

Chairman Patrick Leahy
Hearing On The Syrian Refugee Crisis,
Senate Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights
January 7, 2014

I would like to thank Senator Durbin for holding this important hearing. I recently chaired a related hearing in the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the Department of State and Foreign Operations along with ranking member Senator Graham. We heard sobering testimony from representatives of the State Department, including Assistant Secretary Richards who is with us again today, and the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. That testimony underscored the dire situation that Syrian refugees are facing and I am pleased that funding for relief aid for Syrian refugees is a priority in the State Department and Foreign Operations appropriations bill. I want to thank our witnesses for being here today to discuss what more the United States can be doing to help respond to this humanitarian catastrophe.

The number of displaced Syrians, particularly women and children, is staggering and will continue to grow. The world is very grateful to Syria's neighbors, who have opened their arms to hundreds of thousands of refugees. But we must also work here in the United States to fulfill our commitments to the Syrian people. I am proud that the U.S. has provided over \$1.3 billion in humanitarian aid since the beginning of the crisis, and has opened its doors to 90 Syrian refugees thus far, but we can—and must—do more.

One considerable hurdle to our refugee assistance efforts are the overbroad "Terrorism-Related Inadmissibility Grounds" - or TRIG bars - found in existing immigration law, as well as the Department of Homeland Security's current interpretation of "material support" to include even "*de minimus*" support. That interpretation has led to perverse outcomes including barring otherwise-eligible refugees because they have sold flowers or other commercial goods to customers who happen to be affiliated with a banned group. We are seeing this same problem play out again among Syrian refugees and it is time the administration took action to end it.

For years, I have been urging the Department of Homeland Security to refine its definition of "material support" to exclude to *de minimus* actions such as routine commercial and social transactions. I have written letters to the President and to former Secretary Napolitano. I have raised the issue with now Secretary Johnson. I understand that there is ongoing work to address this problem and I very much hope that we are on the brink of a resolution here. We are capable of both keeping dangerous individuals from coming to the United States, and honoring our proud tradition of offering protection to the world's most vulnerable populations.

Innocent refugees and asylum seekers from around the world have waited long enough and now the lives of thousands of Syrians people lay in the balance. The time to act is now.

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