

Congressman French Hill
House Foreign Affairs Committee Member Day
Written Testimony
Friday, March 26, 2021
3:25PM-3:35PM, WebEx

Good Afternoon,

I would like to thank Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, and fellow members of the Committee for this opportunity.

I appreciate the chance to testify in front of you today about my resolution, H.Res. 117, Supporting Coptic Christians in Egypt, which has a diverse and bipartisan coalition of members that cosponsor it.

I would also like to give special thanks to my friend and Democratic lead on H.Res. 117, Foreign Affairs Committee member, David Cicilline of Rhode Island.

Currently, this bill has 17 cosponsors; last Congress my resolution had 71 cosponsors, including 25 on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

I decided to introduce this legislation following a 2017 visit to Egypt. While preparing for the trip, visiting the country, and returning home, I repeatedly heard about the plight of the Coptic Christians in Egypt. Although the Copts have been victims of numerous terrorist attacks by groups like ISIS, what is most disturbing to me is the attacks against Copts carried out by their fellow Egyptians.

That is why, on January 16, 2019, I originally introduced this resolution, expressing support for Coptic Christians and religious liberty in Egypt.

H.Res.117 acknowledges the importance of the United States-Egypt partnership in advancing our common interests, recognizes Egypt's need for certain government reforms, and calls on the Egyptian government to end the culture of impunity and make examples by arresting, prosecuting, and convicting those responsible for attacks on Christians. It also calls on the government to hold those local government officials accountable who fail to enforce the law.

In the Minya province in Upper Egypt, in late November, a mother and her son were stabbed by a Muslim man while sitting in front of their home after being told that Christians were not allowed outside. Luckily, they were not killed.¹ Sadly, this is a persistent narrative in Minya. The 2018 and 2019 State Department reports on religious freedom in Egypt mention Minya Province more than any other in the province in the country.

¹ *Morning Star News*. "Coptic Christian Family Attacked in Upper Egypt; Adult Son in Intensive Care." Wednesday, November 20, 2019. <https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/coptic-christian-family-attacked-in-upper-egypt-adult-son-in-intensive-care.html>

Also, Ramy Kamel, a Coptic Christian and founder of a Coptic Christian Rights organization, was arrested by Egyptian police and has been accused of numerous terrorism related charges. It is also reported that he has undergone “intensive interrogation” and has been given no legal representation.²

Unfortunately, cases like this in Egypt are becoming more numerous.

Our country and our citizens over generations have worked mightily to uphold the values and unalienable rights granted to us by God above and enshrined in our founding documents, especially the vocal support of free expression abroad particularly in the form of advocacy for religious tolerance and freedom; the rule of law; human rights; education for women and minorities. These are fundamental tenets of our foreign policy.

Likewise, I've met with religious leaders from all across the Levant from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Jerusalem with an eye towards better shaping American and allied support of Christians and other persecuted religious minorities.

In previous years, Pope Francis together with the Grand Imam from Egypt's important Al-Azhar Mosque, issued a message on Human Fraternity inviting “all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters.”³

This public coming together of Catholicism and Islam is a powerful statement to all governments around the world, but particularly those in the Middle East, to support religious freedom and religious tolerance. This was on display recently for the world to see as Pope Francis toured ancient Mesopotamia, said Mass in Baghdad, and met with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani.

I have great respect for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and I applaud the changes and message that he has made in the area of religious tolerance. He continues to say and do the right things at the top level of government. This includes having a good relationship with the Coptic Pope, attending Mass on multiple occasions, reconstructing churches, constructing the largest Christian Cathedral in the Middle East in the “new” administrative center, and holding terrorists accountable for their atrocities.

² Mbakwe, Tola. *Premier Christianity*. “Christian activist facing terror related charges in Egypt.” <https://www.premierchristianity.com/News/World/Christian-activist-facing-terror-related-charges-in-Egypt>

³ <https://catholicoutlook.org/first-anniversary-of-document-on-human-fraternity/#:~:text=It%20is%20a%20document%20that,human%20beings%20brothers%20and%20sisters.>

However, since 1978, the United States has provided Egypt with what now totals over \$50 billion in military and \$30 billion in economic assistance.⁴ I believe there is more to do, and as the fourth highest receiver of annual American aid in the world, the United States Government must use the tools we have to hold our allies, like Egypt, to a higher standard if they are to continue to receive our aid.

It is in that regard, that I believe one vehicle readily available to this committee to highlight the U.S. government's concern of the treatment of Coptic Christians in Egypt is my resolution, H.Res. 117.

Let's recall President Reagan's admonition as to our responsibility: "Respect for human rights is not social work; it is not merely an act of compassion. It is the first obligation of government and the source of its legitimacy."

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify to you this afternoon, and I look forward to working with you on this issue going forward.

⁴ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-egypt/#:~:text=U.S.%20assistance%20to%20Egypt%20has,%2430%20billion%20in%20economic%20assistance.>