

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 21, 2015

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
2201 C Street Northwest
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We write to express our deep concern for the safety and welfare of the Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, and raped by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) on the basis of their faith. Approximately 5,000 Yazidis were abducted by ISIL last year and many still remain in captivity. We must urge you to immediately take further actions in Iraq to specifically protect religious minorities who are victims of crimes against humanity.

First, we request that you invoke your authority under the Refugee Crisis Act of 2007 to designate religious minorities, including Yazidis and Christians, as persecuted groups by establishing a Priority 2 category which makes each group eligible to seek refugee assistance within Iraq. Although religious minorities reside within Iraq, they are in need of refugee assistance because many of them are located within territory occupied by ISIL, making it very difficult to escape to safety.

Second, we urge you to improve the in-country processing time of refugee claims. The estimated processing time for Iraqis who served alongside U.S. military personnel during the war is at the unacceptably high rate of five to eight years. We must ensure timely access to refugee assistance for both Iraqis affiliated with the U.S. government, as well as Iraqis within persecuted religious minorities. As such, we ask you take four actions to accelerate processing times: 1) double the number – from 10 to 20 – of in-country State Department personnel processing Iraqi refugees; 2) consult with the Department of Homeland Security on the use of video interviews, consistent with security requirements, to be conducted in addition to the in-person interviews currently required; 3) identify a non-governmental organization to work with the U.S. Embassy to identify and screen religious minorities, as we have instructed you to do under the Refugee Crisis Act of 2007, seeking refugee assistance in Iraq; and 4) establish a facility in Irbil where the U.S. government can conduct refugee processing.

Third, we applaud the efforts of the Iraqi government to identify and assist female ISIL victims. Over 1,000 victims have been identified for monetary assistance and at least 288 Yazidis have been issued cards to collect a \$500 monthly compensation package from the Iraqi government. We strongly urge the State Department to continue advocating for more Iraqi government support and compensation measures, in addition to using State Department resources toward this end as part of the strategy to rebuild Iraq.

We understand that the State Department's Director of the Admissions Office in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Larry Bartlett, traveled to Irbil earlier this month to meet with international organizations and explore options to address the overwhelming number of refugees. We would like a report of Director Bartlett's findings.

We look forward to working with you to ensure these actions are implemented. In addition, please let us know if further statutory changes are necessary to carry out these or other improvements.

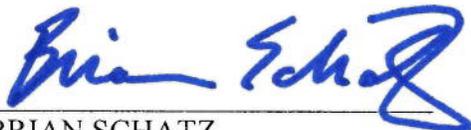
Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



SHERROD BROWN
United States Senate



BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senate



JEANNE SHAHEEN
United States Senate



KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND
United States Senate



BARBARA A. MIKULSKI
United States Senate