

**First the
Saturday
People
Then the
Sunday
People**

**The Exodus of Jews and Christians
from the Middle East**

Report on a trip to Lebanon & Egypt
Congressman Frank Wolf
February, 2013

The Sunday People

I just returned from Lebanon and Egypt where I met with State Department officials, civil society actors, including prominent religious leaders and humanitarian aid organizations, and Syrian refugees. The trip (February 18–21, 2013) came at a critical time, as events in the broader Middle East over the last two years have been both historic and tumultuous.

One of the main purposes of the trip was to spend time with the Syrian Christian community. As a brutal civil war, which has taken nearly 70,000 lives, rages in Syria the plight of the sizable Christian community is often overlooked. While from the outside it appears as though President Bashar al-Assad's brutal regime will ultimately fall, the eventual outcome, including how many will perish in or be displaced by the continued violence and who will step into the ensuing power vacuum, is far from certain. Moreover, what that will mean for the Christian community in Syria is largely unknown and, unfortunately, rarely addressed by Western media or church leaders.

I wanted to hear firsthand from Syrian Christians about their concerns and what the future might hold and to put this issue in the larger context of an imperiled Christian community in the broader Middle East, specifically in Egypt and Iraq.

Coptic Christians and other minorities in Egypt have increasingly been marginalized with the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood. The newly drafted constitution is viewed as highly problematic by many Egyptians. A February 5 Associated Press article reported “[p]rovisions in the document allow for a far stricter implementation of Islamic Shariah law than in the past, raising opponents’ fears that it could bring restrictions on many civil liberties and the rights of women and Christians.”

Egypt is the recipient of billions of dollars in U.S. foreign assistance. A thorough assessment of the conditions in Egypt and the evolving political situation is critical, especially in these tight budgetary times.

These issues must be viewed not simply as today's news but rather through the lens of history. A phrase not often heard outside the majority Muslim world is “First the Saturday people, then the Sunday people.” The “Saturday people” are, of course, the Jews. Their once vibrant communities in countries throughout the region are now decimated. In 1948 there were roughly 150,000 Jews in Iraq; today less than 10 remain. In Egypt, there were once as many as 80,000 Jews; now less than 100 remain. It appears a similar fate may await the ancient Christian community in these same lands.

Consider this observation by author and adjunct fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom, Lela Gilbert, who recently wrote in the *Huffington Post*: “Between 1948 and 1970, between 80,000 and 100,000 Jews were expelled from Egypt—their properties and funds confiscated, their passports seized and destroyed. They left, stateless, with little more than the shirts on their backs to show for centuries of Egyptian citizenship....”

Meanwhile, with the fall of Hosni Mubarak, Coptic Christians, numbering roughly 8–10 million, are leaving in droves. A January 8 National Public Radio (NPR) story reported “Coptic Christians will celebrate Christmas on Monday, and many will do so outside their native Egypt. Since the revolution there, their future in the country has looked uncertain and many are resettling in the United States. Their population in the U.S. may have grown by nearly 30 percent, according to rough estimates.”

Gilbert echoes this reality, writing “...today, hundreds of thousands of Copts have already fled—those able to afford airfare and lawyers have sought asylum in the U.S. and Canada. As for the others...the options are few and fraught with danger.”

Similarly, Iraq's Christian population has fallen from as many as 1.4 million in 2003 to roughly 500,000 today. Churches have been targeted, believers kid-

A phrase not often heard outside the majority Muslim world is “First the Saturday people, then the Sunday people.”

napped for ransom and families threatened with violence if they stay. In October 2010, Islamist extremists laid siege on Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church in Baghdad, killing over 50 hostages and police, and wounding dozens more.

Turning to Syria, in the midst of devastating bloodshed and civil war, the Christian population is particularly vulnerable. A recent Associated Press story reported “[Christians] are fearful that Syria will become another Iraq, with Christians caught in the crossfire between rival Islamic groups.”

Over the span of a few decades, the Middle East, with the exception of Israel, has virtually been emptied of Jews. In my conversations with Syrian Christian refugees, Lebanese Christians and Coptic Christians in Egypt, a resounding theme emerged: a similar fate awaits the “Sunday People.”

An Exodus

While it remains to be seen whether the historic exodus of Christians from the region will prove to be as dramatic as what has already happened to the Jewish community, it is without question devastating, as it threatens to erase Christianity from its very roots.

A recent study on Christian persecution released by the London-based think tank Civitas found that “[p]arts of the media have been influenced by the logical error that equates criticism of Muslims with racism, and therefore as wrong by definition. This has further distracted attention away from the hounding of Christians, helping to cement the surprisingly widespread idea that Christianity is a ‘Western’ faith.”

This idea could not be further from the truth. The Middle East is the very cradle of Christendom.

Consider Iraq. With the exception of Israel, the Bible contains more references to the cities, regions and nations of ancient Iraq than any other country. The patriarch Abraham came from a city in Iraq called Ur. Isaac’s bride, Rebekah, came from northwest Iraq. Jacob spent 20 years in Iraq, and his sons (the 12 tribes of Israel) were born in northwest Iraq. A remarkable spiritual revival as told in the book of Jonah occurred in Nineveh. The events of the book



Both Muslims and Christians have fled Syria to escape the fighting, which has taken nearly 70,000 lives since it started almost two years ago.

of Esther took place in Iraq as did the account of Daniel in the Lion’s Den. Furthermore, many of Iraq’s Christians still speak Aramaic the language of Jesus. In fact a February 2013 *Smithsonian Magazine* story noted “[a]s Jesus died on the cross, he cried in Aramaic, ‘*Elahi, Elahi, lema shabaqtani?*’ (‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’)” In Egypt, some 2,000 years ago, Mary, Joseph and Jesus sought refuge in this land from the murderous aims of King Herod. Egypt’s Coptic community traces its origins to the apostle Mark.

If, as appears to be happening, the Middle East is effectively emptied of the Christian faith, this will have grave geopolitical implications and does not bode well for the prospects of pluralism and democracy in the region, which is especially disquieting in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring.” These developments demand our attention as policymakers.

Similarly, these realities demand the attention of the church in West. As already noted, ancient faith communities have inhabited these lands for centuries and are a vital part of the fabric of global Christendom.

LEBANON

Upon arriving in Beirut on the evening of February 18, I met with the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon, Maura Connelly, and senior embassy staff. One of the many issues addressed was the impact the substantial—and growing—Syrian refugee population is having on Lebanon.

Just over four million people live in Lebanon, which is about the size of Connecticut. Since the fighting started in Syria in the spring of 2011, thousands of refugees have entered the country, putting a strain on the people and government of Lebanon. Complicating this is the fact that Lebanon has its own sectarian issues, and there is concern that the spillover from Syria could lead to instability in Lebanon, given that roughly half the population supports the Assad regime and the other half supports the rebels.

A February 23 *New York Times* story described the precarious balance this way: “As they flee increasingly sectarian killing, Syrians layer their fears onto those of a country deeply scarred by its own generation-long sectarian civil war. They are testing, yet also relying on, the fragile yet flexible balance that has endured here, punctured by occasional fighting, since Lebanon’s war ended 22 years ago.”

On February 19, I met with Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, the only Christian president in the region. I also met with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs Wael Abou Faour. Lebanon’s leaders—and its people—should be thanked for what they are doing to help address the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Lebanon is hosting more Syrian refugees than any other country, and all three expressed concern that the situation is growing more tenuous by the day as greater numbers of refugees pour over the border and resentment among Lebanon’s poorer communities grows, not to

mention the underlying sectarian tension. Criminal activity is also on the rise.

Following the initial meetings with government leaders, I spent the rest of my time in Lebanon meeting with religious leaders, civil society representatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Syrian refugees—both Christian and Muslim.

John and Mary

My first meeting was a moving encounter with a Syrian Christian and his wife who, despite the risks, had driven from Syria to Beirut to meet with me and detail the experience of their community. They often cross the border. Given security concerns, I will simply refer to them as John and Mary.

John and Mary told me that many Christians had left Damascus, and most of those who remained were simply too old to flee. They described some in the Free Syrian Army as terrorists, including foreign fighters from countries like Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen and Egypt.

Increasingly the claims of foreign jihadists are verified. A February 18 *Washington Post* story reported “[a] report issued Monday in Geneva by the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria said the Islamist fighters include foreigners—from Libya, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt—drawn to the conflict because they consider it a Sunni jihad against Assad’s government, which, although secular, is dominated by Alawites, a branch of Shiism.”

John and Mary described the situation in Syria as “very dangerous.” Fear was a constant. “We are always afraid,” they said. They did not see a future for themselves or their community if the Free Syrian Army prevailed. “We were told that when we [the opposition] take over the government you will be out [of the country] or you will die.”

But the threat is actually imminent, not some distant concern. They said the day before meeting with me that they read on the Internet that “we advise you to leave because we are going to destroy your community.”

Throughout the course of the meeting Mary was understandably emotional. Through tears she told me that they had attempted to prepare their children for what the future may hold, saying “we have told our children our house could come under attack and there may be blood. We have told them we will shut our eyes and then open them in Heaven.”

She went on to say that she feels God wants them in Syria. “We will not fail. It is our mission.”

Bashar al-Assad is a brutal dictator and war criminal. But, as John and Mary caution, the West must be clear-eyed about who the rebels are, and what they will do if they seize power. Indeed, factions within the rebel movement, such as the al-Nusra Front, do not seek a peaceful, democratic and pluralistic Syria.

They warned against supporting such segments of the opposition. The prospect of extremists taking over Syria weighed heavily on John and Mary.

I asked if they felt abandoned by the church in the West. Their answer: “yes.”

I left the meeting deeply sobered by what I had heard and convinced anew that there are no easy answers to the unfolding tragedy in Syria.

Church Leaders

On March 15, 2011, Bechara Rai was elected the 77th Patriarch of Antioch and the Levant. The Maronite Church is in communion with Rome, and Patriarch Rai frequently travels on pastoral visits to Maronite communities around the world. I spent an hour with Patriarch Rai and Bishop Sayah, who served in Jerusalem for 16 years before coming to Lebanon.

Patriarch Rai provided a candid assessment of the situation in Syria, saying that “the original movement was spontaneous. It was about freedom and human rights. But all of a sudden someone came in and took over.”

He told me “reforms were needed, but in dealing with theocracies, it backfired.” He pointed to Iraq, saying “it has not reached a democracy, and now the

Sunni and Shia are fighting. Our Christian culture started in Iraq. Now a majority of the Christians have had to leave. A similar thing is happening in Egypt with the Copts. They have been marginalized and are afraid. In Syria, we are witnessing the same scenario.”

Patriarch Rai also spoke to the broader geopolitical implications of the crisis facing Christians in the region, saying “the West is heading to a situation that is going to hurt them. If Christians disappear, what will happen to this part of the world? If the Christians are gone, the West will have to deal with this radicalism.”

He lauded the model of Lebanon, saying “Lebanon has agreed to live together. It has become a model.

It still has its problems, but it has human rights. We have to make sure this country is safeguarded, too. If Lebanon disappears as a formula for success it will hurt this region and the West, too.”

I also met with Archdeacon Emanuel Youkhana of the Assyrian Church of the East. He was the focus of a piece that recently appeared in *National Review Online* vividly detailing the exodus of Christians from Syria. It was written by Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom and a former commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. She also highlighted a recent report by Swedish Journalist Nuri Kino titled “Between the Barbed Wire.” The Archdeacon told me that it is imperative that the church be involved in the political debate and peace process surrounding it. He also cautioned the church not to defend the Assad regime by saying it is protecting them. He said the minorities in Syria, including Christians, are being used to give cover to the dictatorship. He ended our conversation by saying Christianity in the West cannot survive if Christianity in the East is being destroyed and asked for the church in the West to “pray for those suffering in the East. Pray for the Martyrs.”

Again, the complexities of the situation in Syria were apparent.

I left the meeting deeply sobered by what I had heard and convinced anew that there are no easy answers to the unfolding tragedy in Syria.



There are more than 300,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is leading the humanitarian response.

Syriac League

During a meeting with the Syriac League, an NGO in Lebanon that has strong connections with the Syriac community in Lebanon and with Christians who have come to Lebanon to escape conflict and difficulties in their own countries, including Syria, Iraq and Egypt, I had a chance to hear directly from a number of people who had fled Syria. Once again, the general theme was an abiding sense of fear. They said they lived under threat every day. They described killings and kidnappings for ransom. They talked about having to pay smugglers to help them get across the border. (One man told me that he knew he had fake papers, so he turned himself in to the authorities and ultimately had to spend 57 days in a Lebanese prison. He was released the day before we met.) They said there are some towns and villages in Syria where there are no Christians left. They said many of the Christians who remain simply have no money to get out. They talked about multiple checkpoints: some manned by the regime's forces; others by opposition forces.

They said three years ago life in Syria was relatively good. While they may not have had equal rights in the government, they had freedom of religion. They also had their safety and security.

One of the people I met was a doctor. He described how the Free Syrian Army forced him to treat wounded soldiers. He said they came in daily but when they found out he was a Christian they threatened to kill him. The Kurds helped him escape. He said half of his friends had either been killed or kidnapped. He lamented that as a doctor he led a good life in Syria but is struggling now because he obviously can't go back to his country nor is he able to practice medicine in Lebanon.

When I asked what message I needed to take back to leaders in the West, the universal refrain was: "We need you not to support regimes that are persecuting us [Christians]. We need to be treated as equals."

Jihadists Arrive

The people also spoke of a newcomer on the scene: jihadists. They echoed earlier conversations saying that people from other places (Afghanistan, Tunisia and Chechnya were mentioned) were coming in to fight. They specifically mentioned al-Nusra Front. On December 11, 2012, the State Department designated al-Nusra Front as a terrorist organization linked to al-Qaeda in Iraq. In the State Department briefing announcing the designation, the department spokesperson said "Al-Nusra Front has sought to portray



About 20 refugee families share eight tent-like structures in a farmer's field in the town of Zahlé, roughly 90 minutes southeast of Beirut. They have been living there for about six months.

itself as part of a legitimate Syrian opposition, but today's actions are intended to expose them and make clear that the United States believes that al-Nusra's extremist ideology has no role in a post-Assad Syria. Among the consequences of today's actions is a prohibition against knowingly providing or attempting or conspiring to provide material support or resources to or engaging in transactions with al-Nusra Front."

One of the men I spoke to said, "Our people see no future for us. There is no law and order in Iraq or Syria. Our people are leaving and not coming back."

"We want to survive here," another said. "Yet there are two problems: violence and people do not accept us as citizens."

One family who was there with their young daughter, who is an American citizen, said they had been in Lebanon for seven months. They left Syria because the opposition knew their daughter was born in America, and they were going to kidnap her. They said a Palestinian woman once came to their house and said: "Your daughter is an American. I am going to take your house." They said their neighbors were killed because they were Christians.

I asked them what they would want church leaders in the West to know. The response: "There is a total erasure of the Christian presence in the region."

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A Refugee Crisis

I also visited the registration center being operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is leading the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Lebanon. UNHCR has identified roughly 300,000 refugees—both those already registered and those who are known to be waiting for a registration date. As of February 22, there were 309,997 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which includes 196,744 already registered and 113,253 waiting to be registered. The number of Syrians reaching out to UNHCR has accelerated significantly in the last two months with more than 3,000 individuals per day seeking assistance. I was told that it is difficult to quantify how many Christians there are among the Syrian refugee population since most of them are too afraid to register.

During my visit to the center, I met with a Muslim family who had fled Syria after their village was destroyed by a bomb. The father said during the day life was normal, but at night the bombing would start and continue for several hours. "You cannot sleep," he told me. He said his youngest son was cut by shards of glass when the village was hit. The family, made up of two girls and three boys, had been in Lebanon

for three months and would like to go back but don't know what the future holds. The father said he has seen a number of "foreign fighters" in Syria and that there where checkpoints—some controlled by the regime; some controlled by the opposition—throughout the country.

My next stop was the town of Zahlé, about 90 minutes southeast of Beirut, to meet with more refugees and Caritas Lebanon, an NGO that has been operating in Lebanon since 1994. Catholic Relief Services is assisting Caritas.

During my visit, I was able to talk to two families in Caritas' offices and visit two sites where families were living. Their stories were painfully similar to the other stories I had already heard: death, destruction and fear. Both families I met with said the circumstances in Syria have changed dramatically since the fighting started, saying Christians were not initially targeted for violence but they are now. "Christians and Muslims were living like brother and sister but that has changed," one woman, who has two young children and whose husband cannot escape Syria, told me.

She also explained that while she is appreciative of all that the Lebanese have done, her situation is not good. She said she has had a hard time trying to find a place to live and is essentially living in a hallway. She cannot work because there is no one to watch her children. I was told by officials with Caritas that some women are prostituting themselves for \$3.50 simply to help their families survive. In recent years similar heartbreaking stories have emerged out of the Iraqi refugee population. A May 29, 2007 *New York Times* story quoted Sister Marie-Claude, a Syrian nun aiding Iraqi refugees, saying "I met three sisters-in-law recently who were living together and all prostituting themselves... They would go out on alternate nights—each woman took her turn—and then divide the money to feed all the children."

Unlike many humanitarian crises which are the result of war, those fleeing Syria into Lebanon are not living in massive tent cities. Most are being ab-

sorbed into communities and towns across Lebanon. But Wael Abou Faour, the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs, cautioned in our meeting that the time is fast approaching when formal camps may need to be established. Some in the Lebanese government are understandably concerned about this.

“Christians and Muslims were living like brother and sister but that has changed.”

The first "house" I visited looked essentially like a storage unit in the West. It was about 20 feet wide and 40 feet deep (roughly the size of a two-car garage) with a concrete floor and no windows. Three Muslim families—a total of 19 people—shared the space and paid \$250 a month in rent. The second site was in a farmer's field. Twenty families were living in about eight large white tents. They had been there for roughly six months. The ground was extremely muddy, the result of heavy rains in January. They pay rent to the farmer. There did not appear to be running water.

The burgeoning Syria refugee crisis is but one of the great human tolls of this deadly conflict.

EGYPT

I was last in Egypt in June 2011, four months after Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president and turned over power to the military. In the face of decades of human rights and religious freedom abuses under the Mubarak regime, successive U.S. administrations, including the Obama Administration, failed to advocate for those whose voices were being silenced. Many pro-democracy activists and religious minorities that I spoke with during that trip felt abandoned by the West. Their disillusionment with the U.S. and general trepidation about the rise of Islamists in the lead up to the elections was tempered by a palpable sense of anticipation, and in some cases, even hope about what the future might hold for the Egyptian people.

Fast-forward to February 2013. I wanted to witness first-hand the outcome of the revolution. The verdict is not what anyone had hoped. Egypt is in danger of becoming a failed state. Its economy is collapsing,



Carmen Weinstein, 86, is president of the Jewish Community of Cairo. She was born and raised in Egypt and is one of less than 100 Jews remaining in the country.

unemployment is rising, as is inflation, lawlessness is becoming a real issue, and human rights abuses persist, and in some cases, are now enshrined in the new Egyptian constitution.

During my visit, I met with government officials, including Prime Minister Hisham Kandil, civil society activists, Christian leaders and NGOs. In addition, I met with Maggie Gobran, affectionately known as “Mama Maggie.” She runs a ministry that serves poor families living in Egypt’s garbage slums. Established in 1989, Stephen’s Children runs 65 camps, five vocational centers, 80 clinics and 80 community education centers. The organization serves Egyptians of all faiths, including Coptic Christians. I have been so inspired by her work and ministry over the years that I joined with several other Members of Congress, both last year and this year, in nominating her for the Nobel Peace Prize.

One of my last meetings was with 86-year-old Carmen Weinstein, the president of the Jewish Community of Cairo (JCC). She was born and raised in Egypt and has lived her entire life there—a life set against the backdrop of a great Jewish emigration out of Egypt, namely the departure of thousands of Egyptian Jews from the 1940s–60s. She now leads a small

community of mostly elderly Jewish women in Cairo, who with their sister community in Alexandria, represent Egypt’s remaining 70 or so Jews.

There are 12 synagogues left in Cairo. Some, along with a landmark synagogue in Alexandria, have been refurbished by the government of Egypt and/or U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and have received protection as cultural and religious landmarks. Mrs. Weinstein is seeking to form a foreign-based endowment to protect the remaining synagogues, the Bassatine Jewish Cemetery—which is 900 years old and half overrun with squatters—and the patrimony records of the community. This is increasingly important as the remaining Jewish community ages and in all likelihood will eventually disappear.

Summer Marriages

Other than in my meetings with Egyptian officials, no one painted a rosy picture for the future of Egypt. In fact, many suggested that life was better under Mubarak. I was repeatedly told that the new government led by President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood is ignoring women’s rights, human rights and religious rights. I was told women are being removed from positions in the workplace. Photos of

unveiled women are being dropped from textbooks. Child labor abuse continues, as well as female genital mutilation. I was told girls as young as nine are being kidnapped and sold as child brides. When reported to the police, no action is taken. There is no rule of law. Sexual trafficking is prevalent. Girls ages 16–18 are “rented” to rich men from the Gulf in what are called “summer marriages” during the summer months and then returned to their families.

Growing Persecution

The Christian community also continues to be persecuted. Churches have been desecrated, and no permits to build new churches have been granted since January 2011. Just days before I arrived, an angry mob set fire to a church in Fayoum Province. Fox News reported that it was the “second such assault against the town’s Coptic population in a month. The attackers ripped down the church’s cross and hurled rocks at church members....”

Television channels regularly carry programming that insults Christians and women. “The general atmosphere allows Islamists to speak out against women and Christianity and the government does nothing,” one activist told me.

At a meeting at the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo, Bishop Moussa, a close advisor to Coptic Pope Tawadros II, told me he is concerned about where Egypt is headed and said the Coptic community is fearful. He raised a number of issues relating to the proposed changes to the Egyptian constitution. Earlier this month, Pope Tawadros took the unusual step of publicly criticizing the constitution as discriminatory.

Elections

There also is deep concern that the upcoming elections will essentially be rigged, especially since it is believed that the Muslim Brotherhood has put its supporters in place to oversee the elections and that there will be no transparency. The Associated Press reported on February 23 that “[a] key opposition leader called Saturday for a boycott of upcoming parliamen-



A young girl in Egypt awaits the spiritual rite of the Washing of the Feet.

tary elections, saying he will not take part in a ‘sham democracy.’”

In a meeting with Emad Abdel Ghafour, a Salafist who is the presidential advisor for community outreach, all these reports were brushed aside and blamed on politics. At least the prime minister acknowledged that the government still has a long way to go. “We are trying. It just takes time,” he told me.

The media has done a better job of reporting the plight of the persecuted in Egypt than it has in other parts of the Middle East and surrounding region. On February 22, the *Washington Post* ran an op-ed co-written by Robert Kagan and Michele Dunne that makes the case for a new U.S. approach in dealing with Egypt. I agree with much of what they said and have shared it with my congressional colleagues.



Coptic Bishop Moussa, a close advisor to Coptic Pope Tawadros II, said the Coptic community in Egypt is fearful about its future.

The People, Not the Regime

The U.S. must change how it deals with Egypt. On more than one occasion I was told the perception among many Egyptians is that the United States is supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. “Why hasn’t the State Department issued any statements condemning the lack of certain rights?” one person asked me. “There is a double standard,” another told me. “Human rights and women’s rights mean one thing in the United States and another in Egypt.”

I was told people think the United States is developing relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood because it believes the party is going to remain in power. They went on to say that the feeling is that as long as the brotherhood protects the United States’ interests in the region, it can act with impunity within its borders.

One person pointedly said, “the United States is helping create a state of terrorism that will be exported to Europe. The dogma of religion affecting human

rights and women’s rights will be worse than the Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia.”

I also was told the United States is losing credibility. When I asked what message I should take back to the West, I was told: “Make sure you support the people of Egypt, not the regime.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the meetings I had and the insights I gained, I came away with a number of broad-based policy recommendations:

Syria

- The situation in Syria is complex and there is no easy solution. Many believe it will take years to resolve. Will Assad continue to cling to power with the help of Tehran? Will Syria fracture? Will the rebels attempt to form a legitimate shadow government in Syria that can garner international support? There are more questions than answers about the future of Syria. But even before the civ-

il war broke out, Assad's abuses were well-known. Not only was he a brutal, corrupt dictator at home, but Damascus was a lifeline to the terrorist organization Hezbollah. I have seen with my own eyes Hezbollah's murderous aims having visited the Marine barracks in Lebanon following their 1983 bombing that killed 241 American servicemen. Fast-forward to earlier this month, as Hezbollah was implicated in the deadly bomb attack on Israeli vacationers in Bulgaria. Clearly Assad has much blood on his hands and the U.S. must work, even at this late date, to bring about an end to Assad's reign in Syria.

- The Obama Administration missed an early opportunity to aid the opposition in Syria at a time when the conflict had not yet devolved into a proxy war and when international jihadists were not as significant of a factor as they are today. An already complex environment has only intensified, and many of Syria's minorities increasingly wonder what the future holds for them. A January 15, *New York Times* story said, "Former [State Department] Syria adviser, Frederic C. Hof, wrote last month that although the opposition has offered general assurances to the one-third of Syrians who belong to minority groups, 'probably no more than a handful' believe it, especially as jihadist groups grow more prominent on the battlefield...." As the Obama Administration seeks to develop an effective Syria policy, including Secretary Kerry's latest overture to the Syrian opposition, it must be ever mindful of the very real concerns of Syria's Christian community. Opposition to Assad should not be enough to garner American support. A common enemy does not our friend make. Any aid to the rebels, non-military or otherwise, must be accompanied by insistence that the opposition respect minority rights and allay the very real fears of these communities. This is especially

As the Obama Administration seeks to develop an effective Syria policy, it must be ever mindful of the very real concerns of Syria's Christian community.

important given the influx of foreign jihadists and the ambiguity surrounding their influence and numbers among the opposition.

- Christian leaders in the West must begin to speak out about what is happening not only in Syria but in the Middle East and other parts of South Central Asia. Christian leaders from the Middle East need to be brought to the United States to meet with church leaders here and make the case for greater engagement from the faith community in the West. (In January, I wrote to more than 300 Protestant and Catholic leaders in the U.S. urging them to use their influence to speak out on behalf of the persecuted church around the globe—specifically in the Middle East.)

Egypt

- After I returned from Egypt in July 2011, I recommended that the United States seriously consider conditioning U.S. foreign assistance—specifically military assistance—to Egypt. Since the Camp David Peace Accords, Egypt has received over \$60 billion in U.S. foreign assistance, the second largest overall recipient of such funding. Given the Mubarak regime's human rights and religious freedom abuses, I have long believed this assistance should be conditioned on improvements in these areas. Now with the Muslim Brotherhood at the helm, and the transition to a mature democracy with all that entails, far from certain, I am more convinced than ever that aid to Egypt must be conditioned upon the government respecting and upholding universally recognized human rights norms. We must press President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood more broadly to respect and uphold religious freedom, freedom of speech and the press, freedom of assembly and other basic rights. Police reform, too, must be a priority. Rather than ramming through the constitution,



Egyptian President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood must do more to protect women's rights, end religious persecution and allow free speech.

the Muslim Brotherhood must be urged to embrace an inclusive process that takes into account the concerns of the opposition and various minority groups. Clear benchmarks must be set—an agreed upon framework established—that allows policymakers in the U.S. to determine if Egypt is truly on a path to reform. Recognizing that democratic transitions are often long and messy, it is simply unacceptable to blindly give precious aid dollars to a government that is working at cross-purposes with American values. In addition, Congress should seriously consider removing altogether the State Department waiver authority as it relates to aid to Egypt, since the State Department, without fail and irrespective of changes on the ground, uses the waiver.

- The United States should press President Morsi to compromise with the opposition on rules for upcoming parliamentary elections, which he scheduled to begin April 22 over opposition objections.

There are many legitimate opposition concerns, including gerrymandering to break up districts formerly won by secular parties and use of government ministries to advantage Morsi's party. As of now, most of the secular opposition parties say they will boycott, which means that the elections cannot produce a truly representative parliament even if they are cleanly run.

- The administration must utilize every "tool" in its "toolbox" to influence the Egyptian government. President Morsi's planned trip to Washington is a significant point of leverage to begin pressing for key reforms. As Morsi and his government seek further international economic relief, the U.S. must make it clear that not only is American foreign assistance contingent upon clear progress in the areas outlined above, but our willingness to galvanize the additional economic assistance needed to stabilize the Egyptian economy is also based on progress in these areas.

- The U.S. embassy should actively seek to cultivate relationships with the liberal, democratic Egyptian opposition groups and individuals, human rights groups, Coptic Christians and other key civil society actors. By most accounts, U.S. policy has not evolved to meet the new realities in Egypt. We have embraced the Morsi government the same way we embraced the Mubarak government—to the detriment of other elements of Egyptian civil society—elements with which we have a natural affinity. While such groups may not take the reins of leadership in the near future, they are central to the Egyptian democratic experiment, and we can bolster their standing and effectiveness if we take the long-term view. In this same vein, aid to Egypt should once again benefit Egyptian civil society, not simply the military and economy.
- Congressional delegations traveling to Egypt should meet with activists, NGOs and Christian leaders to better understand what is happening on the ground and to hear firsthand the perception of the United States’ support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Regional Recommendations

- *Special Envoy.*—There must be a high level Special Envoy at the State Department with the dedicated mission of protecting and preserving religious minority communities in the Middle East and South Central Asia. In January 2011, I introduced bipartisan legislation in the House which would do just that. It overwhelmingly passed by a vote of 402–20 in July 2011. The House-passed legislation and companion legislation introduced by Senators Carl Levin and Roy Blunt stalled in the Senate. Despite my repeated appeals, former Senators Jim Webb and John Kerry objected to the legislation moving forward. I have joined with my Democratic colleague Rep. Anna Eshoo in re-introducing this legislation in the 113th Congress

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and remain committed to pressing ahead with the envoy despite State Department opposition—opposition which is short-sighted and utterly consistent with the department’s posture on similar initiatives over the years having opposed for example the creation of the International Religious Freedom Office. It is worth noting that it is fully within the Secretary of State’s authority to appoint an envoy absent legislative action. Based on what I heard on this trip, I am confident that such

a move by Secretary Kerry would be warmly embraced by the communities affected in the region and the diaspora communities abroad, including here in the United States.

- *Persecuted Christians Relief Fund.*—In some of the countries where Christians and other religious minorities have faced the most difficulties, severe economic hardship is a consequence of religious persecution, especially when entire communities are displaced. Consider this February 2011 International Organization for Migration (IOM) press report: “The physical instability driving Christian displacement is now leading to financial hardship as well. Some in Baghdad have sought to exploit the situation by publishing rumors of impending violence against Christians in order to drive down prices of Christian homes and to force Christians to flee. Unable to sell their homes for a fair price and quickly in addition to facing difficulties in transferring their jobs or finding new sources of income, many Christians are finding it difficult to support themselves while displaced.” It is worth noting that depletion of the Christian community in Iraq happened while America was deeply involved in Iraq and in a position militarily, politically and otherwise to exert tremendous influence. Similar difficulties faced the Syrian Christian refugees with whom I spoke as outlined above. Despite congressional attempts, over multiple years, to target aid toward Iraqi Christians, the State Department resisted these efforts, and once the

CONCLUSION

funding was provided the department and USAID proved ineffectual in ensuring that the communities in question benefited. In fact, a July 2012 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report, “U.S. Assistance to Iraq’s Minority Groups in Response to Congressional Directive,” found that the agencies could not prove they spent the funds as Congress intended. In fact, it often appears that there is an anti-Christian bias at the State Department. For years the department refused to recognize that Iraqi Christians were being targeted, insisting instead that they were simply victims of generalized violence. In light of these realities, church leaders in the West, especially the leadership of affected communities (Copts, Chaldeans, Assyrians etc.), should consider partnering with other churches in the U.S. in establishing a relief fund to benefit beleaguered Christians in the Middle East.

- *Champion Human Rights.*—Every U.S. government official, from the President, to the Secretary of State, to the young foreign service officer serving in Cairo or Beirut, must champion the cause of human rights, including religious freedom, in their interactions with foreign government officials and civil society actors. Not simply paying lip-service to these foundational American principles but seeing that they are fully integrated into U.S. foreign policy at every turn. In a 1987 Constitution Day speech, President Ronald Reagan described the United States Constitution as “a covenant we have made not only with ourselves, but with all of mankind.” We have an obligation to keep that covenant with the fearful Coptic Christian and the displaced Syrian refugee. My conversations abroad revealed that the covenant is in jeopardy.

In a 1987 Constitution Day speech, President Ronald Reagan described the United States Constitution as “a covenant we have made not only with ourselves, but with all of mankind.”

In closing, I would like to thank the federal employees—embassy personnel, foreign service officers, Diplomatic Security Officers, FBI, and other government agencies—serving in Lebanon and Egypt. They are extraordinarily dedicated and extremely professional. In Lebanon, the ambassador and embassy staff live in an extremely challenging security environment. Their movement is seriously restricted. In Egypt, too, there are also very real security concerns for U.S. embassy personnel. Protesters scaled the walls of the compound on September 11, 2012 and pulled down the American flag, mere hours before the Benghazi consulate at-

tack. We owe these employees of the U.S. government and their families a debt of gratitude.

Specifically, in Lebanon, I was grateful for Ambassador Connelly’s hospitality and for the work of my control officer, Caitlin Spicer, and the embassy’s political and economic section chief, Danielle Garbe. All went to great lengths to ensure that our trip was a success and that our time was filled with insightful meetings.

In Egypt, I appreciate Ambassador Patterson and her team’s efforts to see that our relatively brief visit was productive. I especially want to thank my control officer Peter Shea (who also assisted with my earlier visit to Egypt). His dedication to human rights and religious freedom is evident and appreciated.

I also would like to thank Speaker John Boehner and House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers for approving this trip.

Finally, I would like to thank my staff, particularly Elyse Anderson, my foreign policy director, and Dan Scandling, my chief of staff, who accompanied me on the trip. ■