I rise in strong support of this resolution, and I yield

myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, H. Res. 944 expresses the sense of the House of

Representatives on the status of religious minorities in Iraq.

When the Iraq war began in 2003, little thought was given to the

impact on Iraq's religious minorities. Only 3 percent of the population

in Iraq is non-Muslim. These populations include Christians, Yazidis,

Sabian-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Shabaks, Kaka'is, and a very small number of

Jews.

Although the new Iraqi Constitution recognizes Islam as the official

religion of Iraq, it also states that no law may be enacted that

contradicts principles of democracy or the rights and basic

freedoms stipulated in the constitution. The constitution also

guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief and

practice for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Although the Iraqi Government generally respects these rights,

ongoing violence restricts the free exercise of religion, and this

violence poses a significant threat to the country's vulnerable

religious minorities. These minorities continue to suffer at the hands

of terrorists, extremists, criminal gangs, and even at the hands of

unsavory elements within the Iraqi Government. Sectarian violence,

including attacks on religious leaders and religious places of worship,

continues to hamper their ability to practice religion freely.

Many experts consider the situation for Iraqi Christians as

especially dire. According to Chaldean Catholic Auxiliary Bishop

Andreos Abouna of Baghdad, the number of Christians in Iraq may have

been cut in half since 2003. As documented by the State Department,

Christians have been threatened with violence if they do not leave

their homes. They have been accosted on the streets and have even been

assassinated. Their churches have been bombed and destroyed.

Reports indicate that other religious minorities face similarly

treacherous situations. The Yazidis, who are considered heretical by

many Muslims because of their beliefs, have suffered under a tremendous

onslaught of violence. Another targeted group, the Sabian-Mandaeans,

numbered about 60,000 in 2003. Today, only about 5,000 Sabian-Mandaeans

remain in Iraq, meaning that more than 90 percent have left the country

or have been killed.

That is why we are considering House Resolution 944 today, and that

is why I am proud to say that I am an original cosponsor of that

resolution.

This resolution urges the Government of Iraq to enhance security in

places of worship in Iraq, particularly where religious minorities are

known to be at risk. The resolution calls for the urgent training of an

appropriate number of security forces to protect religious minorities.

It also urges the Iraqi Government to take affirmative measures to

reverse the legal, political and economic marginalization of religious

minorities in Iraq. In addition, it asks the United States to consider

implementing programs for religious minorities as part of its overall

economic assistance to Iraq.

Madam Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to support this resolution

in an effort to make certain that all religions survive and have a

chance to prosper in the new Iraq.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.