



OPENING STATEMENT

Representative Christopher H. Smith Co-Chairman

Hearing on “Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners?”

July 9, 2014

(as prepared for the record)

Good morning and welcome to everyone joining us at this hearing on “Political Pluralism in the OSCE Mediterranean Partners?” As you know, the Arab Spring has left the most vulnerable populations in the region in an even more precarious position. The Commission has taken a consistent interest in this issue – for example in the last Congress we called three hearings on rising sectarian violence in Egypt and other hidden implications of political transition, and we called on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to take a more active role in securing religious freedom in the region.

The Commission’s hearings in the 112th Congress focused on the plight of Coptic Christians in Egypt – particularly the treatment of Coptic women and girls – through the many political transitions that followed the calls for democracy and equality emanating from Tahrir Square. While certainly a minority religion in a Muslim country, Copts comprise 10% of the Egyptian population. They have historically been marginalized in Egyptian society and suffered outright discrimination and violence against both individuals and places of worship.

Sadly, the most recent annual report by the United State Commission for International Religious Freedom states that:

“Despite some progress during a turbulent political transition, the Morsi-era government and the interim government failed or were slow to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, from violence”

The State Department’s most recent International Religious Freedom Reports for the countries who are the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation all express concern regarding the implementation of constitutional and legal guarantees for the free practice of religion, particularly among minority sects.

As long as the exploited in the region remain without a voice, we cannot say that we have truly lived up to the aspirations of the Helsinki Final Act.