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Opening Statement – Chairman Ed Royce
Ancient Communities Under Attack: ISIS's War on Religious Minorities
May 13, 2015

Today we focus on the many minority communities that are under brutal attack – some on the brink of extermination – by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. We are joined by individuals who have personally faced this threat and are familiar with the extreme hardships and grief that displaced minorities face in that troubled region.

ISIS has unleashed a campaign of brutal and depraved violence, not only against Shi'a Muslims and fellow Sunnis who do not share their radical beliefs, but against vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities. As Ms. Isaac put it simply in her prepared testimony: “We cherish ethnic and religious diversity; ISIS hates it.”

Many Americans may not realize that Iraq and Syria are home to dozens of ethnic and religious minorities, with ancient cultures and deep roots. These communities – Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, Yezidis, Alawites, and others - are under mortal threat in their ancestral homelands.

The mass execution of men, the enslavement of women and children, and the destruction of religious sites is part of the ISIS effort to destroy these communities. To make it as if they never existed. In fact, ISIS maintains a “demolition battalion” charged with obliterating religious and historic sites and artifacts that it considers heretical or idolatrous.

The situation for some of these groups was precarious even before ISIS. According to some estimates, more than half of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities have fled the country over the last dozen years.

But the influx of ISIS extremists has become a plague. The fall of Mosul in June of last year uprooted more than two million people. Members will recall the U.S.-led airstrikes and operations by Kurdish forces last August to break the siege of Mount Sinjar, where thousands of Yazidi refugee families had been trapped by ISIS.

The physical security and welfare of displaced minorities is an immediate priority. Options for U.S. assistance range from additional material support to friendly forces, all the way to creating “safe zones” or “no fly zones.” And while it's important to weigh the costs of each option, we can't lose sight of the fact that people are being kidnapped, tortured and killed each and every day.

Beyond that, we need to focus more on their psychological well-being. Many of these people – especially women and children – have been subjected to unspeakable traumas.

And, as with any displaced population, as their vulnerability increases, so does the threat of human trafficking. What can be done to better protect women and girls at risk of slavery?

Finally, what can and should be done to keep these evacuations from becoming permanent? It would be a tragedy if well-intended resettlement fulfilled the goal of ISIS – to drive these believers out. Are there ways to support the reconstruction of local institutions and civil society so that, post-ISIS (and there must be a post-ISIS) these communities can return and thrive in their ancestral homelands?

I'll now turn to the Ranking Member, who has been a true leader on Syria and the humanitarian and human rights disaster in the region, for any opening comments he may have.