

Testimony of
Lisa Ramaci-Vincent

January 16, 2007

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for the Hearing Held on
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before the Senate Judiciary Committee
Regarding
The Plight of Iraqi Refugees

Introduction

Chairman Specter, Ranking Member Leahy, members of the Committee, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the honor and privilege of being able to testify before you today on the Iraqi refugee crisis. I am not an expert on the complexities of this issue, have not studied it extensively, and do not presume to suggest to this august body a possible solution. I am, however, someone whose life has been radically and permanently altered by the Iraq conflict, and it is because of this that I have come before you today. My name is Lisa Ramaci-Vincent; I am the widow of Steven Vincent, the freelance journalist who was kidnapped and murdered in Basra, Iraq on August 2, 2005.

Nour al-Khal

Two days prior to his death, Steven had an op-ed piece published in the New York Times in which he broke the story of how the Iraqi police force was being systematically infiltrated by Iranian-backed fundamentalists and Shiite militiamen loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr rather than to the central government. He also wrote of the "death squads" that roamed Basra in police cars and trucks filled with uniformed men who snatched their victims off the streets and murdered them with utter impunity. When one of those vehicles came for him in broad daylight, his translator, fixer and friend Nour al-Khal bravely stood by him as five men in police uniforms descended on them and wrestled Steven into the truck to take him to his death. From what I was later told by the FBI, the thugs who targeted my husband had no interest whatsoever in Nour; they repeatedly pushed her away, telling her to leave. But she would not abandon Steven; she kept inserting herself into the struggle until they took her as well. She had no idea what her kidnapers planned to do, where they would be taken, what, ultimately, the end would be. For all she knew she was going to her death, yet she did not hesitate for a moment, this tiny, 5-foot-tall woman, to try and protect the man who had hired her to be his guide. Incredibly, she retained the presence of mind, before she was thrown into the truck, to drop her ill on the street so the authorities would know who she was.

She and Steven were bound, gagged and held for 5 hours, during which time he was savagely beaten - the medical examiner at Dover Air Force Base even found human bite marks on his leg.

They were then thrown back into the truck, driven to the outskirts of town, set free, told to run - and shot from behind. Steven was hit at close range and in a final act of God's mercy died instantly; Nour, who had been let go first, was farther from the truck, so even though she was shot in the back three times, she survived. The men fled without killing her when a contingent of "good" police showed up; they contacted the British, who handed her over to the FBI, who took her up to the Green Zone for medical treatment. There she was held incommunicado for three months while I tried to contact her via cellphone and email. During that time she was repeatedly interrogated; she is reticent about her treatment at the hands of our government, but from what little she was willing to tell me it sounds like a nightmare scenario. She was treated as if she were a co-conspirator of the killers, mentally and emotionally bullied, threatened, told she would never be given a visa to come to this country. And when those holding her decided she had no more information to offer and was medically fit enough, they gave her two thousand dollars and threw her out into Baghdad's Red Zone, alone, where she knew no one, had no family, no job, no resources, nowhere to turn. She was too afraid to go back to Basra, where she was born and grew up, knowing her would-be assassins were still roaming the streets; besides, her family wanted nothing further to do with her, fearing she would be a lightning rod for further trouble. Luckily she was able to contact me, and through various machinations I was able to get her out of Iraq and into relative safety in a location she has asked me not to divulge. However, since she has no work papers and is not a legal immigrant, for the most part she has to stay in her apartment, living off the money I send her and doing some occasional translating work for assorted NGOs.

I will never be able to fully express my gratitude to Nour, or repay the debt I owe her. Not only did she help Steven in the months they worked together by lining up interviews, arranging for him to meet a broad cross-section of Basra's secular and religious societies, translating when necessary, going into places and situations that terrified her but doing so anyway, working with him seven days a week to get the stories he wanted to uncover - but she literally took a bullet for him. Three, in fact. And it is more comfort than I can ever say to know that in the final, dreadful hours of his life, when Steven would have known beyond mere knowing that he was going to die violently, that he also knew he was not alone with his executioners, there was a friend there with him, someone who cared about him and who was voluntarily sharing his terror and pain. Cold comfort, yes, but the alternative does not bear thinking of.

And so, in some small attempt to repay her for her dedication, bravery and selflessness, I have 'spent the last year trying to get Nour into America. I have dealt with officials at the Baghdad embassy and the State Department. I have filled out forms. I have made countless calls, sent innumerable emails. I have pledged to stand financial security for her. I have gotten a promise from the UN Bureau Chief of Al-Arabiya that he will hire her when - if - she gets here. And each path I have gone down has proven fruitless. I have been told she does not qualify for refugee or asylum status because Iraq is now a democracy, hence there should be no reason she would need to flee. I spent months working with embassy people who assured me they were extremely touched by her plight, would move heaven and earth to see she got "special treatment" and who then, in the end, told me she needed to go to Amman and apply for a visa like every other Iraqi. I was told the U.S. government was no longer accepting Iraq's Spassports because supposedly there are so many forgeries it's impossible to know who is really holding them, so we won't take any of them. The embassy in Amman is no longer accepting applications from Iraqis; the Jordanian government is beginning to crack down, stopping Iraqis on the streets who then run the

risk of being deported; Egypt is now demanding that before Iraqis come they get a letter of invitation from a certain government official. The noose is tightening, and soon there will be no place in the region where Nour will be able to feel safe. She sits and waits, still hopeful, but the reality is her hope is dwindling, as is mine.

Yet the brutal truth is, she is only one of countless Iraqis who have allied themselves with either our military, NGOs or media whose lives are now imperiled because they did so, and who are in desperate need of asylum and aid. Whether for money, a belief in democracy or an opportunity to come here should not matter - they stood with us, helped us, trusted us, and sometimes died for us. But our government seems to have decided they cannot come here because of the message it might send to the world - that we went into Iraq and toppled a brutal dictator but subsequently lost control of events, unleashing forces which created a groundswell of refugees fleeing from the "democracy" we put into place, thus calling into question the wisdom, viability and sustainability of our efforts. And so we have pursued a shameful policy of ignoring the situation, allowing other countries to absorb the vast hordes abandoning their war-torn land while we let in a few every year in numbers so small they're not even a blip on the radar. Emma Lazarus would be so ashamed. We all should be.

But it is heartening to sit here today in front of this committee and know attention is finally being paid, and that the logjam might be breaking up. Esteemed members, I end my testimony with sincere thanks to you for allowing me to participate, and with a request that you please do your utmost to change this most misguided of policies. Please help those who helped us, who still see this great, compassionate country as the shining city on the hill, who yearn to come here and raise their families in an atmosphere of freedom, peace and safety. And finally, please let me help the woman who helped my husband, and who so greatly helped me by being with him in his final moments.

Mortality Rates

Honestly compels me to admit that I cannot speak to the issue of how many Iraqis who worked for the military or NGOs have been killed, but statistics provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists paint an incredibly grim picture of the situation among both Western and local media. Since March 2003 there have been 93 journalists killed in Iraq to date; that does not include those who died because of medical conditions or accidents. Of that number 11 were Europeans, 2 were Americans, 3 were from Arab lands other than Iraq, 5 were from unspecified countries and 72 were from Iraq. 85 men and 8 women have lost their lives while attempting to report the news for the benefit of the world, 57 through murder, 36 through crossfire or other acts of war. Six were embeds, 87 what is known as "unilaterals", that is, freelancers, those affiliated with Western organizations other than the military, or indigenous media. 39 worked for international news organizations, 54 for Iraqi news groups.

With each passing year save one, the number of journalists killed has increased; in 2003, the first year of the conflict, there were 14; in 2004 - 24; in 2005 - 22; in 2006 - 32. Already, in the first two weeks of 2007, one journalist has been murdered merely for doing his job. Reporters have suffered the highest mortality rate, losing 55 of their own; photojournalists, including still photographers and camera operators, came in a distant second with 25 fatalities, and violence

claimed 13 producers and technicians. These deaths were scattered throughout 10 of Iraq's 18 provinces, with the majority in Baghdad, Mosul, Anbar and Arbil.

And it is not just journalists who die, but also their support staff - drivers, interpreters, fixers, technical support - a total of 37 in all, of whom 34 were murdered, with the remaining 3 killed by crossfire or other acts of war. All but one were Iraqi; 16 worked for international news organizations, 21 for Iraqi news groups. Their deaths are almost never mentioned, but many of them are sustained as they assist those working to bring us the news with our morning coffee. In an attempt to bring many of these unsung heroes into the spotlight where they deserve to be, no matter how briefly, after my husband's death I created the Steven Vincent Foundation to assist the families of indigenous journalists and media helpers in regions of conflict throughout the world who are killed while doing their jobs, and also to support the work of female journalists in those regions.

The Steven Vincent Foundation

Reporting from strife- and war-torn areas would be impossible without local contacts, colleagues and assistance. Since the Iraq war began in April 2003, almost 100 journalists and photographers have been killed while reporting in country, as well as a number of local translators and 'fixers'. Some were Westerners affiliated with Western media companies whose families would have received some kind of compensation, but those working for local news organizations died without health or life insurance, or benefits of any kind. They relied on the paychecks they received to support their families; when they were killed those paychecks stopped, leaving the family bereft of not only a son, brother, husband and/or father, but what was for many doubtless the main, if not the sole, means of support.

The Foundation will ensure that the families of local media workers, fixers and/or translators receive financial aid to help them through the immediate shocking aftermath of losing a family member and provider. In addition to furnishing somewhat of a safety net, it will also send an important message to the recipient(s), namely, that the sacrifice both they and their loved one made has not gone unnoticed, that there are people in the wider world who acknowledge, mourn and honor their loss, and who appreciate the danger these brave men and women put themselves in while attempting to report the truth. Financial aid will not be limited to one particular country, region or conflict, but will be provided on a worldwide basis as needed and as is feasible. With that purpose in mind, the first grant made by the infant Foundation was a donation of one thousand dollars to the widow of Fakher Haider, a New York Times stringer killed in Basra, Iraq, in September 2005.

More recently, the Foundation honored a request for the family of Yasser Salihee, an Iraqi doctor-turned-translator. In June 2005 Salihee, an Iraqi special correspondent for the Knight-Ridder US newspaper group, was shot to death in Baghdad, apparently by a US military sniper, although there were Iraqi troops in the area at the same time who may also have been shooting. Salihee, 30, was driving alone near his home in the western Baghdad neighborhood of Amariyah when a single bullet pierced his windshield and hit him in the head. The US Army continues to investigate the incident. Salihee left a wife and young daughter, to whom the Foundation sent a donation of one thousand dollars.

2006 has been an equally bloody year for the journalist trade, notable for the kidnapping of American freelancer Jill Carroll, during which her translator and friend Allan Enwiyah was brutally executed. Enwiyah, 32, who was still in the car when it was driven away by the abductors, was later found dead not far from where he had been snatched; he had been shot twice in the head, according to local sources. He left behind a wife and two small children, as well as an extended family he was also supporting. After being contacted by the blog Iraqi in America, the Foundation contributed one thousand dollars to a fund for Enwiyah's widow.

Thanks to information received from Talal al-Haj, Al-Arabiya New York/UN Bureau Chief, donations of one thousand dollars each were forwarded to the mother and sister of Atwar Bahjat, the journalist/reporter killed in the days following the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite Golden Mosque at Samarra, and the families of her slain camera- and soundmen Khaled Mahmoud al-Falahi and Adnan Khairallah. Their bodies were found a day after the station lost contact with them; they were on the outskirts of the city covering the bombing of the shrine Askariya, also known as the when armed men driving a white car had attacked the crew after demanding to know the whereabouts of the well-known on-air correspondent.

The Foundation also plans to support women in volatile regions who defy local or religious tradition and risk their lives to report on what they see happening in their countries, who work to change official policies and try to better the lives of their fellow countrywomen, and who then find themselves in jeopardy for doing so. The women below, both International Women's Media Foundation (www.iwmf.org) 2005 Courage in Journalism award winners, were the first of many that the Foundation will be assisting, with each receiving one thousand dollars:

Sumi Khan, 34, a reporter with Shaptahik 2000 (Weekly 2000) in Dhaka. Khan reports on politics, crime and corruption in one of the most dangerous countries for journalists in the world. Since 2000, nine journalists have been killed in Bangladesh and reporters are routinely harassed and beaten while trying to do their work. In 2004, Khan began receiving threatening phone calls after she published an article about local politicians and religious organizations and their ties to attacks on minority groups. The phone calls were followed by an attack against her during which she was stabbed and beaten by three unknown assailants. Khan was injured so severely that she was unable to work for three months. Most recently, she received a death threat from the student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami fundamentalist party after her reporting tied the group to gang activity.

Shahla Sherkat, 49, editorial director of Zanan (Women) in Tehran. Sherkat founded the monthly magazine in 1991, after she was dismissed from her position as editorial director at Zan-e Rouz, a government-owned weekly women's magazine because she wanted to change the way it depicted women. The Iranian government has threatened to close Zanan many times because of the daring way the magazine covers women's rights and feminism. Zanan faces continuing financial difficulties because it is privately owned and funded. It has also been attacked by fundamentalist gangs and Sherkat has been repeatedly summoned to court to defend the articles she chooses to publish in Zanan. In January 2001, she was fined and sentenced to prison for four months after attending a conference in Berlin where discussions on the future of political change in Iran took place. She was not

required to serve the prison sentence, but was forced to pay a fine equivalent to two months' salary.

Women's rights were extremely important to Vincent; he wrote in his book *In the Red Zone* that without such rights, there could be no true democracy in Iraq, let alone anywhere in the world. The Foundation will channel financial aid to women at risk, thereby allowing them, for instance, the ability to hire a security guard, or, as in Shahla Sherkat's case, the funds to continue publishing. As time goes by and the Foundation grows, both its outreach and programs will expand; for now its initial goals of assisting bereaved families and women journalists are valid and much-needed uses of funding. Many dedicated, courageous and unsung media workers will forever remain unknown to us unless their lives are ended in the pursuit of truth, in which case they may get mentioned in an article or two before being swept away in the constantly changing tide of world events; we must do a better job of acknowledging the debt we owe to them, especially if they are lost because of their efforts.

By 2008 the Foundation also plans to institute the yearly Steven Vincent Award for Excellence in War Correspondence, which will award \$5,000 to the journalist who produces the most compelling and important piece or series on a military conflict within a 12-month period, and \$1,000 each to two runners-up.

About Steven Vincent

Steven Vincent (December 31, 1955 - August 2, 2005) Was a respected New Yorkbased writer and critic specializing in stories of art and archaeological theft, fraud and forgery, but a decade of covering the art world left him yearning for new and more meaningful challenges.

On September 11, 2001, from the roof of his East Village co-op, Vincent saw United Flight 175 strike Tower Two, watched the collapse of the World Trade Center, and knew the world had forever changed. Determined to be in the forefront of cataloguing America's new path, he gave up writing about art and methodically set about turning himself into a war correspondent, covering the initial Iraq war and its continuing aftermath. In September 2003 and again in January 2004, he went to Iraq as a freelancer, paying his own way, sans body armor, cell phone or hired security, unwilling to be beholden to any organization, and wanting the ability to freely report on the things he saw, heard and felt. These trips resulted in the well-received book *In the Red Zone: A Journey Into the Soul of Iraq*, published in November 2004.

In April 2005, Vincent set out on what would be his final trip to Iraq. This time he was planning to spend 3 months in the southern city of Basra, which, since it was under British control was universally considered to be much safer than Baghdad. Once he got there, however, Vincent discovered that, contrary to the generally-accepted view, and with the disengaged complicity of the British, the city was, in fact, becoming a radical Shiite state falling under the influence of Iran, in which women were forced to wear full chador, Christians were persecuted, alcohol sellers were killed on the streets and operators of music and/or video stores had their establishments firebombed. He set about methodically detailing these facts in pieces published in *National Review Online*, *Reason* magazine, *Mother Jones*, and the *Christian Science Monitor*.

On July 31, 2005, The New York Times printed what would be Vincent's last piece, "Switched Off in Basra", in which he accused the British of turning a blind eye as the Basra police force was systematically infiltrated by Iranian-backed insurgents, Shiite extremists loyal to the Ministry of the Interior and followers of the radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, documenting how rogue elements within the groups had set up "assassination squads" within the force. These squads, operating unchecked to this day, drive white Toyota Mark II "death cars", and are still free to kidnap and kill their victims with absolute impunity.

On August 2, 3 months to the day he had arrived in the city, Vincent and his female translator were abducted off the streets of Basra in broad daylight by men in police uniforms driving a white police vehicle; then they were bound, gagged, beaten, driven to the outskirts of town, and shot in the back at close range. The translator, Nour al-Khal, survived; Vincent died.

Six weeks later his friend and fellow journalist, Fakher Haider, a Basra stringer for the New York Times, wrote an article that built upon Steven's final op-ed piece. Several days after its publication, men in police uniforms and driving police vehicles went to his house; with his wife and three children watching they bound him, took him away, drove him to the outskirts of town, and shot him repeatedly in the head. Haider's murder was the galvanizing event that brought the Steven Vincent Foundation into being.