

Amendment Directs Government to Make Use of the Pool of Iraqi Translators Who Assisted U.S. Forces in Iraq for Strategic Federal Government Work

Washington, DC— Today, U.S. Congressman Steve Israel (D-NY) announced House floor passage of legislation that addresses the critical Arabic translation shortfall that the U.S. faces by matching Iraqi translators who supported U.S. troops in combat with federal government employment opportunities. Israel's legislation would create a joint Department of Defense/Department of State program for the purpose of hiring Iraqis (who supported U.S. efforts in Iraq and who have legally resettled in the U.S.) as translators, interpreters, and cultural awareness instructors for various agencies of the federal government.

"Iraqi translators who risked their lives to assist our military efforts now struggle to find refuge in the United States and new employment," said U.S. Congressman Steve Israel (D-NY). "Meanwhile, the United States faces a critical shortage of individuals skilled in Arabic translation and cultural understanding. My legislation addresses this shortfall by hiring Iraqi allies that have shown extreme dedication to U.S. military operations as translators, interpreters and cultural awareness instructors."

Israel's amendment before the floor today is a provision of the Relocation Empowerment and Placement Assistance for Iraqi Refugees ("REPAIR Act"), which Rep. Israel authored in 2007. This legislation was inspired by an Iraqi translator who risked his life to assist American forces in Iraq but struggled to attain special immigrant visa (SIV) status to leave Iraq and struggled to find employment in the United States upon visa approval.

Over 1,700 interpreters who assisted efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have received special immigrant visa (SIV) status to relocate to the U.S. These translators, many of whom played strategic roles in assisting U.S. forces in Iraq, often struggle to find basic employment upon arriving in the United States. Rep. Israel's amendment creates jobs for Iraqis who are lawfully residing in the U.S. and who served U.S. forces for at least 12 months in Iraq.

Over 2 million Iraqis have been internally displaced and another 2 million have fled, according to the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR). To partially address this issue, Congress passed legislation to create special immigrant status. Special immigrant status is given to individuals who served as translators with the U.S. Armed Forces. Under the current system, eligible individuals must be nationals of Iraq, must have worked as a translator or interpreter with American forces for a least one year and have obtained written certification of their service by the General Officer of the unit they served. However, applicants must travel outside of Iraq to apply for the visa, and must outlay significant funds for visa fees and travel costs.

Israel's legislation, which passed today as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization of 2009 (H.R. 5658), also instructs the Pentagon and the State Department to

work with the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to ensure that Iraqis resettled here are informed of the program, as well. The temporary program would be authorized through December 2014. The amendment is endorsed by Church World Service, The Episcopal Church, NETWORK (A Catholic Social Justice Lobby), the Education for Peace in Iraq Center, Veterans for Common Sense, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.