

June 20, 2019

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

The United States has long been a country rooted in the sincere belief that each person should be able to freely practice their faith. Even before the freedom of religion was enshrined as the first freedom in the Constitution, colonists came to these shores seeking a place to freely and safely practice their religion. They sought to be a 'city upon a hill,' a light among nations that would protect liberty and freedom for all. The below signed organizations are committed to upholding those ideals today and seek policies that ensure religious freedom for all persons around the world. We commend this Administration's focus on international religious freedom and urge you to take steps to protect a vital population that faces religious persecution: refugees. Specifically, we urge that the U.S. continue to be a place of refuge for those experiencing religious persecution around the world by admitting 30,000 refugees in FY2019 and increasing the refugee admissions number for FY2020 to return to historic norms.

In 1980, the U.S. formally established its tradition of serving as a place of refuge in a program known as the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to admit refugees seeking protection from persecution. From the start, this program offered a critical pathway to be admitted to the U.S. and receive the right to worship without fear or interference. Since 1980, faith communities have worked alongside recently arrived refugees to ensure they can thrive here and enjoy the liberties and protections offered by our nation. Over three million refugees have been resettled to the U.S. since the inception of the USRAP and have become citizens, civic leaders, entrepreneurs, and have contributed enormously to our country.

At a time when the world is facing its worst refugee crisis and religious persecution remains a significant threat globally, we are concerned about the significant reduction in the admission of refugees to the U.S., particularly those refugees who have fled religious persecution. Since 1980, the average annual ceiling for refugee admissions has been set at 95,000, but the Presidential Determination for Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 was set at the drastically lower level of 30,000. As of May 31, 2019, only 18,051 refugees have been resettled to the U.S. Based on this level of processing, we are concerned, like FY2018, that the U.S. will not meet its stated admissions level.

According to data from World Relief, based on the number of arrivals through the first half of FY2019, it is projected that the full year FY2019 arrivals from countries where refugees have been persecuted as religious minorities will have declined by the following percentages, compared to FY2016:

- 58.8% among Christians from Pakistan
- 62.2% among Muslims from Burma (primarily Rohingya)
- 66.9% among Ahmadiyya Muslims from Pakistan
- 67.9% among Christians from Burma
- 95.7% among Yezidis from Iraq and Syria
- 94.6% among Christians from Iraq
- 96.3% among Christians from Iran
- 97.8% among Sabeans-Mandean from Iraq
- 98.0% among Bahai from Iran
- 98.5% among Sabeans-Mandean from Iran
- 100% among Jews from Iran
- 100% among Zoroastrians from Iran

These figures represent a dangerous aberration from U.S. historic commitments to the persecuted, placing lives at risk and drastically reducing our ability to protect religious freedom. By significantly reducing the annual refugee ceiling and the total number of refugee arrivals, while also putting in place stringent vetting requirements of certain nationalities who are coming from countries in which there are high levels of religious persecution, we have ongoing concerns that the refugee resettlement program is being jeopardized precisely at the time when it should be a robust, humanitarian tool helping victims of religious persecution abroad. Indeed, the 2018 annual report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) includes as one of its key recommendations to promote religious freedom the need to “resettle vulnerable refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution, through the [USRAP].”

We are grateful that the Administration continues to prioritize the promotion of international religious freedom as a core foreign policy goal. We believe having a robust U.S. refugee resettlement program is part and parcel of promoting a strong, consistent international religious freedom agenda abroad. We urge the Department of State, in partnership with other agencies, to continue to strengthen the U.S. refugee admissions program as a life-saving foreign policy and humanitarian tool helping victims fleeing religious persecution abroad. We urge that the U.S. admit 30,000 refugees in FY2019 and increase the refugee admissions number for FY2020 to return to historic norms. The U.S. has promoted international religious freedom abroad as a core value and foreign policy agenda, and our acceptance of refugees signals to countries abroad that we value this fundamental freedom and are willing to protect those who are persecuted because of their faith.

Sincerely,

Bethany Christian Services
Boat People SOS
Center for Pluralism
China Aid Association
Christian Reformed Church in North America Office of Social Justice
Church of the Brethren, Office of Peacebuilding and Policy
Church World Service
Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries
Faiths for Safe Water
Franciscan Action Network
Free Yezidi Foundation
Freedom Road, LLC
Friends Committee on National Legislation
HIAS
International Christian Concern
International Human Rights Committee
Islamic Relief USA
Jubilee Campaign USA
Law and Liberty International
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Mission Africa International
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Association of Evangelicals
National Council of Jewish Women
National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference (NHCLC)
National Justice for Our Neighbors
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

Pax Christi USA

Presbyterian Church (USA)

Sisters of Mercy Institute Justice Team

Sisters of Mercy West Midwest

Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission

The Church of Almighty God

The Episcopal Church

The West Papua Human Rights Center

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ

Uyghur Entrepreneurs Network

Veterans for American Ideals

World Relief

YMCA of Greater Houston

Zakat Foundation of America

CC:

Vice President Mike Pence

Deputy Secretary of State, John J. Sullivan

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration,
Carol O'Connell