

Congressional Briefing
“International Religious Freedom”
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Thank you to **Congresswoman Anna Eshoo** and **Congressman Frank Wolf** for their support of this briefing and for their leadership on international religious freedom, particularly as the co-chairs of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus.

I would also like to thank Representatives Eshoo and Wolf for their leadership on HR 301, a bill to create a Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia. This bill overwhelmingly passed the House last year and we are grateful for all the Members who voted in favor of it. Now we encourage Majority Leader Reid to quickly bring S. 653 to a vote on the Senate floor so that it can become law. I’d also like to thank **Senator Roy Blunt** and **Senator Carl Levin** for their leadership on this bill in the Senate.

International religious freedom is a high priority for United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Committee on International Justice and Peace that I chair.

I would like to do four things in my remarks:

1. Share briefly something about the work of our Conference of Bishops on International Religious Freedom;
 2. Outline the Catholic understanding of religious freedom;
 3. Reflect on my solidarity visits to Egypt, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and what I learned about threats to religious freedom; and
 4. Offer some brief concluding remarks on international religious freedom.
- I. Let me briefly describe our work. The Committee acts to promote religious freedom in several ways:
- We make public statements and send letters to U.S. government officials and the leaders of the affected countries.
 - At times, we use private communications with key officials and decision-makers, and private expressions of solidarity with suffering communities.
 - Most importantly, we make solidarity visits to the Church in countries where religious freedom is under attack.
 - The Committee also educates the general public and policy makers through press conferences, press releases, action alerts, conferences, interviews, and social media.
 - Our Committee always consults with the local Church, especially the local Catholic bishops’ conference of each country and local nuncios in each country. They are the ambassadors of the Pope and representatives of the Holy See. At times they ask us to keep our efforts private in order to protect the local Christian population. Their guidance is critically important.

Christians face harassment in the largest number of countries followed by Muslims and Jews.

Our Conference of Bishops vigorously supported the establishment the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom whose mandate Congress happily renewed in 2011 and we hope will be renewed again later this year. A number of my brother bishops have served on this Commission.

Our work is complemented and made possible by the indispensable partnership with Catholic Relief Services. CRS, the U.S. Bishops' International Relief Agency working in over 100 countries, truly represents the compassionate face of Christ in enhancing the dignity of our brothers and sisters in the human family.

Through our solidarity visits and the work of Catholic Relief Services, we learn first-hand about discrimination, harassment and violence that affect religious minorities around the world.

II. Catholic teaching on religious freedom

The Catholic Church has long championed religious freedom.

The Second Vatican Council in 1965 declared that “the human person has a right to religious freedom,” and called upon governments to “assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all [their] citizens....”

According to the Catholic teaching, religious freedom, rooted in the dignity of the human person, is “a cornerstone of the structure of human rights.” It is closely tied to freedoms of speech, association and assembly.

When the Church speaks about religious freedom, it is not arguing solely for freedom from coercion in matters of personal faith and conscience; it is also advocating for freedom to practice the faith individually and communally, in both private and public.

Freedom of religion extends beyond freedom of worship. It includes the institutional freedom of the Church and religious organizations to provide education, health and other social services, to propagate the faith through the media, and to allow religiously-motivated individuals and communities to participate in public policy debates and contribute to the common good.

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel*, wrote:

Religious freedom “includes ‘the freedom to choose the religion which one judges to be true and to manifest one’s beliefs in public’. A healthy pluralism, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience or to relegate them to the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.” (#255)

III. What is the situation in Egypt and the Holy Land?

On my recent solidarity trip, we visited Egypt, Gaza, Israel and the West Bank.

We went to a small Catholic hospital in the Cairo area that illustrates both the importance of institutional religious freedom and the vulnerability of Christians.

St. Therese Catholic Coptic Hospital was gutted by Islamic radicals in November. Most patients served by the hospital are Muslim. The small hospital serves the poor residents of the neighborhood and makes medical care accessible at low cost.

The witness of the Catholic hospital serves as a sign of the Church's commitment to all Egyptians and fosters good Muslim-Christian relations.

The parish is restoring the physical plant (replacing windows, repairing and painting walls and floors, and replacing sinks and other fixtures). CRS will replace all of the major medical equipment. The hospital hopes to be operational soon.

The parish priest who founded the hospital noted that most violence against Christian institutions is from extremist groups from outside local communities.

In Cairo, we also met with Syrian refugees. Most were Muslim, but some were Christian. The Christians expressed fears regarding the extremist elements among the foreign fighters in Syria. These extremists have an anti-Christian agenda. There is also much Muslim on Muslim violence along sectarian fault lines. All of the refugees wanted better and safer lives for their families, and hoped to return to their beloved Syria. Most spoke of how Christians and Muslims have lived together in peace for centuries.

From Cairo we went to Assuit in Upper Egypt. This conservative rural area is home to a remarkable project. The TA'ALA (Tolerant Attitudes and Leadership for Action) project promotes Muslim-Christian collaboration in at-risk communities. TA'ALA provides key religious and clan leaders with skills to mitigate conflict, and supports joint action among Christian and Muslim youth.

CRS' TA'ALA project partners include the Catholic dioceses of Cairo, Assuit and Sohag, and Al-Azhar's Family House Initiative. (Al-Azhar is the pre-eminent and respected center of Islamic studies in Egypt.)

The Vice President of Al-Azhar in Assuit noted that Egypt is a Holy Land in both the Koran and the New Testament. It was blessed by Abraham and the Holy Family. He affirmed that Muslims and Christians are equal.

He was followed by a Christian speaker who affirmed that Egyptians are united as one nation. He declared that violence is un-Egyptian and that the culture of the Assuit governorate is agricultural and peaceful.

From Assuit, we traveled to the rural village of Nekheila to see a local TA'ALA project. Our small delegation was literally welcomed by a parade of 300+ people, including three dancing horses, drums and wind instruments.

A village elder hosted at a reception of the village leaders. The Muslim host and several Muslim and Christian speakers described the mutual respect that the two religious communities have for one another and how their collaboration is improving relations in their village.

I share these two stories to illustrate both the vulnerability and the hope of the Christian minority in Egypt.

Catholic leaders mentioned that both Christians and Muslims are emigrating, fleeing the violence. During an earlier flare-up, five churches in Assuit governate were attacked. Minya governate had many more attacks. But local Muslims banded together to protect churches from outside attacks.

It was clear to me that the Christians of Egypt do not want to be separated from their Muslim neighbors. Many noted that attacks come from extremists from outside their immediate neighborhoods.

Egypt is at a critical moment. Many hope the new constitution will advance the democratic revolution. They want a new Egypt in which both Muslims and Christians have a better future and an inclusive democracy.

In Gaza, we encountered a similarly vulnerable Christian community. Our bishops' delegation was welcomed by smartly uniformed Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts lining both sides of the plaza outside the Church, proudly playing drums and flying flags. The sole Catholic parish in Gaza has about 250 members. It was clear that the visit meant a great deal to this relatively isolated community.

1.8 million people live in Gaza, a densely populated and desperately poor area. Most are Muslims. Only 1,500 to 3,000 are Christian.

Gazans are only allowed to fish within 3 nautical miles of shore, 57% are food insecure, and 35% unemployed. 90% of Gaza's water is polluted and only 25% of households have water delivered via pipes.

Christians share the same challenges of all Gazans: the effects of the blockage by Egypt and Israel and restrictions on travel outside of Gaza for those ages 16-35.

Despite generally good relations with Muslims, Christians are facing additional pressures, notably: the gradual imposition of Sharia, the inability to display Christian symbols in some places, and a new law that requires segregation of education by gender (both teachers and students).

This requirement could have a chilling effect on the five Christian schools that serve Muslims and Christians alike with the best education in Gaza.

The tiny Christian community of Gaza sponsors 45% of Gaza's social institutions, including schools, social services and health care. So again we see the importance of both personal and institutional religious freedom.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories near Bethlehem, we visited the Cremisan Valley. Israel plans to build a security wall, taking most of the Valley. 58 Christian families will lose their land. We listened to their anguish. They are faced with the threatened loss of their lands and livelihoods as the planned security wall will destroy vineyards, groves and orchards and separate them from their land. There is a fear that this will contribute to the alarming Christian emigration rate.

From a solely religious perspective, the proposed barrier will prevent the traditional religious May procession from Cremisan to Beit Jala, and prevent the centuries-old Christmas procession that begins at the Monastery of Mar Elias.

We also visited Bethlehem University. This Catholic University is administered by the Christian Brothers and was founded in the wake of Pope Paul VI's visit in 1964. The student body is 70% Muslim and 30% Christian. It is an example of how the Church's educational outreach promotes religious tolerance and respect. The University aims to create leaders for a future Palestinian state. Sadly, due to the conflict and security measures, most have not visited the Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, a short distance away.

A few lessons of the visit to Egypt and the Holy Land:

- Religious freedom, both personal and institutional, is critical for the Christian presence in the Middle East.
- Christian schools, clinics and social service institutions in the Middle East serve the entire population and strengthen Muslim-Christian relations.
- In Egypt, Christians have experienced Muslim extremist attacks, but generally enjoy good relations with their Muslim neighbors and are working to build stronger ones.
- There is a similar fear of extremists targeting Christians in Syria.
- In Gaza, there are both pressures of the blockade and of Sharia law that threaten the small Christian presence.
- In the Cremisan Valley and Bethlehem, we see the impact of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the Christian presence.
- Many Christians in Egypt and Gaza and among Syrian refugees hesitate to speak of persecution, fearing it will be misconstrued to characterize their overall relationship with Muslims. They do fear Muslim extremist attacks, not their neighbors. They do not want to be separated from their people, be they Egyptian, Syrian or Palestinian.

IV. Concluding Remarks

While my remarks have focused on the situation affecting Christians in Egypt and the Holy Land, I should reiterate that Christians are not the only religious group facing difficulties. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, Hindus, and other religious minorities find themselves discriminated against in education, employment, housing, land ownership, or legal recognition of their marriages and births.

Beyond discrimination, many religious minorities have been harassed and attacked, with national and local governments turning a blind eye, or being slow to respond to protect victims, or in

some cases, even sanctioning the attacks. When the rule of law breaks down, religious minorities don't know where to turn for protection.

This is true in places like Pakistan where Shi'a Muslims, Ahmaddiyas as well as Christians are targeted by extremists. High profile politicians like the Muslim governor of Punjab province can be assassinated by his bodyguard because of his support for amendments to Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws. When that bodyguard is lauded by many as a hero, it speaks to a culture of impunity that undermines the stability of that country.

We see attacks on Muslim communities in Myanmar and attacks on Mosques and Churches in Sri Lanka by Buddhists.

When I was in Iraq last year for the installation of the new Chaldean Catholic Patriarch, I heard story after story of how the weakening of the rule of law in the wake of the U.S. invasion, when local police forces and the military were dismantled, allowed extremist attacks on Christians and other minorities and accelerated Christian immigration from the country.

Sometimes tensions among ethnic groups over land, resources, and access to education and employment can erupt in violence and be framed as a religious dispute if the groups are of different religions.

In the Central African Republic, it was rivalry over economic resources and political power that morphed into a conflict along a religious fault line. The opposition invited 20,000 mercenaries from Sudan and Chad to help seize political control. CAR is 80% Christian and 15% Muslim. Traditionally Christians and Muslims have lived in relative harmony. The foreign fighters were largely Muslims who set about targeting Christian homes, schools and churches. Christian communities have now set up self-defense militia. So what started out as a battle over access to political and economic power, has now taken on a dangerous Muslim-Christian sectarian character never experienced before in CAR.

The Catholic Archbishop has been sheltering the local Muslim Imam and together they have sought to stop the violence and reconcile their communities in CAR. Religious freedom is a force for good.

Protecting religious freedom is critical to the health not only of minorities, but of whole societies. Let me close with the words of Pope Francis who made this point:

“In the world today freedom of religion is often talked about rather than put into practice. ... The serious affronts inflicted on this primary right are a source of grave concern.... One and all are duty bound to defend religious freedom and to promote it for everyone. The shared protection of this moral good is also a guarantee of the entire community's growth and development.”

(Address to President of Italy, June 8, 2013)