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FACT SHEET: Religious Persecution Relief Act of 2016

The Problem: The current refugee resettlement process unintentionally discriminates against Syrian religious minorities.

In 2015, only 2.3% of the 1,790 Syrian refugees resettled in the U.S. were religious minorities. This is despite religious minorities representing 13% of Syria's pre-war population.

So far in 2016, only 4 out of 465 Syrian refugees resettled in the U.S. are religious minorities. That represents a rate of less than 1%.

The U.S. resettlement program for Syria relies almost solely on referrals of refugees from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees ("UNHCR"). According to the U.S. State Department, of the roughly 20,000 Syrians referred to the U.S. for resettlement by UNHCR, less than 1% are non-Muslim religious minorities.

Syrian religious minorities are reluctant to register as refugees with UNHCR. They fear persecution in refugee camps or being marked for retaliation if Bashar al-Assad remains in power.

- According to a July 2013 report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: "*Christians and Alawites reportedly are not registering with their organization because they fear negative repercussions from Sunni refugees identifying them with the regime. They reportedly also fear that if Bashar Al-Assad remains in power and they return to Syria, the Syrian government will view them as disloyal for having sought safe haven in a neighboring country.*"
- According to a May 2013 UNHCR report on Syrian refugees in Lebanon: "*Minority communities and others fear that registration might bring retribution from other refugees or one of the many ethnic and religious groups within Lebanon.*"

Because they are not registering with UNHCR, Syrian religious minorities are not referred to the United States for resettlement in representative numbers. This is unintentional discrimination, and it results in persecuted Syrian religious minorities being shut out of the U.S. resettlement program.

Elements of the Religious Persecution Relief Act

The RPR Act would grant Syrian religious minorities underrepresented in U.S. resettlement admissions priority "P-2 status" in the resettlement review process.

- P-2 status holders do not need a UNHCR referral to apply for resettlement. They can apply directly at Refugee Support Centers funded by the U.S. government. RSCs are present in almost all nations hosting Syrian refugees: Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, and the UAE.
- P-2 status holders also do not have to prove "individualized" fear of persecution. They need only prove membership in the protected category.
- P-2 status holders still need to pass the same security screening that other resettlement applicants must pass.
- P-2 status has been granted in the past to other persecuted groups.
 - The 1989 Lautenberg Amendment extended P-2 status to certain Soviet and Indochinese nationals.
 - The 2004 Specter Amendment extended P-2 status to Iranian religious minorities.
 - A 2007 Kennedy-sponsored bill extended P-2 status to certain Iraqi religious minorities.

The RPR Act would create a dedicated 10,000-person quota for Syrian religious minorities that is in addition to the current worldwide refugee resettlement quota set by the State Department.

- This would allow religious minorities to "play catch-up" after they have been deprived of resettlement opportunities since 2011.
- This would guarantee a critical mass in the U.S. of religious minority groups. This will help preserve the cultural identity in the U.S. of populations that are the target of genocide in the Middle East.