

For Your Information

August 14, 2012| By [Mary Ann Glendon](#) and [Sam Gejdenson](#)

The following guest column appeared in The Star-Ledger on August 14, 2012 at [http://blog.nj.com/njv\\_guest\\_blog/2012/08/lautenberg\\_amendment\\_is\\_vital.html](http://blog.nj.com/njv_guest_blog/2012/08/lautenberg_amendment_is_vital.html)

September will be here before we know it. While some will be looking forward to autumn, others will be apprehensive as the month approaches. They will wonder whether Congress will reauthorize a key measure that has allowed Jews, Christians, Baha'is and other religious minorities to escape religious persecution in Iran and in former Soviet nations.

Originally enacted as part of the 1990 Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill, the Lautenberg Amendment, named after its author, Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), has been reauthorized ever since. However, it is set to expire on Sept. 30 unless Congress steps up to the plate and does the right thing again.

What does the Lautenberg Amendment do? It provides critical safeguards for historically

persecuted groups seeking refugee status by easing the burden of proof and permitting fast-track processing to prevent undue backlogs in “third” countries that host their processing. Without such assurances, these countries likely would no longer be willing to provide transit visas to allow religious minorities to be processed in safety on their soil.

The amendment does not increase the number of refugees allowed into the United States or require any special appropriated funds. Rather, it recognizes the kinds of persecution these groups historically have faced. The small number of refugees who qualify each year are fully screened and vetted.

The Lautenberg Amendment has been the lifeline for many refugees, especially religious minorities from Iran. Every year since 1999, the secretary of state has designated Iran a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act for egregious, ongoing and systematic violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, on which we serve, has found that religious freedom conditions continue to deteriorate in Iran, especially for religious minorities, most notably Baha'is, as well as for Christians and Sufi Muslims, while physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrests and imprisonment have intensified.

Even the recognized non-Muslim religious minorities protected under Iran's constitution — Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians — face increasing discrimination,

arrests and imprisonment. In fact, religious freedom conditions in Iran have regressed to a point not seen since the early days of the Islamic revolution, more than 30 years ago.

Failure to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment would clearly endanger the lives of people seeking freedom and send the signal that the United States is unconcerned. Such inaction would hearken back to the 1930s, when the United States largely closed its doors to refugees seeking to escape Nazi tyranny.

Thankfully, Congress is concerned. The Lautenberg Amendment has broad bipartisan support in the House and Senate, but last year was reauthorized only at the last minute. This year we hope that well before Sept. 30, Congress sends the signal loudly and clearly that religious freedom is paramount for all, including persecuted religious minorities.

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