

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Remarks by Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY)

September 19, 2007 I'm Congressman Steve Israel. I represent Long Island, New York. In addition to that, I have been working on a bipartisan initiative with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle on areas where we can agree on Iraq. Our debate on the floor of the House has been a polarizing debate, but one of the areas where we can agree on, that we have agreed on, is addressing the refugee crisis in Iraq.

We have noted your extraordinary work and are interested in developing a partnership with the Commission so that we can incorporate some of your recommendations into legislative vehicles to make some progress on this crisis. I will commend to your attention a story in Roll Call this morning that talked about members on both sides of the aisle who feel, quite honestly, drowned out by the debate on the extremes, who recognize that Republicans and Democrats are going to disagree on about 75 percent of the issues with respect to Iraq and therefore, understand that we have a profound obligation to move the 25 percent that we agree on. We have been paralyzed on the 25 percent that we agree on because we're so busy fighting over the 75 percent that we will never agree on.

One of the issues that repeatedly comes up in our meetings, including one meeting this morning that was attended by about eight of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, and a long dinner meeting Monday night that was attended by about 15 members on both sides of the aisle, is what we must do with respect to the refugee crisis in Iraq. As you know, as your commission has stated, about two million Iraqi refugees seeking shelter around the world, two million internally displaced persons within Iraq.

We note with appreciation the reform that your commission has called for and has asked Congress to consider: expanding access to the U.S. refugee program for all Iraqis, extending P-2 categories to members of Iraq's religious minority communities. In addition, something that we're looking at, and we would appreciate your feedback as we go forward, is giving our ambassador, Ambassador Crocker, and his successors, more flexibility and more of a decision-making role in determining what refugees should be brought into the United States and expediting that process.

Tomorrow I'll be meeting with an Iraqi refugee who just arrived in Washington on a special immigrant visa. And the purpose of the meeting is first to thank him for his service to the United States government and to the coalition. Secondly to hear, from his perspective, why it took so long for him to get here - and it took an unreasonably long amount of time for him to arrive here, and third, to get his feedback on how we can accelerate and expedite this process.

I am told that this individual, who served courageously in the interests of the United States government and the coalition, is hoping that he can get a job as a cab driver in the United States. Now, I'm sure that he counts his blessings that he was finally able to get a special immigrant visa. But we can do better for him that put him in the job market as a cab driver.

I used to be on the Armed Services Committee. I'll close with this. I was on the Armed Services Committee for four years. I'm now on the Appropriations Committee. My heart is still with the Armed Services Committee, but my wallet is with the Appropriations Committee. And for four years, I heard that we had some very serious deficiencies within Iraq with respect to cultural awareness. I heard General Sanchez tell me, in Baghdad, we don't understand the cultures we're plunging into. I heard General Odierno, now the number two military official in Iraq, tell me in a Black Hawk helicopter, we need to do a better job working with the cultures that we find ourselves in. I heard consistently that we have glaring linguistic deficiencies in Iraq. To this day, we don't understand what people are saying about us.

A few days ago, I met with someone who was being deployed next week to Iraq. And he was telling me the thing he worries about most is going out on patrol and not being able to speak the language. And now we have an Iraq refugee that we're bringing into this country and he may go to work as a cab driver, instead of continuing his service to the United States government. I think there's something wrong with that. And so I want to suggest that we need to do two things.

Number one, we need to continue to find ways to solve this crisis and solve it quickly, and suggest to you that you have a willing, eager partner on both sides of the aisle to take your recommendations and pursue them as legislative vehicles. We want to work with you on that, particularly the Center Aisle Caucus, which I represent. And secondly, once the door is open to this flow of refugees, we need to find responsible ways of integrating them into our society and thanking them for the service that they provided and continue engaging them to provide additional services in the future.

So, thank you for your extraordinary work on religious persecution and this refugee crisis. I also want to recognize Joe Crapa. I'm a big fan of his. And I'm one of those members of the state and foreign operations subcommittee of Appropriations that has tried to put my money where my mouth is, not only supporting you with my rhetoric, but by seeking additional funds for this commission, and will continue to do so in admiration for your work. Thank you very much.