

Washington, DC—Today, U.S. Representatives Steve Israel (D-NY) and Frank Wolf (R-VA), Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, announced legislation that would improve the visa application process for Iraqis that have assisted American efforts in Iraq and ease their transition into American life.

The **R**elocation **E**mpowerment and **P**lacement **A**ssistance for **I**raqi **R**efugees ("REPAIR Act") was inspired by an Iraqi translator that risked his life to assist American forces but struggled to attain special immigrant visa (SIV) status to leave Iraq.

"We can dispute the military's strategy in Iraq, but we can't dispute the fact that a humanitarian crisis of epic proportion is occurring on our watch," said Congressman Israel. "Our legislation will make it easier for all Iraqis - especially those that helped American forces - to safely leave Iraq if they feel they need to, and help them make a transition to life in the United States.

"I recently met with a family of Iraqi refugees," continued Israel. "The father served American forces as an interpreter in Baghdad since 2003, work that enabled him to get a Special Immigrant Visa to come to the United States in the first place. He, his wife, and his two children have overcome huge roadblocks to leave Iraq and apply for special immigrant status and visas, including high costs, long waits, and extensive travel. Here in the United States, this former interpreter and his wife face new challenges in transitioning to American life, making ends meet and ensuring much needed health care for their two children. This interpreter willingly and routinely risked his life for American forces, yet he was nearly unable to leave Iraq with his family. Despite all these hardships, he considers himself fortunate, particularly among the millions of Iraqis who have fled the country or been displaced."

"I am pleased to be an original cosponsor of this important legislation," said Congressman Wolf, the Ranking Member of the State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee. "This bill will ease the process of applying for a visa to the United States for those in Iraq and Afghanistan who have served our government, often at risk of their own lives. I believe it is important to make the process of applying for a special immigrant visa as smooth as possible for these individuals, and this bill does just that."

Over 2 million Iraqis have been internally displaced and another 2 million have fled, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). To partially address this issue, Congress passed legislation to create special immigrant status. Special immigrant status is given to individuals that 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.

To address the refugee crisis, the REPAIR Act:

Empowers our Troops– Currently, only U.S. General Officers can certify Iraqi Nationals for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) and Iraqis rarely have direct contact with a General Officer. The legislation gives Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels that worked directly with Iraqi Nationals the ability to certify their service.

Empowers the Ambassador – Although the U.S. Ambassador can help translators or interpreters, he is restricted from helping Iraqis of any other profession unless they have served for 15 years. This legislation puts him on equal footing with the military and allows him to sign for Iraqis that have served American forces for one year.

Allows Iraqis to Apply in Iraq– Currently, Iraqis seeking either refugee or special immigrant status have to travel through often dangerous territory to a neighboring country with an American presence to apply. The legislation allows Iraqis to apply for Special Immigrant or refugee status and Visas in Iraq – in Baghdad and in Irbil, Iraq.

Helps More Than Just Translators- Translators and interpreters serving American troops risk their lives to do so, but they aren't the only ones. The REPAIR Act allows other key Iraqi personnel who served American forces, such as security personnel and drivers, to apply for Special Immigrant Status as well.

Helps Iraqi Translators and the Pentagon– The legislation addresses America's shortage of translators and interpreters by creating a program at the Department of Defense that will employ relocated translators domestically as either translators or cultural awareness instructors for U.S. troops and military personnel.

Broadens Relocation Benefits – The REPAIR Act requires the federal government to give Iraqis who served the United States all the same language training and adjustment benefits given to other refugees who come to America, plus additional benefits for vocational and computer training as well as English as a Second Language services.

Waives All Application Fees – The legislation makes a SIV affordable by waiving all of the prohibitively high fees that are currently charged to those applying for the status.

Israel and Wolf serve on the House Appropriations Subcommittee which sets funding levels for

Reps. Israel and Wolf Introduce "Repair" Act to Ease Visa Process for Iraqi Allies

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foreign operations and the Department of State.