

“Passage of this resolution will show that Congress makes international religious freedom a priority,” said Bilirakis, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Religious Freedom Caucus. “As the Republic of Cyprus prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary as a nation, the very future and existence of historic Greek Orthodox, Maronite, and Armenian communities in the north are in grave danger of extinction.”

Since Turkey invaded the northern area of the Republic of Cyprus on July 20th 1974, numerous religious sites have been destroyed and religious artifacts have been stolen. Turkish soldiers have been witnessed throwing icons from looted churches onto burning pyres and leaving churches open to both looters and vandals.

“This year, we marked the 36th anniversary of the Turkish invasion and continuing illegal occupation of the northern part of the Republic of Cyprus. Since the 1974 invasion, many priceless symbols of Cyprus’ religious and cultural heritage have been destroyed, looted or vandalized, and even stolen or illegally excavated for sale abroad,” Maloney said. “Passage of this resolution would demonstrate the United States’ commitment to protecting the rights and fundamental freedoms of the Cypriot people and religious freedom everywhere.”

Turkey must be held responsible for the continued violations of humanitarian law with respect to the destruction of religious and cultural property, according to testimony at U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing.

Bilirakis and Maloney also urged the Turkish government to protect the cultural and religious heritage of the Greek Cypriots living in the northern-occupied areas of the country, who have been prohibited from worshiping freely due to the restricted access to religious sites and continued destruction of the property of the Church of Cyprus.

“We’re calling on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to investigate and make recommendations on violations of these religious freedoms,” Bilirakis said. “Additionally, I continue to call on Turkey to remove its troops from Cyprus, remove its settlers, and come to the negotiating table in good faith to find a solution that is just for the Cypriot people.”

The 13 original cosponsors joining Bilirakis and Maloney include: House Foreign Affairs Committee Ranking Member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), International Religious Freedom Caucus Co-Chair Trent Franks (R-Ariz.), Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-Nev.), Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-Ill.), Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.), Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Md.), Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), Rep. Zach Space (D-Ohio), and Rep. Dina Titus (D-Nev.).

( [Read the bill here](#) )