Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 13, 2013

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

As Members of the United States Congress who are committed to ensuring justice for victims of ethnic and religious persecution, we are writing to express our concern regarding the return of a collection of restored Jewish communal and religious items by the United States Government to the Government of Iraq.

The Jewish community in Iraq has roots that date back thousands of years. Once the epicenter of Jewish cultural, religious and scholastic life, Baghdad is now estimated to have a Jewish population in the single digits. As the rise of the Nazis began in Germany, a rampant hatred for Jews became more prevalent in Iraq. The Iraqi Jewish community faced increasing harassment, persecution, and pogroms that left hundreds dead, eventually forcing the majority to flee the anti-Semitic policies of the Iraqi government.

When the Jewish people were forced to uproot their centuries-old community, they left behind their sacred treasures in the last remaining Jewish temple in Baghdad for safe keeping. Then in the 1980's, Saddam Hussein ordered his men to confiscate almost all of their possessions. Many communal, religious, and even personal items ended up warehoused in the basement of the Mukhabarat secret police headquarters, with no regard paid to their condition. Ancient texts, letters, books, and even personal photos were left to slowly disintegrate. It was not until U.S. and coalition forces entered Baghdad in 2003 that this cultural treasure trove was rediscovered. This set in motion a rescue operation that would eventually lead to these items finally being cared for in a professional and respectful manner here in the United States.

The State Department, along with the National Archives, has worked diligently to preserve these artifacts and to allow the public to get a glimpse of the rich life that was once the Iraqi Jewish community. However, we understand that the United States Government entered into an agreement with the Government of Iraq to send these looted items back to Iraq rather than to the Iraqi Jews, to whom they rightfully belong.

The Government of Iraq has no legitimate claim to these artifacts. We firmly believe that these items should be returned to the descendants of the Iraqi Jewish community, who still mourn the loss of these priceless reminders of their former lives in Iraq. Therefore we urge the Department of State to facilitate the return of these items to their rightful owners or their descendants, and not

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to the Government of Iraq. We are committed to ensuring justice for the Iraqi Jewish community and their descendants and to seeing that these important artifacts that were confiscated from them are rightfully returned to their community. We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

STEVE ISRAEL
Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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Member of Congress

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TRENT FRANKS
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PETE SESSIONS
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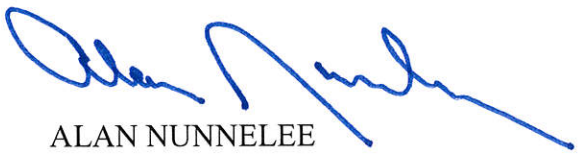

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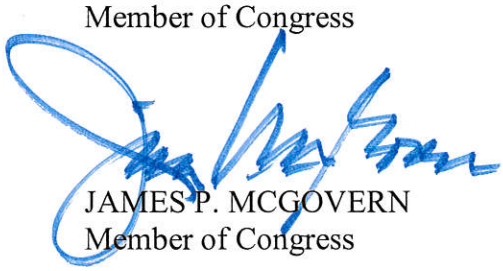

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