Thank you Mr. Speaker and I thank Mr. Berman, our distinguished ranking member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, not only for giving me this time but for his conscience. Because that indeed is what this is about, and his unflagging leadership on so many issues and your endorsement and strong support of this bill I think bolsters it enormously and says to the entire House that a person that is steeped in the background of the issues of the entire world is for this. I want to pay tribute to Mr. Wolf for his incredible advocacy on this issue relative to religious minorities for so long. It’s an honor to have worked with you, to bring this to a realization of not only legislation but to bring it to the floor, and I salute you. You’re a gentleman and you too are a man of great conscience. So Mr. Speaker, I think today we’re here on something that really distinguishes the USA. From the founding of our nation, religious freedom has been a pillar of our democracy and it remains one of the most critical exports of our great nation. I think having said that, really establishes the foundation of why we are here in strong support of HR 440. This bill, as my colleagues have said, will create a special envoy to promote religious freedom of religious minorities in the Near East and South Asia. The legislation responds to the very urgent needs of Christians and other religious minorities who are under siege. And when I say that, I underscore it. They are under siege in the Middle East. Again, I commend everyone, especially Mr. Wolf, who had been part of this effort, and as a co-chair of the religious minority community and all the members of it, I thank them as well.

In January of this year, Representative Wolf chaired a hearing to review the violence and the hardship faced by many Middle Eastern religious minorities. I was privileged to testify that day about the plight of many people, but especially the Assyrians. I am of both Assyrian and Armenian descent. And the language that Mr. Wolf spoke of, Aramaic, I speak fluently and understand very well. It is the language, as he said, that Jesus spoke. These are the world’s oldest Christians. And they are quickly disappearing from Iraq. During this hearing we also learned of Egypt’s Coptic Christian population, what they face, and the renewed threats and the unacceptable violence in that uncertain political situation. At the conclusion of the hearing, we agreed to press forward with this...

Interrupted by time limitation. Floor is yielded to Rep. Eshoo for an additional two minutes.

...legislation to create this special envoy at the State Department, someone at the ambassador level to elevate this issue for the attention it deserves. We need a high level official dedicated to religious freedom in the region, committed to the concerns of minority communities. I’m very pleased that this legislation has attracted very solid bipartisan support. We have 78 co-sponsors; an even split between republicans and democrats all calling for the state department to elevate religious freedom in the Middle East as a diplomatic priority. And there is a history for this. Senator John Danforth served our nation as a special envoy to Sudan and Senator George Mitchell as we all know, to Northern Ireland. So
there is a precedent for this. I want to speak of a meeting I had in my office last week. Three Dominican nuns, sisters, had traveled from Iraq. They once again relayed their story of what is happening to them. They have been dispersed across Iraq. They teach everyone regardless of their background, Muslims, Christians, no matter what the background is, and in their hospitals, they care for whoever is sick and wounded. And yet their convents have been burned, the statue of the blessed mother’s hands chopped off and placed at their door. And so these threats are very real. They are very real. That is just one example of it. The history of violence should be dealt with. As I said, our great nation treasures its religious freedoms and its part of the core of our democracy. So that’s why I urge all of my colleagues to join us, not just me, but in all of us in supporting this important legislation. And that message will go forward from this chamber, with all the other issues that are swirling around us, is that we stand with great dignity for one of the great principles of our great nation.