

# America's Responsibility to Protect Our Iraqi Allies

## A Ground Truth Interview with Kirk Johnson: Part 2

From January to December 2005, Kirk Johnson worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to help rebuild war-torn Iraq. In [Part 1 of our interview](#), EPIC talked with Kirk about his time in Baghdad and Fallujah with USAID, and the near-fatal accident that prevented him from returning to his post. In Part 2, Kirk shares the harrowing stories of his Iraqi colleagues, the dangers they face for working with Americans, and what he is doing now to help save their lives.

**epic:** What led you to become an advocate for Iraqis threatened because of their affiliation with the U.S.?

**Kirk:** One day in the middle of November, I got news of an Iraqi colleague at USAID, a friend of mine named Yaghdan, who had received a death threat. I had met Yaghdan on my second day in the compound. He was one of the most mild-mannered and friendliest guys I'd ever met.

Yaghdan grew up around Karbala, where his father still lives. He and his wife are about 30 years old. I believe he has one brother and an extended family, but no children.

Initially, he worked in the children's office on primary and secondary education. He has a BA in liberal arts, and his English was top-notch, so USAID was able to work well with him. In terms of the actual development work, he was one of the few Iraqis given authority to talk to the implementing partners.

In October 2006, Yaghdan received a death threat, along with the decapitated head of a dog on his doorstep. The lethality of his threat was mobile; he brought it with him wherever he went. It wasn't as simple as changing neighborhoods. He was very concerned about transferring it to his friends and family, so unless he could stay in the Green Zone, he had to leave the country. USAID gave him something like two months of administrative leave, but the severity of the threat was such that it wouldn't just blow over. Yaghdan and his wife fled to the United Arab Emirates and then to Syria, where he currently lives.

He likens Syria to pre-war Iraq, in that it's a police state with

government minders and secret police. And, because he is Iraqi, he is discriminated against. As a result, he is unable to get a job. It's the same story in almost every case I am working on: visas, money and resources expiring and unemployment.

**epic:** When Yaghdan worked with USAID, did he have to come into Green Zone every day?

**Kirk:** Yes. It was very dangerous.

I remember Yaghdan once coming in to the compound at five in the morning just to sleep in his air conditioned office because it was so hot. Baghdad was peaking that summer at 138 degrees and there was power only about five hours a day. While Americans were getting cold because there were so many air conditioners running inside the compound, Iraqis had to develop other coping mechanisms, many of them illegal or dangerous. I remember hearing about street sweeping missions at night to gather the bodies of electrocuted Iraqis who had died trying to connect illegally to neighborhood grids. There were a lot of desperate acts.

These people were having a hard enough time outside the Green Zone, but the extra level of difficulty they took on by working for us was incredible. They would try to disguise themselves and hide their identities. They would try to enter and exit the Zone through different checkpoints. They would break their patterns. They would never get a taxi from the Green Zone to their home. They couldn't tell their friends who they were working for. It was a secret life.



Kirk Johnson, a writer and Arabist, has worked and researched throughout the Middle East. As a Fulbright Scholar from 2002 to 2003, Kirk analyzed political Islamic "pulp" writings in Egypt. In the fall of 2005, he was appointed USAID's first regional coordinator for reconstruction in Fallujah, Iraq. Since returning from Iraq, Kirk has advocated for a safe-haven for his former Iraqi colleagues—now refugees—and others who suffered because of their affiliation with the U.S. government. He holds a B.A. with honors in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from the University of Chicago. Kirk may be contacted directly at [kwjohnson@gmail.com](mailto:kwjohnson@gmail.com).

For many, the gig was up the moment they were identified. I have copies of a lot of the death threats. Yaghdan's is hanging on my wall. Most of them say, "You've got three days to clear out of Baghdad."

There have been two USAID direct-hires who have been identified and killed, and those killings sent shock waves through the Iraqi staff. They have called me to ask what would be done in the event that they received a threat. USAID is now starting to let some critically-threatened Iraqis stay inside the compound, but that's really not an ideal solution for anybody. It puts the Iraqis closer to the source, the reason for the threat on their lives.

There seems to be this reticence about being proactive to help the Iraqis. They say, "You know what you're getting into by working here." We give these Iraqis salaries of between \$10,000 and \$12,000, and we assume that covers the price of a clean conscience if they get killed.

**epic:** What did you do when you heard about the death threats against your friend Yaghdan?

**Kirk:** The news came through the grapevine and, honestly, although it stuck with me, it didn't mobilize me immediately. A few weeks later, one of Yaghdan's supervisors from USAID sent an email saying, "If you want to contribute money, I think we should try to wire it." I remember thinking, "Shoot, I wish I had more cash." I had been living off of my savings for the whole year; I couldn't work right away because of my injuries.

But that email set my mind racing: I began writing down everything I thought I could do to help him, trying to convince the State Department to open up an embassy for him.

At the beginning I didn't know anything about refugee resettlement or asylum. I just knew this guy, a friend, needed my help. It hit me so hard that I couldn't even go to sleep the first night the email came in asking for cash. It was so inauspicious in its origins. It was something as simple as a suggestion.

**epic:** What have you learned about the asylum and resettlement process in the U.S.?

**Kirk:** The way we like to resettle Iraqi refugees is to have clearly defined groups living in tent communities that are fairly stable. The U.S. doesn't do quick resettlement; they provide a slow service, which brings refugees to the United States over several years. They fund groups like the UN

Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Rescue Committee and others to refer cases to them.

After an op-ed I wrote appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in mid-December, I began receiving three or four emails from Iraqi colleagues each day. I also heard from scores of Iraqis who I didn't work with, but who might have worked with the U.S. military or the State Department. Then it ballooned out from there.

Early in January, I was quoted in a front page *New York Times* story about the shockingly low number of Iraqis gaining sanctuary in the U.S. I only mention it because the article was passed around in the refugee community, and I think these people recognized me as someone sympathetic to their plight.

I started keeping a list of my former Iraqi colleagues who contacted me, and began calling up folks like Refugees International and Human Rights Watch to see how they might help. But I found out that none of them take on individual cases. I assumed there must be some sort of existing framework to rapidly advocate on behalf of these people and get help.

I asked officials at the State Department if they would have a meeting with me, and they agreed. I think they had already heard of the list I was compiling, so I came down and dropped off the first list, which consisted of just 40 colleagues minus their families. I identified them as refugees: direct hires of USAID who had fled Iraq. I wanted to make it as simple as possible for them to say yes.

After about a week, they wrote to me saying they would forward the list to the UNHCR for priority processing. I thought this was a positive step. They announced a task force on February 14th, the day before my meeting with them.

After they launched the task force, they held their first public press conference, saying they would fund 30 percent of UNHCR's request. They said they were aiming to bring in 7,000 Iraqis over the next year. Since after 9/11 we basically froze our resettlement program, a lot of these are old cases that have been sitting in the pipeline for years. But I've never been calling for any generic increase in number; I've been calling for targeted assistance and resettlement for those who worked for us and are now running from the militias.

**epic:** How has the public responded to your work and this issue?

"[Iraqis working in the Green Zone] would try to disguise themselves and hide their identities...They couldn't tell their friends who they were working for. It was a secret life."

**Kirk:** Never at any point in this war have I sensed such a strong connection to this issue on the part of average Americans. People are writing to me from all over the country, from every state, telling me that they're so ashamed of this, that they're ready to do whatever they can with whatever free time or money they have to make sure that we help those who helped us. It's very heartening.

Despite the last 5 years of being told that Iraqis are terrorists, I think people understand that this is a particular group we don't have to worry about. It's unfortunate that Congress and the folks in government don't seem to have the same certainty. I think the Bush administration believes that if they don't talk about it or turn the volume up on other issues, then it's going to go away.

50,000 Iraqis are fleeing -- not leaving voluntarily -- every month. We are ignoring this at our own serious risk, not just in terms of the moral credibility we're losing, but strategically. When we talk about stability in the Middle East and the potential spillover, this is how it happens. I don't like the expression that refugees are carriers of conflict, but there's already anti-Shi'a and anti-Iraqi backlash in Syria and Jordan, and by many accounts, Egypt. You've got a whole mass of millions of frustrated, traumatized human beings who can't work and are constantly terrified that they're going to have to go back to Iraq. That's not something anyone in government can be ignoring right now.

**epic:** How has Washington responded?

**Kirk:** Politicians are afraid to touch any issue of Iraq's failure in a constructive way, but addressing this problem requires a constructive frame of mind. This is the first time that Iraqis are front and center in a policy issue instead of just some intangible concept. I used to think it was a fringe issue, as though it wasn't very relevant to the larger issue. But it is.

We can occupy and live in a comfortable realm of abstraction in which we determine where money ought to be reprogrammed or where we think troops should be repositioned. But if you're ignoring this flood of people, then you have to question whether or not those abstract deliberations are having any actual impact, improving the lives of the Iraqis, who, in theory, are the whole reason we went over there in the first place. But now that they need our help we're not helping them quickly enough.

I'm trying to remain optimistic, but it took another President -- not Nixon, but Ford -- to help the Vietnamese refugee population. It also took a sort of universal consensus that we had lost in Vietnam. I'd prefer to help these Iraqis before making a declaration on whether or not the war is over. I'm not advocating breaking down the bases, packing up and

leaving. In fact, I'm still considering going back myself to keep pitching in on the reconstruction. I'm trying to get Bush to make a statement about what we owe these Iraqis who put their lives on the line for us, but I don't think I'm going to succeed. I wonder if he's even thought about it, frankly. I think certain people in government need to be educated on who these Iraqis are and what they did for us.

If you believe enough in this country to represent it as an elected official, then you also have to believe in the way this country appears to the rest of the world. Though everyone in the Middle East is following what happens to the Iraqis who work for us, none of our Iraqi allies feel like we actually value them enough to help them. If we care about our involvement in the Middle East, this issue should be front and center right now.

**epic:** You've already mentioned Yaghdan as one Iraqi you are trying to help. Tell us about some of the other Iraqis on your list.

**Kirk:** First, I'd like to point out that nobody on my list has gotten over here yet. Some days I wonder if we're going to see any of them in the States before the end of the year.

I wrote about an Iraqi woman named Rita in a *New York Times* piece called, "[Hounded by Insurgents, Abandoned by Us.](#)" Rita was an assistant for Bernard Kerik, the former Police Commissioner of New York City, who was tasked with setting up Iraq's police force. Rita's son was kidnapped when he was 15 and the initial ransom demand was \$600,000.

Her work with the Americans had already put a huge strain on her family. She has two kids, a son and a daughter. But for her husband, that was the last straw. He said to her, "You ruined this family by working for the Americans." So he divorced her, bringing together whatever money he could to pay the ransom for his son, and then he and his kids fled to Syria. He's never let them talk to her. Rita has lost them all.

Even still, she kept working with us for a time. But soon she was discovered and began receiving many death threats. In early 2006, she fled to Amman, Jordan.

I included Rita in my op-ed because her story points to a gaping hole in U.S. policy. There's a clause in the PATRIOT and Real ID Acts that says if you provide any support to terrorists then you'll be blocked from entering the U.S. On the surface, it seems to make sense: we don't want people who are funding terrorists to come into our country.

But the problem is that legislators never made the exclusion for material support under duress, so as written, this legislation blocks out folks like Rita, who are forced to pay a ransom for the safe release of a kidnapped family member.

They created a waiver, but it took them years, and there's still no defined process for applying for such a waiver. People point to the material support bar as one of the major factors in explaining the decrease in refugee admissions since the P.A.T.R.I.O.T. and Real ID Acts.

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey likes to say that Iraq's refugee crisis didn't start until only recently, and that Iraqi refugees and those who work for us are her bureau's very top priority. But there are people on my list who fled well before a few months ago, and if you're only going to respond to the heart-wrenching stories of Iraqis included in sizzling media pieces, that's not a just response.

For every Rita, there are more with identical stories. The State Department has the list; the names are coming in right and left now. But nobody has a clue how long it's going to take the Department of Homeland Security to respond. We know who to help, but everybody's dragging their feet on this thing.

**epic:** In his March 2007 article in *The New Yorker*, George Packer writes at length about your time in Iraq and your work to help your former Iraqi colleagues. He also mentions an Iraqi named Ibrahim. Can you tell us about him?

**Kirk:** Ibrahim is in his late twenties. He was a procurement agent for USAID, making sure that we had food, desks, and other things we needed, but he left the Agency when I was there.

He wrote to me in January after hearing about what I was doing, and he sent me all his medical reports, including CAT scans. He was in the early stages of a brain tumor. Because it's sort of the luck of the draw in terms of which militia is running which hospital, he was too scared to get any treatment in Baghdad, so Ibrahim's tumor was going untreated and he was getting chronic headaches.

He paid over \$10,000 to get into a smuggling network. At one point he was in India, at another, Malaysia. He flew into Egypt on forged documents with a group of Iraqis. He wanted to be smuggled into Sweden, but I didn't want him to go through with the dangerous operation. There was no guarantee that he wouldn't end up in prison somewhere.

Ibrahim is one of the high priority cases I've been pushing. He could get a medical parole here, allowing him to side-step the traditional process and all the different rounds of interviews. The State Department, to its great credit, had the embassy call him up and invite him in for a meeting. I know

he is getting some medical treatment now, but I don't know how long it will take for him to come here or how aggressively they're pursuing his resettlement case. He tells me that they have pretty much run the course of available treatment in Egypt, and that he needs treatments that aren't available in the Middle East. The bit of treatment he's received is one of the only tangible successes that I've had so far.

**epic:** Are there any American doctors willing to help him?

**Kirk:** Anytime I've asked, Americans have been eager to volunteer their help. I'm hoping that even if these Iraqis come to the States that Americans will show their true colors and help them in the way we have before.

I think, like a lot of Iraqis, he's proud to have worked with us, but it's been really painful to be treated so poorly.

I'm always asking people higher up in government if they think these Iraqis are really going to be brought here. I still don't know if they're going to make it -- maybe only handful. But I won't be satisfied with that. Iraqis write to me everyday saying that I'm their only hope, that they don't know where else to go, that their emails to the State Department are going unanswered, and that their interviews with UNHCR are scheduled for six months after their visas expire. For many, it becomes a question of whether or not to renew their visas under the table, or simply go back to Iraq.

In the United Arab Emirates, for example, if you have to overstay your visa, you are assessed a fine of \$35.00 per day. This is a huge price tag for many Iraqi refugees. They need to have hope that something will happen in their favor in order to fight through all the pressure to go back to Iraq.

As refugees, they don't have rights; they don't feel welcome; and if they are able to find a job, they're ripped off by their employers. What are they going to do? There are roughly 550,000 school-age Iraqi refugees, and most are not able to attend school or get the healthcare they need. I am not minimizing the strain on the regional governments, but I am bringing it up to point out that Iraqi refugees lack the confidence of citizenship. Iraqis hear about others being deported so they just hide in their apartments and pray that something good happens before their visas run out.

For the U.S. to address this crisis, there needs political will, and it has to come from above. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice apparently "feels" for these Iraqis, but she hasn't made any statements yet. Instead, she's allowing Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey to make statements that are patently unrealistic.

"You've got a whole mass of millions of frustrated, traumatized [refugees] who can't work and are constantly terrified that they're going to have to go back to Iraq."

Sauerbrey said that if the State Department gets referrals from UNHCR, it could resettle 25,000 Iraqis by the end of the year. The media interpreted this as upping the ante for the Geneva Conference. Sauerbrey said, "It's fair to say that if they give the referrals they could resettle" -- resettle, not just start processing -- "25,000 refugees under the Presidential Determination this year."

But this year so far we have let in only 70 Iraqis, and just one per month in April and May. Initially the State Department said they would consider 7,000 referrals for the fiscal year, which ends in October -- just four months away. The State Department's low goal for resettlement is approximately 1,500. To reach that goal, they would need to up the average to 357 Iraqis per month. And to reach the 25,000 goal, they would need to bring in 6,232 Iraqis each month. That's doesn't even take into consideration Department of Homeland Security processing, which everybody knows is going to take time. When you only let in one person in April and one person in May, why stop at 25,000? Why not just say we'll resettle the entire country? All statements are equally improbable at the rate things are going.

The day they were made, Sauerbrey's statements went through the Iraqi refugee community like wildfire. The refugees were saying, "This is great! Now more of us are going to be let in. How soon do you think it'll happen?" Ironically, they tell me how I might be falsely raising the expectations of the Iraqis on my list!

The problem is, because there are no consequences, we've reached the point where we feel comfortable just throwing out numbers. It's reckless. Our leaders have to be held to those numbers. But without political will to cut through all the bureaucratic cholesterol, there's no way the administration will reach these numbers.

**epic:** Are there any other Iraqis on your list you'd like to tell us about?

**Kirk:** A good friend of mine, who I'll just call 'L,' began working for USAID as a direct hire in 2003. In late 2005, someone in L's neighborhood found out he was working for the Americans. His choice, as he saw it, was to either leave Iraq or move into the Green Zone. He had to pay 90 percent of his salary just to stay in the Green Zone and keep his wife and two children safe; plus he put himself in greater danger by being so closely associated with Americans.

Weeks later, American soldiers broke into his brother's house and arrested him, asking where L was. When he heard the news, L was baffled, and he actually went over to the palace and said, "Here I am! Why are you looking for me?" It took him about a month to locate his brother and get him out.

After working for us for three years, he fled the country at the beginning of 2007 with his wife. They're in the Gulf.

**epic:** Did he ever tell you how he started working for the Americans?

**Kirk:** No, he didn't, but you have to understand that there's a fairly severe firewall that blocks information about Iraqi employees. They don't even want each other to know what neighborhood they live in.

L was thrilled that we took out Saddam. Driving around the Green Zone, he always talked about how Baghdad's streets were awash with Kalashnikovs and side arms in the days before our forces reached the capital. He said how wonderful it was to be driving throughout the Green Zone's streets because they had been off-limits to him and others who weren't in Saddam's inner circle.

L loves America, so he was elated at the chance to come and work for us. He's still really hoping to come here one day.

**epic:** Some analysts claim that a fundamental mistake in Iraq has been our distrust of Iraqis. Do you agree?

**Kirk:** On a basic level, we didn't even trust the Iraqis who are on my list. Every time "L" and I left the Green Zone, even for a few minutes, we'd come back and have to go to the control gate. I'd be permitted to stay in the air-conditioned car, but they'd make him get out, dozens of times a day, so they could wipe these little strips of paper on him and run them through a machine to look for bomb residue. Then they would bring out a bomb dog to sniff him. He went through this song and dance for years. At what point do we trust him?

The message every single time was that we don't trust him. I'm not encouraging lax procedures and I'm not a security officer, but you have to understand the signals being sent and the demoralizing effect it has on your Iraqi staff. We tell everybody they have to wear flak jackets and helmets because of indirect fire, but we don't issue any to the Iraqis.

In that environment, trust is the only way to succeed but it's also the greatest risk. You need trust to cut past the explosions and the bombs and to make a relationship.

**epic:** Consider the best scenario where the Maliki government suddenly starts operating in the national interest of all Iraqis and within a few years things begin to stabilize. When would people like Yaghdan and Rita be able to return to Iraq?

**Kirk:** Yaghdan feels like he can never go back. He fears for his life. At the risk of a gross characterization, death seems

to be a central component of the Iraqi way of thinking. I don't know if there is another country that has been through as much war as this group of people. A lot of times there are people on my list that are losing hope and say, "I'm going to have to go back to my death in Iraq." I do what I can to keep them from going back, but as Yaghdan says, "It's my destiny, I have to go back and be killed."

To begin to reverse this thinking, there would have to be a sea change in the political tenor within Baghdad, but there would also have to be faith in the security forces and in the uniform. Last year, the Iraqi government sent out messages on television telling its people not to let Iraqi policemen into their homes unless they are accompanied by a member of the coalition forces. The Iraqis were terrified when they read that. There have been so many attacks carried out by and in the presence of Iraqi police or security forces that the respect for the uniform is blown.

**epic:** Given that many of Iraqis you are trying to help are professionals, are you concerned that providing asylum for them diminishes the prospects for rebuilding Iraq?

**Kirk:** There's not a person who has worked in Iraq who would tell you that 'brain drain' [the forced migration of Iraqi professionals from their homeland] hasn't already happened. We spent billions on reconstruction projects, restoring water and power plants to capacity for the first time in decades, and found out, to our own embarrassment, that there weren't any trained Iraqis to run them. I got into the reasons for this in our past talk, but the notion of a vibrant Iraqi civil society in June 2007 is borderline ridiculous. The folks who are the most educated suffer routine kidnapping of their children, extortion, or assassination. Iraq appears to be proceeding along the way of the gun, not of the brain, and we have been suffering from an anemic civil society for years now.

A lot of folks within the U.S. government have tried to employ the brain drain argument, but with the Iraqis on my list, I think it collapses at the first touch. I wonder how they'd be able to say that to 'A.', a former Iraqi colleague of mine I recently heard from.

A. had been identified by the militias, but for months tried to sneak to and from the Green Zone to help us. He was walking back one day when he saw a commotion -- militia-men were dragging his pregnant wife and small son down the street, set to abduct them. A crowd of neighbors managed to pry them free, but the militia made off with her cell-phone, which had in it the contact information for their

extended family. The event gave his wife labor complications and his son was catatonic for months. They fled to Syria, and are struggling to survive.

But what do those who are concerned about the brain drain argument say to A.? "Sorry, we can't help you because we need you to go back to Iraq to rebuild your country." These people already tried to help their country, and they were ground in the gears. The people I am trying to help have been shot at, kidnapped, tortured, raped, extorted, thrown out of moving cars, and hounded by militias and terrorists for the simple reason that they tried to help us rebuild Iraq.

People that dabble in vagaries like countering "brain-drain" are ignorant of the fact that it has already happened. They're clinging to an illusion while people are being murdered.

**epic:** What would you say to those who are resistant to bringing Iraqis to the U.S. because they are afraid they might turn around and attack our country in the end?

**Kirk:** It's unlikely. But let's walk through what would need to happen for such a scenario to take place.

Al-Qa'eda would have needed to be in Iraq in the very first days of the war, recruiting the Western-oriented Iraqis who loved America and were thrilled that we toppled Saddam. Then, they would have had to direct these 'terrorists' to come work for the United States in spite of phenomenal risks, passing daily through Green Zone checkpoints that are routinely attacked by car-bombs, IEDs, and snipers. And they would have to face the same risks on the way home.

These Iraqis would have to work for us for years, translating for us, eating with us and helping us rebuild their country. When things got rough, say their brother is murdered or children are abducted or their house is raked by AK-47 gunfire, they'd have to go to their American employers in the Green Zone and ask for help. But they'd get nothing more than a "good luck" and maybe a couple months of administrative leave.

To flee Iraq and resettle in the U.S., they would have to pay exorbitant bribes for safe passage through Anbar Province, and hope that they could get into Syria or Jordan. There, they'd languish in waiting for a protracted series of UNHCR interviews, required by the State Department, all the while facing an increasingly hostile anti-Iraqi populace in Damascus and Amman. Given that only one Iraqi was settled in April, and one in May, they'd have to stretch their meager savings as long as possible. Then, miraculously, they'd have to make it through the series of DHS background checks.

"If we are so crippled by our fear of terrorists that we blind ourselves to our moral obligations to save those who served us and now need help, then we have already lost the war on terror."

After all of this, if they are resettled in the United States and then attack us, Al-Qa'eda is more sophisticated than we'll ever know. All of the Americans who served in Iraq, who are struggling to help their fleeing Iraqi colleagues and allies, would become scapegoats. I'm willing to take that risk.

If we are so crippled by our fear of terrorists that we blind ourselves to our moral obligations to save those who served us and now need help, then we have already lost the war on terror.

**epic:** What word would you use to describe the Iraqi refugee issue and the U.S. response to it?

**Kirk:** Until the U.S. aggressively begins to help these people, I think the only word is "abandonment." I know there are desperate refugees all over the world, but this is the war we're in right now. If the theories are true -- that the Bush administration is scared to touch this issue for political reasons -- then we're witnessing severe moral cowardice. And unless the President is willing to invest in this, the bureaucratic gears won't turn quickly enough to save these lives. It's a horrific glimpse at the implications of bureaucracy without presidential leadership.

Our past is full of precedents where we acted quickly and justly and honorably. Ten years ago we let into our country about 10,000 ethnic Albanians. We didn't use UNHCR. We put them on military planes and flew them to a U.S. military base and processed them right there. Somebody needs to take the lead on this issue. Bush is the one who must tell the American public that we're going to bring in some Iraqis and to reassure the public that these are friends who deserve our swift help.

**epic:** From talking with you, we have a clear picture of what the Bush administration ought to be doing to protect our Iraqi allies. What can Congress and your average American do to help?

**Kirk:** On the House side, Congressman Blumenauer has led the charge with the legislation he proposed. Last week, he and Congressman Shays told me they are seeing more and more co-sponsors sign on. I hope that folks on both sides of the aisle sign on to this legislation, because if this isn't an issue that transcends partisan politics, I don't know what is. Senator Kennedy has been the long-standing hero for the plight of those Iraqis who worked for us, and just introduced legislation on the Senate side that I'm optimistic about.

But the problems aren't resolved just yet. The President just signed legislation that would expand the Special Immigrant Visa program for military interpreters, but, because of bureaucratic cholesterol, the legislation may turn out to be useless. The 500 new spots created by the legislation haven't even been filled yet because the gears turn too slowly, and because there is no roll-over, they may end up being wasted. So Congress needs to expeditiously pass this legislation and hold the mechanisms of the government accountable to implementing it before more lives are lost.

There are more and more avenues for Americans to get involved in helping our Iraqi allies. If they're interested, I'm launching a new initiative called "The List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies" ([www.thelistproject.org](http://www.thelistproject.org)), which will couple Iraqis on my list with attorneys from the law firms of Holland & Knight and Proskauer Rose and American 'sponsors' from Amnesty International.

At the outset, I hope to plug in the thousands of Americans that have written to help these refugees into a letter-writing campaign. If they want to help fund some of the project, that would be helpful, but I hate rattling the tin cup. Then, assuming that the government starts letting them in, I am counting on Americans to step up with employment opportunities and other assistance for these Iraqis. We have rolled up our sleeves in the past as responsible Americans when our government is lagging, and this is our chance now.

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## THE EPIC GROUND TRUTH INTERVIEWS

amplify the voices of Iraqis, aid workers, returning soldiers, and others who have lived, worked or served in Iraq. By offering perspectives about Iraq that can only be gained from being there, EPIC hopes these interviews will inspire meaningful policy change and citizen action in support of a better future for all Iraqis. Learn more or subscribe by contacting EPIC at [GroundTruth@epic-usa.org](mailto:GroundTruth@epic-usa.org). To support the project, visit [www.epic-usa.org/Donate](http://www.epic-usa.org/Donate).

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