



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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CARDIN, CASEY RECOMMEND REVIEW OF IRAQI REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT POLICIES

WASHINGTON, DC- U.S. Senator Bob Casey (D-PA), Chairman of the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South and Central Asian Affairs, and Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, urged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano to review procedures impeding the rapid resettlement of Iraqi refugees to the United States.

“Streamlining the refugee application process and increasing the resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the United States could help bring about a more efficient and humane resolution of the Iraqi refugee crisis,” said Senator Casey. “We encourage the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security to consider these recommendations and prioritize the refugee crisis in the upcoming months, especially as the United States military begins its drawdown.”

“Iraqi refugees, especially those who have made extraordinary sacrifices while helping U.S. troops, need our support. Secretary Clinton and I have regularly discussed our obligation to help Iraqi refugees who have worked with American soldiers to achieve peace and security in their country. The current resettlement process has some administrative problems that should be addressed,” said Senator Cardin.

Since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, over two million Iraqis have been forced to relocate indefinitely to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and other countries in the region. The majority of them are unable to return home because their old neighborhoods are unsafe. Many Iraqi refugees apply for resettlement in the United States, including those who assisted the U.S. mission in Iraq, but they often face difficulties during the application process.

In March, Senator Casey chaired a subcommittee hearing on the return and resettlement of displaced Iraqis. The hearing focused on the efforts being taken by the Iraqi government, the United States and the rest of the international community to facilitate the return of Iraqis displaced internally and the repatriation of Iraqi refugees living in neighboring countries.

Copies of the letters are attached.

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May 21, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madame Secretary:

We are writing to encourage the Department of State to review its policies in order to facilitate the more rapid resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the United States. We request that the Department work in concert with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to identify refugees for resettlement and expand the categories of refugees targeted for priority resettlement. In addition, we ask that the Department implement measures to ensure that the benefits of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program are extended to all eligible Iraqis.

Organizations representing Iraqi refugees have highlighted the absence of NGO coordination and the cumbersome application process through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as a major bottleneck in resettling refugees, due in part to the significant demands placed upon UNHCR's limited resources. Iraqi refugees in the region must first register with UNHCR, which then refers refugees that meet certain criteria to the relevant U.S. Embassy and its contractual affiliate in this process, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Allowing NGOs to refer resettlement cases to IOM would help alleviate some of the pressure on UNHCR and enable local NGOs to use their connections within Iraqi refugee communities to better identify individuals with urgent health or safety needs and bring them to the attention of IOM for priority resettlement. Currently, the State Department does not permit most NGOs with a presence in the Middle East to directly refer refugees for resettlement, even though the Department's Foreign Affairs Manual does not forbid NGOs from doing so.

As you are aware, Iraqi refugees can apply for resettlement either as Priority 2 (P-2) applicants or non-P-2 applicants. The P-2 category provides priority resettlement for groups of refugees that face unique threats to their wellbeing. At present, the only P-2 category for Iraqi refugees applies to individuals who worked for the U.S. government or associated organizations in Iraq and their families. We are unaware of any formal process by which NGOs working in the region can recommend the establishment of new P-2 categories. While the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act called on the State Department to designate new P-2 categories, this has not yet occurred. Refugee organizations have noted several other categories of refugees that could similarly benefit from priority resettlement due to the unique threats they face. However, there is no established process by which NGOs can make recommendations to Department officials on what groups should be considered for P-2 status.

It has also come to our attention that beneficiaries of the SIV program, which is designed to help resettle former translators for U.S. forces and allies, are being denied admission to the United States without a G-series Iraqi passport. Unfortunately, this type of document is not currently available in Iraq. While in some cases it appears that a waiver of the G-series passport requirement is possible, the process and conditions relevant to acquiring such a waiver are not clear. We ask that you consider expanding the availability of this waiver to any Iraqi meeting the requirements for a special immigrant visa. Furthermore, we ask you to consider whether the G-series requirement is necessary for those who have passed the security background check and whose entry to the United States we are trying to facilitate with the SIV process.

Streamlining the refugee application process and increasing the resettlement of Iraqi refugees in the United States could help bring about a more efficient and humane resolution of the Iraqi refugee crisis.

We encourage the State Department to consider these recommendations and prioritize the refugee crisis in the upcoming months, as the United States military begins its drawdown.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

May 21, 2009

The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Madame Secretary:

We are writing to express concern about difficulties Iraqi nationals are facing applying for admission to the United States as special immigrants. As you know, the special immigrant visa (SIV), authorized by the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act, is designed to “fast-track” the resettlement process into the United States for threatened Iraqis who served the US government or its affiliates faithfully for over a year. We are pleased to see that the SIV process has already assisted many Iraqis in need. We are concerned, however, that some minor procedural requirements may be hindering the effectiveness of this track for many other Iraqis and preventing the program from filling its annual allotment of 5,000 visas.

First, the petition (I-360) requires the submission of a paper copy of the individual’s original signature with the full application to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) processing center in Nebraska. We are concerned that this requirement may pose an often insurmountable obstacle for applicants currently in Iraq, particularly those who have been targeted as a result of their work with U.S. forces or who are living in more remote parts of the country. Unless the applicant has access to the military postal system, there are very few places from which an Iraqi can reliably send documents to the United States, as Iraq’s civil postal system is vulnerable to theft and violations of privacy. We ask that you consider whether an email submission, with a PDF version of the applicant’s signature, could satisfy our security concerns, while removing a difficult obstacle to resettlement for many needy and deserving Iraqis.

Second, the special immigrant visa process requires an Iraqi to obtain a G-series passport in order to travel to the United States. Obtaining such a passport can be extremely difficult; only one office in Baghdad can issue it, and has been unable to do so for apparent technical reasons since January 2009. In some cases, it appears a waiver of the G-series passport requirement is possible. We hope you would consider expanding the availability of this waiver to any Iraqi meeting the requirements for a special immigrant visa. Furthermore, we ask you to consider whether the G-series requirement is necessary for those who have passed the security background check and whose entry to the United States we are trying to facilitate with the special immigrant visa process.

We are very pleased that the special immigrant visa process already has helped many Iraqis and express our gratitude to the Department for its efforts. We hope you will consider making these two minor

modifications to the process to ensure many more deserving Iraqis can benefit from eased entry into the United States.

Thank you for your consideration, and we look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

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