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MEDIA BRIEFING CALL: Media Briefing on American "SAFE" Act

Participants

- **Matthew Olsen**, Former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center
- **Ryan Crocker**, U.S. ambassador to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kuwait
- **Brigadier General Murray Sagsveen**, US Army-Ret.

1:27 pm EDT

Hardy Vieux:

Hi, good afternoon everyone. I hope you can hear me okay. We thank you for joining this call put on by Human Rights First. My name is Hardy Vieux and I am the Legal Director here at Human Rights First. I'd like to welcome everyone to the call today and hopefully you are staying warm, especially if you are in DC or parts of the Midwest. The purpose of the call is to discuss serious concerns surrounding the so called "American SAFE Act." The Senate is scheduled to vote tomorrow on a motion to proceed on this bill, which has already been passed in the House. The American SAFE Act, if passed, would effectively halt the resettlement of vulnerable refugees from Iraq and Syria in the United States. The experts on today's call will address the challenges this poses to national security and generally to the global reputation of the United States. Today joining us we have Matthew G. Olsen, former Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Ryan Crocker, U.S. ambassador to Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kuwait, and Brigadier General Murray Sagsveen, US Army Retired. I'd like to turn the floor over to Director Olsen for his comments on the SAFE Act, Matt.

Matthew Olsen:

Great, thanks Hardy. My name is Matt Olsen I am the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center. I will just make a quick couple comments and then turn it back over to you Hardy. I wanted to really focus my comments on two issues. First, I wanted to comment on the quality and thoroughness of the refugee screening that currently takes place for potential refugees from Syria and Iraq. I was involved in this process with respect to Iraqi refugees when I was the director of the National Counterterrorism Center. Just a couple points on that, from my perspective it is the most thorough and rigorous of any process that we apply, any vetting process that we apply to any group of travelers who are seeking to enter the country. Before they can cross into the United States, prospective refugees are subject to multiple layers of background checks, interviews. The process itself usually takes around 18 months to two years to complete. The agency I was head of, the National Counterterrorism Center, is involved in this process, but so is the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, Department of State, and the Department of Defense. Each of us have a role in reviewing refugee applications and then of course we check that information against all of the intelligence databases and the law enforcement databases. We run fingerprint checks, biometric checks, in person interviews. Bottom line, the process is about as thorough as any process for any traveler seeking to enter the country. That said, no process is absolutely perfect and there is no way to guarantee that every person that enters the country poses no threat. That is not realistic, but I think the bottom line from my understanding of the process is now that if there is a doubt about the security of the person, that person is not going to be admitted. So that's what I wanted to say about the process itself.

The other larger point I wanted to make is that the effort to prohibit or restrict the efforts of refugees entering the

country is actually adverse to our national security interest. And I say that for a couple reasons. One, it really feeds into the ISIS message that we are at war with Muslims. It risks alienating Muslim American communities here, who are in the best position to identify and stop individuals who may be susceptible to ISIS propaganda and recruitment. So it really does feed into the ISIS propaganda and it is really a windfall for them. The other thing is that it actually distracts us from the more urgent ways of dealing with ISIS. In particular, working with European partners to share information better to stop the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and back into Europe and possibly the United States. Which is a more urgent concern when it comes to travelers. So with that I will turn it back over to you Hardy and be willing to answer any specific questions. Thanks.

Hardy Vieux:

Thank you for your comments Matt. I would like to turn the floor over to Ambassador Crocker. Ambassador Crocker you have obviously had extensive experience being an ambassador to many countries including Syria and Iraq. We would love to hear your perspective on the SAFE Act.

Ryan Crocker:

Thank you, Hardy. I spent a number of years out in the Middle East including as Ambassador in Damascus and Baghdad. I've got to know a lot Iraqis and Syrians pretty well. Several things strike me about them. Both the Iraqis and Syrians suffered under brutal regimes for many years before they were caught up in the recent conflicts in each country. I cannot think of populations that have suffered more and longer than the people in these two countries.

Second point is, perhaps not unusual for people that have experienced that kind of hardship, they place a high premium on education, taking care of their kids, preparing them to have better lives than their parents did. Their hard workers, incredibly industrious and they know they have to take care of themselves. Just based on my own time with the Iraqis and Syrians, these are people I would certainly like to live next door to.

There is a very important signal being sent here by what we do or don't do. I would pick up on Matt's second point. I was just in the region before Christmas. There is a perception already that the United States is turning against Arabs and Sunni Arabs in particular, for a variety of reasons. That we are siding with Iran and that we're in league with Russia. Shutting the door on vulnerable refugees feeds into this perception that's already out there. It would be hugely harmful to our larger interest in the region. And as Matt suggests it feeds right into the Islamic State narrative that the West, led by the United States, to Muslims and to Sunni Muslims in particular and that the Islamic State is their only refuge. That is not in our best interest at all.

Two other really quick points, I truly believe we are a nation of values and that's what I tried to represent during my time abroad. One of our most fundamental values is literally inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, "...Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses..." That's what we've always done. It's in our interest and it's consistent with our values that we do so now and not the opposite. The final point is that this is a global problem, not a regional problem. We're watching Europe stagger under the weight of the refugee flow. The United States has to lead here. We can't do everything in the world, but we are the world leader. We have not been leading on this, we need to be stepping forward. Not taking a step back as this act would do. Over to you Hardy.

Hardy Vieux:

Thank you Ambassador we appreciate your thoughts. Bringing in General Murray Sagsveen. General, we'll take the floor over to you now. I know that you're on the board of directors of an organization that resettles refugees. So we'd love to hear from you.

General Murray Sagsveen:

Thank you Hardy. Many Iraqis have served with or alongside the U.S. military, U.S. contractors, or U.S. based NGO's. These Iraqis and their families would greatly suffer if this bill is passed. The refugee crisis in Iraq Act that was passed with bipartisan support a few years ago in 2007 gave these refugees priority resettlement in the U.S. and has a moral obligation to protect them.

This new legislation would effectively slam the door on these Iraqis and their families. It would also send an unfortunate message to any foreign national who may be considering employment with the U.S. military, or U.S. based NGO, or U.S. based contractor working with the military.

I'm on the board of Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota, which resettles refugees in North Dakota. About 11 percent of those refugees are from Iraq. This board met yesterday and the staff reported that these refugees are employed, they are participating in the communities, they are beginning businesses, they are enlisting in the military, and they are model citizens. We also heard that employers are satisfied with the new American employees. he employers are frequently contacting Lutheran Social Services and they are saying that they want to hire the newly resettled refugees to join our workforce. They show up for work, they are happy with what they are doing, and they stay employed. One statistic was that 96 percent of them have stayed 90-day retention. They love their employers and their employers love working with them. Another statistic, is that that 76 percent of the naturalized citizens who arrived in the U.S. and now in North Dakota have doctoral degrees. So these are highly educated people and very much are a benefit to North Dakota. This is what I can report from our state. Hardy back to you.

Hardy Vieux:

Thank you General, appreciate that. What we've heard here is that we're really talking about vulnerable families in need of refuge and that very much speaks to who we are as a nation and our nations values that is the fundamental principle of giving refuge to those in need. The SAFE Act plays into some narratives that are detrimental to say the least. One of which is the Islamic State narrative. We have also heard that those who have resettled here have prospered from an economic perspective, enriched their communities, and have bettered their own lives. That's some of the themes we've heard here today. We want to open up the floor to those of you on the line and take some questions for our speakers.

Operator:

If you would like to ask a question you may do so by pressing "star 1" on your telephone key to be placed in the queue. Once again, press "star 1" on your telephone key pad to be placed in the queue. Our first question on the line is from Rachel Oswald. Your line is live.

Rachel Oswald:

Hi, thank you for organizing this call. Can you hear me?

Hardy Vieux:

Yes, go ahead.

Rachel Oswald:

Great. This Question is for Hardy or for anyone on the panel who has a sense of the situation. Do you know if Democrats are likely to filibuster the cloture motion tomorrow? Back in November Harry Reid suggested that the bill would not pass the Senate, which was taken to mean that he had confidence that the bill would be filibustered. But I haven't heard anything since he made those comments.

Jennifer Quigley:

This is Jennifer Quigley with Human Rights First. At this moment there has not been a decision made yet on whether to filibuster, so that's something that we expect to hear either this evening or tomorrow morning.

Rachel Oswald:

Jennifer, do you know what is being taken into account as Democrats discuss this?

Jennifer Quigley:

To our knowledge, some of the concerns right now are to what extent this bill will change the current system that's in place, and so that's something that's being taken into consideration.

Rachel Oswald:

Ok, thank you very much

Hardy Vieux:

I'll use this opportunity as folks are still thinking about what to pose to remind people that this bill – The American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act – would likely bring the process of refugee resettlement, at least for Iraqi and Syrian refugees, to a halt, and that process is already moving at a snail's pace. More specifically it would require refugees from Iraq or Syria who have already been vetted, it would require the Secretary of Homeland Security with the unanimous concurrence of the head of the FBI, and the DNI – the Director of National Intelligence – to certify to 12 different congressional committees that that individual refugee is not a threat to security. And as we heard before, committee chairman Michael McCaul, Republican from Texas, indicated that these three heads of the agencies have to make the certification themselves rather than outsource that to some subordinate. That's why when we look at this, we see a process to slow down and effectively target those who are most vulnerable and most in need – and much of what we are talking about is women and children fleeing persecution that we read about on a daily basis and hear about – and that's what the SAFE Act from our perspective is going to make happen.

Ryan Crocker:

Hardy this is Ryan Crocker, if I could I'd just like to make one additional point. I understand the fears that people have in this country in the wake of Paris and San Bernardino. No one should try and belittle those very real fears and concerns. It's just important to be targeting our concern in the right place. I just profoundly believe that refugees, themselves the victims of terrorism, are exactly the wrong place. They've been through all of the vetting that goes on, we know the contributions they make to their communities, but again the fears are real and there are real enemies out there. The refugees are not them. I would much rather see what Matt suggested earlier – that we do more to work with our European allies, for example, to track who is going from the West to fight for the Islamic State and why and crack down on that just as I would like to see us have a more effective overall policy against the Islamic State. So

there are things we need to do to counter a real enemy who has struck in the West, it's just that refugees are not that enemy.

Hardy Vieux:

Before we close there's one question that I think is the elephant in the room and that is that the United States has already committed to taking some 10,000 Syrian refugees and the question might be – well wouldn't taking more simply increase America's vulnerability? Any one of our panelists want to speak to that question?

Ryan Crocker:

For all the reasons that we've discussed, I do not see a significant threat coming from refugee admissions no matter what the number is. If anything, I think that taking a larger number would improve, not limit, our security. It would be seen as a positive step by the Muslim community currently in the U.S., it would counter the Islamic State narrative of U.S. prejudice against Muslims – Sunni Muslims in particular. So I think that as the numbers go up, security doesn't go down, it actually goes up too.

Hardy Vieux:

Everyone thank you so much for joining us and we appreciate you bearing with us as we work through the technical difficulties. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to us.

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