July 16, 2017

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

As former diplomats and national security officials who have served in Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, and community leaders who have been involved in efforts around the world to address issues relating to conflict and displacement, we write with respect to your deliberations around the reorganization of the Department of State.

We write at a time in which world displacement is at the highest level ever recorded, which underscores the critical importance of U.S. capacity to address this crucial global issue. In this respect, the Administration is very fortunate to have been extremely well-served by the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM). The PRM Bureau plays, in effective partnership with USAID, a key role in promoting U.S. humanitarian and foreign policy interests, and has been an extraordinarily valuable tool for the Department of State and the Secretary of State – now and over the past decades. For this reason, any reorganization plan should seek to validate and reaffirm the role of PRM.

Refugee issues are rooted in international politics and diplomacy, which are the key concerns of the Department of State and U.S. foreign policy. This is unambiguously reflected in the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, which provides the authority for assistance programs that are now overseen by PRM and have enjoyed strong bipartisan support over many years.

Whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kenya, Turkey or South Sudan, the Department of State’s efforts to address humanitarian crises must include the tightest coordination of diplomatic engagement and emergency assistance. Displacement needs become key issues of concern for U.S. counterparts during bilateral discussions on issues relating to politics and security, and it is critical that the Secretary of State have at his or her disposal both the expertise and resources from within the Department that PRM provides.

We also note that most of the State Department’s provision of humanitarian assistance is through investments in a number of international humanitarian organizations. The State Department’s strong role in the governing bodies of those organizations, such as UNHCR and ICRC – along with USAID programs -- provide the United States with enormous influence over how humanitarian organizations operate in areas of concern to the U.S. government.

We are convinced that the elimination of PRM’s assistance functions would have profound and negative implications for the Secretary of State’s capacity to influence policy issues of key concern to the United States. It would also be ironic, as this is one of the bureaus at State that has enjoyed strong bipartisan support over many years.
We also believe it is critical that PRM retain its current responsibilities for the U.S. refugee resettlement program. The 1980 Refugee Act, passed overwhelmingly by the Congress, made clear that the measure was both an expression of U.S. global interests and a vital tool of U.S. foreign policy. Even modest U.S. refugee resettlement levels can influence host governments to provide safe haven, educational opportunities, and other forms of social integration to significantly larger populations of displaced people, thereby preventing forced returns of refugees and discouraging onward migration – both of which can have destabilizing impacts on fragile regions. The U.S. program has also helped to encourage other countries to provide resettlement opportunities for refugees, and thereby lighten the load for host governments.

While a change or elimination of the State Department’s role would be in stark conflict with the goals of the 1980 Refugee Act, we do recognize that the Department of Homeland Security has important equities in this program. But DHS already plays a significant role, by ensuring robust security vetting and by determining the eligibility and admissibility of all refugees. In short, nobody enters without DHS approval. But DHS has neither the international staffing infrastructure nor the expertise to identify refugee groups in need of protection or resettlement, nor to understand the diplomatic consequences or opportunities to leverage resettlement for U.S. foreign policy interests.

In conclusion, we encourage you in the strongest of terms to sustain the roles and vitally important mission of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

Sincerely,

Former government officials:

Frederick D. Barton
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations
Former UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees
Former Director, Office of Transition Initiatives, US Agency for International Development (USAID)

Robert M. Beecroft
Former Head of Mission, OSCE Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Rand Beers
Former Deputy Assistant to the President for Homeland Security

Mark Bellamy
Former U.S. Ambassador to Kenya
Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs

Robert Blake
Former Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs
Former U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia and to Sri Lanka and the Maldives
Barbara Bodine  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen  

Mark Brzezinski  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Sweden  
Former National Security Council Director for Russian/Eurasian Affairs and Southeast European Affairs  

Reuben Brigety  
Former U.S. Ambassador to the African Union  

Nicholas Burns  
Former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs  
Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and to Greece  
Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior NSC Director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia  

William J. Burns  
Former Deputy Secretary of State  
Former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia and to Jordan  

Lorne Craner  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor  
Former Member, National Security Council Staff  

Sheba Crocker  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs  

James Cunningham  
Former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, to Afghanistan and to Israel  

Mary Curtin  
Former Political Counselor, US Mission to the European Union  

Jeffrey Davidow  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Venezuela and Zambia  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs  

Arthur “Gene” Dewey  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration  

James I. Gadsden  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Iceland  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs  

Jean Geran  
Former National Security Council Director for Democracy and Human Rights
Jeremy Konyndyk  
Former Director, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)  
U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

Gordon Gray  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Tunisia  
Former Director, State Department Office of Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Operations

Victoria K. Holt  
Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs

Elise Jordan  
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Mark P. Lagon  
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Former Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs

Princeton Lyman  
Former U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria and South Africa  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs  
Former Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan

Phyllis Oakley  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration  
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research

Lynn Pascoe  
Former US Ambassador to Malaysia and Indonesia  
Former UN Undersecretary General for Political Affairs

James Purcell  
Former Director, Bureau of Refugee Program  
Former Director General, International Organization for Migration (IOM)
Nancy Ely-Raphel
Former U.S. Ambassador to Slovenia
Former Coordinator for the Balkans, U.S. Department of State

Anne C. Richard
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration
Former Director, Secretary of State’s Office of Resources, Plans and Policy

Dennis Ross
Former Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for the Central Region
Former special Middle East coordinator
Former Director, Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State

Ellen Sauerbrey
Former Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration

Teresita Schaffer
Former U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka

Kori Schake
Former Deputy Director for Policy Planning, Department of State
Former National Security Council Director for Defense Strategy and Requirements

Wendy Sherman
Former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

William H. Taft
Former Legal Advisor, Department of State
Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO
Former General Counsel, U.S. Department of Defense

Sam Witten
Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration
Former State Department Deputy Legal Advisor

Representatives of Non-governmental Organizations:

T. Alexander Aleinikoff
Director, Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility, The New School
Former UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees
Former General Counsel, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), Department of Justice

Scott Arbeiter
President
World Relief
Dr. Georgette F. Bennett  
Founder, Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees

Linda Hartke  
President and CEO  
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Mark Hetfield  
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HIAS

Erol Kekic  
Executive Director, Immigration and Refugee Program  
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Save the Children

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Former Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration  
Former Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for Multilateral and Humanitarian Affairs  

The Rev. Canon E. Mark Stevenson  
Director  
Episcopal Migration Ministries  

Tsehaye Teferra  
President and CEO  
Ethiopian Community Development Council  

Wendy Young  
President  
Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)  

Copies to:  

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Senator Lindsey Graham, Chair  
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Representative Nita Lowey, Ranking Member  
House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs