Traveling with a handful of other members of Congress as part of a mission arranged by the Air Force, Bilirakis also spent time in Iraq and Kuwait.

He arrived there in a time of unease as well. Authorities had just arrested six al-Qaida suspects planning to bomb Camp Arifjan, the main U.S. base in Kuwait.

It was Bilirakis' second trip to Iraq since being elected in 2006. Since his last visit in 2007, he said there have been great strides in security.

Throughout the week, Bilirakis visited with troops, including some from New Port Richey, Tarpon Springs and Hillsborough County. "They are very upbeat," he said. "But they are concerned when they come home that there are job opportunities available. I'm going to work on that."

Bilirakis also brought a glimmer of good news. A bill he and Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, sponsored would let more troops get care packages from back home for free.

The measure was approved in June as part of the House defense spending and now the Senate must go along.