

Floor Statement  
HON. FRANK R. WOLF  
of Virginia  
In the House of Representatives  
Wednesday, February 24, 2010

**In Support of H.Res. 944 Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives on religious minorities in Iraq**

Mr. WOLF. Madam Speaker, I rise in support of H. Res. 944 and thank the Chair and Ranking Member for their efforts to bring this to the floor for consideration at such a pivotal time in Iraq.

A February 6 ABC News story opened with the following observation: “Across the Middle East, where Christianity was born and its followers once made up a sizable portion of the population, Christians are now tiny minorities.”

This is perhaps no more true than in Iraq. With the exception of Israel, the Bible contains more references to the cities, regions and nations of ancient Iraq than any other country. The patriarch Abraham came from a city in Iraq called Ur. Isaac’s bride, Rebekah, came from northwest Iraq. Jacob spent 20 years in Iraq and his sons (the 12 tribes of Israel) were born in northwest Iraq. A remarkable spiritual revival as told in the book of Jonah occurred in Nineveh. The events of the book of Esther took place in Iraq as did the account of Daniel in the Lion’s Den.

Tragically Iraq’s ancient Christian community is facing extinction. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees estimates that some 250,000 to 500,000 Christians have left the country since 2003, or about half the Christian population. According to the bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “while Christians and other religious minorities represented only approximately 3 percent of the pre-2003 Iraqi population, they constitute approximately 15 and 20 percent of registered Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Syria, respectively, and Christians account for 35 and 64 percent, respectively, of all registered Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and Turkey.”

It is critical to note, as the figures above indicate, that the violence and intimidation that Iraq’s Christians and other vulnerable ethno-religious communities have faced is targeted. In July 2008, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration & Refugee Services said this about the minority religious communities: “These groups, whose home has been what is now Iraq for many centuries, are literally being obliterated — not because they are fleeing generalized violence but because they are being specifically and viciously victimized by Islamic extremists and, in some cases, common criminals.”

Reports indicate that since 2003, more than 200 Christians have been killed in Iraq, and since June 2004, 65 churches have been attacked or bombed. The situation facing these minority communities is not improving. In fact there has been a recent uptick in violence in the lead up to the elections in Iraq. A *Reuters* story last week reported that, “With Iraq’s March 7

parliamentary vote looming, a spike in attacks against Christians could be a sign of voter intimidation by factions in the bitter Kurd-Arab dispute, or another attempt by al Qaeda to derail the election.”

I have appreciated Ambassador Chris Hill’s commitment to this issue. In recent correspondence he indicated that “the security of the Christian community remains one of my paramount concerns, especially in light of attacks directed at Christian churches in Baghdad and Mosul over the past five months.”

But there needs to be leadership from the highest levels within the State Department as well. I have long advocated, both during the previous administration and in the current administration, that the U.S. needs to adopt a comprehensive policy to address the unique situation of these defenseless minorities. This resolution includes language urging the Secretary of State to develop just such a strategy.

It is time for this administration to start taking religious freedom seriously. The position of U.S. ambassador for International Religious Freedom has been vacant for more than a year while other more junior posts have been filled. There’s a saying in Washington that personnel is policy. When there isn’t personnel, the policy inevitably suffers.

The ancient faith communities of Iraq and others enduring religious persecution worldwide deserve a voice. This resolution is a step in the right direction.