

For Your Information

September 7, 2012| By: [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

The following opinion appeared in Roll Call on September 6, 2012.

An unmarried Baha'i woman spent three years in Iran's notorious Evin Prison charged with being a spy for Israel and the United States. She was told: "To destroy you, we have to destroy your community, your meetings and your prayers." She hopes to live "as a free Baha'i in the U.S." and wants to be sure that "no one will look at me as someone who doesn't belong in society."

An unmarried Christian woman fled Iran after she was forced to join a mosque and develop a relationship with a mullah who stalked her daily. She fears the mullah would kill her if she were forced to return.

A husband and wife who are Mandaeans - religious followers of John the Baptist - fled Iran with their two children after enduring a lifetime of religious persecution. Suffering from physical

developmental delays and epilepsy, the daughter had been denied medical care because of her religion.

What do these people have in common, besides fleeing Iran? They were able to seek safety and freedom in the United States thanks to a provision in U.S. law known as the Lautenberg Amendment. Authored by Sen. [Frank Lautenberg](#) (D-N.J.), this law is a needed lifeline for religious minorities, including Jews, Christians and Baha'is, to escape religious persecution in former Soviet nations and now Iran.

They also share the fervent hope that the Lautenberg Amendment will continue offering a lifeline to others. It is now up to Congress to make sure that happens. Enacted as part of the 1990 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, the Lautenberg Amendment has been reauthorized ever since. Unless Congress extends its life, it is set to expire Sept. 30.

The Lautenberg Amendment offers vital protections for historically persecuted groups seeking refugee status by establishing a presumption of eligibility and allowing fast-track processing to prevent undue backlogs in "third" countries that host their processing. Such processing is vital for those who flee countries, such as Iran, which do not have U.S. embassies. Without such assurances, "third" countries probably would not provide transit visas permitting persecuted individuals to be processed in safety on their soil.

The amendment neither increases the number of refugees the United States accepts each

year nor requires any special appropriated funds. Rather, it recognizes the unique situations these groups continue to face. The small number of refugees who qualify each year are fully screened and vetted.

The Mandaean, Christians, Bahai's and others who have fled Iran seek refuge from a country that the Secretary of State each year since 1999 has designated a "Country of Particular Concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act for egregious, ongoing and systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which I chair, 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. Religious minorities, including Baha'is, Christians, and Sufi Muslims, along with recognized non-Muslim religious minorities - Jews, Armenian and Assyrian Christians, and Zoroastrians - who are protected under Iran's constitution, face increased discrimination, arrests and imprisonment.

The Lautenberg Amendment enjoys strong support from both parties in Congress. Given the many issues that Congress must wrestle with in September, we urge lawmakers to put the Lautenberg Amendment at the top of the agenda and swiftly reauthorize this measure, sending the unmistakable message that religious freedom matters, as do the lives and safety of the persecuted.

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