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May 27, 2011

The Honorable Lamar Smith
Chairman, House Judiciary Committee
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman,

As you know, for more than two decades the “Lautenberg Amendment” has provided a lifeline for Jewish and other religious minorities escaping persecution to seek refuge in the United States.

We write to you as NGO’s with a deep interest in the plight of Iranian Jews and other religious minorities who will be set adrift if this provision is not extended on June 1, 2011.

In recent days, the Islamic regime has intensified its crackdown on the educational institutions of Iran’s Baha’i community, arresting thirty educators and ransacking buildings belonging to the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), cynically accusing them of belonging to a foreign espionage ring.

On May 12, 2011, the Department of State revealed that a Jewish woman and her Armenian Christian husband were executed earlier this year by the Iranian regime, apparently for their beliefs. Faced with a brutal regime that does not hesitate to murder its own citizens in the streets, and that has made Holocaust denial an official policy of state, the Lautenberg amendment provides a beacon of hope for Jews and other minorities seeking to escape from tyranny.

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The lapse of this provision between September 30, 2010 until it was temporarily reinstated on April 15, 2011, put nearly 800 members of Iranian religious minorities seeking processing in Vienna at great risk, and to support the inclusion of the amendment in annual appropriations legislation as has been done every year since 1989.

A failure to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment in an expeditious manner would send a terrible message to the tyrants of Tehran that America's commitment to religious freedom can be bargained away. With no U.S. Embassy in Tehran, a lapse in this provision would force persecuted Iranian religious minorities to flee to dangerous neighboring countries such as Pakistan, where – prior to the expansion of the Lautenberg Amendment to include Iran – a dozen Iranian Jews disappeared en route.

Mr. Chairman, none can doubt the willingness of the Iranian regime to use its own citizens as hostages and bargaining chips. By reauthorizing the Lautenberg amendment, the U.S. Congress can say proudly it stands on the side of freedom.

Sincerely,

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