

**Opening Statement for “Ibrahim”  
U.S. States Helsinki Commission  
June 11, 2007**

Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Cardin and members of the commission:

In 2003, when the United States went to war against Saddam Hussein’s regime, I and many other Iraqis didn’t know or care about the political debate occurring in the U.S. Congress about the war. Iraqis wanted to live the American life—we wanted to taste Big Macs, eat at Pizza Hut, and listen to American music. We wanted to work with Americans who would teach us about the world outside. We wanted to pursue the American Dream. Unfortunately for the Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government, the war turned into a long nightmare.

I would like to begin by shedding some light on the Iraqis connected with the List Project that Kirk Johnson is advocating for. Even though we had very simple reasons for working for the U.S. government, we were asked by the U.S. government for our support. When terrorism started to breed in Iraq, Iraqis like me saw only one option. This was a battle between what we dreamed about and what we feared most, and we were tired of being afraid.

I joined USAID in 2003. I was very excited, as were almost all my Iraqi colleagues working there. We believed—and continue to believe—that we joined the right side. We worked in many places all around the country—at U.S. Embassy Regional Offices, U.S. Army posts, and with U.S. contractors. We dreamed of creating a modern and prosperous Iraq. There were dangerous days when we knew we put ourselves in the front line of a big battle, yet we were comforted by our belief that the world’s strongest power would protect us against terrorist gangsters with no values or courage.

I worked hard and with dedication. My supervisors appreciated my work and gave me On-the-Spot and Meritorious Awards, along with “kudos” letters praising my dedication and hard work. I literally risked my life every day for the American government, and I risked the lives of the Iraqi staff that worked with me to bring everything that our American colleagues needed from outside the Green Zone, even simple things they wanted to remind them of their homes back in the States, such as low fat yogurt with apricots.

Soon after I joined USAID, my country became classified as one big dangerous Red Zone. High walls separated the American citizens from the rest of country, yet there was one problem for Iraqis who worked for the Americans. We were not American citizens. We lived on one side of the walls and worked on another. Outside those walls, the violence grew worse. Outside the Green Zone we were hated by Iraqis who no longer considered us Iraqis; inside the Green Zone no one understood that according to Islamic culture, Iraqis like me were worse than the infidels. In a divided country, the only thing that unified everyone was hatred of those individuals who worked for the United States, who were viewed as collaborators.

In the days after the war began, the majority of Iraqis didn’t view America as an occupier. As the Iraqi people started to regard the U.S. as an occupying army and even a violent aggressor, it was too late for Iraqis working for the U.S. government to retreat or hide. We were already

carrying the tattoo that is unforgivable in Islamic culture. We were collaborators with the infidels.

These were terrifying days. Street vendors would shout “come watch the latest CD showing the beheading of a collaborator.” More and more of my colleagues were threatened, but nothing was done to help us. We were chased and followed. I remember once when angry Iraqis spit at us, right at the check points into the Green Zone in front of American soldiers.

USAID had a Foreign Service National (FSN) Committee that represented the Iraqi staff. I was a member of that committee. When the first Iraqis were killed because they worked for the United States, the FSN Committee asked the U.S. to stop exposing us to needless dangers. For example, our identity was never protected. Our photos and names were available on USAID websites, which anyone could access. Soon our photos, names and addresses were more public to Iraqis than the U.S. effort to reconstruct Iraq.

When we asked if there was a plan to protect Americans working for the United States, it quickly became clear that there was nothing in place to protect us. We suggested simple ways to improve this situation, but nothing was done. This led us to believe that our lives were worthless in the eyes of those who were supposedly trying to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis. We didn't mean anything to the Americans, but we meant something to the terrorists. Killing a supposed collaborator sent a clear message about who really controlled the land.

Sadly, like so many other Iraqis who worked for the Americans, my life became a horror movie. It started when I had a serious health emergency. My family had to take me out of the hospital because they were afraid militia men would identify me, as they had killed many others right inside the emergency room. Then, my own 67 year old mother was attacked and beaten because I worked with the Americans. During another incident, an Iraqi policeman threatened to kill me, and then an Iraqi policeman assaulted me. The only thing the Americans did for me was to offer an empty promise of help.

Eventually, I was threatened in a very direct way. I received a death threat telling me that I was a target of JAM (Jaish Al Mahdi)—the Mahdi Militia. I had to run away. At that time, networks existed that smuggled many of my former colleagues to Sweden. I heard that Sweden was providing sanctuary to Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government. I decided to take the same dangerous trip that many of my colleagues took when their lives were at stake.

The smugglers took me on a dangerous trip to India and along the way the smugglers treated me brutally. Unfortunately, I was arrested by the Indian immigration authorities and deported to Syria. There, I saw Iraqi refugees suffering from humiliation and lack of basic human needs. I could not stay, so I continued my journey out of the Middle East with a smuggler network that decided to take me to Egypt. Unfortunately, the Egyptian police didn't allow the smugglers to succeed. I had no option but to hide in the slums of Cairo. I lost all hope and wished to die so I could save myself from further suffering.

Eventually, I registered with and fell under the protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Nevertheless, the Egyptian authorities arrested me because I had illegally entered their country. I spent three weeks in jail, where I was tortured,

beaten and humiliated. The UNHCR came to my rescue by protesting that if the Egyptian authorities deported me to Iraq I might be killed.

Even though I was released from prison, my life had become nothing but a series of hardships. Every day I questioned God's wisdom and wondered if a person like me who lost everything and who was rejected by his own country and people should live. During these dark times, the only person who knew about me and who was in touch with me was Kirk Johnson, my old American friend and colleague from Iraq. No one in the world knew anything about me and who I was, except Kirk. He was the only connection that reminded me of my humanity. He gave me hope when I had nowhere else to turn. Kirk Johnson put me in touch with Chris Nugent, who provided me with the legal services in order to help me resettle in the U.S.

When I arrived in the U.S., I decided to work with Kirk Johnson and help the countless Iraqis like me who could be helped by the List Project. Kirk introduced me to Eric Blinderman, an American attorney from Proskauer Rose who has dedicated himself to helping Iraqi refugees. At Proskauer I learned how attorneys were assisting Iraqis, targeted for death because of their work with the United States, and who remained stranded in Iraq desperate for assistance and a chance to find safety.

There is a PhD holder whose son was killed because she worked for an American organization. There is an Army translator in Fallujah reaching out the List Project. There are hundreds of Iraqi families with children, old men and women. These are the families of those who served the United States and are now in danger, just like I was, and they have no one to help them but those people working on the List Project.

The reason for this is that the U.S. government's support of refugees has been ineffective and at times, negligent; particularly for those who are threatened because they decided to help the U.S. Thankfully, progress has been made through the efforts of Congress and the passage of the Iraq Refugee Crisis Act. But even these efforts, which have led to the processing of Iraqi refugees in Baghdad, are imperfect. For example, despite the heroic work of the Refugee Coordinators on the ground in Baghdad, they have insufficient staff and resources to process the applications which are sent to them. Even worse, Iraqis who are called for interviews inside the Green Zone are prohibited from entering without escorts or proper International Zone Badges. Since the Refugee Coordinators are understaffed, they do not have the ability to escort applicants from the Green Zone checkpoints to and from their interviews. This has led to a catch-22. A mechanism for people to escape Iraq has been created, but only those with sufficient connections to enter the Green Zone can take advantage of it.

The United States can certainly do better. For example, the Danish government evacuated the Iraqis affiliated with their efforts. Britain did the same, as did Australia. Why can't America send a plane, not with bombs, but to evacuate those most at risk in Iraq? This was done at the end of the Vietnam War when over 100,000 Vietnamese were relocated to the United States. And at the end of the First Gulf War, the United States processed thousands of Iraq refugees in Guam before resettling them in the United States.

Today, I believe I was lucky enough to be saved by the List Project so that I could speak for those Iraqis who worked for the U.S. government In Iraq. They deserve to have their voices heard. Their efforts to help America should be appreciated.

Please do something to preserve the values and hopes that America represents to the world. Please do something so that the Iraqi people will know that the United States stands by its friends.

Thank You.