

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Remarks by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA)

September 19, 2007 And I welcome you to an appropriations committee hearing room in the Senate. It's nice to have an appropriation committee hearing room for a proceeding like this, an important proceeding. It doesn't cost the government any money.

But after that glowing introduction, I don't have very much to say; you've taken all my lines, but on a serious note I'm very delighted to be here and I thank the commission for what you are doing. We're about to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act, which Congressman Wolf and I had produced coordinately in the House and Senate. And it is very, very important work that you are undertaking. And I want to thank my longstanding friend Commissioner Leonard Leo for alerting me to the fact that you were here today and would be willing to hear a few comments from me.

The subject, which you are addressing, the sectarian violence in Iraq is one of overwhelming importance. Great humanitarian tragedy in that country today with the factionalism and with the battles among the Shi'ites and the Sunnis and the Kurds and with religious persecution the nth degree; they're not only persecuting, but they are annihilating as a form of genocide that they are undertaking there to the present time. And it is something which really requires a lot more attention from the United States. And the United States Congress, in a sense, has delegated a good bit of the important work to this commission; so, I'm glad to see you in session and hearing a very distinguished array of witnesses today.

The Judiciary Committee had a hearing in January on the subject of focused public attention and we need to get the White House more involved. We need to get the president more involved. When he speaks on the problems in Iraq, it would be helpful, I think, to note the refugee problem. And when you talk about mass migration, I was in the area in December and talking about the Mideast peace process with Syrian President Bashir Assad and he complains very strongly about the immigration problem there. Our figures listed at 700,000 who have gone from Iraq to Syria. He claims it's more like a million. And the United States has not been as open or forthcoming as the United States should be. I checked the statistics and found that since 2003, only 466 of these immigrants have been admitted to the United States, and last year, only 202 out of a quota of some 70,000.

So, our country should be doing a great deal more. And one of the items that is very, very problematic, there are Iraqis who are cooperating with the United States on our efforts and once their identities are determined, they're at risk and they're being murdered and it is not a matter solely of humanitarian concern for those individuals, it is a matter of what we owe them. When they help us, we ought not to leave them at the peril of assassins, which is what is happening at the present time. So this is a matter which requires a great deal more concerted attention.

One item that I would suggest is that this distinguished commission get behind immigration reform in the United States, which should have a provision to deal with immigration from Iraq. As you know, we passed a bill in the Senate last year, the bill was passed in the House, but they could not be reached to reconciled; a little thing called politics came into play in the rotunda before there could be a conference report. Now this year, the Senate bill was defeated because of the contention of amnesty. And I have circulated a study bill which makes two changes.

As much as I dislike to have done so, I have eliminated citizenship and have only sought to eliminate the fugitive status of the immigrants so that the employers could not threaten to blackmail them into substandard living conditions and wages and so they would come out of the shadows and that we could register them, get them to pay their taxes, identify those who are criminals - you can't deport 12 to 20 million but you could deport the criminals. But I tell you just a little bit about the bill because I've talked to the majority leader Senator Leahy who chairs Judiciary and Senator Kennedy who's on the subcommittee, and we really need to bring the bill back. And that bill could deal with this issue to some extent in Iraq; can't be a total problem solver but it would take up and perhaps provide some suggestions and some recommendations.

Now those were my thoughts, distinguished commissioners. I again thank you for the work you're doing. When I say what is happening is the result of a legislation which Congressman Wolf and I pursued, I'm very pleased to have been a part of it. I thank you for putting me on the dais though I would've been pleased to have been at the witness table and I would submit myself to your questions, running the risk that you might have some probing questions for me as I do, on rare occasion, for witnesses.