

22 July 2010

The Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
& The Honorable Alcee L. Hastings

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
234 Ford House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Support for the “Guam Option” and H.R. 578 “Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement, and Security Act of 2009.”

Distinguished Chairmen and Members of the Commission:

Greetings. Thank you for this opportunity to submit a statement on behalf of Intersections International in support of the Iraqi refugees and Iraqi allies cause, the “Guam Option,” and H.R. 578 “Iraqi Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement, and Security Act of 2009.”

Intersections International, a social justice non-governmental organization, traveled to the Near East in 2008 and 2009 while leading the Iraqi Voices Amplification Project (IVAP)¹ delegation of eight American artists on a fact-finding mission of the Iraqi refugee crisis. Our experiences in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, with over 150 Iraqi refugees and NGOs providing aid and relief to Iraqi refugees, lead us to support such practical and viable solutions found in the “Guam Option” and H.R. 578 in an effort to help alleviate this gross humanitarian crisis.

Of particular concern is the safety of the cultural and language interpreters who worked with the United States government or coalition forces and their families, due to their particular vulnerability to threats and/or acts of violence. Moreover, the likelihood of increased threats of violence or attacks targeting this group seems likely as the number of U.S. troops in Iraq diminishes to 50,000 by 1 September 2010.²

The “Guam Option” airlift strategy would provide an emergency evacuation alternative to the Special Immigrant Visa program currently in place for this at-risk population. The screening process would remain, but its implementation would take place on the U.S. military installations in Guam, outside of the conflict zone.

According to H.R. 578 “many Iraqis have put their lives and those of their families at risk by working for the United States Government, United States corporations, the United States media, and nongovernmental organizations.”³ This population, which comprises between 30,000 to 100,000 people, merits special protection by the “Guam Option.”⁴ While working in the Near East, it was this population that was strikingly different from the general refugee population in that regret, not anger, was their most vivid emotion. A sense of betrayal and abandonment in light of their situation has taken hold of many former Iraqis who willingly provided knowledge, protection, and camaraderie to U.S. personnel in Iraq during its darkest hours.

The “Guam Option” alternative would expedite the screening process for resettlement of America’s proven Iraqi allies, and clear the bureaucratic barriers that currently constrict this group’s exit strategies.⁵

Samantha Power, the National Security Council’s Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs, would be the appropriate person to head such an operation. Eric Schwartz, Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, can serve as an important consultant as he led the 1996 Operation Pacific Haven, which airlifted over 6,000 Iraqis to Guam over a four-month period during intense fighting in Northern Iraq.⁶

A 1997 Department of Defense Report notes that “Pacific Haven was so successful due, in part, to the strong support by the local community...The U.S. military people stationed on Guam and the local community’s outpouring of goodwill resulted in donations of well over 40,000 volunteer hours and \$650,000 in needed materials -- primarily clothing, household items, toiletries and toys.”⁷ In light of this previous event and success, the U.S. should again pursue such an option.

Additionally, H.R. 578—currently referred to the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law—warrants special attention as the only current piece of legislation pertaining to the Iraqi humanitarian crisis.

It is our opinion that H.R. 578 offers practical and non-overreaching solutions to this humanitarian crisis that can help strengthen America’s leadership role, and reaffirm our commitment to those that assisted our government and armed forces in carrying out their mission objectives.

Currently, most UN agencies and civil society are struggling to fund their humanitarian activities for this Iraqi refugee population at the requisite level. As proposed in H.R. 578, the U.S. should significantly increase its financial support for this group’s humanitarian assistance in Iraq and its neighboring countries, providing at least 50 percent of requested amounts for this purpose by relevant organizations.⁸

The fact that funding for UNHCR and NGOs working with the vulnerable displaced Iraqi population is in question, only adds more burdens and pressures to this crisis. The growing number of Iraqi children and adolescents without an education, or opportunities for growth, will lead to an increase in unemployment, marginalization, exploitation, and fanaticism. This denial of opportunities, or human rights, to this population can threaten the peace and security of the region and the United States. Generous funding by the United States should elicit a more robust international response to this crisis.

Furthermore, H.R. 578 recommends increasing the number of Iraqi refugees who may be admitted to the United States to no less than 20,000 per year for three fiscal years.⁹ As a result of our experiences, through engagement with refugees and civil society, at home and abroad, it is our opinion that increasing the admission quota as proposed by H.R. 578 can serve both as a way to provide hope to displaced Iraqis, and relief to NGOs and governments who are working at capacity for Iraqi refugees.

Lastly, noting H.R. 578’s call for the establishment of a Special Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees within the Executive Office of the President,¹⁰ we strongly favor the creation of an ambassadorial

level position uniquely responsible for addressing this crisis versus it being one of the many responsibilities of the Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs at the National Security Council at the White House.

An international representative with plenipotentiary powers to address this issue is essential for lobbying key actors such as the European Union, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and Arab League countries to resettle significant numbers of vulnerable Iraqis as defined by UNHCR criteria; seeking matches for financial support to host countries and international aid agencies assisting Iraqi refugees; and advocating for a cease of all refoulement processes in Europe and the Near East.

We respectfully urge the Commission to support H.R.578 and the “Guam Option” as both practical and feasible ways for the United States to provide immediate relief—and hope—for the almost 5 million displaced Iraqis, while sending a clear signal of our stronger leadership role in this crisis by providing greater assistance to Iraq’s vulnerable refugees and our allies.

Rev. Robert Chase
Executive Director
Intersections International

C. Eduardo Vargas
Project Manager

Christina Clare
Project Associate

¹ Intersections International-Iraqi Voices Amplification Project. Available at: <http://www.intersectionsinternational.org/iraqivoices>

² Williams, T., & Arango, T. (2010, July 14). Commander in Iraq Warns of Attacks on U.S. Bases. *New York Times*, A10.

³ H.R. 578 Sec.3 (6). 111th Congress, 1st Session.

⁴ Ondiak, N., & Katulis, B. *Operation Safe Haven Iraq 2009: An Action Plan for Airlifting Endangered Iraqis Linked to the United States*, Available at: http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/01/pdf/iraqi_refugees.pdf/ (January 2009)

⁵ The List Project, *Recommendations for the President*, Available at: http://thelistproject.org/withdrawal/?page_id=722

⁶ The List Project, *Presidents and Precedent*, Available at: <http://thelistproject.org/ACPresidentsandPrecedents.html>

⁷ U.S. Department of Defense Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, *Operation Pacific Haven Wraps up Humanitarian Efforts*, Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releasedid=1218> (April 15, 1997)

⁸ H.R. 578 Sec.6 (b) (1). 111th Congress, 1st Session.

⁹ Ibid, Sec.7 (c).

¹⁰ Ibid, Sec.5 (2).