

On Thursday, Gus addressed a forum to highlight the treatment of Coptic Christians in Egypt, and promote religious freedom in the Middle East and worldwide.

As a Greek Orthodox Christian, Gus has made it a feature of his service in Congress to be a voice for all religious minorities wherever they may be persecuted in the world. He led an effort in 2011 to prevent the Egyptian military from using U.S. taxpayer dollars to persecute and attack thousands of Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

Watch Gus' speech here:

Remarks as prepared for delivery:

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak. 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 the world's religions. I express my deepest condolences for your 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 1,200 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 it 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 is why organizations like Coptic Solidarity are so important to remind the world that as we speak here today, Christians in the Middle East are dying or being displaced. 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. Last year 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. I will continue to call for these conditions as long as the rights of minorities in Egypt are ignored. Egypt's new president and new parliament must understand that the US is watching their actions and we will not turn a blind eye to the persecution of religious minorities. We will also be watching as the Constitution is written. I have expressed my support in the past for the proposed Bill of Rights that would cement the rights of religious minorities in Egypt and I express it here again today. And I promise that I will remain vigilant to the plight of the Coptic Christians as Egypt continues its transition.

Moving forward, we must continue to work together to support the freedom of religion and expression for all of Egypt. As I am sure you know, the spokesman to the newly elected Egyptian president said that President Morsi would appoint a woman and a Coptic Christian to be his co-vice presidents, a first in Egyptian history. Whether this will take place is yet to be seen, but it does remind us that we must never lose hope that one day Coptic Christians will enjoy equal citizenship in their native country of Egypt.

