

Last Saturday, Gus hosted a forum to highlight the treatment of Coptic Christians in Egypt, honor the late Pope Shenouda, and promote religious freedom in the Middle East and worldwide.

The Congressman was joined by former Congressman Fred Grandy, who now serves as Executive Vice President of the Center for Security Policy and is an expert on religious freedom and national security issues, and Cynthia Farahat, a political activist and Coptic Christian who has personally experienced the persecution of Coptics in Egypt.

"It was an honor and privilege to host this event with our local Coptic community. We had the opportunity to hear from a large group of passionate individuals about the persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt," said Gus, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Middle East and South Asia Subcommittee as well as International Religious Freedom Caucus. "As a Greek Orthodox Christian, I have made it a feature of my service in the U.S. House of Representatives to be a voice for all religious minorities wherever they may be persecuted in the world. The religious persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt is an issue in which we cannot remain silent."

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Remarks prepared for Rep. Gus Bilirakis

Christos Anesti! Christ is Risen!

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing me to speak and introduce tonight's speakers. Before I begin, I want to take a moment to remember His Holiness Pope Shenouda. He was instrumental in the search for mutual understanding among all the world's religions. I express my deepest condolences to you loss and pray that a worthy successor will arise – a successor who will protect the oldest Christians in the middle east and prevent the persecution of religious minorities.

As you know I have worked to condemn violations of religious freedom throughout the world. As a member of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and the International Religious Freedom Caucus, I am alarmed especially at the dwindling number of Christians in the Middle East. A good friend of mine, Caroline Glick, wrote in the Jerusalem Post a column on this very issue. She noted that in Turkey, the Christian population has dwindled from 2 million at the end of World War I to less than 100,000 today.

And, there are only about 1200 Greek Orthodox Christians left in Constantinople – a place that refuses to recognize the Ecumenical nature of our Patriarch Bartholomew. Additionally the Theological School at Halki – a seminary to train Orthodox clergy - has been shut down for over 40 years. This is unacceptable behavior by the Turkish government.

In Iraq a decade ago there were 800,000 Christians - today there are 150,000. In Iran prior to the Islamic revolution, Iran's Christians were more or less free to practice their religion - today they are executed. In Syria, four decades ago, Christians made up nearly half of the population.

Today 4% of Syrians are Christian and they are suffering currently during tragic times over there. Please include them in your prayers. In Jordan, half a century ago, 18% of the population was Christian. Today 2% of Jordanians are Christian. And, of course, we all know of the horrible massacre and persecution of Egyptian Copts. I am sure you have seen time again, just like I have, the massacre of Christians in Tahrir Square and Maspero, as well as during holy events such as Christmas Eve mass.

That's why holding events like this are so important to remind the world that Christians in the Middle East are dying or being displaced as we speak. We must hold Middle Eastern governments accountable. The right to worship must be protected in the Middle East starting with Egypt in order for a free and democratic society to flourish.

And Egypt must know that the United States strongly supports the safety of religious minorities. With the assistance and encouragement of our special guests – Fred and Cynthia- I called for conditions to be placed on the \$1.3 billion in annual aid that we provide Egypt. This money has been used by the Egyptian military to persecute and attack Coptic Christians and other religious minorities and this is unacceptable.

That is why must continue to work together to support the freedom of religion and expression for all people and never lose hope, and why I join the Coptic Church in supporting a bill of rights upholding freedom of expression and belief. I look forward to continuing to make that bill of rights a reality.

And now I will turn the floor over to our experts.

First, the Honorable Fred Grandy is the Executive Vice President of the Center for Security Policy, a non-profit, non-partisan national security organization that specializes in identifying policies that are vital to American security. He also hosts a popular national radio talk show. Some of you might be familiar with him from one of his previous jobs, as a beloved television star on the Love Boat, and a four term Congressman from Iowa. In addition to his careers in show business and politics, Grandy has been a respected non-profit executive as President and CEO of Goodwill Industries International. He has served as an adjunct professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs. Welcome, Fred.

Now a few words about Cynthia. Cynthia Farahat is an Egyptian political activist, writer and researcher. She is a fellow at the Middle East Forum and the Center for Security Policy. She's been published in the Middle East Quarterly, and other publications in both English and Arabic. Last year, Ms. Farahat testified before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on the roots of the persecution of the Coptic Christian minority in her native Egypt, which is where I first had the chance to hear her story. I was so captivated by her testimony, that I invited both her and Fred to brief me personally in my DC office so I could learn more about her personal experiences as a Coptic Christian living in terror in Egypt. As a result, I wanted her story to be told to a broader audience so I invited Cynthia and Fred to share their knowledge with you. It's something that everybody should hear.

Please join me in extending a warm welcome to both.

Thank you and God bless.