Madam Speaker, I thank the gentleman from New York for

yielding the time.

While the majority of Iraqis are Muslim, there are many communities

of religious and ethnic minorities whose history in Iraq goes back

thousands of years. This includes Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians, and

other Christians, as well as Sabian Mandeans and Yazidis.

Since 2003, approximately 2 1/2 million refugees and asylum seekers

have fled Iraq, and millions more have become displaced, forced to flee

their homes and neighborhoods because of sectarian violence. In fact,

there were approximately 1 1/2 million Christians in Iraq in 2003, and

today there is less than half of that amount.

Many of these Iraqis would like nothing more than to return home.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in

2008, approximately 221,000 Iraqis returned to their home village or

neighborhood in Iraq and the vast majority settled into areas where

members of their own religious community controlled the neighborhood or

local government.

Unfortunately, Iraqi religious minorities do not have militia or

tribal structures to defend themselves, and they do not receive

adequate protection from the police or security forces. Not only does

this make the possibility of return nearly impossible for Iraqi

religious minorities, it also leaves them particularly vulnerable to

violence.

Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities are often

specifically targeted in gruesome and random acts of violence such as

murder, rape, and abductions. This includes the Chaldean community, who

this week is mourning the kidnapping and murder of Archbishop Paulos

Faraj Rahho on February 29, 2008.

Archbishop Rahho spent almost his entire life living in Mosul and

serving its Christian communities which are among the oldest and

largest in Iraq. For years, the archbishop was threatened with violence

because he spoke out against discrimination against Christians by

Muslim extremists. Sadly, the archbishop was murdered because he

refused to lend the support of his church to terrorists in their fight

against U.S. forces in Iraq.

These stories continue to be tragically common, and more must be done

by the United States Government and by the Government of Iraq to

protect religious minorities.

This resolution calls upon the United States and the Iraqi Government

to protect religious minorities by encouraging free and fair elections,

training Iraqi security forces, and providing safe places to worship.

It also seeks an investigation into human rights violations and calls

for an end to the abuse of Iraqi religious minorities. Finally, the

resolution calls for the United States to work with the Iraqi

Government to ensure the physical and economic safety of those wishing

to return to Iraq.

I would like to thank my colleagues, Mr. Wolf and Ms. Eshoo, who, as

co-Chairs of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, have

shown great leadership on this issue and for their support of this

resolution. I would also like to thank Chairman Berman and Ranking

Member Ros-Lehtinen for their support and for their staffs' work in

helping me bring this resolution forward today.

It is no longer possible to stand by and watch as millions of

religious minorities are subject to torture, abuse, and discrimination,

which is why I ask my colleagues to support this important resolution.