



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on June 26, 2017

Federal Judge Blocks Deportation of Iraqi Christians

A federal judge in Michigan has temporarily blocked the deportation of more than 100 Iraqi Christians living in Detroit, who fear for their lives if they are forced to return to their native land. The 114 Iraqi nationals were arrested June 11 by U.S. immigration officers, and were facing deportation before a lawsuit was filed on their behalf by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan.



U.S. District Judge Mark Goldsmith made the ruling June 22, saying that the Iraqis could stay in the United States for two weeks while the courts sort out who has jurisdiction in the case.

The Justice Department had argued that the detainees, many who have been in the United States for decades, must plead their case for remaining in the United States before an immigration court rather than a U.S. district court. But ACLU attorneys warned that the Iraqis might be deported before an immigration judge could consider their cases.

In his ruling Goldsmith agreed, saying that the possible harm facing the Iraqi detainees “far outweighs any conceivable interest the government might have in the immediate enforcement of the removal orders before this court can clarify whether it has jurisdiction to grant relief to petitioners on the merits of their claims.”

Clarence Dass, one of the attorneys representing the Iraqis, said he was “ecstatic” with the temporary stay. “When your life is on the line, each day is a victory — and in this case, 14 days,” he said. “We now have the breathing room to ensure that every individual detained has the proper motions filed and, ultimately, a chance to be heard. The work continues.”

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The Associated Press reported that the majority of the Iraqi detainees are Chaldean Christians, while a few are Shiite Muslims who have converted to Christianity. They were among more than 200 Iraqis arrested in recent weeks, with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) claiming that all have criminal convictions in the United States.

But ACLU attorneys argued that forcing the Iraqi Christians they represent to return to their native land would place them in danger. “We are thankful and relieved that our clients will not be immediately be sent to Iraq, where they face grave danger of persecution, torture, or death,” said Michael J. Steinberg, legal director for the ACLU of Michigan. “It would be unconstitutional and unconscionable to deport these individuals without giving them an opportunity to demonstrate the harm that awaits them in Iraq.”

Iraq had earlier agreed to accept Iraqi nationals being deported from the United States. In addition to the Iraqi Christians arrested in the Detroit area, at least 85 other Iraqis have been detained by the ICE across the United States. As of April 17, a total of 1,444 Iraqi nationals were facing deportation, and eight have already have been returned to Iraq.

“The court took a life-saving action by blocking our clients from being immediately sent back to Iraq,”



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said Lee Gelernt of the ACLU's Immigrants' Rights Project. "They should have a chance to show that their lives are in jeopardy if forced to return."

According to the AP, among those facing deportation is Louis Akrawi, "who served more than 20 years in Michigan prisons for second-degree murder. He was accused of arranging a shooting that killed an innocent bystander in 1993." His son, Victor Akrawi, explained that his father is 69 years old, "he has two artificial knees, and he needs surgery on both eyes. Sending him back to Iraq is unfair."

Another is 47-year-old Moayad Barash, whose 18-year-old daughter Cynthia explained that her father's only conviction was for marijuana possession in the 1980s. "My dad is Christian and Donald Trump is sending him back to a place that is not safe whatsoever," she said. "He did something wrong 30 years ago. He didn't do anything today, yesterday, or a year ago."

Christian watch-dog groups have noted that Iraq, home to about 1.5 million Christians in 2003, now has fewer than 300,000, all of whom face severe persecution and even death at the hands of Islamic radicals, many aligned with ISIS.

On June 19, a group of influential evangelical leaders sent an [open letter](#) to the Trump administration on behalf of the detained Iraqi Christians. "We write urgently and with grave concern that Christians will be removed from the United States to face potential persecution, and even death, in the Middle East," reads the letter, addressed to Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly. The Christian leaders called on the Trump administration to "exercise the discretion available under law to defer the deportation of Chaldeans who pose no threat to U.S. public safety to Iraq until such time as the situation in Iraq stabilizes and its government proves willing and capable of protecting the rights of religious minorities."

Added the letter: "We would urge you to take the same approach to any individual, regardless of whether they share our Christian faith or not, who does not pose a threat to the safety of Americans and for whom deportation would be likely to result in persecution, torture, or death."

The letter is signed by seven evangelical leaders: Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Scott Arbeiter, president of World Relief; Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities; Hyepin Im, president of Korean Churches for Community Development; Jo Anne Lyon, ambassador and general superintendent emerita of the Wesleyan Church; Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; and Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference.

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