened embassy engagement, proven methodologies, and growing regional awareness—presents an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen child protection mechanisms across the Arab world.

However, sustainable progress requires moving beyond case-by-case interventions toward systemic reform. This demands political will from Arab governments, sustained investment from the international community, and continued innovation from specialized organizations bridging cultural and legal divides.

The children at the center of these disputes cannot wait for perfect solutions. They need immediate, effective action grounded in their best interests, cultural sensitivity, and unwavering commitment to their fundamental rights.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This glossary provides definitions of key legal, cultural, and technical terms used throughout the report. Understanding these concepts is essential for navigating the complex landscape of international parental child abduction in the Arab region.

Abducting Parent

The parent who relocates a child across international borders without the consent of the other parent or in violation of custody arrangements or court orders.

Best Interests of the Child

A legal principle requiring that decisions affecting children prioritize their welfare, safety, and development above all other considerations. Interpretation varies significantly across legal systems.

Central Authority

Under the Hague Convention, the designated government agency responsible for facilitating the return of abducted children and coordinating international cooperation.

Custody (Ḥaḍāna - حضانة)

In Islamic jurisprudence, the right to physical care and daily raising of a child. Distinguished from guardianship (wilāya), custody typically belongs to the mother during early childhood years.

Displacive Summary

A summary so comprehensive that it substitutes for reading the original source, potentially violating copyright or diminishing the value of the original work.

Extended Family

In Arab culture, the network of relatives beyond parents and children—including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—who play active roles in child-rearing and family decision-making.

Goldman Act (2014)

U.S. federal legislation requiring the State Department to report annually on international parental child abduction cases and countries' cooperation levels, with provisions for potential sanctions.

Guardianship (Wilāya - ولاية)

In Islamic law, the authority over major decisions affecting a child's life (education, marriage, financial matters), which typically remains with the father even when the mother has custody.



Habitual Residence

Under the Hague Convention, the country where a child has established their primary home and social connections, which determines jurisdictional authority for custody disputes.

Hague Convention (1980)

The Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, which establishes procedures for the prompt return of children wrongfully removed to or retained in signatory countries.

Hanbali School

One of four Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence, known for conservative interpretations, predominantly followed in Saudi Arabia and influencing personal status laws in several Gulf countries.

HOPE Methodology

iHOPE's specialized mediation approach designed for the Middle East context, emphasizing trilingual communication, cultural sensitivity, extended family inclusion, and rebuilding trust between disputing parents.

Ibadi School

An Islamic school of jurisprudence distinct from the four main Sunni schools, predominantly practiced in Oman, influencing that country's personal status laws.

International Parental Child Abduction (IPCA)

The wrongful removal or retention of a child across international borders by one parent without the consent of the other parent or in violation of custody rights.

Jaafari School

The predominant Shia Islamic school of jurisprudence, applied in Shia-majority areas and by Shia courts in countries like Lebanon, with distinct custody provisions from Sunni schools.

Left-Behind Parent

The parent from whom a child has been abducted or wrongfully retained, who is seeking the child's return or contact.

Mediation

A voluntary, confidential dispute resolution process where a neutral third party facilitates communication between parents to reach mutually acceptable agreements regarding custody and access.

Personal Status Law

Legislation governing family matters including marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance. In Arab countries, often based on Islamic jurisprudence or sectarian religious law.



Sectarian Court System

A judicial structure where different religious communities maintain separate courts applying their own religious laws, as in Lebanon's 18-sect system.

Sponsorship System (Kafala - كفالة)

Employment and residency system in Gulf countries where foreign workers' legal status depends on a sponsor (typically employer or spouse), affecting the mobility and rights of foreign spouses in custody disputes.

Strategic Litigation

Carefully planned legal action designed not only to resolve individual cases but also to establish precedents and advance broader policy or legal reform objectives.

Three-Front Strategy

iHOPE's comprehensive approach combining: (1) contextual and conflict analysis, (2) multi-level advocacy, and (3) strategic litigation to address abduction cases.

Travel Ban

A legal restriction preventing a person (often a child) from leaving a country, frequently used in Arab countries by fathers to prevent mothers from relocating children abroad.

Trilingual Mediation

Mediation conducted by professionals fluent in Arabic, English, and the relevant local language/dialect, ensuring all parties can communicate effectively in their preferred language.

Wrongful Retention

The refusal to return a child to their country of habitual residence after a lawful visit or stay abroad, considered a form of parental abduction under international law.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	12
CHAPTER ONE: STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND EMERGING VARIABLES	13
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE	13
REPORT METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE	15
IMPACT OF POLITICAL AND SECURITY TRANSFORMATIONS (SYRIAN & LEBANESE CASES AS MODELS)	17
<i>Political Transformations in Syria and the Abduction Wave Linked to Return</i>	17
<i>Lebanon's Security Situation as a Factor Influencing Abduction Dynamics</i>	19
<i>Regional Implications of Political and Security Crises</i>	20
<i>Figure 1: Arab Countries - Hague Convention Status & Risk Assessment</i>	21
CHAPTER TWO: STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES	22
INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK	22
CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES	24
<i>Figure 2: iHOPE Case Distribution by Country (2021-2025)</i>	27
CHAPTER THREE: THE REALITY OF INTERNATIONAL PARENTAL CHILD ABDUCTION IN ARAB COUNTRIES	28
LEBANON	28
SYRIA	31
EGYPT	33
JORDAN	33
IRAQ	34
PALESTINE	35
KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA	36
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	37
QATAR	37
KUWAIT AND BAHRAIN	39
SULTANATE OF OMAN	39
YEMEN	40
ARAB MAGHREB COUNTRIES	42
Morocco	43
Tunisia	43
Algeria	43
Libya	44
<i>Figure 3: Comparative Legal Framework Analysis</i>	44
CHAPTER FOUR: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND WORKING METHODOLOGY	44
DISCLAIMER	44
GOVERNMENTS, INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS WORKING IN INTERNATIONAL CHILD ABDUCTION	45
<i>Role of States and Embassies</i>	46
The United States of America	46
The Kingdom of the Netherlands	48

The Republic of Poland	50
Australia	51
Canada	51
Kingdom of Sweden	52
Additional Embassy and Government Engagement in Lebanon	53
<i>Role of International and Regional Organizations</i>	54
<i>Challenges and Gaps in International Organizational Response</i>	56
iHOPE ORGANIZATION - A PIONEERING MODEL IN THE REGION	58
<i>Who Are We?</i>	58
<i>The Three-Front Strategy</i>	59
The HOPE Mediation Methodology	60
<i>International Recognition and Institutional Development (2021-2025)</i>	60
<i>Figure 4: iHOPE Timeline - Key Activities and Milestones</i>	66
CHAPTER FIVE: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS	67
RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE STEPS	67
<i>Recommendations at the International Level</i>	67
<i>Recommendations at the Regional Level</i>	69
<i>Recommendations at the National Level</i>	70
STRATEGIC VISION	71
CONCLUSION	72



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International Hope (iHOPE)



Foreword

Cross-Border Child Protection - A Message of Hope from the Heart of Crises

The issue of international parental child abduction is not merely a legal dispute over "custody rights," but rather, at its core, a blatant violation of a child's fundamental right to stability and security. Behind every dry legal text lies the story of a child torn from their familiar environment and a family living the bitterness of loss and waiting.

This strategic report for 2025 comes at a critical juncture as our Arab region witnesses major political and security transformations that have cast heavy shadows on the reality of children and families. Between the legal vacuums resulting from political changes in Syria and the institutional complexities arising from judicial pluralism in Lebanon, children often find themselves the first victims in a conflict not of their making.

Since its establishment, iHOPE has taken upon itself to be the bridge connecting disparate legal systems and the staunch defender of "the best interests of the child" beyond gender or cultural bias. We believe that dialogue and innovative mediation, supported by strategic litigation, are the only means to find sustainable solutions in a region where binding international agreements such as the Hague Convention are absent.

The purpose of this work is not merely to document challenges, but to provide a clear roadmap for decision-makers, diplomatic missions, and international organizations. We place in your hands the fruit of years of fieldwork and in-depth legal expertise, hoping that this report will serve as a catalyst for strengthening international and regional cooperation, ensuring that no child remains a victim of legal loopholes or political borders.

This is a call to action, launched on behalf of every child who dreams of returning, and for a tomorrow where children's rights stand above all considerations.



CHAPTER ONE: STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND EMERGING VARIABLES

Background And Rationale

International parental child abduction represents one of the most legally and humanitarily complex phenomena of our current era, where intricate legal, diplomatic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions intersect, leaving profound effects on the lives of affected children and families. While this phenomenon is not new, the increase in migration, mixed-nationality and cross-cultural marriages, alongside accelerating political and security transformations in many regions of the world, has exacerbated this problem, placing it among the top priorities of international organizations, governments, and civil society alike.

International studies and reports indicate that the Arab region faces particular and complex challenges in dealing with cases of international parental child abduction, due to a set of interrelated factors including. Significant diversity in prevailing legal systems, multiplicity of courts with jurisdiction over personal status and custody matters, cultural and religious differences in viewing concepts of family, childhood, and parental rights, in addition to the non-accession of most Arab countries to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, makes the process of returning abducted children to their countries of origin or to the custodial parent extremely difficult and complicated. The reality of international parental child abduction in the Arab region requires a deep understanding of the local and regional contexts affecting this issue, and cannot be addressed from a purely legal perspective or through the application of uniform international mechanisms without considering the cultural and legal specificities of each country individually. The Arab region is characterized by exceptional diversity in its legal systems, where some countries apply civil laws derived from Western legal systems, while others rely entirely on Islamic Sharia in regulating family and custody matters, and yet other countries combine both systems or adopt a multi-confessional court system as in Lebanon, which comprises fifteen different personal status judicial systems. This diversity creates enormous challenges in determining applicable law and competent courts, opening the door to protracted and complex legal disputes that may continue for years without resolution.

Recent years have witnessed major political and security transformations in the Arab region that have had a direct and profound impact on the reality of international parental child abduction. In Syria, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024 led to a sudden return of large numbers of Syrians residing in Europe,

the United States, Canada, and Australia, among whom were a considerable number of men married to foreign women or Syrian women permanently residing abroad. The months following Syria's political change witnessed an unprecedented wave of child abductions, where many of these returning fathers took their children to Syria without maternal consent or in violation of judicial rulings issued in countries of residence, resulting in mothers being deprived of their children and creating painful humanitarian crises requiring urgent international intervention. This new pattern of abduction linked to political transformations adds another dimension to existing complexities and poses new challenges for diplomatic and legal authorities concerned with protecting the rights of affected children and parents.

Conversely, the situation in Lebanon has witnessed a different development during the same period, where the war that erupted in southern Lebanon and the security escalation witnessed in large areas of the country led to a noticeable decline in new abduction cases. Indeed, the deteriorating security situation and fear for children's safety prompted many abducting fathers to agree to their children's return to their mothers in more stable countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and other European nations. iHOPE documented several cases where children were successfully returned during the war period, as fathers realized that the best interests of their children required relocating them to a safe and stable environment away from conflict zones. This positive development, despite arising from tragic circumstances, opens a window of hope and confirms that security and political conditions can play a decisive role in facilitating the resolution of some intractable cases.

This comprehensive strategic report comes in the context of an urgent need for deeper and more accurate understanding of the actual reality of international parental child abduction in Arab countries, away from generalizations and theoretical assumptions that may not reflect the situation on the ground. Over the past years, iHOPE has worked directly and intensively in this field, building unique and specialized expertise in handling these complex cases, not only through providing legal support and litigation before various courts, but also through developing innovative mechanisms for mediation, advocacy, training, and capacity building. From this perspective, this report aims to present a realistic and comprehensive picture of existing challenges and available opportunities, based on documented field experiences, in-depth legal analyses, and real case studies, while avoiding reliance on hypothetical data or inaccurate statistics that could lead to a mistaken understanding of reality.



Report Methodology and Scope

This report is addressed primarily to decision-makers in international organizations, foreign embassies, foreign ministries, and governmental institutions concerned with child and family rights, as well as to non-governmental organizations working in child protection and human rights, and researchers and academics interested in private international law and cross-border family relations. The main objective of this report is to provide these parties with a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the complex reality of international parental child abduction in the Arab region, the legal, cultural, and political factors affecting it, and the mechanisms available for dealing with these cases, whether through traditional legal pathways or through mediation, dialogue, and diplomatic cooperation. The report also aims to highlight the vital role played by specialized local organizations such as iHOPE in bridging the gap between different legal systems and providing practical and sustainable solutions for affected families.

In its preparation, this report adopted an integrated methodology combining comparative legal analysis, field study, and in-depth interviews with multiple concerned parties, including affected fathers and mothers, specialized judges and lawyers, and experts in child rights and international relations. The report was also primarily based on the rich database owned by iHOPE through its direct work on hundreds of cases over recent years, which includes detailed case studies, precise documentation of followed legal procedures, achieved results, and lessons learned. The report authors were careful to rely exclusively on documented information and real statistics where available, clearly indicating limitations and gaps in available data, and avoiding recourse to assumptions or estimates not based on objective foundation.

This report covers a wide geographical scope including all Arab countries, with detailed analysis dedicated to each country individually addressing: the national legal framework in effect regarding personal status and custody, position on the Hague Convention and related international treaties, prevailing patterns of abduction cases, particular challenges facing authorities concerned with resolving these issues, and mechanisms available locally whether legal or alternative. The geographical scope includes Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain), in addition to the four Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya), with brief reference to exceptional situations in Sudan



and Yemen where current security conditions make it difficult to obtain accurate data or conduct in-depth analysis.

It is noteworthy that this report is not limited to documenting problems and challenges, but also seeks to highlight successful experiences, best practices, and innovative initiatives that have been developed and implemented in the region for dealing with cases of international parental child abduction. The report also reviews international efforts in this field, including the role of embassies, consulates, and international organizations such as the Hague Conference on Private International Law, the U.S. State Department and its Office of Children's Issues, Ministries of Foreign Affairs and their Central Authorities, in addition to the network of non-governmental organizations working globally in this field.

The humanitarian nature of international parental child abduction requires all concerned parties to handle it with high sensitivity and deep awareness of the devastating psychological and emotional effects it leaves on affected children and families. A child who is suddenly relocated from their usual environment and deprived of one parent suffers psychological trauma that may affect their emotional and social development for many years. Psychological studies have proven that the experience of parental abduction can cause serious psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and difficulties in building healthy future relationships. On the other hand, the parent deprived of their child lives daily bitter suffering including feelings of helplessness, frustration, and constant fear for the child's fate and safety, which may lead to serious health and psychological problems. Therefore, any effective strategy for addressing this issue must place the best interests of the child at the core of its concerns, seeking rapid and sustainable solutions that protect the child's right to grow in a safe and stable environment and maintain their relationship with both parents as much as possible.

This report consists of five main chapters distributed across several integrated sections and subsections, where the first chapter addresses the general framework and current context including this executive summary in addition to a section analyzing the contemporary political and security context and its impact on abduction cases. The second chapter is dedicated to reviewing the legal framework and systemic challenges at international and national levels. The third chapter contains detailed country analysis reviewing the reality of abduction in each Arab country individually. The fourth chapter focuses on organizations working in this



field with special spotlight on iHOPE's experience. Finally, the fifth chapter presents comprehensive strategic recommendations directed to various parties concerned with this issue including governments, international organizations, embassies, and civil society.

The greatest challenge facing the international community in dealing with international parental child abduction in the Arab region lies in finding the right balance between respecting national sovereignty and the cultural and religious specificities of each country on one hand, and ensuring protection of the child's fundamental rights according to international human rights standards on the other. This delicate balance requires a collaborative and flexible approach that takes local contexts into account and builds on existing strengths in each legal and cultural system, rather than imposing ready-made model solutions that may not suit local reality. In this context, the importance of the role played by specialized local organizations as bridges connecting different legal systems and facilitating dialogue and understanding between disputing parties emerges, helping to find practical and culturally acceptable solutions that achieve the best interests of the child without compromising the fundamental values and principles of any party.

Impact Of Political and Security Transformations (Syrian & Lebanese Cases as Models)

The phenomenon of international parental child abduction cannot be separated from the political and security contexts witnessed by the Arab region. The fundamental transformations that have swept some countries in the region in recent years have produced new and complex patterns of abduction cases, creating unprecedented challenges for authorities concerned with protecting children's rights and affected families. Understanding these political and security dynamics constitutes a necessary entry point for any serious attempt to develop effective strategies for dealing with this growing phenomenon.

Political Transformations in Syria and the Abduction Wave Linked to Return

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024 marked a historical turning point in the Syrian and regional landscape, but this political transformation was not limited to Syria's interior; rather, its repercussions extended to affect Syrian diaspora communities spread across the world. The first months following political change witnessed a large influx of returnees from Europe, the Americas, and Australia, driven by feelings of nostalgia for the homeland and desire to participate in building a new Syria, or seeking economic opportunities in the expected reconstruction

phase. However, this return wave carried with it a tragic humanitarian dimension of unprecedented magnitude.

It became apparent that a large proportion of returnees were men married to foreign women or Syrian women permanently settled in countries of residence, many of whom had children born and raised in those countries and holding their nationalities. A not inconsiderable number of these fathers, whether motivated by revenge against the wife after marital disputes, desire to raise children within the Syrian cultural environment, or even responding to extended family pressures in Syria, took their children with them to Syria without obtaining maternal consent, and in some cases in explicit violation of judicial rulings issued by courts in countries of residence granting custody to the mother or prohibiting travel with children abroad without judicial permission.

This pattern of return-linked abduction following political transformations is distinguished by characteristics making it more complex than traditional abduction cases. On one hand, abducting fathers exploit the administrative and legal chaos that accompanied Syria's transitional phase, where judicial and security institutions had not yet stabilized, making it difficult to track cases or implement any legal procedures against abductors. On the other hand, the prevailing political discourse during that period focused on Syrians' return to their homeland and participation in its reconstruction, creating a kind of societal sympathy with returnees without sufficient attention to legal and humanitarian aspects related to children's and deprived mothers' rights.

Furthermore, Syria's absence from the Hague Convention system on international child abduction, and the lack of clear bilateral agreements with most countries from which returnees came, makes the legal pathway for child recovery virtually impossible under current circumstances. Mothers deprived of their children find themselves facing a thick legal and bureaucratic wall, where Syrian courts do not recognize rulings issued by foreign courts in most cases, and even if a mother seeks litigation before Syrian courts, she faces enormous challenges including difficulty of physical access to Syria, lack of knowledge of local language and laws, shortage of financial resources necessary for a lengthy legal battle, not to mention cultural and legal bias she may face as a foreign woman in a judicial system that tends usually to grant custody to the father or his family in many cases.

iHOPE has documented, through its communication with multiple embassies and concerned international organizations, dozens of cases falling under this new



pattern of return-linked abduction to Syria. Available information indicates that abducted children come from multiple nationalities including the United States, Canada, Sweden, Germany, France, Netherlands, Britain, and Australia, and their ages range from infancy to adolescence, meaning that an entire generation of children has been suddenly torn from their familiar environment and from their mother, placed in an entirely new cultural and geographical context without any preparation or psychological conditioning.

Lebanon's Security Situation as a Factor Influencing Abduction Dynamics

In contrast to the Syrian situation, security developments in Lebanon have produced an entirely different dynamic regarding international parental child abduction cases. The war that erupted in southern Lebanon and the military escalation that affected wide areas of the country, in addition to general security deterioration and ongoing economic collapse, created a repelling environment making Lebanon an undesirable destination for abduction, and even prompted many previous abducting fathers to reconsider their decisions.

Fear for children's physical safety constituted a decisive factor in changing some abducting fathers' positions. With escalating military operations, shells falling on residential areas, electricity and water cuts, and shortages of food and medical supplies, many realized that keeping their children in Lebanon exposes them to real risks far exceeding any other considerations related to custody or marital disputes. iHOPE exploited this narrow window for intervention and negotiation with abducting fathers, using discourse focusing on the child's best interests and the necessity of protecting them from war horrors.

iHOPE documented several cases where it successfully facilitated children's return to their mothers in safe countries during the security escalation period. In one such case, two U.S. children held in Lebanon for three years, where all legal and diplomatic attempts to recover them had failed, but with the war's outbreak and the father's residential area being subjected to repeated shelling, an agreement was reached allowing the mother to take the children to the United States with possibility of future visits when the situation stabilizes. In another case, a girl held in Beirut for two years, where the father refused to allow even maternal visits, but with security and economic deterioration, the parent found a settlement with the mother requiring his daughter's exit from Lebanon provided the mother allows him to visit his daughter whenever he wishes.

This shift in abducting fathers' positions reveals an important truth often ignored in discussions about international child abduction: many of these fathers are not necessarily conscienceless individuals or unconcerned about their children's interests, but rather often act under cultural, family, or emotional pressures, or based on a different understanding of what constitutes the child's best interests. When circumstances change radically such that the child's remaining in the abduction location poses a clear danger to their safety, many of these fathers are willing to reconsider their position and reach a solution ensuring child safety.

Lebanon's catastrophic economic situation, with the Lebanese pound's collapse, loss of bank deposits, rising unemployment rates, and deterioration of basic services including education and health, has made it difficult for many abducting fathers to provide a decent standard of living for their children. A father who perhaps believed a few years ago he could provide a better life for his children in Lebanon compared to living with their mother abroad, today finds himself unable even to provide their basic needs for food, medicine, and education. This harsh reality pushed some fathers to seek help from embassies or organizations working in international parental child abduction to facilitate their children's return to their mothers in more stable countries.

It is important to note that these positive developments in Lebanon do not mean the problem has ended. There are still numerous cases of children held in Lebanon despite difficult conditions, either because abducting fathers still refuse to allow their return for reasons related to spite against the mother or due to extended family pressures, or because logistical and security circumstances prevent implementing any practical arrangements for child relocation. Also, legal challenges represented by multiple courts and judicial systems in Lebanon remain, and many mothers deprived of their children still face enormous difficulties dealing with Lebanon's complex legal system.

Regional Implications of Political and Security Crises

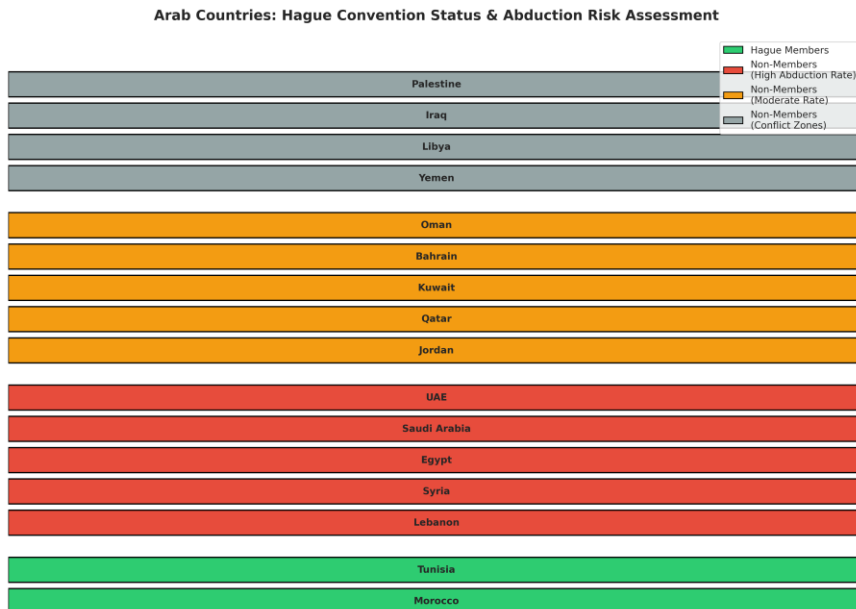
Political and security transformations in Syria and Lebanon are not isolated from the broader regional context. The Arab region as a whole is witnessing political and economic instability directly affecting international parental child abduction dynamics. In Iraq, security and sectarian challenges continue creating a complex environment for abduction cases, especially in cases where different sectarian or ethnic affiliations intersect. In Yemen, the war continuing for years has exacerbated the suffering of families affected by abduction, where it has become practically

impossible to implement any legal procedures or even communicate with children held in conflict zones.

In Libya, political division and multiplicity of authorities and armed groups have created a legal and security vacuum making it difficult to track abduction cases or intervene to resolve them. Even in countries enjoying relative stability such as Gulf states, regional tensions and changing diplomatic relations between these countries and the West affect the level of cooperation on abduction files, where these issues can be influenced by general political mood and bilateral relations between countries.

Understanding these political and security dynamics helps realize that the issue of international parental child abduction in the Arab region cannot be addressed from a purely legal perspective, but requires a comprehensive approach taking into account changing political and security contexts, and benefiting from windows and opportunities created by these transformations to find practical solutions protecting children's rights and achieving their best interests.

Figure 1: Arab Countries - Hague Convention Status & Risk Assessment



This visualization categorizes 22 Arab countries by their Hague Convention membership status and assessed abduction risk levels based on case frequency, institutional capacity, and political stability. Only Morocco and Tunisia have ratified the Convention.



CHAPTER TWO: STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

International and Regional Legal Framework

The 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction represents the fundamental pillar of the international legal system concerned with protecting children from cross-border abduction. This Convention emerged as a response to the increasing cases of mixed-nationality marriages and the resulting complex custody disputes involving unlawful child relocation across international borders. The Convention's philosophy rests on two fundamental principles: first, that a child must be returned immediately to their country of habitual residence so that custody matters can be decided before competent courts in that country; and second, that delay in resolving these cases causes severe harm to the child and must be avoided as much as possible.

However, this international system faces a major problem in the Arab region, namely that the overwhelming majority of Arab countries have not acceded to this Convention, meaning they are not bound to apply its mechanisms and do not recognize rulings issued under it. Of twenty-two Arab countries, only Morocco, which ratified it in 2010, has joined the Convention, followed by Tunisia. As for the remaining Arab countries, including those with significant political and economic weight such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, they have not joined the Convention to this day, despite repeated diplomatic efforts by Western countries and international organizations urging them to do so.

The non-accession of these countries to the Hague Convention is not due to a single reason, but rather to a complex set of legal, cultural, and political factors. From a legal standpoint, some provisions of the Convention conflict with principles of Islamic Sharia as interpreted by religious courts in these countries, particularly regarding custody matters and the rights of father and mother. Islamic Sharia, according to prevailing interpretations in most schools of thought, grants the mother custody rights for young children until a certain age that varies by school of thought and gender, after which custody transfers to the father or his family. The father also retains guardianship over the child even if custody remains with the mother. This system differs fundamentally from the prevailing concept in Western law where custody is determined based on the criterion of the child's best interests without predetermined consideration of parental gender or child's age.

Furthermore, the principle of judicial jurisdiction upon which the Hague Convention is based—which grants jurisdiction to courts in the country of the child's habitual

residence—conflicts with prevailing principles in private international law in Arab countries, where most of these countries apply the principle of nationality or religion in determining judicial jurisdiction and applicable law in personal status matters. Lebanese courts, for example, consider themselves competent to examine any custody dispute where one party is Lebanese, regardless of the child's place of residence, and apply Lebanese law or rather the law of the sect to which the Lebanese father belongs. This means that Lebanese courts will not accept the principle of immediate return of the child to their country of habitual residence as stipulated by the Hague Convention, but rather will examine the custody matter according to their domestic laws.

On the other hand, there are political and cultural concerns preventing some Arab countries from joining the Convention. Some governments fear that such accession will be viewed as submission to Western pressure or abandonment of national sovereignty and cultural identity, especially given public opinion's sensitivity toward any matters related to Islamic Sharia and family values. There are also concerns that the Convention's mechanisms may be used selectively against Arab and Muslim citizens, and that Western courts may not be neutral in dealing with cases involving cultural and religious differences. These concerns have been reinforced by some documented cases where Muslim fathers or mothers were treated unfairly in Western courts, or where culturally biased decisions appeared to be made.

However, the absence of the Hague Convention does not mean a complete absence of any international legal framework that can be relied upon in dealing with abduction cases. Almost all Arab countries are parties to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which in its Article 11 stipulates the obligation of States Parties to take measures to contest the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad, and encourages the conclusion of bilateral or multilateral agreements or accession to existing agreements for this purpose. However, this article remains general and not directly applicable, as the monitoring and enforcement mechanisms in the Convention on the Rights of the Child are not effective and do not allow affected parties direct recourse to an international body to enforce their rights.

In addition, some Arab countries have entered into bilateral agreements with other countries that include provisions related to judicial cooperation in personal status matters. Morocco, for example, in addition to its accession to the Hague Convention,



has bilateral agreements with France and Spain addressing cooperation in custody and visitation matters, and these agreements have proven reasonably effective in resolving some cases. Jordan and Tunisia have also shown interest in developing cooperation mechanisms with European countries in this field, although these have not yet crystallized into binding agreements. However, this bilateral approach remains limited in scope and depends on each country's political will individually, and does not constitute a comprehensive alternative to the Hague Convention.

At the Arab regional level, attempts to create a unified Arab framework for dealing with cross-border custody and abduction issues have not succeeded. Although the League of Arab States issued the Convention on the Execution of Judgments in 1953, this convention does not specifically address custody and abduction matters, and its practical application faces significant difficulties due to large disparities in legal systems among Arab countries. In recent years, initiatives have been proposed to create a joint Arab mechanism for dealing with these issues, but they have not progressed beyond initial discussions and have not materialized into a binding convention or practical, applicable mechanism.

Cultural and Social Challenges

Understanding legal challenges alone is insufficient to comprehend the complexities of international parental child abduction in the Arab region, as this issue is deeply rooted in cultural and social structures that fundamentally determine how family, childhood, and parental roles are viewed. Arab societies, despite their diversity and differences, share a set of values and perceptions that directly affect how custody disputes and abduction are handled.

One of the most prominent of these perceptions relates to the concept of the extended family and its role in the child's life. Unlike Western societies that focus on the nuclear family consisting of parents and children only, the extended family occupies a central position in Arab societies in raising and caring for children. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, and other relatives are considered an integral part of the child's educational environment, with a quasi-natural right to participate in their upbringing and decisions regarding their future. This perception makes the idea of isolating the child from their extended family—even if for the sake of living with one parent in a foreign country—something viewed with suspicion and rejection in many cases.

This partially explains why extended families are active parties in many abduction cases, where the role of grandparents and relatives is not limited to supporting the



abducting father, but in some cases extends to pressuring him to commit the abduction in the first place, or even carrying out the abduction on his behalf if he is unable to do so. iHOPE has documented numerous cases where grandparents or uncles actually relocated children from their country of residence to the Arab country, while the father was absent or not even fully consenting to this decision. In other cases, the extended family refused to allow children's return even after the father himself agreed to it, using their social and financial influence to keep the children under their control. As in the case of a U.S. mother who found herself stuck in Lebanon with her children, where the father's niece's Syrian husband abducted the children and separated them from their mother based on instructions from the children's grandmother and father who primarily lives outside Lebanon. This led iHOPE to file a criminal abduction complaint against him (*the niece's husband*), which resulted in the children being retrieved, but the Appellate Public Prosecution in North Lebanon dismissed the complaint file in November 2025 after the mother received her children—meaning the Appellate Public Prosecution in North Lebanon dropped the complaint after we retrieved the children without criminalizing the abductor and holding him criminally responsible for his actions!

Concepts of honor and social reputation also play a central role in complicating these issues. In many Arab societies, marital failure, especially if one party is foreign, is viewed as a disgrace affecting the entire family, with the foreign party usually blamed for this failure. In this context, retaining children within the Arab family becomes a matter of honor and dignity, not merely a legal custody dispute. The family's refusal to allow children to return to the foreign mother is often read as a defense of family dignity and cultural and religious identity, not as a violation of legal rights. This is also what iHOPE witnessed firsthand when it entered mediation in October 2025 with the uncles of four European children abducted to Gaza. The children's uncles categorically refused to return the children on the grounds that the mother, who is in Europe and of Arab origin, had remarried another man, and this is a matter of honor that cannot be overlooked according to them. This means that the children's uncles and their late father's mother preferred to risk the children's lives amid the bombing in Gaza rather than remove them from there and return them to their country of residence where they were born and raised.

Related to this perception is also the issue of the child's religious and cultural identity. Many Arab families fear that raising the child in a foreign environment may lead to their loss of Islamic and Arab identity, and that the foreign mother, even if Muslim, may not be able to raise the child according to correct Islamic values and

traditions. These fears are reinforced by the negative stereotype of Western societies prevalent in many Arab societies, which portrays the West as morally dissolute societies devoid of religious and family values. Consequently, retaining the child in the Arab country is justified in many minds as a religious and moral duty to protect the child from deviation and loss. In this regard, iHOPE sent a draft law to the Turkish Parliament to legislate a convention guaranteeing the rights of Muslim children when returned to their country of residence in a way that preserves their culture as Muslims and respects their teachings.

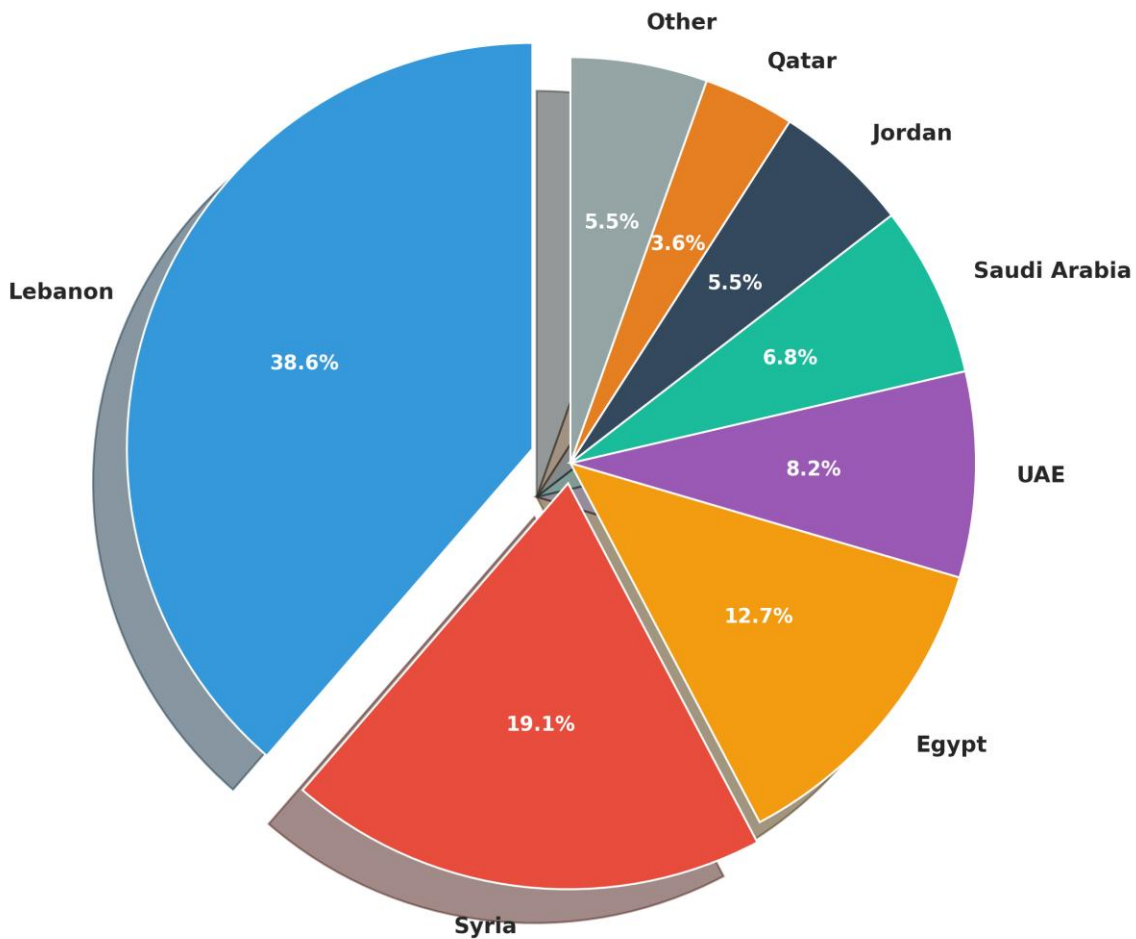
However, these concerns are not limited to the Arab side only. Foreign mothers also harbor legitimate concerns about raising their children in an Arab environment that may impose values and practices they disagree with. Many of these mothers fear that their daughters will be subjected to gender discrimination or deprived of educational and life opportunities equal to males, or that they will be married at an early age against their will, or subjected to practices such as female genital mutilation in some societies. Regarding boys, mothers fear they will be raised with conservative or extremist religious concepts that may limit their intellectual openness and personal freedom in the future. These mutual fears create a state of cultural polarization making it difficult to reach consensual solutions. iHOPE has also witnessed many similar cases, including the case of two children from Canada, abducted to Lebanon, where the father prevented the children from seeing their mother for more than six years until iHOPE conducted mediation efforts between the parents. After six years, the mother was reunited with her children in Lebanon, and it became clear that the two boys had been severely brainwashed and advocate extremist Takfiri Islam according to their father's mentality. They refused to return to their mother country despite the Juvenile Judge in North Lebanon listening to them and being prepared to rule on sending them to their mother country, but she considered that they were at an age enabling them to choose and select, especially since the children's age when heard by the court was 16 and 15 years, and they strongly opposed returning to their mother country even though they do not receive education like most children their age and work delivering goods from the supermarket to neighboring homes with all the danger this work entails for them.

In addition, there is a real problem related to gender bias in legal and social systems in many Arab countries. Although religious laws grant the mother custody rights for young children, this right is conditional and restricted by numerous conditions that may lead to its easy forfeiture. A Muslim mother may lose custody rights if she marries a man foreign to the child, or if she travels outside the country without the

father's permission, or if it is proven that she does not adhere to religious teachings in the required manner. As for the non-Muslim mother, her situation is more difficult, as many religious courts consider that raising a Muslim child by a non-Muslim mother is impermissible after a certain age, meaning that her custody right automatically lapses even if the mother is most suitable for caring for the child from all other aspects.

Figure 2: iHOPE Case Distribution by Country (2021-2025)

**iHOPE Cases by Country (2021-2025)
Total Cases Handled: 220**



Distribution of 220 cases handled by iHOPE across Arab countries. Lebanon (85 cases) and Syria (42 cases) represent the highest concentrations due to political instability, complex legal systems, and large diaspora populations returning from Western countries.



CHAPTER THREE: THE REALITY OF INTERNATIONAL PARENTAL CHILD ABDUCTION IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Lebanon

Lebanon represents an exceptional and complex case in the Arab region regarding international parental child abduction issues, due to its unique legal system based on sectarian pluralism. Lebanon does not have a unified personal status law applicable to all its citizens; rather, these matters fall under the jurisdiction of eighteen officially recognized religious sects, each with its own courts and legal system. This reality means that a single custody case can be examined in entirely different ways depending on the sect to which the father belongs, creating a state of legal chaos and structural discrimination.

If the father belongs to the Sunni sect, for example, the Sunni Sharia Personal Status Court has jurisdiction and applies provisions of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, which grants the mother custody rights until age twelve for males and fourteen for females, after which custody transfers to the father, with guardianship remaining with the father in all circumstances. If the father is Shia, the Jaafari Sharia Court has jurisdiction and applies Shia jurisprudence provisions, which grant the mother custody rights only until age two for males (possibly extending to seven under certain conditions) and nine for females. If the father is Maronite Christian, the Maronite Spiritual Court examines the case according to Maronite Canon Law, which does not recognize divorce at all and deals with separation and custody in an entirely different manner. This diversity makes the legal outcome of any custody case in Lebanon depend primarily on the father's sectarian affiliation rather than on objective criteria related to the child's best interests.

If sectarian judicial plurality poses a major challenge, the overlap of jurisdictions further complicates matters. In addition to religious courts, there are also Lebanese civil courts that may have jurisdiction over some aspects of the case, especially if one party is non-Lebanese or if there are international elements in the case. It may happen that a religious court issues a custody ruling in favor of the father, while a civil court issues a ruling preventing travel or granting visitation rights to the mother, creating a conflict in judgments difficult to resolve. There are also criminal courts that may examine some abduction cases on the basis that they constitute kidnapping or deprivation of liberty crimes, especially if there is a prior judicial ruling granting custody to the mother, but application of criminal law in these cases remains rare and limited.

This complex legal situation has made Lebanon an attractive destination for fathers wishing to abduct their children, as they realize there is a significant opportunity to obtain a custody ruling from Lebanese courts, especially if the child has exceeded the age at which the mother's custody ends according to the applicable religious law. Furthermore, Lebanon's absence from the Hague Convention and Lebanese courts' non-recognition of foreign judgments in custody matters makes it virtually impossible for a foreign mother to recover her child through the traditional legal pathway. Even if the mother succeeds in obtaining a ruling from a Lebanese court granting her visitation rights or even custody, enforcement of these rulings faces enormous practical obstacles due to weak enforcement mechanisms and the father's extended family's resistance.

However, the situation in Lebanon is not entirely bleak. There are some legal loopholes and creative spaces that can be exploited in favor of affected mothers. iHOPE has succeeded, through its intensive fieldwork over the years, in developing innovative legal strategies that benefit from contradictions existing in the Lebanese legal system. For example, iHOPE managed in several cases to file lawsuits before Lebanese civil appellate courts demanding application of the principle of the child's best interests as a general constitutional and legal principle superseding sectarian laws, based on Article 7 of the Lebanese Constitution which guarantees childhood protection, and Lebanon's obligations under the international Convention on the Rights of the Child.

iHOPE has also achieved important judicial precedents by resorting to civil appellate courts in some cases with a clear international element, obtaining rulings ordering children's return to their country of habitual residence, on the basis that their abduction constitutes a violation of their fundamental rights and that Lebanese courts lack jurisdiction to examine custody matters as long as the child was not habitually residing in Lebanon. These rulings, although few and limited, constitute an important step toward establishing a new legal principle in Lebanese jurisprudence recognizing the rights of abducted children and providing a legal mechanism for their protection.

It is noteworthy that foreign embassies in Lebanon, especially the U.S., Canadian, Dutch, Swedish, and Polish embassies, have listed iHOPE on their official rosters as an accredited legal service provider for their citizens facing child abduction cases in Lebanon. This official recognition reflects the trust the organization has earned



through its field successes and accumulated experience in dealing with the complexities of the Lebanese legal system.

Beyond legal strategies and case-by-case interventions, Lebanon has witnessed significant progress in capacity-building and public awareness initiatives aimed at addressing international parental child abduction systematically. Over recent years, iHOPE organized and conducted specialized training workshops to equip lawyers, judges, and legal professionals with the specialized skills needed to handle IPCA cases effectively. These training programs have focused on comparative legal analysis, cross-cultural mediation techniques, and understanding international frameworks like the Hague Convention. These capacity-building efforts represent a crucial investment in preparing Lebanon's future generation of legal professionals to navigate the complexities of cross-border family law with cultural sensitivity and technical expertise.

iHOPE's sustained advocacy and capacity-building work has led to significant institutional recognition and systemic changes within Lebanon's legal and academic communities. The Tripoli Bar Association, recognizing international parental child abduction as a distinct legal challenge requiring specialized expertise, established the International Parental Child Abduction Commission managed by iHOPE. This formal institutional structure within Lebanon's legal establishment represents a milestone in elevating IPCA from an overlooked consular issue to a recognized area of specialized legal practice deserving dedicated institutional attention and resources.

In the academic sphere, iHOPE collaborated with Al-Jinan University to launch Lebanon's first Advocacy Clinic dedicated to child rights advocacy and international parental child abduction. This pioneering initiative aims to equip university students with the analytical tools, advocacy skills, and legal knowledge necessary to defend left-behind parents and advocate against IPCA systematically. By embedding IPCA education within university legal training, the Advocacy Clinic ensures that future generations of Lebanese lawyers, policymakers, and civil society leaders will understand cross-border family law complexities and recognize child abduction as a serious rights violation rather than a private family matter. This institutional innovation creates sustainable mechanisms for knowledge transfer and ensures that specialized expertise in IPCA will continue developing within Lebanon's legal community.

Simultaneously, iHOPE invested in awareness initiatives targeting broader Lebanese society, aimed at shifting public opinion on international parental child abduction from viewing it as a private family matter to recognizing it as a serious child rights violation requiring systemic response. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives have helped challenge traditional narratives that often excuse or normalize child abduction, particularly when committed by fathers. By educating communities about the psychological harm inflicted on abducted children, the legal consequences of abduction, and the rights of both parents regardless of nationality, these initiatives are gradually transforming societal attitudes. This shift in public opinion is not merely symbolic—it creates essential political pressure that can ultimately lead to policy reform, legislative changes, and stronger institutional mechanisms for child protection. When communities begin to view international parental child abduction as unacceptable rather than culturally justifiable, it becomes increasingly difficult for policymakers to ignore calls for legal reform and for courts to perpetuate discriminatory practices.

Syria

Syria currently presents a unique case different from all other Arab countries, as the fundamental political transformation the country witnessed at the end of 2024 created an unprecedented legal and institutional vacuum. The Syrian judicial system, which before the transformation was subject to strict central control, is now going through a transitional phase where it is difficult to predict how courts will operate and the stability of rulings issued by them. This situation has made Syria a legal gray zone regarding custody and abduction issues, where there is no clear central authority to deal with, and no stable mechanisms for enforcing judicial rulings even if issued.

Before the political transformation, the Syrian legal system relied on the Syrian Personal Status Law issued in 1953, which derives its provisions from Islamic jurisprudence and applies to Muslims, while Christian sects are subject to their own systems. This law granted the mother custody rights until age thirteen for males and fifteen for females, with the possibility of extending this period by judicial decision if the child's best interests so require. However, despite this legal text, judicial practice tended clearly in favor of fathers, especially in cases involving a foreign element or religious difference.

In the current transitional phase, the situation is more ambiguous. The new authorities have not yet issued clear legislation determining how to deal with



personal status and custody issues, nor is it known whether the old personal status law will be retained or a new law will be issued, and if so, what directions it will adopt, with the likelihood that the new system will be more stringent due to the extremist Islamic currents currently ruling Syria. This ambiguity makes it very difficult to plan any long-term legal strategy for dealing with abduction cases in Syria, and makes abducting fathers feel a kind of effective immunity, knowing that the existing chaos makes it virtually impossible to prosecute them legally or force them to return the children.

This situation has transformed Syria from a country that witnessed limited cases of international child abduction into a major hotspot for this phenomenon in the region. As previously mentioned, the return wave following political transformation brought with it hundreds of new abduction cases, distinguished by being linked to complex political and emotional motives more than ordinary custody disputes. Many returning fathers were opponents of the previous regime who lived in exile for many long years, and their return to Syria carries strong symbolic and emotional dimension, and they want their children to share this historic moment and be part of building the new Syria. This emotional and political dimension makes it difficult to negotiate with them or convince them that the child's best interests may not lie in remaining in Syria under current difficult circumstances.

Syria's humanitarian situation also complicates the problem. The country's infrastructure suffered widespread destruction during the long war years, and many areas lack basic services including electricity, water, and sanitation. The educational and health systems suffer from serious problems, and the economic situation is severely deteriorated. All these factors mean that children abducted to Syria live in very difficult conditions affecting their physical, psychological, and educational development, which doubles the suffering of mothers who feel completely powerless to protect their children.

In truth, since the regime's fall, iHOPE has received more than forty abduction cases to Syria mainly from the U.S. and European countries. In most cases, iHOPE remained unable to achieve any results when families in Syria did not cooperate, especially since the matter requires funding and support to establish a center in Syria concerned with mediation and dispute resolution, which iHOPE cannot do alone in Syria. However, despite all these difficulties, we as an organization continue trying to make many contacts with decision-makers in Syria to reach a formula that



helps families whose children have been abducted to Syria and work on returning them to their mother country.

Egypt

Egypt occupies a special place in the map of international parental child abduction in the Arab region, due to the large size of the Egyptian diaspora abroad, especially in Gulf countries, Europe, and the United States, meaning the existence of a large number of mixed marriage cases that may develop into custody disputes and abduction. Egypt is also distinguished by a relatively developed judicial system and courts with long experience in dealing with complex personal status cases, making the situation there different from some other countries suffering from institutional weakness.

Muslims in Egypt are subject to provisions of Egyptian Personal Status Law, which was last amended in 2000, granting the mother custody rights until age fifteen, with the possibility of extension by judicial decision. This age is relatively longer than most other Arab countries, which gives Egyptian mothers a relatively better position in custody disputes. However, this legal position does not necessarily apply to foreign mothers married to Egyptians, where these mothers face additional challenges related to difficulty in adapting to the Egyptian legal system, language, and complex judicial procedures.

One of the major challenges facing foreign mothers in Egypt is the travel ban issue, where under law, the Egyptian father has the right to submit a request to prevent his children from traveling outside the country even if the mother is the legal custodian. This procedure is widely used as a pressure tool on foreign mothers, where the child becomes effectively detained in Egypt even if there is no abduction case in the traditional sense. International organizations concerned with child rights have documented dozens of cases of American, European, and Australian mothers stuck in Egypt for years due to travel ban orders issued against their children, depriving them of returning to their countries and disrupting their lives and professional careers.

Jordan

Jordan enjoys a relatively stable legal system and courts with a good reputation regionally in terms of professionalism and adherence to sound legal procedures, making dealing with custody and abduction cases there less complex than some neighboring countries. Jordan applies the Jordanian Personal Status Law issued in 2010, considered one of the most developed laws in the region, granting the mother

custody rights until age fifteen for both males and females equally, giving the judge authority to extend custody if the child's best interests so require.

Jordanian Sharia courts have shown in recent years greater willingness to take the principle of the child's best interests into account more flexibly than traditional rigid interpretations of jurisprudential texts. Several judicial rulings have been issued taking into account the special circumstances of each case, including the child's psychological and educational stability and attachment to their previous environment, which opens a wider scope for foreign mothers to defend their rights. Additionally, Jordan has expressed interest in joining the Hague Convention, although it has not yet taken actual steps in this direction, but there are serious discussions within legal and governmental institutions about the feasibility of this accession and how to reconcile Convention requirements with national laws.

However, Jordan faces a particular challenge represented by the large number of Syrian and Iraqi refugees on its territory, some of whom are involved in child abduction cases. The unstable legal status of these refugees and difficulty tracking them and determining their residence make it difficult to enforce judicial rulings against them even if issued. Some camps also constitute areas difficult for judicial authorities to access, providing a relatively safe haven for abducting fathers seeking to hide from legal prosecution.

Iraq

Despite Iraq's ratification of the Hague Convention without implementing it for an indefinite period, this country represents an extremely complex case due to deep sectarian and ethnic divisions affecting all aspects of legal and social life. The country is effectively divided into different spheres of influence, each region having its judicial and administrative authorities that may operate independently or even contradictorily with central authorities in Baghdad. This reality makes custody and abduction cases more complex, as a judicial ruling issued in Baghdad may not be enforceable in Kurdistan Region or in Sunni or Shia majority areas, depending on the sectarian and political affiliation of the concerned parties.

Iraq applies the Iraqi Personal Status Law issued in 1959, which at the time was one of the most progressive laws in the region, granting women relatively broad rights compared to other Arab countries. However, this law has been subject to amendments and varying interpretations over decades, especially after the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003 and subsequent political transformations. Currently, there is varying application of the law between different regions, where Shia-

majority areas tend to apply more conservative interpretations derived from Jaafari jurisprudence, while some other areas maintain more liberal application.

In Kurdistan Region, the situation is entirely different, where the region enjoys wide autonomy and has its own judicial system. Kurdistan Parliament has issued special personal status laws differing in some aspects from federal Iraqi law, tending to give women broader rights in custody and divorce matters. However, this legal independence creates major problems in abduction cases, where an abducting father can flee from Baghdad to Kurdistan or vice versa, becoming outside the scope of rulings issued against him.

Additionally, Iraq's volatile security situation and continuing terrorist threats make it very difficult for foreign mothers to travel to Iraq to follow their cases before courts or even to visit their children. Foreign embassies in Baghdad also operate with limited capacities and are subject to strict security restrictions, limiting their ability to provide effective support to their affected citizens. All these factors make Iraq one of the most difficult destinations for dealing with international child abduction cases.

Palestine

Palestine faces an exceptional situation due to the political situation and internal division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, creating unique challenges in dealing with custody and abduction cases. The West Bank is partially subject to the Palestinian Authority which applies a mixture of old Jordanian laws and new Palestinian laws, while Gaza Strip is under Hamas control which applies a more conservative interpretation of Islamic Sharia. This division means that a single abduction case may be treated in entirely different ways depending on whether the child is located in the West Bank or Gaza.

Israeli occupation also imposes strict restrictions on movement of persons and goods between different Palestinian areas and between them and the outside world, making it very difficult for foreign mothers to reach their children or follow their legal cases. Entry to the West Bank requires an Israeli visa that may be refused without stating reasons, while entry to Gaza is virtually impossible for foreigners. Even if the mother manages to obtain a Palestinian judicial ruling in her favor, its enforcement on the ground faces enormous obstacles due to Israeli restrictions on movement and travel.

In the West Bank, Sharia courts apply the Jordanian Personal Status Law of 1976, which remained in effect since the Jordanian rule period of the West Bank before 1967. This law grants the mother custody rights until age nine for males and eleven for females, an age lower than current Jordanian law, meaning that Palestinian mothers' situation is worse than their Jordanian counterparts. In Gaza Strip, courts tend to apply stricter provisions derived from Hanbali interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence, further limiting the mother's custody rights, especially if the mother is foreign or non-Muslim.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents a unique model in the region due to its legal system based entirely on Islamic Sharia without codified personal status laws. Saudi courts apply jurisprudential provisions directly according to the Hanbali school of thought, with a large degree of discretionary authority for the judge in interpreting jurisprudential texts and applying them. This system creates a state of legal uncertainty, where vastly different rulings can be issued in similar cases, depending on the judge's interpretation and view of the matter.

Generally, Saudi courts apply very conservative provisions in custody cases, and there are strict conditions that must be met for the mother to retain custody rights, including not marrying a man foreign to the child, residing in Saudi Arabia, and strictly adhering to religious provisions. If the mother is non-Muslim, her situation is much worse, as courts consider raising a Muslim child by a non-Muslim mother impermissible under Sharia, and therefore her chances of obtaining custody rights are virtually non-existent.

Saudi Arabia also applies a guardianship system over women, despite easing some of its restrictions in recent years, meaning that Saudi women themselves may need their guardian's approval to travel or make some important decisions, which doubles the difficulty of mothers' situation in custody disputes. For foreign mothers, the Saudi sponsorship system makes them legally dependent on their husbands or another sponsor, meaning they cannot travel outside Saudi Arabia or even renew their residence without the sponsor's approval, making them effectively detained in the country if the husband refuses to cooperate.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia enjoys strict legal sovereignty and does not recognize any foreign rulings in personal status matters, nor does it allow any diplomatic interference in internal judicial cases. This strict position makes it virtually impossible for foreign embassies to provide any effective assistance to

their citizens involved in custody disputes, as Saudi authorities consider these purely internal matters and do not accept any external pressure regarding them. Despite the major social and economic transformations Saudi Arabia is witnessing within the framework of Vision 2030, legal reforms in personal status matters remain very limited, and courts continue to apply the same traditional conservative interpretations.

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates presents a different model from Saudi Arabia, combining modernity and economic openness on one hand, with legal and social conservatism on the other. The UAE issued in 2005 a federal personal status law applying to all citizens and Muslim residents, a codified and detailed law deriving its provisions from Islamic jurisprudence but with modern and precise formulation. This law grants the mother custody rights until age eleven for males and thirteen for females, with possibility of extension by judicial decision, a relatively better situation than Saudi Arabia.

UAE courts also enjoy a high degree of professionalism and organization, issuing rulings based on clear and defined legal procedures, reducing the degree of legal uncertainty. Courts have shown in some cases willingness to take into account the special circumstances of each case and consider the child's best interests more flexibly. However, despite this, interpretations remain conservative at their core, and foreign mothers' chances of obtaining fair rulings remain limited, especially if there is religious difference.

The biggest challenge in the UAE relates to the residence and sponsorship system, similar to the Saudi system in terms of making foreigners' residence linked to a sponsor, usually the husband in the case of foreign wives. This means that a foreign mother who separates from her husband automatically loses her right to reside in the UAE unless she finds another sponsor, which in most cases forces her to leave the country and leave her children behind. Even if she obtains a custody ruling from UAE courts, practically exercising this right requires her to remain in the UAE, which requires finding work and a new sponsor—a very difficult task for women under circumstances of divorce and custody dispute.

Qatar

The State of Qatar faces complex challenges regarding international parental child abduction cases, especially given its non-accession to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction. This legal situation creates a

significant legislative vacuum in dealing with cross-border abduction cases, where there is no binding international legal mechanism regulating the return of abducted children to their country of habitual residence.

Qatar's legal system is subject to Islamic Sharia provisions in personal status and custody cases, meaning Qatari courts apply local law and Islamic Sharia in deciding international custody disputes. In most cases where one parent is Qatari or Muslim, Qatari courts tend to grant custody according to Islamic Sharia provisions, which often grant the mother custody of young children (until a certain age) then custody transfers to the father. This legal approach may conflict with foreign court decisions or the child's best interests as understood in Western legal systems.

Foreign parents, especially non-Muslim mothers, face exceptional difficulties in recovering their children from Qatar once they are unlawfully relocated there. The absence of bilateral agreements or binding international treaties means these parents rely entirely on the Qatari judicial system, which may not recognize foreign court custody rulings. Travel and exit laws are also subject to guardian approval, complicating foreign mothers' attempts to leave Qatar with their children even if they have legal custody in their home country.

Practically, diplomatic and consular reports indicate that cases of international parental abduction to and from Qatar require intensive diplomatic intervention, often taking years of negotiations without guaranteed results. Western embassies in Doha regularly deal with cases of parents seeking to recover their children, but their legal options are extremely limited in the absence of an international legal framework.

Qatar's cultural and social environment, which places great importance on family and tribal ties, also plays a role in complicating these cases. A Qatari or Gulf parent who relocates their children to Qatar often enjoys wide family and social support, increasing the difficulty of the foreign parent's position trying to recover their children.

It is noteworthy that Qatar, despite its small population, hosts a large number of foreigners who constitute the overwhelming majority of the country's population, among them many mixed marriages between Qataris and foreign women. custody disputes often intersect with complex financial matters involving property, business ownership, and inheritance rights, making the Qatari parties strongly motivated to retain children within Qatar not only for custodial reasons but also to preserve

family wealth and ensure children remain connected to significant economic assets and business interests.

Kuwait and Bahrain

Kuwait and Bahrain share many legal and social characteristics regarding personal status issues. Both apply personal status laws derived from Islamic Sharia, with variation in details. In Kuwait, the Kuwaiti Personal Status Law issued in 1984 applies, granting the mother custody rights until age fifteen, among the longest periods in the region. In Bahrain, the Bahraini Family Law issued in 2009 applies, also granting the mother custody until age fifteen.

However, despite these legal texts that appear favorable to mothers, actual practice may be different. Courts in both countries tend to strictly interpret conditions for custody continuation, and a mother can easily lose her custody right if proven she married another man, or moved to live outside the country without the father's permission, or if her behavior is considered incompatible with prevailing religious and social standards. The father in both countries also has the right to prevent his children from traveling even if custody belongs to the mother, which is used as an effective pressure tool.

In Bahrain specifically, there is a sectarian dimension that cannot be ignored, as the country is divided between a Shia majority and Sunni rule, and this division is sometimes reflected in legal cases. There are Sunni Sharia courts and Shia Jaafari courts, each with its authorities and jurisdictions. In some cases, one party can exploit this judicial plurality to obtain more favorable rulings by choosing the appropriate court or by manipulating judicial jurisdiction.

Sultanate of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is distinguished by a legal system combining antiquity and modest development. Oman applies the Omani Personal Status Law issued in 1997, based on Ibadi jurisprudence prevalent in the Sultanate. This school of jurisprudence, despite being less widespread than the four Sunni schools, is distinguished by some characteristics affecting custody provisions.

Under Omani law, the mother is granted custody rights until the child reaches the age of discernment, an age not precisely defined in law and left to the judge's discretion, but usually ranges between seven and nine years. This means the mother's custody right in Oman is relatively shorter than most other Gulf countries. Omani courts are also very conservative in applying custody provisions, tending to



prefer children remaining within the Omani family even if the foreign mother is more capable of caring for them.

Among Oman's particular challenges is that the Sultanate enjoys a high degree of legal sovereignty and independence in its decisions, and does not easily accept foreign diplomatic interventions in its judicial affairs. Omani society is also conservative by nature and values tribal traditions and customs, meaning extended families play a large role in custody disputes, and these families often have strong influence difficult for an isolated foreign mother to confront.

Yemen

Yemen represents one of the most complex and dangerous countries in the field of international parental child abduction, where the catastrophic humanitarian crisis intersects with the absence of rule of law and ongoing civil war since 2014 to create an extremely difficult environment for protecting the rights of internationally abducted children. Yemen is not a party to the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction, and there are no bilateral agreements between Yemen and Western countries regulating the return of abducted children, making child recovery from Yemen a virtually impossible task under current circumstances.

The Yemeni legal system is based on Islamic Sharia in personal status and custody matters, and Yemeni courts apply local law exclusively without recognizing foreign court rulings in most cases. In disputes between spouses of different nationalities, Yemeni courts tend to apply custody provisions according to Islamic Sharia, which grants the mother custody of young children until a certain age (usually seven years for boys and nine years for girls), then custody transfers to the father. However, the situation is much more complex when the father is Yemeni, as courts give great weight to the father's right to guardianship over his children, and it becomes virtually impossible for the foreign mother to recover her children or even obtain visitation rights.

The deteriorating security situation in Yemen since the Houthi Ansar Allah group's control of the capital Sanaa in 2014, followed by civil war and Saudi-led coalition intervention, has led to a near-complete collapse of government institutions and disintegration of the judicial system. The country is effectively divided between Houthi-controlled areas in the north and the internationally recognized government in the south, with multiple armed factions controlling different areas. This



fragmentation means there is no central authority capable of enforcing any judicial rulings, even if issued by Yemeni courts, let alone foreign rulings.

Security challenges make child recovery from Yemen extremely dangerous. The U.S. Embassy in Sanaa closed its doors in February 2015, and the United States, Britain, and most Western countries issue highest-level travel warnings advising their citizens not to travel to Yemen under any circumstances due to terrorism, armed violence, kidnapping prevalence (including kidnapping of foreigners for ransom), landmines, and severe health hazards. Western governments are unable to provide any consular services to their citizens in Yemen, leaving foreign parents attempting to recover their children without any direct government support.

Documented cases of international parental abduction to and from Yemen are relatively few compared to other countries in the region, but are characterized by a high degree of complexity and desperation. The U.S. State Department documents cases of American parents who left their children in Yemen and were unable to return them. In one case that reached U.S. courts, an American mother tried to file a lawsuit in New York to return her children from Yemen where they had been living with their father for years, but the court rejected the case because Yemen had become the children's 'home state' under U.S. law. The mother claimed she remained in Yemen with her children for years fearing the father's retaliation and his political connections with the Houthis, but the court decided that Yemen—despite being a war zone—is the children's legal home, making it legally impossible to return them to the United States.

In another documented case, a Yemeni-American father was convicted of international child abduction under the U.S. federal International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act after he detained his children in Yemen and refused to return them to New York despite court orders. However, even his criminal conviction and imprisonment did not lead to the children's return, as American criminal law does not include a mechanism to force a foreign country to return children, and the U.S. government cannot intervene in the Yemeni judicial system or force Yemeni authorities to enforce American court rulings.

Houthi control over large parts of Yemen adds an additional layer of complexity and danger. The Houthis are accused of widespread human rights violations, including forced kidnapping of thousands of civilians and detaining them as hostages, using children as soldiers (the UN documented the deaths of approximately 2,000 child recruits in Houthi ranks), and extorting families to pay ransom for releasing their



relatives. Reports indicate that Houthis force families to hand over their children to fight under threat of depriving them of humanitarian aid or detaining other family members. In this context, foreign or half-foreign children abducted to Yemen may face additional risks including forced recruitment or use as political bargaining chips.

The absence of specialized non-governmental organizations in Yemen and lack of mediation services in custody disputes means affected parents have no local resources to turn to. Even international organizations that were working in Yemen face severe restrictions; the Houthis arrested dozens of local UN and humanitarian organization staff since 2024, accusing them of espionage, leading many organizations to suspend their operations. The death of a World Food Programme employee in Houthi custody in February 2025 highlights the danger of the situation even for humanitarian workers.

Western parents with children detained in Yemen live in a state of absolute helplessness. There are no effective international legal mechanisms, no way to reach children through diplomatic channels, and attempting to travel to Yemen to forcibly recover children could lead to the parent's arrest or even death. Western governments explicitly advise their citizens not to attempt to remove their children from Yemen without the other parent's consent, as this may constitute a crime under Yemeni law and lead to imprisonment.

The situation in Yemen represents the worst possible scenario for international parental abduction: a country not party to the Hague Convention, applying local and religious laws that do not recognize foreign rulings, suffering from civil war and institutional collapse, partially controlled by an armed group accused of grave human rights violations, with no Western diplomatic missions able to provide assistance. Children abducted to Yemen are effectively outside international protection, and their families live a double tragedy: losing their children while constantly worrying about their safety in a country suffering from the world's worst humanitarian crisis. There is an urgent need for international dialogue with all parties to the conflict in Yemen, but the bitter reality is that cases of international parental abduction to Yemen remain unresolved in the foreseeable future.

Arab Maghreb Countries

Maghreb countries constitute a diverse group in terms of dealing with custody and abduction issues.

Morocco is the only Arab country alongside Tunisia and Iraq that has joined the Hague Convention, and this accession came in the context of extensive reforms in Moroccan family law, where the Family Code was issued in 2004, considered one of the most progressive laws in the Arab world in terms of women's and children's rights.

The Moroccan Family Code grants the mother custody rights without specifying a certain age, leaving the matter to the judge's discretion based on the child's best interests—an important development moving away from rigid determinations based on gender and age. The Code also gives women broad rights to participate in making decisions related to children even if she is not the custodian. However, despite this legal progress, actual practice still faces challenges, as Moroccan society remains conservative in many areas, and judges do not always apply the Code's provisions with the progressive spirit in which they were formulated.

Tunisia: As for Tunisia, it follows a similar path to Morocco in terms of legal openness. Tunisia issued the Personal Status Code in 1956, one of the first laws in the Arab world to grant women advanced rights, including banning polygamy. The Code has undergone numerous amendments over decades, most recently in 2013, which strengthened women's custody rights and enabled judges to consider the child's best interests more broadly. Tunisian courts are also considered among the most progressive in the region, having issued pioneering rulings in women's and children's rights.

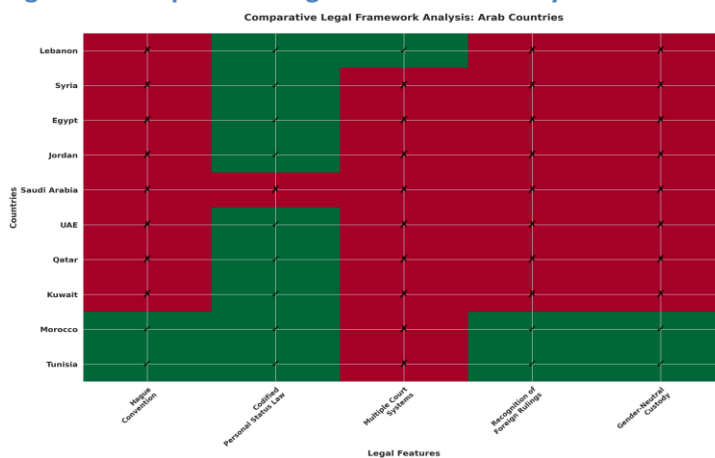
However, Tunisia, like Morocco, faces challenges in actual implementation of laws, especially in rural and conservative areas where tribal customs and social traditions still exercise strong influence. The difficult economic situation in both countries also makes many divorced mothers in a fragile economic position, weakening their ability to defend their rights before courts or provide appropriate care for their children even if they obtain custody rulings.

Algeria: As for Algeria it applies the Algerian Family Law issued in 1984, which was very conservative when issued, but underwent amendments in 2005 that introduced some improvements to women's status. Algerian law grants the mother custody rights until age ten for males, and custody does not lapse if the mother marries a close relative of the child—a positive development. However, Algerian courts remain conservative in their interpretation of the law, and foreign mothers face significant difficulties obtaining fair rulings, especially given the strong

nationalist sentiment in Algeria and sensitivity toward any foreign interference in internal affairs.

Libya: Finally, Libya represents an exceptional case due to the ongoing civil war since 2011 and political and military division between the country's east and west. Libya suffers from a near-complete collapse of judicial and administrative institutions, with two competing governments each claiming legitimacy, each having its courts and legal system. This chaotic situation makes it practically impossible to deal with custody and abduction cases in an organized manner, where there is no central authority to deal with, and even judicial rulings that may be issued in Tripoli or Benghazi cannot be enforced on the ground due to lack of security and armed militias' control over wide areas of the country.

Figure 3: Comparative Legal Framework Analysis



This matrix compares key legal features across ten Arab countries, revealing significant disparities in institutional frameworks. Morocco and Tunisia stand out as the only countries meeting multiple progressive criteria, while Saudi Arabia lacks codified personal status law entirely.

CHAPTER FOUR: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE AND WORKING METHODOLOGY

Disclaimer

Before examining the roles of various governments, embassies, and international organizations in addressing international parental child abduction, it is essential to establish an important methodological clarification. iHOPE does not presume to comprehensively evaluate or rank countries and organizations based on their overall contributions to combating IPCA globally. Such an undertaking would require access to comprehensive data sets, internal governmental reports, diplomatic cables, and operational details from numerous state agencies and non-



governmental entities worldwide—information that extends far beyond the reach and mandate of any single organization.

The assessments presented in this chapter are derived exclusively from iHOPE's direct operational experience over the past four years, specifically addressing those governments, embassies, ministries, and organizations with which we have established working relationships, exchanged information, and coordinated advocacy efforts.

This limited vantage point means we cannot claim comprehensive knowledge of what every country or organization is doing in this field. Bilateral negotiations between governments, internal policy reforms, training programs, awareness campaigns, and countless other initiatives may be underway without our direct observation or involvement. *The absence of mention in this report does not constitute evidence of inaction; rather, it reflects the inherent limitations of our organizational perspective and the specific cases that have come under our purview.*

What follows should be understood as **documentation of iHOPE's direct collaborative experiences** rather than a comprehensive audit of global efforts. When we highlight the cooperation of specific embassies, ministries, or organizations, we do so to acknowledge partnerships that have directly enhanced our capacity to serve affected families and to provide concrete examples of effective engagement models that have yielded tangible results for the children and families we collectively serve.

Governments, International and Regional Organizations Working in International Child Abduction

International and regional organizations and governments form a complex network of actors in the field of combating international parental child abduction, each with its role, scope of work, and limits of influence. Understanding this institutional ecosystem helps realize existing gaps and available opportunities for improving response to this phenomenon. Despite the multiplicity of concerned parties, coordination among them remains limited, with each party working within its own geographical or legal scope, creating challenges in providing a comprehensive and integrated response.



Role of States and Embassies

The United States of America

The U.S. State Department, through its Office of Children's Issues, plays a pivotal role in dealing with cases of international parental abduction involving American citizens. The Office's work is based on the Goldman Act of 2014, named after David Goldman who struggled for years to recover his son abducted to Brazil. This law requires the State Department to publish an annual report classifying countries based on their degree of cooperation in abduction cases, and imposes potential sanctions on non-cooperating countries.

The annual report prepared by the U.S. State Department is virtually the most comprehensive source of information about the reality of international parental child abduction worldwide. The report has listed several Arab countries as countries witnessing a pattern of abduction cases, including Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. This classification reflects the size of the problem from the U.S. perspective, but has not yet led to imposing actual sanctions on these countries; rather, it is used primarily as a diplomatic tool for pressure toward improving cooperation and dialogue on these sensitive issues. iHOPE has relied heavily in its current report and previous reports on the reports prepared by the U.S. State Department due to their accuracy and comprehensiveness. Beyond its annual compliance reporting, the U.S. State Department participates in the Malta Process framework, submitting country reports to the Hague Conference on Private International Law. In its 2024 country report, the State Department recommended iHOPE to be invited to the Malta Conference and explicitly acknowledged iHOPE's collaboration in advocating for and resolving IPCA cases in Lebanon, reflecting official recognition of the organization's expertise and effectiveness at the international level.

The U.S. State Department's Office of Children's Issues and the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon have been pioneers in advocating for and investing in institutional responses to international parental child abduction in the region. In June 2023, the Embassy organized a historic workshop at the Royal Hotel in Beirut on international child abduction, bringing together Lebanese decision-makers, delegations from multiple embassies, and senior officials from the Office of Children's Issues. iHOPE participated as a key stakeholder, presenting a comprehensive legal assessment of the situation in Lebanon regarding abduction cases and proposing models for cooperation between embassies and civil society organizations. This represented



the first dedicated governmental convening on IPCA issues in Lebanon, creating a platform for dialogue between Lebanese authorities, the judiciary, civil society, and the international community on this sensitive issue.

The Office of Children's Issues has demonstrated sustained commitment through significant investment in both staff training and community engagement. In February 2025, the State Department held an intensive training program in Doha, Qatar, specifically targeting U.S. embassy staff throughout the Middle East and North Africa region. iHOPE participated as a specialized regional expert, presenting on the legal and cultural challenges in the region, the Three-Front Strategy combining contextual analysis, advocacy, and litigation, and the HOPE mediation methodology specifically developed for resolving abduction cases in the Middle East context. This training equipped consular officers with specialized knowledge on the complex intersection of Islamic family law, multiple judicial systems, and cultural sensitivities that characterize these cases in Middle Eastern countries. This investment in specialized training reflects the State Department's recognition that standard consular approaches are insufficient for the unique challenges posed by non-Hague countries in the region.

Beyond staff capacity building, the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon has invested in community workshops and awareness-raising initiatives aimed at legal professionals, judiciary members, and civil society actors. Through investment in iHOPE initiatives, Lebanon's first National Advocacy Campaign Against Abduction was launched, featuring the digital platform Lebanon Against Abduction (www.lebanonagainstabduction.org), which serves as a comprehensive resource for affected families, legal professionals, and policymakers. These workshops, conducted in partnership with iHOPE and Lebanese institutions, have addressed the legal perspective of international child abduction under Lebanese law, explored possibilities for bilateral cooperation mechanisms, and examined potential paths toward Lebanon's accession to international conventions. The Embassy's engagement has elevated IPCA from a private family matter to a recognized child protection concern requiring coordinated institutional response.

U.S. embassies and consulates in the Middle East and North Africa region provide critical consular support to affected parents. This support includes documenting cases, communicating with local authorities, facilitating contact between affected families and local lawyers, and conducting welfare visits to check on children's conditions when authorized by local authorities. However, embassies' ability to



actually intervene remains limited due to constraints of national sovereignty and political and cultural sensitivities surrounding these issues in the region. U.S. consular officers are explicitly prohibited from taking physical custody of children, assisting in their removal in violation of local law, or representing parents in legal proceedings. To bridge this gap, the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, along with other embassies in Lebanon, officially lists iHOPE as an accredited service provider for their citizens, referring cases requiring specialized expertise in local law and cross-cultural mediation.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Netherlands maintains one of Europe's most specialized institutional frameworks for international parental child abduction, operating through the Central Authority International Children's Issues (CA IKA) under the Ministry of Justice and Security, headquartered in The Hague. The Dutch system is distinguished by its complete centralization of IPCA adjudication, with the District Court of The Hague serving as the only Dutch court hearing such cases. This concentration enables development of specialized expertise and consistent jurisprudence, with dedicated judges possessing international family law expertise and statutory timelines requiring judgment within six weeks at first instance.

For non-Hague Convention countries in the Middle East, the Dutch Central Authority follows a structured protocol of receiving applications, verifying custody rights, and forwarding cases to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for diplomatic engagement through embassies in Lebanon, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. The Dutch system distinctively emphasizes mediation through its Cross-Border Family Mediation network and the International Child Abduction Center (IKO), which provides expert advice, mediator referrals, and cultural competency training for working with Middle Eastern families, achieving approximately 40-50% success rates in cases where mediation is attempted.

The Netherlands has demonstrated exceptional commitment to understanding and addressing IPCA in the Middle East region through sustained engagement with iHOPE across multiple governmental levels. This comprehensive collaboration began in December 2024 when iHOPE representatives presented to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time, establishing initial contact and introducing iHOPE's work in the region. Throughout 2025, the Dutch government expanded this engagement significantly, hosting iHOPE for a presentation to the Dutch Central Authority, followed by high-level presentations on December 1, 2025



at the Ministry of Justice and Security in The Hague, and on December 2, 2025 to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch embassies in The Hague. This progression of meetings across multiple ministries and the Central Authority demonstrates the Netherlands' genuine interest in understanding the regional context and building effective partnerships for addressing IPCA in non-Convention countries.

The Dutch government's support extended beyond these formal presentations to active advocacy for iHOPE's credibility within international networks. Dutch authorities consistently provided positive recommendations when inquiries were made about iHOPE by other governments and organizations, lending institutional weight to iHOPE's expertise and reputation. This endorsement proved invaluable in establishing iHOPE's legitimacy with other European governments and international bodies seeking reliable partners in the Middle East region.

Recognizing the value of specialized expertise, the Dutch government facilitated a meeting on December 11, 2025 between iHOPE and the International Child Abduction Center (IKO) in Amsterdam. Discussions covered practical aspects of navigating diverse legal systems including Sharia family law, cultural considerations in mediation, and effective advocacy strategies for child protection in the MENA context. This invitation from IKO reflected growing recognition of iHOPE's expertise in Middle Eastern IPCA cases and strengthened knowledge exchange between European and Middle Eastern child protection practitioners, contributing to building IKO's understanding of complex case dynamics involving the region.

The Dutch Central Authority and the Dutch Embassy in Lebanon have established close and regular cooperation with iHOPE in following up on abduction cases involving Dutch citizens or children with Dutch roots, whether in Lebanon or Syria. The Netherlands officially lists iHOPE as an accredited service provider for Dutch citizens, referring cases requiring specialized expertise in local law and cross-cultural mediation. The Dutch Embassy's commitment to this partnership is further demonstrated through its active attendance at all of iHOPE's major events and conferences alongside 9 other embassies. This consistent presence at local initiatives, combined with institutional endorsement and formal accreditation, reflects the Netherlands' comprehensive support for iHOPE's work and recognition that effective responses to IPCA in complex non-Convention jurisdictions require sustained investment in local partnerships and cultural expertise.



The Republic of Poland

The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs has demonstrated interest in understanding IPCA challenges in non-Hague Middle Eastern countries. On May 15, 2025, the Ministry hosted iHOPE representatives for a presentation in Warsaw on international parental child abduction in the Middle East, examining the legal and cultural complexities of addressing these cases in the absence of Convention frameworks. This presentation provided Polish authorities with insights into regional challenges, available legal mechanisms, and effective strategies for case resolution in complex jurisdictions.

Poland's engagement with iHOPE has expanded across multiple Polish missions in the region. In September 2025, the Polish Embassy in Egypt reached out to iHOPE requesting collaboration and assistance with international cases, demonstrating the growing recognition of iHOPE's expertise beyond Lebanon and reflecting Polish diplomatic missions' practical need for specialized regional support in handling complex IPCA cases.

Poland's commitment to addressing IPCA in the region was further demonstrated during iHOPE's presentation to the EU Delegation in Beirut on September 25, 2025. During this session, which gathered representatives from Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France, Cyprus, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Bulgaria, and other countries, iHOPE presented on the National Campaign Against Abduction and the comprehensive resource hub at lebanonagainstabduction.org. The Polish representative expressed particular interest in the campaign, insisting on providing assistance to support iHOPE's national advocacy efforts. This proactive engagement reflected Poland's increasing commitment to supporting institutional initiatives addressing IPCA and demonstrated recognition of the value of sustained investment in regional capacity building and awareness-raising efforts.

The Polish Embassy in Lebanon has established cooperation with iHOPE, officially listing the organization as an accredited service provider for Polish citizens and referring cases requiring specialized expertise in local law and cross-cultural mediation. The Embassy has actively participated in iHOPE's conferences and workshops, demonstrating Poland's commitment to supporting institutional initiatives addressing IPCA in the region.



Australia

Australia has demonstrated active engagement with IPCA issues in the Middle East through sustained participation and leadership in regional initiatives. The Australian Embassy has moved beyond passive attendance to take meaningful roles in advancing understanding of consular challenges in non-Hague Convention jurisdictions.

At the November 2025 International Conference on Child Rights and International Parental Child Abduction organized by iHOPE in partnership with Jinan University, the Australian Consul delivered a presentation addressing the specific role of the Australian Embassy in handling IPCA cases and the particular challenges Australian consular officials face when supporting their citizens in Lebanon and the broader Middle East region. This presentation provided valuable insights into the operational realities of consular work in complex legal environments and contributed to the multi-stakeholder dialogue on improving cross-border cooperation.

The Australian Embassy has maintained consistent presence at iHOPE's conferences. Australian consular officials' participation in these convenings has enabled direct engagement with Lebanese legal professionals, judges, and civil society organizations to better understand the complexities of Lebanese personal status law systems and explore practical mechanisms for supporting Australian families.

In 2024, the Australian Embassy demonstrated leadership by hosting its own IPCA workshop, to which iHOPE was invited as a specialized resource on Middle Eastern legal frameworks and case resolution strategies. This initiative reflected Australia's proactive approach to building embassy capacity and fostering dialogue among stakeholders working on international parental child abduction cases in the region. The Australian Embassy's evolution from participant to convener of IPCA-focused gatherings underscores its growing institutional commitment to addressing this challenge systematically rather than solely through case-by-case consular assistance.

Canada

Canada has established itself as a leading coordinator of multi-lateral efforts to address IPCA in the Middle East, demonstrating sustained commitment through diplomatic leadership and active participation in regional initiatives. In early 2024, the Canadian Embassy in Beirut hosted a comprehensive working group meeting that brought together all embassies operating in Lebanon, with Global Affairs Canada participating virtually from Ottawa. iHOPE served as guest speaker at this convening, presenting on Lebanese laws and the judicial role of courts in IPCA cases. This initiative reflected Canada's recognition that effective responses to international parental child abduction require coordinated inter-embassy strategies and deep understanding of local legal contexts. By convening embassies



around iHOPE's specialized expertise on Lebanese personal status law, custody procedures, and enforcement challenges, Canada facilitated knowledge transfer that benefits all countries' consular operations in the region. The working group format has enabled Canadian officials and their counterparts to discuss common challenges including navigation of eighteen distinct confessional court systems, weak enforcement mechanisms for custody orders, and limited recognition of foreign judgments.

Canadian diplomatic representatives have maintained consistent presence at critical regional convenings throughout 2024-2025. Canadian consular officials participated in the November 2025 International Conference on Child Rights and International Parental Child Abduction organized by iHOPE and Jinan University, the 2024 Tripoli Bar Association IPCA Workshop, the September 2025 EU Delegation presentation in Beirut, and workshops convened by other embassies addressing cross-border family law issues. This sustained multi-lateral engagement has positioned Canada as an active partner in regional efforts to strengthen child protection mechanisms and improve outcomes for families affected by international parental child abduction.

Kingdom of Sweden

Sweden has demonstrated exceptional commitment to addressing IPCA in the Middle East through sustained engagement at multiple levels—from consistent embassy participation in regional initiatives to facilitating iHOPE's contributions to high-level international policy discussions.

Swedish diplomatic representatives have maintained regular presence at all iHOPE workshops and conferences, including the 2024 Tripoli Bar Association Workshop, the November 2025 International Conference on Child Rights and International Parental Child Abduction, and capacity-building initiatives throughout 2024-2025. This consistent attendance has enabled Swedish consular officials to develop nuanced understanding of Lebanese legal frameworks, case resolution strategies, and the cultural dimensions of custody disputes in the MENA region. The Swedish Embassy has officially listed iHOPE as a trusted service provider for Swedish citizens facing child abduction cases in Lebanon, reflecting institutional recognition of the organization's specialized expertise.

Beyond bilateral engagement in Lebanon, Sweden has played a pivotal role in elevating iHOPE's mediation methodology to international policy forums. In June 2025, Sweden facilitated iHOPE's participation in the Working Party on Cross-Border Family Mediation in the Context of the Malta Process, convened by the Hague Conference on Private International Law (HCCH). iHOPE's representative presented to 30 participants from 13 HCCH Members and 1 Observer State, alongside independent experts and members of the HCCH Permanent Bureau, demonstrating two complex abduction cases to and from the Middle East and highlighting the effectiveness of the HOPE Mediation Method as a crucial



strategy for resolving IPCA cases in contexts where comprehensive international and national legal frameworks remain absent.

This invitation represented significant recognition of iHOPE's specialized expertise in mediating IPCA cases between Hague Convention Contracting States and non-Contracting Sharia Law States. Sweden's role in connecting specialized regional practitioners with global policy-making bodies exemplifies a sophisticated diplomatic approach that bridges operational case management with systemic policy development. By facilitating knowledge transfer from field-level practice to international standard-setting forums, Sweden has contributed to advancing global understanding of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that can function effectively in non-Hague Convention jurisdictions.

Sweden's multi-dimensional engagement—combining consistent embassy-level participation in regional workshops, formal recognition of iHOPE as trusted service provider, and facilitation of international policy contributions—demonstrates a comprehensive strategy for addressing IPCA that operates across bilateral, regional, and multilateral levels simultaneously.

Additional Embassy and Government Engagement in Lebanon

Beyond the sustained bilateral partnerships with the United States, Netherlands, Poland, Australia, Canada, and Sweden, numerous other diplomatic missions and governmental institutions have demonstrated meaningful engagement with IPCA issues in Lebanon and the broader Middle East region through participation in workshops, conferences, and high-level policy discussions.

In September 2025, iHOPE representatives presented to the European Union Delegation in Beirut in a landmark gathering that assembled diplomatic representatives from across Europe and beyond. The presentation introduced the National Campaign Against Abduction and iHOPE's comprehensive resource platform designed to provide support, information, and unified advocacy for affected families. The session brought together key representatives from the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France, Cyprus, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Bulgaria, and additional observer states.

Participating embassies engaged in substantive discussions on the unique challenges of international parental child abduction in non-Hague Convention jurisdictions and explored opportunities for enhanced cross-border cooperation in supporting their citizens. The meeting concluded with invitations from several diplomatic delegations to pursue collaborative initiatives aimed at creating safer environments for children and preserving family integrity across international borders.

Beyond embassy-level participation in Lebanon, several governments have engaged directly with iHOPE at ministerial levels to develop deeper institutional understanding of IPCA challenges in the Middle East. In 2025, iHOPE representatives met with senior officials at



the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels to discuss international parental child abduction cases in the Middle East, with particular emphasis on Lebanon and Syria as jurisdictions presenting acute challenges for Belgian authorities.

This engagement reinforced the essential role of partnerships between specialized NGOs and foreign ministries in achieving child-centered outcomes. The discussions laid groundwork for continued cooperation in supporting Belgian families affected by international parental child abduction in the Middle East and contributed to Belgian policy development on consular responses in complex legal environments.

Germany, France, Denmark, Finland, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Spain, Romania, and the United Kingdom have all demonstrated their commitment to addressing IPCA in Lebanon through consistent participation in regional conferences and workshops. Several embassies have formalized their engagement by officially listing iHOPE on their rosters as a trusted service provider for their citizens facing child abduction cases in Lebanon—most notably the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Poland. This official recognition reflects these governments' confidence in specialized local expertise and their willingness to establish formal partnerships with civil society organizations to enhance consular support for affected families. The collective embassy engagement has elevated IPCA as a regional diplomatic priority and created essential foundations for coordinated, knowledge-based responses in non-Hague Convention jurisdictions.

Role of International and Regional Organizations

The Hague Conference on Private International Law comes at the forefront of international organizations concerned with international parental child abduction, where it supervises the implementation of the 1980 Hague Convention and provides a main platform for cooperation among member states. The Conference periodically holds meetings and regional conferences to enhance cooperation and exchange experiences among central authorities concerned with implementing the Convention in different countries.

Among the important initiatives supervised by the Conference is the Malta Conference series, which specifically targets strengthening cooperation and dialogue between countries applying different legal systems, including Islamic countries that adopt Islamic Sharia in personal status matters. These conferences aim to build bridges of mutual understanding and search for alternative mechanisms for cooperation in the absence of the binding legal framework provided by the Hague Convention. As part of the Malta Process, participants are required to submit country reports to the Hague Conference on Private International Law.



iHOPE submitted a comprehensive overview of the situation in Lebanon, serving as the only NGO from Lebanon and the Middle East in this process. The U.S. State Department, in its 2024 country report, acknowledged iHOPE's collaboration in advocating and resolving cases, reflecting official recognition of the organization's expertise and effectiveness at the international level. iHOPE participated in the Fifth Malta Conference held in Valletta, Malta, in September 2024, presenting its specialized vision on mediation's role as an effective and culturally appropriate mechanism for resolving abduction cases in the Arab region. The presentation by iHOPE focused on the importance of understanding the cultural and religious context in designing mediation strategies, and how the HOPE methodology developed by the organization can provide a successful alternative to litigation in cases where resorting to courts is complex or futile.

However, despite the tremendous efforts made by the Hague Conference, its impact remains limited in the Arab region due to most Arab countries' non-accession to the Hague Convention, meaning that its legal mechanisms and procedural protocols do not apply to these countries. In the absence of this binding legal framework, the Conference's efforts become mostly limited to awareness-raising, dialogue, and advocacy for joining the Convention. Despite continuous efforts to convince more Arab countries to join the Convention, political and cultural resistance remains strong, and there do not appear to be signs of major change in this position in the near term. Many Arab countries fear that joining the Convention may conflict with applying Islamic Sharia in personal status matters, or may be viewed locally as relinquishing national sovereignty in sensitive issues related to family and children.

Beyond the Hague Conference, specialized organizations have emerged to address gaps in the global response to IPCA. iHOPE has established strategic partnerships with several of these entities, enabling knowledge exchange and coordinated case resolution across jurisdictions.

The International Child Abduction Center (IKO) in the Netherlands represents a key partnership for addressing cases involving Dutch citizens in the Middle East. Following iHOPE's meeting with IKO in Amsterdam in December 2025, where iHOPE provided comprehensive briefings on how IPCA cases unfold in the Middle East context, IKO established a referral mechanism whereby cases involving the region are directed to iHOPE for resolution through mediation. This collaboration operates alongside the Dutch Central Authority, enabling culturally informed mediation strategies that complement formal diplomatic channels. The partnership



demonstrates how European expertise centers can effectively engage with regional specialists to enhance outcomes in complex cross-border cases.

In the United States, iHOPE signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Unshakeable, a specialized NGO based in Nevada, establishing a framework for collaborative case resolution. This partnership has proven particularly valuable in addressing cases involving abductions from the United States to Syria, where traditional diplomatic channels face significant constraints. The collaboration allows both organizations to leverage their respective expertise—Unshakeable's knowledge of U.S. legal frameworks and iHOPE's regional access and cultural competency—to pursue solutions that would be difficult for either organization to achieve independently.

iHOPE has also established working relationships with French child protection organizations as part of its European network expansion strategy. In December 2025, iHOPE representatives held a strategic meeting in Paris with leading French organizations dedicated to children's rights and family mediation, including Droit d'Enfance, SSI France (represented by its Director), and 116000—specialists in international parental child abduction. Discussions centered on the unique challenges of IPCA in the Middle East region and opportunities for enhanced cross-border cooperation, exploring collaborative frameworks across three priority areas: advocacy for children's rights in cross-border family disputes, mediation services for IPCA cases, and bridging expertise between European and Middle Eastern legal and cultural contexts. This partnership has moved beyond initial dialogue to active collaboration, with iHOPE and French partners currently co-mediating an abduction case involving a child taken from Lebanon to France. This cross-border mediation model, leveraging expertise from both the country of origin and destination country, represents an innovative approach to cases where traditional return mechanisms prove insufficient or culturally inappropriate, demonstrating shared commitment to child-centered approaches and establishing groundwork for ongoing partnership development that strengthens service delivery for affected families across both regions.

Challenges and Gaps in International Organizational Response

Regarding other non-governmental organizations working in combating international parental child abduction, there is a noticeable scarcity in the number of specialized organizations in this matter globally. Among the few existing organizations, we find that most work primarily on individual mediation to resolve



specific cases, without their efforts extending to working on public policies or international advocacy for changing legal frameworks or improving international cooperation in this field. This focus on individual cases, despite its importance, leaves a large gap in efforts aimed at addressing the root causes of the problem or pressing for legislative reforms or new countries joining international treaties. These organizations also often focus their efforts on Hague Convention member states or countries with legal systems close to Western systems, making their impact in the Arab region extremely limited.

Perhaps one of the fundamental problems that iHOPE noticed during its work in 2025 is that coordination among different actors remains very limited, where each organization or government entity works within its own geographical or legal scope without an effective mechanism for information exchange or effort coordination on a broader scale.

iHOPE also noticed that most of these entities focus on Hague Convention member states or countries with strong diplomatic relations with Western countries, leaving a large and dangerous gap in dealing with non-member Arab countries that do not enjoy strong cooperation relations in this field. This gap means that hundreds of children abducted to these countries remain effectively outside international protection, and their families face exceptional difficulties in obtaining any kind of effective institutional support.

It is clear from reviewing the role of governments and international organizations that there are genuine and continuous efforts being made to address the phenomenon of international parental child abduction, but these efforts face major structural, political, and cultural challenges, especially in the Arab region. However, significant gaps remain in international willingness to invest in regional capacity building and specialized expertise. iHOPE's experience in seeking partnerships and funding reveals the extent of these challenges. Despite outreach to numerous Arab organizations, responses have been minimal.

Similarly, extensive outreach efforts to organizations in the EU—including hundreds of emails—have largely gone unanswered. Notably, when six million euros in funding were allocated for three-year projects related to women's leadership, legislative reforms, and fostering enabling environments for women, iHOPE's attempts to highlight IPCA as fundamentally connected to women's rights protection received no response. This pattern persists across European countries despite iHOPE's emphasis that IPCA directly affects European children and merits high-



priority attention. The reality is that organizations like iHOPE cannot resolve this issue alone and require substantial resources that self-funding cannot sustain. The absence of binding legal framework in most Arab countries, limited coordination among actors, focus on previously cooperating countries, and lack of investment and funding for national and regional organizations are all factors limiting the effectiveness of international response and leaving critical gaps in protection for the most vulnerable children and families affected by cross-border abduction.

iHOPE Organization - A Pioneering Model in the Region

Who Are We?

The International Hope for Parental Equality (iHOPE) represents a unique model in the Arab region for dealing with international parental child abduction cases. It is the only local organization specializing exclusively in this field, having developed deep expertise and innovative methodologies over years of intensive fieldwork.

iHOPE was founded as a civil company in Lebanon in 2021, then as an American non-profit organization tax-exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, headquartered in Greensboro, North Carolina. Simultaneously, it operates as a civil society organization officially registered in Lebanon, headquartered in Tripoli, North Lebanon. This dual institutional structure allows iHOPE to work on two integrated levels: the international level through the American entity enabling access to international networks and funding from American institutions, and the local level through the Lebanese entity enabling direct work with courts and local authorities.

iHOPE's team consists of specialized lawyers, mediation experts, and coordinators in the United States and Europe, enabling the organization to handle cases across a wide geographical span. iHOPE's vision is based on building a global network fortified by human rights advocates to prevent international child abduction cases and ensure the safe return and welfare of abducted children. Its mission is to assist, present, protect, and empower marginalized individuals with special focus on children, through legal advocacy for human rights, highlighting violations and gaps in the judicial system, and empowering and supporting families affected by international child abduction.



The Three-Front Strategy

The uniqueness of iHOPE's approach is manifested in its Three-Front Strategy developed over the years. The strategy begins with in-depth contextual and conflict analysis, where the organization conducts a comprehensive study of each case including cultural, religious, and social background of all parties, real motives behind abduction, relationship dynamics between parents and between each of them and the child, the extended family's role, and influencing psychological and economic factors. This analysis enables iHOPE to design a customized strategy for each case instead of applying a uniform approach that may not suit special circumstances.

The second front is advocacy at multiple levels, where iHOPE works with foreign embassies and consulates to provide accurate information and coordinate efforts, with foreign ministries in concerned countries to exercise appropriate diplomatic pressure, with international and regional organizations to raise awareness and enhance cooperation, and with media when necessary to highlight certain cases. This multi-level advocacy approach ensures that the case is not only addressed at the local legal level, but receives attention and support at higher levels that can influence the course of events.

The third front is strategic litigation, in cooperation and partnership with several law firms in the Arab region, where iHOPE uses its deep expertise in Lebanese and Arab legal systems to build solid legal cases before competent courts. iHOPE has succeeded in achieving important judicial precedents in Lebanon, obtaining rulings from civil appellate courts ordering the return of abducted children to their countries of habitual residence, despite Lebanon's non-accession to the Hague Convention. These rulings were based on general constitutional and legal principles related to child protection and Lebanon's international obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

iHOPE has also achieved important judicial precedents by resorting to civil appellate courts in some cases with a clear international element, obtaining rulings ordering children's return to their country of habitual residence, on the basis that their abduction constitutes a violation of their fundamental rights and that Lebanese courts lack jurisdiction to examine custody matters as long as the child was not habitually residing in Lebanon. These rulings, although few and limited, constitute an important step toward establishing a new legal principle in Lebanese



jurisprudence recognizing abducted children's rights and providing a legal mechanism for their protection.

The HOPE Mediation Methodology

Perhaps iHOPE's most prominent innovation is developing a specialized mediation methodology known as the HOPE Approach, designed specifically for dealing with international child abduction cases in the Middle East context. This methodology differs from traditional mediation in that it takes into account cultural, religious, and social factors specific to the region, and uses trilingual mediators capable of communicating fluently with all parties. Mediation is also not limited to parents only, but sometimes includes the extended family, which is often an active party in the dispute.

The HOPE methodology focuses on rebuilding trust between the two parties, removing mutual cultural and religious fears, and finding creative solutions that consider the child's best interests while respecting the values and beliefs of all parties. This methodology has proven its effectiveness in numerous cases where traditional legal pathways failed, and where iHOPE managed to reach consensual agreements allowing children's return or at least organizing regular and safe visits.

International Recognition and Institutional Development (2021-2025)

In addition to direct work on individual cases, iHOPE invests heavily in training and capacity building. The closing months of 2025 witnessed intensive institutional partnership development across Europe. iHOPE representatives presented at the prestigious lecture hosted by the Netherlands Ministry of Justice and Security in The Hague, addressing the country's leading legal professionals, judges, and policymakers on the intersection between law, culture, and children's rights in IPCA cases. The following day, iHOPE presented to officials from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch embassies across the Middle East, providing essential context on legal, cultural, and procedural obstacles that distinguish IPCA cases in the MENA region. Shortly after, the Director of the International Child Abduction Center invited iHOPE to a meeting in Amsterdam, where extensive discussions covered IPCA cases and child protection frameworks in the Middle East. This engagement resulted in IKO establishing a referral mechanism whereby cases involving the Middle East region are directed to iHOPE for resolution through mediation alongside the Dutch Central Authority. During the same period, iHOPE met with officials from Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss IPCA cases in the Middle East, exploring comprehensive approaches encompassing litigation



strategies, mediation approaches, and advocacy efforts. iHOPE also held a strategic meeting in Paris with leading French child protection organizations including Droit d'Enfance, SSI France, and 116000, establishing collaborative frameworks for advocacy, mediation services, and bridging expertise between European and Middle Eastern contexts. This partnership has moved to active collaboration, with iHOPE and French partners currently co-mediating an abduction case involving a child taken from Lebanon to France.

The previous month saw iHOPE organize the first International Conference on Child Rights and International Parental Child Abduction in partnership with Jinan University, bringing together diplomatic representatives from the United States, Netherlands, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, and Poland, alongside bar association leadership, human rights institute representatives, judicial authorities, and religious leaders from Christian and Muslim communities. The conference enabled meaningful exchange of perspectives on real challenges faced in addressing IPCA across different institutional positions. The event also marked the launch of Lebanon's first Advocacy Clinic dedicated to child rights advocacy—a joint initiative between Jinan University and iHOPE, creating infrastructure for ongoing student engagement in child protection advocacy.

Earlier that fall, iHOPE presented to the EU Delegation in Beirut, with representatives from Netherlands, Germany, Poland, France, Cyprus, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Greece, Switzerland, Bulgaria, and others in attendance. The presentation introduced the National Campaign Against Abduction and emphasized the necessity of strengthened cross-border collaboration, robust international cooperation, and harmonized strategies for effective IPCA response in the region. Around the same time, the Polish Embassy in Egypt reached out to iHOPE requesting collaboration and assistance with international cases, reflecting the growing recognition of iHOPE's regional expertise.

Mid-year 2025, iHOPE organized, with funding from the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, an intensive four-day training workshop on litigation, mediation, and advocacy in international child abduction cases in countries not signatory to the Hague Convention and lacking unified personal status law. Participants in this workshop included lawyers, judges, psychologists, and representatives from civil society organizations. The workshop addressed international laws governing abduction and their relationship to Lebanese child protection laws, litigation strategies according to Lebanese laws and iHOPE's mediation methodology, in addition to advocacy's



role in combating abduction as well as focusing on the importance of terminology in advocacy and mediation, with practical activities including a debate on the necessity of Lebanon joining the Hague Convention and a mock trial of an abduction case. Following the conclusion of the intensive training workshop, iHOPE launched the "Lebanon Against Abduction" national advocacy campaign in partnership with the Human Rights Institute at the Tripoli Bar Association, with attendance from the U.S. Embassy including the Consul General and Cultural Affairs Officer. The campaign unveiled an innovative digital platform at lebanonagainstabduction.org designed to advance Lebanon's ratification of the 1980 Hague Convention and provide comprehensive resources for affected families, legal professionals, and policymakers.

During that time, iHOPE delivered a presentation on Child Protection in the Digital Age to junior attorneys and law students, hosted by the Tripoli Bar Association and the Human Rights Institute. The workshop provided comprehensive examination of Lebanon's legal framework for combating cybercrimes affecting children, with participants drafting legal texts for a proposed "Child Protection in the Digital Space in Lebanon" law and creating advocacy pieces to raise awareness on online grooming, digital blackmail, and harassment.

On the occasion of International Family Day, iHOPE organized two simultaneous events in Warsaw, Poland and Tripoli, Lebanon. iHOPE representatives presented in Warsaw before the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs within a conference on cross-border cooperation in family matters within the European Union and parental child abduction to countries not signatory to the Hague Convention. Simultaneously, iHOPE organized in Tripoli in cooperation with the Bar Association and Human Rights Institute a specialized seminar on international child abduction in the Middle East and available challenges and solutions.

Earlier in 2025, iHOPE participated in a week-long training program organized by the U.S. State Department in Doha, Qatar, targeting U.S. embassy staff throughout the Middle East and North Africa region. iHOPE representatives presented on the organization's triple-front strategy integrating context analysis, advocacy, and litigation, as well as the HOPE mediation methodology. The training provided comparative analysis of Hague Convention and non-Hague Convention countries and explored bilateral agreements as alternative mechanisms for resolving IPCA cases.



The preceding year concluded with iHOPE presenting to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time, establishing initial contact and introducing iHOPE's work in the Middle East region. Throughout 2024, iHOPE participated in numerous embassy workshops and working groups with diplomatic missions including Canada, Belgium, Australia, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom, France, and Spain, providing clarity on legal processes in family cases, enforcement of child access orders, and the role of civil courts in prioritizing children's best interests.

The organization participated in the Fifth Malta Conference that fall, presenting on mediation's role in addressing abduction cases in the Middle East in the context of complex legal systems combining civil law and Islamic Sharia. That summer, iHOPE participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program organized by the U.S. State Department on NGO management, acquiring important expertise in institutional governance, advocacy strategies, and fundraising.

Canada hosted a working group meeting with all embassies and Global Affairs Canada early in 2024, with iHOPE serving as guest speaker on Lebanese laws and the judicial role of courts in IPCA cases. At the beginning of that year, iHOPE organized a pioneering workshop in cooperation with Tripoli Bar Association with representatives from the embassies of the United States, Canada, France, Australia, Sweden, and Tunisia, in addition to politicians, judges, and lawyers. The workshop addressed the legal perspective of international child abduction in Lebanon, and the importance of cooperation between the Bar Association and judicial authorities to address this phenomenon and consider the possibility of Lebanon joining the Hague Convention. The U.S. Embassy honored iHOPE leadership with a certificate of appreciation in recognition of efforts in defending abducted children.

The historic turning point came when the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon organized a groundbreaking workshop at the Royal Hotel on international child abduction, bringing together decision-makers in Lebanon, delegations from embassies, and officials from the Office of Children's Issues at the U.S. State Department. iHOPE representatives presented a comprehensive legal assessment of the situation in Lebanon regarding abduction cases, proposing a model for cooperation between embassies and civil society organizations to address this issue.

iHOPE's activities were not limited to official events and conferences but extended to community awareness. The organization worked in cooperation with the French Life Project for Youth organization, conducting a series of testimonies at the organization's hall in Surat, Batroun, on international child abduction, custody



rights, and women's rights, also highlighting the phenomenon of international child abduction and welcoming anyone wishing to join the struggle against this crime. This cooperation led to several young women joining iHOPE's training program, acquiring legal knowledge and applying it to their daily lives.

In its founding year, iHOPE established early international presence through participation in the 8th Annual Conference organized by iSTAND in late September 2021, centered on Parental Child Abduction Across Borders, where representatives joined legal experts, advocates, and international organizations addressing IPCA issues. That same period saw iHOPE representatives attend the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing "The Rights of Parents and Children: How to Better Implement the Goldman Act on Child Abduction" in the United States House of Representatives, where experts discussed implementation improvements for the Sean and David Goldman International Child Abduction Prevention and Return Act of 2014. Through participation in international discussion panels alongside organizations worldwide, iHOPE representatives explained why conventional methods would not be effective in the Middle East due to complex legal systems, while achieving unprecedented success returning abducted children from Lebanon through strategic litigation despite no prior documented cases of successful returns, demonstrating that combining advocacy alongside litigation proved essential to resolving cases in non-Hague Convention countries.

iHOPE maintains strategic partnerships with numerous international organizations working in the same field. In addition to many partnerships established with some American organizations, iHOPE cooperates with the British Find My Parent organization, Return Our Children Home Canada, and the British The Change for Children organization comprising 23 prominent British organizations working on combating parental abduction and parental alienation. This network of partnerships enables iHOPE to exchange experiences and information and access broader resources, also enhancing its credibility and weight on the international arena.

Among iHOPE's important achievements is that despite its limited financial resources compared to major international organizations, it has managed to achieve tangible results on the ground. The organization has succeeded in facilitating the return of dozens of children to their mothers in different countries, whether through litigation, mediation, or combining both. It has also succeeded in obtaining regular visitation arrangements in cases where child return was not possible, allowing mothers to maintain continuous relationships with their children. In some cases,



iHOPE managed to convince abducting fathers to agree to children relocating to live with their mothers while ensuring fathers' visitation rights, representing an ideal solution preserving the child's right to a healthy relationship with both parents.

Perhaps one of iHOPE's most important successes is that it has managed to change the prevailing view of abduction cases in Lebanon and the region. Before iHOPE's work, these cases were often treated as ordinary custody disputes or private matters not deserving special attention from authorities or society. However, through continuous advocacy, awareness-raising, and legal successes achieved, iHOPE succeeded in placing this issue on the agenda of foreign embassies, Lebanese official authorities, and media, and creating growing awareness of its seriousness and necessity of dealing with it seriously.

iHOPE is also today the primary reference for information on the reality of international child abduction in Lebanon and the region, where foreign embassies, international organizations, and media rely on information and analyses provided by iHOPE to understand this phenomenon and its developments. iHOPE has contributed to formulating U.S. State Department annual reports on international child abduction by providing them with accurate and documented information on cases in Lebanon and neighboring countries.

However, iHOPE does not claim to be the comprehensive solution to this complex problem, but believes that addressing the phenomenon of international child abduction requires concerted efforts of all concerned parties, from governments, international organizations, embassies, civil society, and media. Therefore, iHOPE always seeks to build bridges and cooperate with all relevant parties, exchange experiences and information transparently, and contribute to building capacities of other organizations working in the same field.

Among the challenges facing iHOPE is limited financial resources, as the organization's funding depends primarily on grants from donor institutions and countries, which is unstable and not guaranteed long-term funding. The size of demand for iHOPE's services also far exceeds its current response capacity, as the organization receives dozens of requests monthly from affected families in various parts of the world, and cannot accept all cases due to human and financial resource constraints. Therefore, iHOPE currently seeks to expand its team, strengthen its fundraising capacity, and build long-term funding partnerships ensuring its work's sustainability.

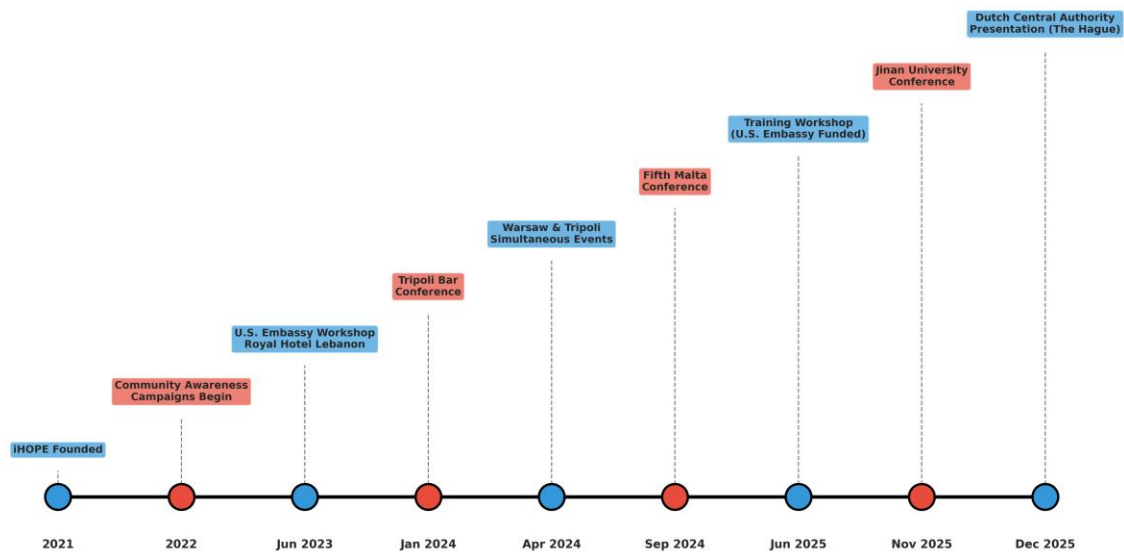


iHOPE also faces security and logistical challenges in its work, especially given volatile security conditions in Lebanon and the region. Access to some areas may be difficult or dangerous, and movement between countries may be complex due to travel and visa restrictions. Working on sensitive cases related to family disputes may also sometimes expose team members to pressure or threats from some disputing parties or their extended families.

Despite all these challenges, iHOPE continues its work with determination and resolve, driven by its deep belief in every child's right to grow in a safe and stable environment and maintain a healthy relationship with both parents. iHOPE aspires to expand its work to include more Arab countries, build a network of local partner organizations in different countries working according to the same methodology and principles, and contribute to creating legal and institutional changes at the regional level that facilitate dealing with these complex cases and better protect children's rights.

Figure 4: iHOPE Timeline - Key Activities and Milestones

iHOPE Timeline: Key Activities and Milestones (2021-2025)



Chronological overview of iHOPE's major conferences, training programs, and international partnerships from founding (2021) through 2025. Notable achievements include presentations at the Malta Conference and Dutch Central Authority, plus multi-embassy accreditation.

CHAPTER FIVE: STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations and Future Steps

After this comprehensive review of the reality of international parental child abduction in the Arab region, the legal, cultural, and political challenges associated with it, and efforts made by various actors, it becomes necessary to formulate applicable strategic recommendations targeting various parties concerned with this issue. These recommendations are based on iHOPE's accumulated field experience and in-depth analysis of the legal and social reality in the region, aiming to improve response to existing abduction cases on one hand, and prevent new cases on the other.

Recommendations at the International Level

Addressing international parental child abduction in the Arab region requires thoughtful evolution of current international approaches. While the Hague Convention has proven highly effective in signatory states, its limited applicability in a region where most countries are non-signatories presents opportunities for developing complementary mechanisms that respect the legal and cultural contexts of Arab countries while advancing child protection objectives.

The Hague Conference on Private International Law is well-positioned to explore an optional protocol or annex to the Hague Convention that accommodates diverse legal systems. Such a protocol could recognize the application of Islamic Sharia in personal status matters while establishing safeguards ensuring adherence to fundamental principles of child rights and parental equality. The protocol might incorporate mandatory mediation mechanisms prior to litigation, an approach consistent with Arab and Islamic preferences for consensual dispute resolution.

Major international organizations such as UNICEF and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have significant opportunities to expand their engagement with IPCA issues in the Arab region. Enhanced attention to this phenomenon—including dedicated programs for judicial capacity building, technical support for local organizations, and resources for strengthening institutional responses—would complement existing efforts and address current gaps in international child protection frameworks.

Countries experiencing significant numbers of IPCA cases involving Arab countries would benefit from deepening bilateral partnerships that extend beyond traditional diplomatic channels. Such partnerships might encompass judicial and legal



exchange programs, joint professional training for judges and lawyers, technical assistance for legislative development, and support for judicial system modernization. This collaborative approach tends to yield more sustainable outcomes than approaches perceived as external pressure.

International funding mechanisms would benefit from prioritizing specialized local organizations with demonstrated effectiveness in IPCA case resolution. Organizations such as iHOPE possess local knowledge, community networks, and cultural credibility essential for navigating complex legal systems—capabilities that external actors require considerable time to develop. Strategic investment in strengthening local organizational capacities and supporting regional expansion offers significant returns and sustainable impact.

International non-governmental organizations working on child abduction issues have opportunities to expand their geographical focus to more comprehensively address the Arab region. Enhanced engagement might include developing region-specific programs, appointing specialized regional coordinators, and building partnerships with established local organizations. Such expansion would strengthen global response capacity and ensure more equitable service provision across affected populations.

Investment in research and documentation would strengthen the knowledge base regarding IPCA in the Arab region. Currently, limited availability of comprehensive data and statistics presents challenges for strategic planning and evidence-based advocacy. Conducting field studies and publishing periodic assessments would enhance understanding, inform policy development, and support resource mobilization.

Strengthening coordination and cooperation among international organizations working on IPCA represents another strategic opportunity. An international coalition or network could facilitate information exchange, resource sharing, and coordinated interventions in complex cases requiring multi-level engagement. Such a platform might also advance development of unified standards and best practices, ensuring consistent quality of service and support for affected families.

Prevention and awareness merit increased attention alongside case intervention. Awareness initiatives targeting individuals entering cross-cultural marriages could provide information on potential legal considerations and protective measures. Educational materials and guidance resources in multiple languages, accessible



through digital platforms and consular offices, would support informed decision-making and risk awareness.

Recommendations at the Regional Level

At the level of the League of Arab States and its specialized organizations, there exists significant opportunity to launch a comprehensive regional initiative addressing international parental child abduction. This initiative might begin with an extensive regional study documenting the scope, patterns, and impacts of IPCA across Arab countries—research that would provide a valuable empirical foundation for policy development and regional coordination. Such a study would offer objective data to inform future efforts and enhance understanding of the phenomenon's dimensions across diverse national contexts.

Building upon comprehensive regional research, the Arab League is well-positioned to explore an Arab convention for cooperation in child protection across borders. Such a convention would ideally respect legal and cultural diversity among member states while establishing practical cooperation mechanisms. Rather than attempting to harmonize divergent legal systems, the convention might focus on operational coordination including: establishing national central authorities specialized in IPCA case management, creating shared information systems for cross-border cooperation, developing protocols for judicial and security collaboration, and establishing regional mediation mechanisms that respect diverse legal traditions.

The Arab League could play a constructive role in facilitating dialogue on personal status law reform that balances parental rights with children's best interests. This approach would draw upon contemporary jurisprudential interpretations that allow flexibility in applying custody and guardianship provisions, taking into account evolving social realities and demographic changes while remaining grounded in Islamic legal tradition. Many contemporary scholars have developed interpretations that permit greater adaptability in family law—resources that could inform legislative modernization efforts across the region.

The Arab Council for Childhood and Development represents an important institutional resource with potential to expand its engagement with IPCA issues. The Council could enhance its contributions through awareness initiatives, professional training programs, and capacity-building efforts. Regional conferences and workshops convening experts and practitioners would facilitate knowledge exchange and development of context-appropriate solutions that reflect Arab legal and cultural frameworks.

Recommendations at the National Level

At the level of individual Arab countries, there exist opportunities for meaningful legislative and institutional development. Countries not party to the Hague Convention might benefit from examining accession possibilities, or alternatively, developing specialized national legislation on international parental child abduction with clear case management mechanisms. Such legislation would ideally recognize cross-border child relocation without proper consent as contrary to children's rights, while providing effective remedies for affected parents.

Personal status laws could benefit from reforms that more fully implement the principle of the child's best interests. Contemporary approaches to custody determination increasingly emphasize individualized assessment of each family's circumstances and each parent's capacity to provide optimal care, rather than predetermined criteria based solely on the child's gender or age. The child's best interests principle, as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child to which all Arab countries are party, provides a framework for such reform while remaining consistent with Islamic legal tradition's fundamental concern for child welfare.

At the judicial level, enhanced training opportunities for judges examining custody cases would strengthen their capacity to address the complex international and cultural dimensions of cross-border family disputes. Regional and international training programs, including judicial exchange visits and exposure to diverse approaches in family law adjudication, could enrich judges' understanding of best practices in applying child-centered decision-making frameworks that account for psychological, social, educational, and emotional factors.

Establishing specialized family courts or dedicated chambers within existing court structures represents another avenue for strengthening institutional capacity. Such courts, staffed by judges with specialized training and supported by psychological and social experts, would be well-equipped to conduct comprehensive assessments of children's best interests. Streamlined procedures would serve the interests of families and children by reducing case resolution times and minimizing the harm associated with prolonged custody disputes.

Strengthening enforcement mechanisms for custody and visitation orders merits attention in many jurisdictions. When judicial rulings remain unimplemented,



children's rights and family relationships suffer. Enhanced roles for judicial police and public prosecution in enforcement, combined with meaningful consequences for non-compliance, would improve the effectiveness of judicial decisions and protect the rights they are intended to secure.

Strategic Vision

Addressing international parental child abduction in the Arab region requires an integrated approach combining legal development, institutional strengthening, advocacy, awareness, and direct support for affected families. The complexity of this challenge necessitates collaborative efforts among all stakeholders and genuine cooperation grounded in mutual respect, contextual understanding, and shared commitment to child protection.

Experience demonstrates that meaningful progress is achievable when specialized legal expertise combines with cultural competency, effective advocacy, and strategic partnerships. The region would benefit from adapting and scaling successful models across diverse Arab country contexts, with each implementation reflecting national specificities and local needs. Investment in local organizational capacity and empowering regional expertise tends to yield sustainable outcomes and lasting institutional development.

These efforts are most effective when built upon genuine respect for cultural and religious diversity, recognizing that child protection principles align with values across legal traditions. Many foundational principles articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child resonate with principles present in Islamic and Arab heritage. Success in advancing child protection frameworks requires constructive dialogue across cultures and legal systems, joint efforts to identify shared principles, and collaborative development of approaches that serve children's best interests while respecting diverse legal and cultural contexts.

Conclusion

This comprehensive report documents a challenging reality: thousands of children in the Arab region experience separation from one parent due to international parental abduction, while parents endure the profound pain of being unable to maintain relationships with their children. These cases represent human stories of disrupted childhoods, strained family relationships, and lasting psychological impacts.

The analysis presented demonstrates that international parental child abduction in the Arab region emerges from complex interactions among legal, cultural, social, and political factors. Diverse legal systems, gaps between legal frameworks and implementation, varying enforcement mechanisms, cultural considerations, extended family dynamics, and the intersection of traditional and contemporary values all contribute to the challenges of preventing and resolving these cases.

Recent political and security developments in the region have introduced additional dimensions to the phenomenon, creating new patterns of return-linked abduction in Syria while simultaneously creating opportunities for case resolution in Lebanon. These developments confirm that the phenomenon evolves continuously, requiring flexible and adaptive response strategies.

Despite the challenges documented throughout this report, there are grounds for measured optimism. Field experience demonstrates that progress is achievable when deep contextual understanding, specialized legal expertise, creative problem-solving, and genuine commitment to children's best interests converge. Each child reunified with family, each relationship preserved between children and both parents, represents meaningful progress and demonstrates the potential for broader systemic improvement.

Future advancement in this field requires sustained political commitment from Arab governments, continued investment from the international community in regional capacity building, and ongoing dedication from local and international organizations. Progress also depends upon reframing discourse around IPCA—viewing it not as a civilizational conflict but as a universal humanitarian concern centered on protecting vulnerable children and ensuring their fundamental right to healthy development and meaningful relationships with both parents.

Children affected by international parental abduction require immediate and effective support alongside longer-term systemic reforms. While legislative development and international treaty accession represent important goals, they must proceed in parallel with direct interventions that address current cases and provide tangible support to affected families. This dual approach—combining systemic reform with immediate case assistance—represents a shared responsibility among governments, international organizations, diplomatic missions, civil society, and concerned individuals.



This report aims to contribute to broader dialogue on protecting children in the Arab region from abduction, strengthening legal and judicial systems, and enhancing international and regional cooperation. The recommendations presented are intended to inform concrete actions that address the needs of affected children and families, working toward a future where all children can maintain meaningful relationships with both parents regardless of nationality, religion, or geography.

iHOPE expresses its profound gratitude to

The Hamxe Family

whose generous sponsorship of initiatives throughout 2024-2025 was instrumental during a pivotal period of organizational growth. Their commitment to protecting children's rights and supporting families affected by international parental child abduction enabled iHOPE to maintain operations and expand its regional impact during this critical phase.