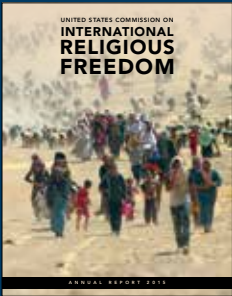
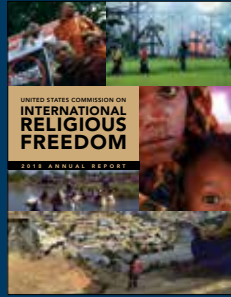
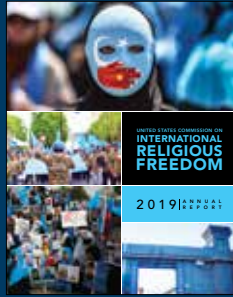
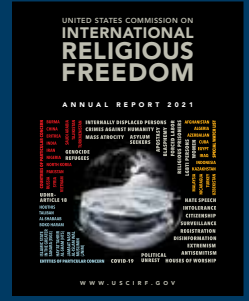
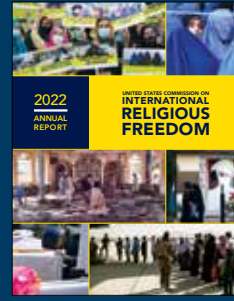
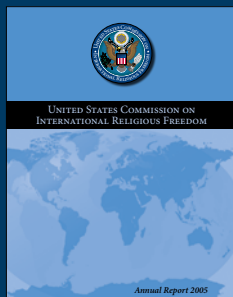
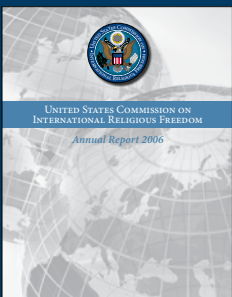
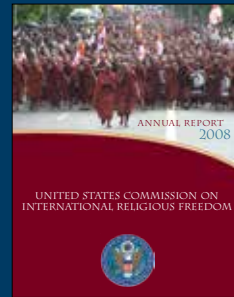
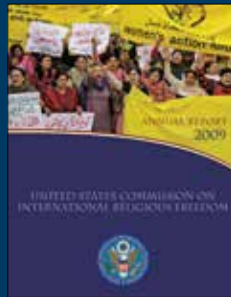
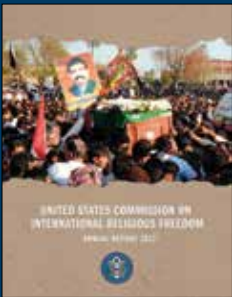
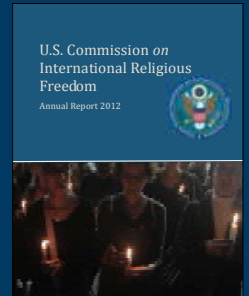
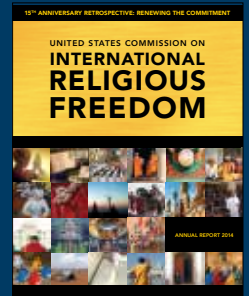


# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT



# UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



# ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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# 2024 ANNUAL REPORT INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

October 27, 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the enactment of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). This landmark [law](#) made promoting the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief a priority in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA [mandates](#) that U.S. policy includes condemning violations of religious freedom abroad and assisting foreign governments to protect this fundamental human right. It established the U.S. Department of State's [Ambassador at Large and Office for International Religious Freedom](#) and the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF), required monitoring and annual reporting, delineated consequences for the worst violators, and incorporated religious freedom concerns into U.S. bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, programs, training, and refugee and asylum policies.

In honor of this important anniversary, the cover of this year's Annual Report—USCIRF's 25th such report—is a collage of cover images from previous USCIRF [Annual Reports](#). Those covers, and the underlying reports, have documented both the persecution and the progress that USCIRF has seen in countries around the globe over the past quarter century of carrying out its mandate. Unfortunately, some egregious situations have remained constant or even worsened during this period, and several countries with periods of notable progress have regressed. Yet at the same time, there have been many important [successes](#).

USCIRF's first annual report, issued in May 2000, focused primarily on China, Russia, and Sudan. Today, the governments of China and Russia remain among the world's worst violators of their people's religious freedom, as well as among the most active perpetrators of cross-border repression and other malign activities abroad, including in the United States. Indeed, Chinese authorities' repression of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims has reached such extremes that the U.S. government recognized it as genocide and crimes against humanity in 2021. The two other recent situations that the United States has recognized as genocide and crimes against humanity also targeted religious minority groups whose persecution USCIRF has long been documenting and decrying—Yazidis, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims in Iraq and Rohingya Muslims in Burma. In all three cases, regrettably, justice for the survivors and accountability for the perpetrators remain elusive to date. By contrast, Sudan saw real religious freedom improvements during the period of civilian-led transitional rule that began in 2019. However, the 2021 military coup and subsequent civil war in 2023 have jeopardized that progress and resulted in a

humanitarian crisis impacting all Sudanese. Over the years, USCIRF also has recognized improvements but continues to have ongoing concerns and has seen backsliding in other countries, including Egypt, India, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

Twenty-five years after IRFA's passage, various state and nonstate actors continue to perpetrate or tolerate severe religious persecution. Governments enforce laws and policies to restrict or punish peaceful religious activity and expression, to impose official religious interpretations, or to discriminate on the basis of religion. Societal

actors, including individuals, mobs, and violent groups, often purporting to act in the name of religion, target those they deem the religious other. Derogatory and dangerous rhetoric against members of religious groups, including from government officials and religious leaders, heightens intolerance and can provoke violence. In too many countries, [individuals](#) and communities continue to suffer for their religious beliefs, activity, or identity or for their religious freedom advocacy. Those indi-

viduals and communities are why IRFA was enacted. They are also why the U.S. government's efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief for all—in partnership with like-minded governments, parliamentarians, and nongovernmental organizations—remain essential today and in the future.

## About This Report

Created by IRFA, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the State Department, that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on the provisions of its authorizing legislation and the standards in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), and other international documents. USCIRF's [mandate and annual reports](#) are different from, and complementary to, the mandate and annual reports of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

USCIRF's 2024 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress in 28 countries during calendar year 2023 and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including travel, hearings, meetings, and

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briefings, and they are approved by a majority vote of Commissioners. IRFA expressly provides each Commissioner the right to include in the annual report a statement with his or her own individual or dissenting views. Various Commissioners have done so many times over the years, either to elaborate on or disagree with some aspect of the report. This year, several Commissioners included individual or dissenting views in the chapters on the implementation of IRFA, Azerbaijan, and China.

The report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its Special Watch List (SWL). The report also includes USCIRF's recommendations of nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) under IRFA. In addition, the report analyzes the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA during the reporting year and provides recommendations to bolster overall U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief abroad. It also includes a section discussing key trends and developments in religious freedom globally during the reporting period, including in countries that are not recommended for CPC or SWL status. This year, that section covers topics including transnational repression, laws restricting religious freedom, attacks against religious sites in areas of armed conflict, risks to religious minorities during elections, the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, religious freedom concerns in Europe, and religious freedom concerns for refugees. Finally, the report's last section highlights key USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government has implemented since USCIRF's previous annual report.

In this report, USCIRF uses the terms "religious freedom," "freedom of religion," and "freedom of religion or belief" interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief—including the right to nonbelief—protected under international human rights law.

## Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

IRFA defines CPCs as countries where the government engages in or tolerates "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom. It defines the State Department's SWL for countries where the government engages in or tolerates "severe" violations of religious freedom.

Under IRFA, particularly severe violations of religious freedom mean "systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious violations . . . , including violations such as—(A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; (B) prolonged detention without charges; (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or (D) other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons." Although the statute does not specifically define severe violations of religious freedom, in making SWL recommendations USCIRF interprets it to mean violations that meet two of the elements of IRFA's systematic, ongoing, and

egregious standard (i.e., that the violations are systematic and ongoing, systematic and egregious, or ongoing and egregious).

To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as defined above, and must also be "a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

The Annual Report highlights the countries and entities that, in USCIRF's view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation; it is

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intended to focus U.S. policymakers' attention on the worst violators of religious freedom globally. The fact that a country or nonstate group is not covered in this report does not mean it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year. It only means that based on the information available to USCIRF, the conditions during that year did not, in USCIRF's view, meet the high thresh-

old—the perpetration or toleration of particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom—required to recommend the country or nonstate group for CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. In the case of a nonstate group, it also could mean that the group did not meet other statutory requirements, such as exercising significant political power and territorial control.

USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions abroad, including violations of freedom of religion or belief perpetrated or tolerated by governments and entities not covered in this report. The full range of USCIRF's work on a wide variety of countries and topics can be found at [www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov).

## USCIRF's 2024 CPC, SWL, AND EPC Recommendations

For 2024, based on religious freedom conditions in 2023, USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- [Redesignate](#) as CPCs the following 12 countries: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following five countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Nigeria, and Vietnam;
- [Maintain](#) on the SWL the following country: Algeria;
- Include on the SWL the following 10 countries: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan;
- [Redesignate](#) as EPCs the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (also referred to as ISIS-West Africa), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

These recommendations reflect several changes from the 2023 Annual Report. This year, USCIRF is recommending for the first time that Azerbaijan be designated as a CPC. Having recommended the

country for SWL status since 2020 and included it on USCIRF's Tier 2 for serious concerns there for many years prior to that, USCIRF's 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports noted increasing religious freedom violations by the government of Azerbaijan in 2021 and 2022. Regrettably, this trend continued during 2023, leading USCIRF to conclude that the CPC standard had now been met. In addition, based on heightened religious repression by the government of Kyrgyzstan in 2023, USCIRF is recommending that country for SWL status for the first time. For Syria, given that the government's violations of religious freedom have evolved to become more political and administrative in nature in recent years, including in 2023, USCIRF is now recommending that country for SWL placement for severe religious freedom violations, rather than CPC designation. However, nonstate actors in conflict with the Syrian regime continue to perpetrate particularly severe violations there. Finally, in this Annual Report, USCIRF is not recommending the Central African Republic (CAR) for SWL placement, based on a lack of reported incidents in 2023 that would meet the severe violations standard.

The conditions supporting the CPC or SWL recommendation for each country are described in the relevant country chapters of this report. The conditions supporting the EPC recommendations for Boko Haram and ISWAP are described in the Nigeria chapter and for HTS in the Syria chapter.

For al-Shabaab, the Houthis, IS Sahel, and JNIM, the EPC recommendations are based on the following conditions:

In 2023, the violent Islamist insurgent group al-Shabaab was active in the Horn of Africa region and maintained its campaign in Somalia with constant battles against technologically advanced government forces and their allies for control of territory. The group declared it would [kill](#) any professed Christians, including through the use of suicide bombings, making any public religious practice unsafe. In January, al-Shabaab operatives [bombed](#) the main mosque in Buulaburte, killing 18, with some victims still inside the building. The group also has very active cells in Kenya.

*Nonstate actors in conflict with the Syrian regime continue to perpetrate particularly severe violations there.*

The [Houthi movement](#), also known as Ansar Allah, continued to [undermine](#) religious freedom in Yemen throughout 2023. The group particularly targeted the rights of women and girls by imposing a *mahram* (male escort) requirement, while also [enforcing](#) gender segregation in public spaces, including at the country's largest educational institution, Sana'a University. Jewish prisoner of conscience [Libi Marhabi](#) remained in Houthi detention despite a court order for his release. Houthi leaders contin-

ued to promote explicitly antisemitic propaganda by deliberately conflating Israeli policy and Judaism. In May, Houthi gunmen [raided](#) a peaceful Baha'i gathering in Sana'a, detaining 17 Yemeni Baha'is and subjecting them to forced religious education. Five of the 17 individuals remain detained, and those released were forced to sign statements as a condition for release. The Houthis continued to harass, detain, and torture Yemeni Christians, particularly converts from Islam. Only a [few thousand Christians](#) remained in the country, with many leaving Yemen altogether to escape persecution.

Islamist insurgent groups IS Sahel and JNIM continued attacks across several African countries in 2023, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, often in the context of weak state security. Experts estimate that insurgent activity [killed](#) more than 1,700 citizens in the region, particularly in areas bordering Mali. In Mali, unidentified violent insurgents threatened the Christian community in Douna, forbidding worshipers from gathering and praying in churches, ringing bells, or playing musical instruments. In Douna, insurgents also often demanded Christians [convert](#) to Islam and threatened violence if people refused. In August 2023, IS Sahel insurgents started applying *hudud* punishments (those fixed within Shari'a) including stoning and severing limbs as sentences for those they perceive as [breaking](#) laws in Gao and northeast Mali. In doing so, insurgents imposed religious interpretations of existing laws that now restrict freedom of religion or belief. In Niger in June, 69 families [left](#) their homes after insurgents threatened them with death if they refused conversion to Islam in a village near the Burkina Faso border.



# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

## Key Findings

In 2023, the 25th anniversary year of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the Joseph R. Biden administration maintained its support for many initiatives related to international religious freedom (IRF).

In December, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) 12 countries as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) under IRFA for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. USCIRF expressed [disappointment](#) that India and Nigeria were not designated as CPCs, despite the violations in both countries meeting the legal standard. The State Department [reimposed](#) existing sanctions on eight of the 12 countries it designated as CPCs and issued waivers on taking any action against the remaining four. USCIRF has long called on administrations to refrain from issuing waivers and relying exclusively on existing sanctions to hold CPCs accountable. The State Department placed five countries on its Special Watch List (SWL) for severe religious freedom violations, including Azerbaijan for the first time. USCIRF had been recommending Azerbaijan for placement on the SWL since 2020, the first year it began recommending countries for inclusion on the State Department’s SWL. Between 2013 and 2019, USCIRF included Azerbaijan in its own Tier 2 category of countries with serious religious freedom concerns. Finally, the State Department designated eight Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs), which are nonstate actors that engage in particularly

severe violations of religious freedom. USCIRF recommended seven of those eight entities for such designation.

Throughout the year, the Biden administration [imposed](#) Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on religious freedom violators, including Taliban officials responsible for religiously inspired human rights abuses committed against women and girls and Chinese officials responsible for violations against Uyghur and other Muslim groups

in the Xinjiang region. The Global Magnitsky Act gives the U.S. government authority to issue visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights,” including violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. In addition, the State Department launched the [Without Just Cause Political Prisoners Initiative](#) to advocate for the release of political prisoners, including religious prisoners of conscience.

In September, President Biden [maintained](#) the heightened admissions cap for refugees at 125,000 for fiscal

year (FY) 2024 and designated certain populations for priority consideration as refugees, including multiple groups fleeing religious persecution. Also in September, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) [extended](#) temporary protected status for Afghan nationals living in the United States. In December, USCIS [extended](#) the reregistration period for extensions of temporary protected status for Nicaraguan nationals living in the United States.

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## 2023 STATE DEPARTMENT DESIGNATIONS

2023 STATE DEPARTMENT DESIGNATIONS	
CPC Designations	Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Algeria, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam
EPC Designations	Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, ISIS-Sahel (formerly known as Islamic State in Greater Sahara), the Islamic State in West Africa, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Lift the waiver on the four CPC-designated countries—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation and review U.S. policy to make changes that impose meaningful consequences and encourage positive change;
- Increase the use of the Global Magnitsky Act and other human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses, and coordinate with other countries with similar sanctions regimes on such targeted sanctions whenever possible;
- Advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience, including those documented in USCIRF’s [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) in multilateral fora and in bilateral meetings with relevant governments;
- Maintain U.S. leadership and engagement in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization of American States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to advance religious freedom;
- Appoint a well-qualified individual as Special Adviser to the President on IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandate as outlined in IRFA;
- Continue to strengthen the mechanisms of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to increase the ability to meet the admissions ceiling for refugees in FY 2024 and prioritize resettlement for survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution;
- Address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in [Expedited Removal](#), including by enhancing the quality and oversight of the initial processing of noncitizens, improving detention conditions, and appointing a high-level official at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS);
- Allocate greater funding to programs that support civil society and human rights defenders in exile who document and monitor religious freedom violations in countries where civil society is repressed;
- Form a joint State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) task force to develop and implement a strategy to address communal violence severely impacting religious communities in countries that the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL; and
- Perform an assessment on foreign governments’ transnational repression as it relates to religious freedom, including analysis of how to improve U.S. government policy and U.S. collaboration with allies to prevent and counter transnational targeting of religious communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- As individual members of Congress, advocate for IRF by sponsoring religious prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project, collaborating with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and joining task forces or caucuses such as the U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism, the House IRF Caucus, or the Ahmadiyya Muslim Caucus;
- Participate in congressional delegations to countries USCIRF recommends for designation as CPCs or placement on the SWL to assess conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs as well as nonbelievers, raise religious freedom issues, and press for the release of religious prisoners of conscience;
- Convene public hearings to receive the testimony of officials from the State Department, USAID, the Department of Defense, and other relevant agencies regarding their respective assessments of international religious freedom issues and the actions their agencies are taking to implement USCIRF recommendations;
- Request that the Government Accountability Office conduct an accounting of all U.S. foreign assistance provided to countries that the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL;
- For countries the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL, condition U.S. security assistance on improvements in religious freedom conditions in those countries;
- Permanently reauthorize the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment to allow individuals legally residing in the United States to facilitate the resettlement of persecuted religious minority groups from their countries of residence to the United States;
- Support policies in the bipartisan [Transnational Repression Policy Act](#) to strengthen U.S. efforts to counter foreign governments’ transnational repression on the basis of religion or belief; and
- Introduce and pass legislation that prohibits any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments of countries that the State Department designates as CPCs—such as China or Saudi Arabia—or places on the SWL.



## Legal Framework

IRFA, as amended by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#), seeks to make religious freedom a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. These include [governmental institutions](#) (USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency requiring regular reauthorization, the ambassador at large and the State Department's [IRF Office](#), and a special adviser on the White House NSC staff); ongoing monitoring and annual reports on international religious freedom violations; the imposition of consequences for the worst violators; and making publicly available Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) victims targeted due to their religion or belief. The consequences set forth in IRFA consist of CPC designations and related actions, placement on the State Department's SWL, the ability to bar entry to the United States of foreign officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations, and EPC designations for nonstate actors.

IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs and requires training on religious freedom and religious persecution for State Department foreign service officers and U.S. immigration officials. Further, it includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy. It also specifically cites U.S. participation in multilateral organizations as an avenue for advancing religious freedom abroad. IRFA is centered on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief as recognized in international law and as articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), and other international instruments and regional agreements.

For a more detailed description of IRFA, its legislative history, and its implementation, see [USCIRF's Factsheet: IRFA](#).

Alongside IRFA, other laws provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Countability, and Divestment Act (CISADA, P.L.111-195). More broadly, the [permanently reauthorized](#)

2016 [Global Magnitsky Act](#) allows the president, who has delegated these authorities to the secretaries of the treasury and state, to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for "extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights" against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. Executive Order (E.O.) [13818](#), issued in December 2017 to implement and build on the Global Magnitsky Act, authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in "serious human rights abuse," providing an even more expansive basis for targeted sanctions.

In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department's FY 2023 annual appropriations (P.L. 117-328) requires the secretary of state to make foreign officials and their immediate family members ineligible for U.S. entry if there is credible evidence that such individuals have been involved in "a gross violation of human rights." Unlike the visa ineligibility provision enacted in IRFA, visa bans under this provision may be announced publicly.

*IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs and requires training on religious freedom and religious persecution for State Department foreign service officers and U.S. immigration officials.*

## Key Developments in 2023

### Key U.S. Government IRF Positions

Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Rashad Hussain](#) continued implementing his mandate through public speeches and meetings, including with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) IRF Roundtable and other stakeholders. In addition, Ambassador Hussain traveled to [Mauritania](#), [Germany](#), [Israel and the West Bank](#), [Qatar](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Czechia](#) to meet with governmental officials and faith communities to advance religious freedom and combat religious intolerance, including antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism [Deborah E. Lipstadt](#) traveled to [Poland](#), [Spain](#), [Tunisia](#), [Morocco](#), the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Israel twice](#), [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [Switzerland](#), [Italy](#),

## KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls for Congressional Hearing after State Department Fails to Designate Nigeria and India as Countries of Particular Concern](#)
- **Podcast:** [Shortcomings of the State Department's CPC Designations](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Marking 25 Years of IRFA](#)
- **Event:** [The First 25 Years: IRFA Accomplishments and Next Steps](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Policy Update:** [Countering China's Techno-Authoritarianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence](#)
- **Compendiums:** [Anti-Conversion Laws](#) and [Blasphemy Laws](#)
- **Factsheet:** [African Traditional and Indigenous Religions](#)
- **Special Reports:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#), [The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia](#), and [A Retrospective: 25th Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act](#)

France, Germany, and Canada. During 2023, Special Envoy Lipstadt also [spoke twice](#) at the UN in New York on combating antisemitism, issued two [joint statements](#) in the wake of Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack, and [addressed](#) the Forum of Special Envoys and Coordinators Combating Antisemitism at the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The Office of the Special Envoy also released a [report](#) on policies, programs, and actions across the globe to combat antisemitism. Special Envoy Lipstadt's efforts came amid a [surge](#) of antisemitism in Europe, including a reported [quadrupling](#) of antisemitic acts in France.

In 2023, Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights [Uzra Zeya](#), who also serves concurrently as the U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, [spoke](#) at a Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day event, [highlighted](#) the Chinese government's arbitrary imprisonment of Tibetan monk Go Sherab Gyatso, and delivered [remarks](#) at a side event at the IRFBA Ministerial Conference on the Chinese government's religious freedom violations in Tibet.

### Lack of CPC Designations for Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam

The State Department did not designate Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, or Vietnam as CPCs in 2023 despite USCIRF's recommendations and the State Department's own reporting on the particularly severe religious freedom violations in those countries. USCIRF has recommended CPC status for Afghanistan since 2022, India since 2020, Nigeria since 2009, Syria since 2014, and Vietnam since 2002, and it issued a [statement](#) criticizing the State Department's omissions. The State Department did, however, place Vietnam on its SWL and designate the Taliban as an EPC.

### New Designation for Azerbaijan

The State Department accepted USCIRF's recommendation to place Azerbaijan on its SWL. USCIRF has made this recommendation since 2020, the first year it began recommending countries for placement on the SWL. Previously, USCIRF had reported on Azerbaijan in its own Tier 2 category of countries with serious religious freedom concerns between 2013 and 2019. The State Department failed to place Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Uzbekistan on its SWL, despite USCIRF recommendations.

### Without Just Cause Political Prisoners Initiative

On January 11, 2023, the State Department launched the [Without Just Cause Political Prisoners Initiative](#), which seeks to raise international awareness and advocate for the release of political prisoners. The initiative includes diplomatic engagement in Washington, DC, and by U.S. embassies abroad. Some of those individuals [featured](#) are religious prisoners of conscience included in USCIRF's [Frank R. Wolf](#)

[Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) such as [Gulshan Abbas](#), [Rolando Álvarez](#), [Ekpar Asat](#), and [Go Sherab Gyatso](#).

### Malign Foreign Influence

The [Lobbying Disclosure Act](#) and the [Foreign Agent Registration Act of 1938](#) regulate the employment of lobbyists by malign foreign actors. This regulatory framework [does not prevent](#) lobbyists from working on behalf of foreign adversaries who engage in gross violations of human rights. As such, foreign adversaries such as China and Iran can legally attempt to promote their interests or influence U.S. government policy on human rights and international religious freedom issues. In 2023, a bipartisan group of senators introduced the [Disclosing Foreign Influence in Lobbying Act](#), which would require regis-

tered lobbyists to disclose any foreign countries or political parties that are involved in the direction, planning, supervision, or control of a lobbyist's activities. The Senate passed the Disclosing Foreign Influence in Lobbying Act; the House did not vote on the Act.

No member of Congress reintroduced the bipartisan [Stop Helping Adversaries Manipulate Everything Act \(SHAME Act\)](#), which would prohibit lobbyists from receiving compensation from countries [designated](#) as foreign adversaries by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Most of the designated countries, which include China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, and Russia, engage in particularly severe religious freedom violations and other egregious human rights abuses. The SHAME Act would considerably strengthen the existing regulatory framework around lobbying on behalf of foreign governments.

### Multilateral Engagement

The State Department continued to serve as the Secretariat of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA). During the year, IRFBA made multicountry statements, including on [combating](#) antisemitism, the [persecution](#) of Christians worldwide, and Chinese [religious prisoner of conscience Wang Yi](#). In addition, the U.S. government [cosponsored](#) a UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) resolution on freedom of religion or belief.

In 2023, the United States served the second year of a three-year term as a member of the UNHRC. The U.S. government [cosponsored](#) a resolution on freedom of religion or belief and [held](#) a side event on combating antisemitism worldwide. The U.S. government also joined a multicountry [statement](#) condemning Iran for its religiously motivated persecution of women and girls, delivered a [statement](#) speaking out against blasphemy laws, and [supported resolutions mandating](#) investigations into human rights violations in Iran, Syria, Nicaragua, Ukraine, Eritrea, Belarus, Burma, and Afghanistan. At the UN Security Council, the U.S. government [supported two](#) resolutions condemning the Taliban's religiously motivated persecution of women and girls.

*The State Department did not designate Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, or Vietnam as CPCs in 2023 despite USCIRF's recommendations and the State Department's own reporting on the particularly severe religious freedom violations in those countries.*

## Individual Violators

During 2023, there were no known visa denials to any foreign officials for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the provision added by IRFA. However, the U.S. government continued its use of other accountability tools to deny U.S. visas or block the U.S.-based assets of foreigners for corruption or human rights abuses.

In 2023, the total number of individuals and entities sanctioned under the Global Magnitsky Act and its related E.O. [13818](#) rose to 681. The U.S. Department of the Treasury [imposed](#) Global Magnitsky Act sanctions on Taliban officials for religious-inspired human rights abuses committed against women and girls and on Chinese officials responsible for violations against Muslim groups in the Xinjiang region.

The U.S. government also used non-Global Magnitsky Act tools to hold violators accountable. Pursuant to E.O. [13851](#), the Treasury Department sanctioned Nicaraguan judicial officials responsible for stripping citizenship from wrongfully exiled religious leaders and for unjustly imprisoning Bishop Rolando Álvarez. In [January](#), [March](#), [April](#), [June](#), and [September](#), pursuant to E.O. [13553](#), E.O. [13846](#), and E.O. [13224](#), the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Iranian officials for their 2022 crackdown on demonstrators protesting Mahsa Zhina Amini's death in police custody for wearing an "improper hijab" and for their continued rights violations against women and girls. In addition, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) individuals and entities connected to the Burmese military—which the State Department in 2022 [determined](#) committed genocide against Rohingya Muslims—on the two-year anniversary of the military's coup d'état, pursuant to E.O. [14014](#).

## Programs

IRFA envisaged the funding of religious freedom programs authorizing U.S. foreign assistance to promote and develop "legal protections and cultural respect for religious freedom." For [FY 2023](#), the State Department was required to make funds available for international religious freedom programs. During 2023, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor issued requests for proposals to advance religious freedom and/or provide protection to religious minority groups in [Tibet](#) and [Mongolia](#) as well as requests for proposals to monitor and document religious freedom violations [globally](#).

Throughout 2023, the Biden administration collaborated with religious communities and funded humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. In February, USAID convened a roundtable [discussion](#) with faith-based organizations working in development and humanitarian assistance. In July, USAID [announced](#) \$74 million in additional humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations in Burma, Bangladesh, and the surrounding region, including the Rohingya. In September, USAID [announced](#) the launch of its first-ever

strategic [religious engagement](#) policy to boost USAID's collaboration with religious communities to improve development and humanitarian assistance outcomes.

## Refugee Resettlement

Under USRAP, the president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year; under IRFA, religious persecution should be considered in this determination. In September 2022, the Biden administration [maintained](#) the annual refugee ceiling at 125,000 for FY 2023. For FY 2023, the Biden administration [designated](#) certain populations for priority consideration as refugees—including Turkic Muslim refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of the People's Republic of China, Rohingya refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of Burma, and Iraqi and Syrian nationals who are members of a religious or ethnic minority group. In December 2022, the President [reauthorized](#) the Lautenberg

Amendment for FY 2023. The amendment is a family reunification program providing a legal path for resettlement for religious minorities from Iran and from former Soviet Union countries who are fleeing government persecution. Despite these steps, only 60,014 refugees were [admitted](#) to the United States in FY 2023.

In September 2023, the White House [announced](#) that it was maintaining the admission

ceiling at 125,000 for FY 2024. For FY 2024, the Biden administration [designated](#) certain members of religious minority groups in Eurasia, the Baltics, and Iran for priority consideration pursuant to the Lautenberg Amendment. The Lautenberg Amendment was [reauthorized](#) in March 2024. In December, at the Global Refugee Forum, the U.S. government [announced](#) new pledges, including increasing the resettlement of Rohingya to the United States.

## Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

As authorized by IRFA, USCIRF examined the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows DHS officers to quickly deport—without immigration court hearings—noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documents unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution or torture. USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in comprehensive reports released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#) that document major problems successive administrations have not addressed. Specifically, USCIRF found that DHS officials often fail to follow required procedures to identify asylum seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations; that they detain asylum seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions; and that funding disparities and a lack of high-level oversight hamper the complicated, multiagency process. These flaws raise serious concerns that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution or torture in violation of both U.S. and international law—a risk that Expedited Removal has only exacerbated. In May, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [announced](#) changes that

*Throughout 2023, the Biden administration collaborated with religious communities and funded humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism.*

may allow families seeking asylum in Expedited Removal proceedings to access alternatives to detention while awaiting the processing of their claim.

### Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

In 2023, Congress continued its own IRF promotion efforts. The House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) held multiple hearings or events on religious freedom conditions abroad, including on Chinese [religious prisoner of conscience Gao Zhisheng](#), the [crisis](#) facing women and girls in Afghanistan, the [dire](#) state of religious freedom around the world, the [Nicaraguan](#) government's severe [persecution](#) of the Catholic Church, and several on [antisemitism](#) in intergovernmental organizations and in Europe. The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) held a [hearing](#) on human rights in Burma in the aftermath of the military coup d'état. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China held hearings on preventing [forced](#) assimilation in Tibet,

[implementing](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, [countering](#) China's transnational repression, and Uyghur [forced labor](#). The Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party held a [hearing](#) on the Uyghur genocide. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a [hearing](#) on transnational repression.

In addition, members of Congress advocated for [religious prisoners and other prisoners of conscience](#) through the TLHRC's [Defending Freedom Project](#). Members also participated in numerous USCIRF hearings or events, including on religious freedom and women's rights in [Iran](#), the religious freedom implications of Russia's [invasion](#) of Ukraine, [transnational](#) repression of freedom of religion or belief, deteriorating religious freedom conditions in [Cuba](#), religious freedom conditions in [Vietnam](#), the 25th [anniversary](#) of IRFA, and the [launch](#) of USCIRF's 2023 Annual Report. Finally, members of Congress sent the administration multiple letters supporting USCIRF's policy recommendations, and the U.S. House of Representatives passed a [resolution](#) condemning Iran's state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i religious minority group.

### **Commissioner dissent on IRFA Implementation by Commissioner Eric Ueland**

USCIRF's work is critical in holding violators of religious freedom to account, and demanding religious freedom for all be as respected as other human rights. On the welcome day USCIRF and the many fighting for international religious freedom succeed, there will no longer be the need for programs by the United States to provide succor and refuge to those whose freedom of religion is under threat.

Until then, America's generosity towards refugees who suffer religious freedom violations has been consistent across multiple administrations, providing an option to those whose religious freedom is extinguished, restricted, or threatened. I believe lower than recommended levels for religious refugees along with a rigorous review process deliver optimal results to those with religious freedom needs who flee oppression, suppression, relocation, revocation, terror, imprisonment, torture, or looming death. These refugees come to the United States free to practice their faith without fear or favor under our Constitution and laws.

The United States should work to expand the number of countries who can, if they choose, adopt religiously based refugee admittance programs, so more countries provide refuge to those fleeing in the face of threats to their religious freedom. Well-grounded religiously based refugee programs in other countries would meet the need of advancing religious freedom opportunities around the globe, and protect those whose religious freedom is threatened. In key bilateral relationships, it would be worthy work on behalf of religious freedom to diplomatize this priority.

### **Additional view on IRFA Implementation by Vice Chair Frederick A. Davie, and Commissioners Susie Gelman, Mohamed Magid, and Stephen Schneck**

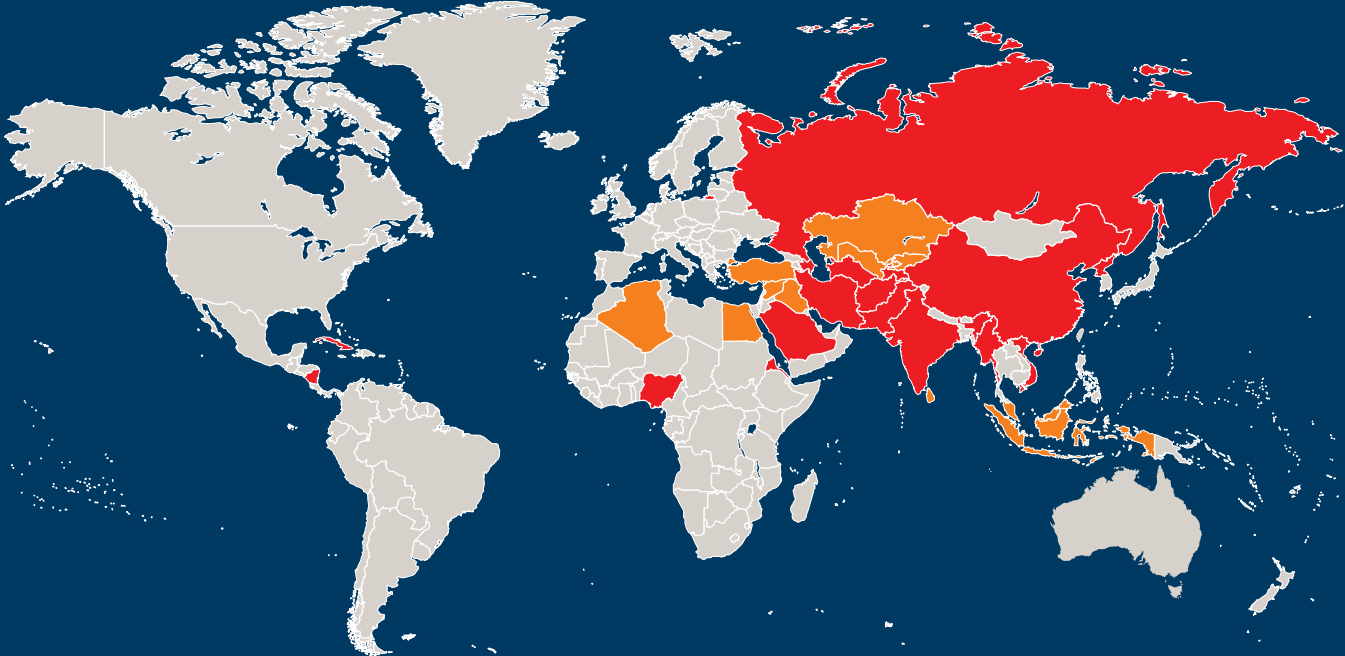
USCIRF has a commendable track record of recommending a strong and robust refugee program. The importance of USCIRF's recommendation that the Biden administration continue to strengthen the mechanisms of this program to increase the ability to meet the admissions ceiling for refugees, along with prioritizing survivors of egregious religious persecution, cannot be overstated.

The United States has long been a leader in the resettlement of refugees from abroad, including victims of religious persecution. While USCIRF's focus is on individuals and groups being persecuted for their religion or belief, we strongly believe that the United States must also continue to resettle those fleeing persecution on all of the grounds recognized by U.S. and international law. Protecting refugees and giving them hope for the future is a core tenet of the United States' history and values.

Unlike the previous administration, the Biden administration has returned the United States to a global leadership role on refugee resettlement. We also strongly support the United States and its partners continuing their generous humanitarian aid to the vast and growing number of refugees and internally displaced people around the globe. Given the scale of today's world crises, it is crucial that the administration continue to work with other countries to expand their own resettlement programs.



# 2024 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



**■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN**

- Afghanistan
- Azerbaijan
- Burma
- China
- Cuba
- Eritrea
- India
- Iran
- Nicaragua
- Nigeria
- North Korea
- Pakistan
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- Tajikistan
- Turkmenistan
- Vietnam

**■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES**

- Algeria
- Egypt
- Indonesia
- Iraq
- Kazakhstan
- Kyrgyzstan
- Malaysia
- Sri Lanka
- Syria
- Turkey
- Uzbekistan



# AFGHANISTAN

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate under Taliban rule. De facto Taliban authorities continued to enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a, violating freedom of religion or belief for all Afghans holding a different interpretation of Islam and for members of religious minority groups. The Taliban expanded and enforced [dozens](#) of edicts and decrees based on their religious interpretation to restrict Afghans' movement, dress, employment, and education, disproportionately impacting religious minorities as well as women and girls.

Under the Taliban, the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) harshly enforced this interpretation of Shari'a. Throughout the year, Taliban officials conducted [hundreds](#) of public floggings and detentions across the country after finding individuals guilty of offenses deemed illicit or immoral, without due process. They detained a number of journalists, women's rights activists, and religious minorities. In October 2023, Taliban authorities [released](#) French-Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi after 284 days in jail. Behboudi, who is Hazara Shi'a, was held on charges of espionage. The same month, after detaining him for seven months, the Taliban [released](#) Matiullah Wesa, an outspoken advocate for the education of Afghan girls. Prior to his arrest, Wesa had repeatedly called on the Taliban to reverse its decree barring girls from pursuing education beyond sixth grade. In December, the Taliban [announced](#) that it would allow girls of all ages to attend Islamic schools (*madrassas*), 13,500 of which are government controlled and employ teachers approved by the Taliban's Ministry of Education.

The Taliban continued to enforce [restrictions](#) on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the country. In addition to prohibiting employment of Afghan women, the Taliban in September [detained](#) 18 NGO workers, accusing them of promoting Christianity. Under Taliban rule, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians face severe restrictions, including on their dress and [appearance](#), and

have been prohibited from celebrating their religious holidays publicly. In March, the Taliban's Religious Affairs Ministry [directed](#) imams throughout the country to instruct Afghans to refrain from celebrating [Nowruz](#), [claiming](#) the holiday is against Shari'a.

Shi'a Muslims also continued to face harassment, violence, and interference with their right to worship. In February 2023, a governor in Badakhshan issued a letter [prohibiting](#) marriages between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The Taliban additionally banned the teaching of the Shi'a Jafari school of jurisprudence, forcing private universities to [remove](#) all religious books that do not conform to the Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The Taliban declared April 21 as Eid al-Fitr and instructed police to force Shi'a Muslims to break their fast at vehicle checkpoints. In July, citing security concerns, Afghanistan's Council of Shi'a Scholars published a [declaration](#) advising mourners to limit their activities marking Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. The declaration called on mourners to refrain from street processions during Ashura, where Shi'a Muslims commemorate the death of Imam Hussain. The same month, Taliban members prevented Shi'a residents from publicly celebrating Eid al-Adha. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), several Shi'a clerics were [killed](#) in targeted attacks throughout October, November, and December.

Increased [attacks](#) by terrorist groups, including the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), continued to threaten Afghanistan's religious minorities and the country's overall stability. While ISIS-K attacks throughout the year focused primarily on Taliban members, terrorists also targeted Afghanistan's Shi'a communities, including Hazaras. In October, an [attack](#) on the largest Shi'a mosque in Baghlan resulted in the death of [17](#) worshipers. In November, an [explosion](#) in a Shi'a Hazara majority neighborhood near Kabul killed seven people; ISIS later claimed responsibility for the attack.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Afghanistan under the de facto rule of the Taliban as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Expand the existing Priority 2 (P-2) designation granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members to explicitly include Afghan religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution;
  - Integrate protections for freedom of religion or belief into all potential dialogue with the Taliban, continue to clearly and publicly condemn ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Taliban and ISIS-K, and emphasize to Taliban leadership the close relationship between religious freedom and overall security; and
  - Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities—citing specific religious freedom violations—and coordinate with allies to impose similar sanctions.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Create by law a P-2 designation for members of religious groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Afghanistan](#)

## Background

In August 2021, the Taliban returned to power after two decades. Despite attempts to project a more moderate stance, it has imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law that purposefully undermines the human rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities, including their right to religious freedom. The country's population is [estimated](#) at 39.2 million and is composed of a wide range of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Balochs. The country is 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a) and less than 0.3 percent other religions. Many religious minorities fled Afghanistan following the Taliban's 2021 takeover, but small communities of Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs remain. An [estimated](#) 50 Hindus were in Afghanistan in 2021, while eight Sikhs and fewer than 10,000 Christians remained in 2023, despite the Taliban's previous [claim](#) that no Christians are present in the country. The Taliban considers Afghans who convert from Islam to Christianity as "[apostates](#)" and as such subject to the death penalty.

The Taliban has rejected Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, viewing it as "insufficiently" Islamic and failing to recognize God's commands as the basis for law and policy. While the Taliban has not introduced a formal written constitution for Afghanistan, reports indicate the drafting process is "ongoing." In the absence of a constitution, the Taliban has professed that its interpretation of Shari'a and the Qur'an are the basis for law in the country.

In July 2023, a new law [dissolved](#) the Office of the State Secretary General and put in its [place](#) the Directorate General of Supervision and Pursuit of Decrees, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of edicts in both public and private institutions. The new law also granted the Taliban's Supreme Leader total authority to oversee the "correct" implementation of laws, rules, and decrees. In September, Taliban officials announced their establishment of *ulema shuras* (councils) throughout all 34 provinces, none of which included representation from Shi'a Muslims or women.

## Restrictions on Women

In 2023, the Taliban established, expanded, and implemented a series of edicts and [decrees](#) to further restrict the rights of Afghan women and girls in society, including their dress, movement, access to education, and employment. In April, the Taliban [prevented](#) Afghan women from reporting to work at the United Nations (UN), expanding its 2022 decrees forbidding women from working in offices or for NGOs. In March, [UN experts](#) released a statement calling for schools to reopen for girls across Afghanistan and for the lifting of restrictions on female educators, stating that the Taliban has "no justification to deny the right to education, on any grounds, including religion or tradition." Secondary schools for girls remained closed. However, in August, the Taliban [barred](#) 100

Afghan girls from leaving for the United Arab Emirates to complete their university education. In October, the Kandahar religious police mandated to women's *madrassas* that the only acceptable form of hijab is the burqa.

These edicts have had severe impacts on women in Afghanistan. In March 2023, the Taliban [announced](#) that under its interpretation of Shari'a, women's divorces were invalid. This decree, coupled with the elimination of domestic violence shelters throughout the country, leaves Afghan women susceptible to abusive or harmful marriages. In December, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that the Taliban [detains](#) women to "protect" them from gender-based discrimination. The Taliban also arbitrarily detained women throughout the year for participating in peaceful protests against its restrictive policies, such as the [education ban](#) and the closure of [beauty salons](#). The absence of women's participation in the workforce and in education has had direct consequences in the distribution of humanitarian aid and increased the risk of poverty and [child marriage](#).

## Key U.S. Policy

In 2023, key issues for U.S. policymakers included refugee resettlement and the relocation of Afghans who worked for the U.S. government, NGOs, or media outlets. U.S. policy also focused on addressing protection of women's rights. In March 2023, the U.S. Department of State's special representative for Afghanistan joined a multilateral [statement](#) with relevant special envoys condemning the Taliban's human rights violations, including against religious minorities. The statement expressed concern and called for the immediate reversal of the restrictive bans on education and employment for women.

While the United States does not recognize the de facto Taliban authorities as the official government of Afghanistan, several U.S. delegations have participated in conversations with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. In April, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan met with Afghan civil society and political leaders, journalists, and human rights activists to discuss current challenges in the country. The same month, U.S. officials [participated](#) in a UN-organized meeting in Doha focused on potential ways to engage with the Taliban on key human rights issues, including women's and girls' rights, minority rights, and inclusive governance. In December, the U.S. mission to the UN voted in [favor](#) of a Security Council resolution calling for the creation of a UN special envoy for Afghanistan to increase engagement with Taliban officials. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$812 million for programs in Afghanistan.

In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [issued](#) targeted sanctions against Taliban officials Fariduddin Mahmood and Khalid Hanafi for repressing the rights of Afghan women and girls. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) the Taliban as an entity of particular concern (EPC) for particularly severe religious freedom violations.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended negatively. The government continued to enforce its 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, which required the registration of religious groups to operate legally and engage in worship, mandated the official review and approval of religious literature and other materials, and restricted who could engage in “religious propaganda” or missionary activity, among other limitations. In keeping with the previous year, the government yet again refused to register any non-Muslim religious community despite continued efforts by Protestant Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses to obtain official registration. The government only reported registering two mosques during the year.

Authorities continued to exert pressure on Muslims related to their religious activities, and they surveilled, fined, detained, and arrested those considered to have violated Azerbaijan’s religious regulations. In January and February 2023, courts [fined](#) four Muslim men on administrative charges for “illegally involv[ing] minors in the performance of religious rituals” after they brought their children to a shopping mall to participate in a religious celebration. Authorities subsequently arrested one of the four men on questionable drug trafficking charges. The Muslim Unity Movement (*Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı*) or MUM—a Shi’a Muslim group that has opposed the government’s control of religious practice—continued to experience harassment and persecution that many human rights defenders characterized as politically motivated. Over the course of the year, police [detained](#) the group’s members, placed them under administrative arrest, and subjected those who were detained or imprisoned to physical and psychological pressure. In several cases, MUM members claimed that authorities beat and tortured them. Following an armed attack in January on the Azerbaijani Embassy in Tehran, Iran, authorities conducted arrests across the country to counter alleged acts of espionage, efforts to overthrow the government, and drug trafficking. While officials asserted that the individuals arrested in these sweeps sought to establish a theocratic

state, human rights defenders contended that many were wrongly detained in likely connection to their criticism of the government’s religious policies. At the end of the year, a nongovernmental organization [identified](#) 183 persons as “peaceful believers” unjustly imprisoned in Azerbaijan due to their religious beliefs or activities, which marked a significant increase in that number compared to the preceding year.

Jehovah’s Witnesses still could not perform an alternative civilian service in place of carrying out mandatory military service, despite the provision of such an option in the country’s constitution. In some instances, Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced retaliation for attempting to exercise their right to conscientiously object in accordance with their religious beliefs. In June, the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal of [Seymur Mammadov](#), whose nine-month prison sentence had been converted to a one-year suspended sentence the previous year. Relevant government bodies refused to issue passports to other Jehovah’s Witnesses or imposed on them exit bans because they had failed to complete their military service.

The government continued to pose a threat to religious sites in and around the region of Nagorno-Karabakh. In May, the chairman of the official State Committee for Work on Religious Affairs Mubariz Gurbanli [urged](#) Armenian Apostolic priests to leave the Dadivank Monastery located in the Kalbajar region, falsely claiming that they had no ties to the religious site. Although a United Nations mission to the city of Khankendi in October [concluded](#) that it “saw no damage ... to cultural or religious structures,” other organizations remained concerned by the potential for damage or destruction in the region. In November 2023, Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW), a research initiative supported by Cornell University, [reported](#) damage to the historical Meghretsots Holy Mother of God Church in Shusha. That same month, CHW [released](#) satellite imagery that [indicated](#) probable damage to two Armenian cemeteries also in Shusha.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Azerbaijan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Work with the government of Azerbaijan to revise the 2009 religion law, as most recently amended in 2022, to comply with international human rights standards and to bring it into conformity with recommendations made in 2012 by the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe;
  - Assist the Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with international partners, to develop an alternative civilian service and permit conscientious objection in line with its constitution and pursuant to its commitment made to the Council of Europe and obligations under international human rights law; and
  - Allocate funding to the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Embassy in Baku to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious or cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise concerns, through public hearings and other actions, about Azerbaijan’s religious freedom and broader human rights abuses, including treatment of the MUM, directly with the Azerbaijani Embassy and other government officials and advocate for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [State Control of Religion in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Azerbaijan](#)

## Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of approximately 10.4 million. Nearly 96 percent of the population [identify](#) as Muslim, split between 65 percent who identify as Shi'a Muslim and 35 percent who identify as Sunni Muslim. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox. The constitution [characterizes](#) Azerbaijan as a secular state and stipulates a separation between the state and religion. Nonetheless, the government continued to play an active role in the management and oversight of religious activities throughout the country and subjected virtually all religious practice to strict state control. Throughout the year, various officials misleadingly sought to [promote](#) Azerbaijan as a "model of state-religion relations."

The government maintained and utilized a problematic conceptualization of the term "extremism," often levying charges of extremist activity against political opponents and those who dissented against or criticized the government. In July 2023, police [arrested](#) scholar Gubad Ibadoghlu on fictitious allegations that included the possession of religious "extremist" materials. In March 2023, the Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights expressed concern in a joint opinion that Azerbaijan [abused](#) such concepts to "restrict the legitimate exercise of the rights to freedom of religion or belief, expression, association, and peaceful assembly."

## Crackdown on Muslims

The government routinely harassed, fined, surveilled, detained, arrested, and imprisoned Shi'a Muslims related to their religious activities and religious activism. Law enforcement agencies in particular targeted individuals affiliated with the MUM. The group reported that police [detained](#) or [arrested](#) dozens of its members, many of whom received brief sentences of administrative arrest. In March 2023, a court [sentenced](#) MUM member Mahir Azimov to four years in prison on charges of drug trafficking. In November, the same court [sentenced](#) MUM member Etibar Ismailov to nearly 10 years in prison on the basis of similar accusations. Other MUM members claimed that authorities [subjected](#) them to torture and "psychological pressure" while in custody. In July, guards reportedly [beat](#) MUM member Jeyhun Balashov, while in September, police allegedly [tortured](#) and threatened MUM member Agali Yakhyaev with sexual assault. In February 2023, the European Court for Human Rights [awarded](#) compensation to eight individuals with links to the group who experienced ill treatment while in custody that authorities failed to investigate.

In December, the Union for the Freedom for Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan [documented](#) 183 individuals as "peaceful believers" wrongly imprisoned in connection with their religious beliefs, activities,

or activism. Many of the individuals included on that list were detained in early 2023 in mass arrests that the government carried out as part of a campaign to foil supposed espionage, treason, and drug-related crimes. However, observers claimed that authorities arrested numerous religious activists in those sweeps, with one [stating](#) that he "presume[d] that there are innocent people among the detainees, who were only practicing their religion, and perhaps criticized the government's policy regarding religious freedoms." Additionally, in March, Sabuhi Salimov of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan [died](#) in court after carrying out a hunger strike. In early 2023, another prisoner and leader of the Islamic Party, [Movsum Samadov](#), was [released](#) after he completed his 12-year prison sentence.

## Threats to Religious Sites

International observers remained concerned by the potential for the damage or destruction of religious sites located in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenian Apostolic priests [expressed fears](#) that the Azerbaijani government would specifically target their community's religious heritage throughout the region.

## Key U.S. Policy

The subject of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan monopolized much of the U.S.-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship during the year, as the U.S. government continued to seek a convening and mediating role between the two countries. Throughout the year, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with President Ilham Aliyev on multiple occasions concerning the reopening of the Lachin corridor and the urgency of allowing humanitarian access to Nagorno-Karabakh. The U.S. Department of State also [hosted](#) both countries' foreign ministers as part of ongoing peace negotiations.

The U.S. government continued to highlight concerns for human rights in Azerbaijan. In February, the State Department spokesperson [called for](#) the expeditious release of Azerbaijani activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and all other persons wrongfully imprisoned. In March 2023, officials from the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) [visited](#) Azerbaijan. At the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference in October, the principal deputy to the ambassador at large for IRF [criticized](#) Azerbaijan, describing it as a place where "religious observance is tightly regulated by the government, and state persecution has continued against some non-state-aligned religious communities, including both Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities." During Azerbaijan's Universal Periodic Review, the United States once again [called on](#) Azerbaijan to "immediately release all persons incarcerated for exercising their human rights and remove undue restrictions on ... religious activists," among others. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$23 million for programs in Azerbaijan. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

**Commissioner dissent on Azerbaijan by  
Chair Abraham Cooper and Commissioners  
Susie Gelman, Mohamed Magid, and Nury Turkel**

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USCIRF has and does acknowledge religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan, along with violations by many other nations. It is important that issues related to freedom of religion or belief must be raised and addressed.

Last year, the U.S. Department of State listed Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List (SWL) for the first time. Through various discussions with officials at the State Department, they made it clear that in their assessment conditions in Azerbaijan are not at the level of a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). We too believe the conditions previously and currently under review and scrutiny do not rise to the level of CPC. For someone who has traveled multiple times to the region, we agree with the State Department's analysis and strongly disagree with USCIRF's ill-advised recommendation.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Burma continued to decline significantly. Since its February 2021 coup, the country's military—known as the Tatmadaw—has attempted to rule the country through the State Administration Council (SAC) under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The SAC has relied on assistance from abroad, [importing](#) approximately \$1 billion in weapons, the majority from Russia and China. Throughout the year, the SAC continued to pursue what the United Nations (UN) Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar [described](#) as “increasingly brazen” war crimes in its attempt to quell the disparate opposition forces, including through the increasing use of [airstrikes](#). Since 2021, such tactics have [destroyed](#) nearly 200 religious buildings across Burma, including 85 churches in Chin State and 40 Buddhist monasteries, a nunnery, six churches, and three mosques in Sagaing. In 2023, the Tatmadaw continued to target, occupy, and destroy more houses of worship, particularly those belonging to minority religious communities. In November, the army bombed and then [occupied](#) Christ the King Cathedral in Kayah State. These tactics mirror previous [reporting](#) on the army's occupation of Baptist churches in Chin State.

Throughout 2023, the SAC continued its attempts to link its legitimacy to Buddhism, including through [printing](#) new currency to showcase its sponsorship of Theravada Buddhism. In July, the SAC [finished](#) construction on a giant seated Buddha. The project was supervised by Senior General Hlaing and cost around \$26.7 million, which the government financed amid a deteriorating [economy](#). In August, authorities [arrested](#) a Swiss movie director and 13 Burmese actors on blasphemy charges for producing a film that allegedly insulted the virtue of Buddhist monks. The military's sponsorship of Buddhism has not prevented the SAC in 2023 from attacking monasteries or [killing](#) Buddhist monks. [Evidence](#) suggests that members of the Bamar Buddhist majority have largely abandoned support for the Tatmadaw.

As of the end of 2023, hundreds of thousands of people were internally displaced in Burma, [including](#) over 100,000 people in Christian-majority Kayah State. Rohingya refugees from Burma located in Bangladesh continued to face an uncertain future. In October, officials from the SAC [traveled](#) to Bangladesh as part of a pilot repatriation scheme brokered by China. While Rohingya families in refugee camps wish to return to their homeland, the ongoing conflict and absence of guarantees of safety remained a persistent concern. The SAC [continues](#) to block humanitarian aid to all vulnerable populations, including those displaced.

International efforts to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses and atrocities within Burma continued in 2023, [including](#) in the case of *The Gambia vs. Myanmar* at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In November, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom [filed](#) a joint declaration of intervention in support of *The Gambia*. The Maldives [filed](#) a separate declaration to intervene in support of *The Gambia*. This case would officially determine, according to international law, whether the Burmese authorities committed acts of genocide against Rohingya in 2017. In March 2022, the United States [determined](#) unilaterally that the Burmese authorities committed genocide against Rohingya and has provided evidence in support to *The Gambia*.

The National Unity Government (NUG), a prodemocracy opposition organization that has attempted to organize the various ethnic armies and resistance movements, continued to pledge respect for international human rights standards following a return to democracy. This includes [reiterating](#) its commitment to abolish the 1982 citizenship law that excludes Rohingya from citizenship, as well as any other local laws used to discriminate against Rohingya. Human rights activists continued to [raise](#) the need for a federal system of government in Burma to better empower ethnic and religious minorities at the local and state level as a means for securing religious freedom and other related human rights.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Burma as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Engage with the prodemocracy Burmese opposition, including the NUG, as well as ethnic organizations as outlined in the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act)
- Work with the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to assist Rohingya and other refugee communities from Burma, including by identifying solutions within Cox's Bazar to fully scale up livelihood and skills training programs for adults and youth and providing curriculum to ensure a quality education for all children within Cox's Bazar.
- Hold hearings on implementation of the BURMA Act, including justice and accountability mechanisms for Rohingya and other persecuted religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Rising Authoritarianism in ASEAN Member States](#)
- **Hearing:** [Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Burma](#)



## Background

Burma's [population](#) consists of Buddhists (87.9 percent), Christians (6.2 percent), Muslims (4.3 percent), Animists (0.8 percent), and Hindus (0.5 percent). Although the constitution treats Buddhism as the de facto state religion while recognizing Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism, non-Buddhist religious and ethnic minorities face longstanding persecution. In 2015, Burma [passed](#) race and religion laws with the support of hardline Buddhist nationalist groups such as the Ma Ba Tha. These laws regulate religious conversion, marriage, and births; they also restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims.

## Rohingya and Other Refugees and Displaced Peoples

The Tatmadaw's violent repression of Burma's ethnic and religious minorities, including its 2017 [genocide](#) against Rohingya, has led to their mass displacement. In January 2023, a military-backed court [sentenced](#) 112 Rohingya to jail for traveling without documents within Burma. Over 18 million Burmese, [constituting](#) a third of the total population, require humanitarian aid due to the conflict. The SAC has [restricted](#) access to and coopted the flow of humanitarian aid and particularly targeted religious organizations that have become the primary source of aid to vulnerable, disconnected communities.

The situation for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh remains dire. In March, a fire in the camps destroyed almost 2,000 shelters, [leaving](#) 12,000 Rohingya refugees homeless. Additionally, throughout 2023, thousands of Rohingya risked their lives attempting to leave the refugee camps. In November, Indonesian authorities and residents of Aceh repeatedly [refused](#) entry to around 200 Rohingya refugees who had traveled from Bangladesh. By December, some 1,500 Rohingya [arrived](#) in Aceh, [including](#) 465 children. By the end of December, hundreds were still stranded at sea, as Indonesia and Malaysia refused them entry. Once ashore, conditions for Rohingya in Malaysia and Indonesia are not stable. For example, in Malaysia, Rohingya girls have been [forced](#) into risky marriages in order for them and their families to raise money to survive. In Indonesia, anti-refugee protesters [stormed](#) a shelter temporarily housing Rohingya, demanding their deportation.

## International Efforts toward Accountability

In January, Burmese activists and 16 alleged victims of abuse [filed](#) a criminal complaint through universal jurisdiction in Germany against the SAC's generals for instigating genocide against Rohingya Muslims and other atrocities. In June, an Argentine court [heard](#) testimony in a case concerning allegations of genocide and crimes against humanity committed by Burmese officials against Rohingya Muslims. In October, relatives of victims of alleged war crimes committed by the Burmese army [filed](#) a criminal complaint in the Philippines naming Senior General Hlaing, eight other military commanders, and a state

minister as responsible for attacks that occurred against Christians. These cases are occurring simultaneously as the ICJ and the International Criminal Court pursue allegations concerning human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations, perpetrated by the Burmese authorities against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya.

In March, Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, noted the expanding humanitarian emergency in Burma, observing that persons belonging to ethnic or religious minorities bore the brunt of the conflict. In August, 13 of the 15 UN Security Council members [released](#) a joint statement reiterating support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) efforts to resolve the conflict in Burma, as well as highlighting the demands of [Resolution 2669](#).

## Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2023, the BURMA Act, as included in the [2023 National Defense Authorization Act, continued](#) to guide the United States' engagement with Burma, and in particular with opposition and resistance forces. In February, President Joseph R. Biden [extended](#) Executive Order 14014, declaring the Tatmadaw as a national emergency threat to the United States for another year. The U.S. government led efforts with international partners to sanction the SAC. In January, the United States [coordinated](#) with Canada and the United Kingdom to sanction several agencies within Burma, including the Union Election Commission and the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE). MOGE is a primary source of revenue for the SAC, and the January sanctions were the United States' first against the state energy company. In October, the U.S. government further [sanctioned](#) MOGE. Throughout 2023, the United States [continued](#) to sanction individuals and agencies of the SAC and to [level](#) targeted sanctions against jet fuel suppliers.

In July, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) to Indonesia to urge ASEAN foreign ministers to take tougher action in response to the conflict in Burma. In September, Vice President Kamala Harris attended the U.S.-ASEAN Summit where she [discussed](#) the situation in Burma with ASEAN members. In September, Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Erin Barclay noted in a congressional [hearing](#) that since the 2021 coup, the U.S. Department of State has provided financial assistance to over 1,000 human rights defenders and activists in Burma and provided The Gambia with information in its pursuit of justice and accountability at the ICJ. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$233 million for programs in Burma. The United States has [contributed](#) \$2.1 billion to the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

In December, the U.S. government [committed](#) to expanding the number of Rohingya resettled in the United States. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Burma as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to Section 402(c)(5).

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated. The government [intensified](#) the [implementation](#) of its multifaceted “sinicization of religion” policy, demanding that [all](#) major religious groups [obey](#) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its ideology and policies. Sinicization requires groups to [follow](#) the CCP’s Marxist interpretation of religion, including by [altering](#) religious scriptures and doctrines to [conform](#) to that interpretation. Authorities [demolished](#) and forcibly [modified](#) Christian [churches](#) and Muslim [mosques](#) because of architectural features they deemed “foreign.” In the ethnoreligious minority regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, sinicization entailed [forced assimilation](#) of local populations that [threatened](#) their religious and cultural identities. In September, the government implemented its new [Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues](#), further [restricting](#) religious freedom.

During the year, top CCP officials Xi Jinping and Wang Huning [vowed](#) to [strengthen](#) repressive policies and continue sinicizing Islam in Xinjiang. Authorities continued to [detain](#) and [imprison](#) Uyghurs. According to reports, some became [critically ill](#) in custody while others [died](#) in prison or shortly after [release](#). The government continued to subject Uyghurs to [forced labor](#), including in [prisons](#). Authorities heavily [surveilled](#) and [prevented](#) Uyghurs from fasting during Ramadan and [rebranded](#) Xinjiang as a tourist destination. The government also [increased](#) its repression of [Hui Muslims](#) across several provinces, subjecting them to similar mistreatments experienced by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.

The government intensified its suppression and [sinicization](#) of Tibetan Buddhism. Authorities [increased](#) surveillance and [security measures](#) on Tibetan Buddhists, [restricting](#) their peaceful religious activities, [arresting](#) and [imprisoning](#) them for engaging in such activities and possessing the Dalai Lama’s portraits or teachings, and [placing](#) them in “political re-education” camps to prevent self-immolation. Some Tibetan Buddhist monks [died](#) in prison. The

government [separated](#) one million Tibetan children from parents, [putting](#) them in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them. Some local authorities [banned](#) parents from teaching religion to Tibetan children. The government [controlled](#) the ordination of Tibetan monks and [reiterated](#) its intent to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation and appoint his successor.

Despite the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, in April the government [installed](#) a bishop without Vatican approval. Authorities continued to [forcibly disappear](#) and [convict](#) underground Catholic [priests](#)—including Bishop Augustine Cui Tai and Joseph Yang Xiaoming—who refused to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

Persecution of Protestant house church Christians intensified. The government continued its nationwide crackdown on house churches, [detaining](#), [arresting](#), and [sentencing](#) independent Protestants on security and criminal charges. Authorities [tortured](#) Christians held in secret detention centers and [prisons](#). Authorities in Henan Province required Protestants to [register](#) on a government “smart-religion” app to attend worship services. Authorities also continued to persecute [ethnic minority](#) Protestants, such as [Miao](#), Lisu, and Nu Christians.

The government continued its persecution of Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God (CAG), often using “anti-cult” provisions under [Article 300](#) of China’s Criminal Law. In 2023, Falun Gong sources documented [6,514](#) cases of harassment and arrest, [1,190](#) prison sentences, and [209](#) deaths because of persecution. Across China, authorities [arrested](#) and tortured thousands of CAG members, some of whom reportedly [died](#) due to abuses.

The government engages in sophisticated and comprehensive campaigns of [transnational repression](#), using a wide array of physical, digital, and psychological tactics to attempt to silence those it views as threats, such as Uyghurs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Continue imposing sanctions, in coordination with partners, to target Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, especially within the CCP’s United Front Work Department and the public security and state security apparatus;
- Work with like-minded partners to address China’s technology-enabled

religious freedom and other human rights violations by strengthening the effectiveness of existing export control regimes—including by establishing a formal, binding, multilateral export control regime—countering China’s economic coercion, reducing economic and trade dependence on China, and diversifying supply chains;

- Expand the network of countries that abide by U.S.-led technology governance regimes that respect and protect religious freedom and other related human rights, including rules governing the development and use of AI systems

and other emerging critical technologies; and

- Work in close coordination with international partners to exchange intelligence and to continue prosecuting those engaging in transnational repression against religious minorities on behalf of the Chinese government.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Ban foreign lobbying by agents representing the Chinese government and its state-affiliated commercial entities that undermine religious freedom and related human rights.

## Background

China is officially an [atheist state](#). China's religious regulations and policies explicitly [require](#) state-controlled religious organizations to be loyal to the CCP and to serve its political objectives and interests. Of China's [estimated](#) 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; five percent are Christian; and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religion practices.

## International Accountability in the United Nations

In March 2023, the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights [expressed](#) concern over the Chinese government's use of forced labor and restriction and criminalization of religious practices in Xinjiang. The committee also noted China's sinicization and forced assimilation policy imposed on Tibetan children and its destruction of religious sites in Xinjiang and Tibet. In April, six UN special rapporteurs [expressed](#) concern that China's "labor transfer" and "vocational training" programs in Tibet could lead to forced labor and that Tibetans placed in such programs are "discouraged from expressing their religious identity," violating international law. They urged China to dismantle its "discriminatory ideas and practices."

In September, three UN special rapporteurs [raised](#) grave concerns over China's forced assimilation of Uyghur children in state-run boarding schools, leading to "a loss of connection with their families and communities" and undermining "their ties to their cultural, religious and linguistic identities." Also in September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called on China to take "strong remedial action" in Xinjiang, per his office's recommendations. Following China's [election](#) to the UN Human Rights Council (2024–2026) in October, 51 countries [delivered](#) a joint statement at the UN Third Committee, urging China to end its human rights and religious freedom violations in Xinjiang.

## Religious Freedom in Hong Kong

According to a Hong Kong Watch [report](#), religious freedom in Hong Kong is slowly being [undermined](#). Chinese and Hong Kong authorities continued to implement the draconian National Security Law, which severely restricts related human rights such as the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and press. This increased political pressure has led to self-censorship among Hong Kong's religious leaders and [closures](#) of some religious groups. In 2023, Catholic religious freedom advocate and democracy activist [Jimmy Lai](#) remained imprisoned in solitary confinement.

## Transnational Repression and Malign Influence

The Chinese government engages in transnational repression against diaspora religious communities with ties to China, including in the United States. During 2023, the U.S. government prosecuted individuals who engaged in these illegal activities on behalf of the Chinese government. In April, the U.S. Department of Justice arrested and

[charged](#) Lu Jianwang and Chen Jinping in connection with operating an illegal Chinese overseas police station in New York City. Lu has a history of engaging in transnational repression on behalf of the Chinese government, targeting religious groups and dissidents on U.S. soil. In May, the Justice Department [charged](#) John Chen and Lin Feng for furthering the Chinese government's transnational repression against Falun Gong practitioners in the United States. The Chinese government's malign political influence campaigns, particularly its [lobbying efforts](#) in the U.S. Congress, represent a particularly insidious form of political influence, aimed at shaping federal policymaking to further the Chinese government's interests and goals.

## Key U.S. Policy

In August, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials involved in the forced assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in state-run boarding schools. In September, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [restricted](#) the imports of three Xinjiang companies, pursuant to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (P.L. 117-78). Also in August, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [signed](#) an executive order prohibiting certain U.S. investment in China and other countries of concern in the sensitive technology sectors of semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI). In October, the Biden administration [updated and strengthened](#) existing export controls rules to more effectively [ban](#) exports of high-end chips used in AI for human rights violations and military applications.

In November, President Biden met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in California and [raised](#) concerns regarding China's human rights abuses, including in Xinjiang—which the administration affirmed as genocide and crimes against humanity—Tibet, and Hong Kong. In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Chinese officials Gao Qi and Hu Lianhe for their connection to ongoing serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang, pursuant to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (P.L. 116-145). On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing restrictions on exports of crime control or detection instruments or equipment to China. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government obligated approximately \$12 million in [assistance](#) for programs in China.

In February, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced the Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2023 ([H.R.1154](#)), which passed the U.S. House of Representatives in March. In April, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Representative Young Kim (R-CA) introduced the Uyghur Policy Act of 2023 ([S.1252/H.R.2766](#)) to support the human rights—including freedom of religion or belief—of Uyghurs and other minority groups in Xinjiang. In July, Representative Jennifer Wexton (D-VA) introduced the Uyghur Forced Labor Disclosure Act ([H.R.4840](#)), requiring publicly traded companies to review and disclose all information about links between their products and Uyghur forced labor in Xinjiang. In October, Representative Mark Alford (R-MO) introduced the Combatting the Persecution of Religious Groups in China Act ([H.R.6069](#)).

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Countering China's Techno-Authoritarianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Congress Must Act to Stop the China Lobby](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [China](#)

**Additional View on China by  
Chair Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair Frederick A.  
Davie, and Commissioners David Curry, Susie  
Gelman, Mohamed Magid, Stephen Schneck, Eric  
Ueland, and Frank Wolf**

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Religious communities are suffering under Chinese Communist oppression. We have seen Chinese officials target anyone advancing religious freedom and human rights for persecuted religious and ethnic groups, in particular Uyghurs. USCIRF has experienced this first-hand, as Chinese authorities sanctioned seven USCIRF Commissioners in 2021, including current Commissioner Nury A. Turkel. It is part of an alarming pattern of Chinese transnational repression against American citizens serving the U.S. Government that requires urgent attention and action. Not only have Chinese officials attempted to intimidate individuals directly, but Chinese security officials also regularly harassed and intimidated family members as a form of retaliation.

The government of a world power does not have the right to threaten anyone advocating for religious freedom and human rights. There must be consequences for the trampling of anyone's fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief.

As a friend and admirer of the people of China, we promise to continue to lend our voices, on behalf of all suffering religious communities, and to continue to raise, on a humanitarian basis, Mr. Turkel's mother's case, at every opportunity.

The Chinese government should allow this ailing, elderly woman to travel to the United States to see her children and grandchildren. It is our hope that such gestures will encourage the Chinese government to allow all of its population to be able to freely practice their religion in the future.

**Additional view on China by  
Chair Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair Frederick A.  
Davie, and Commissioners David Curry, Susie  
Gelman, Mohamed Magid, Stephen Schneck,  
Nury Turkel, Eric Ueland, and Frank Wolf**

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It is imperative to ban lobbying for the Chinese government, its state-affiliated commercial entities, and their interests while the government continues its egregious acts of religious persecution. These harsh actions impact every faith group in China with leaders of the Catholic Church and Protestant house churches imprisoned and even "disappeared."

Cultural genocide devastates Tibet where Buddhist monks die in prison. Physical genocide ravages Uyghur Muslims, with millions in detention camps and children taken from their parents. Organs are harvested from Falun Gong and Uyghurs, some while still alive. Hong Kong represses Christians, including 92-year-old Cardinal Zen.

China's influence spreads worldwide. China supports Iran, which provided training and weapons for the attacks on Israel by Hamas and they supply arms to Hezbollah and the Houthis.

China aids Russia in its war on Ukraine and supports North Korea, one of the world's worst religious persecutors. China supports both Nicaragua and Cuba where Christians are being aggressively persecuted.

Concerns are rising over China threatening to attack Taiwan, which many experts believe may lead to direct U.S. involvement and the loss of American military lives.

Amidst all of this, the words of 18th-century British parliamentarian William Wilberforce about the evils of the slave trade come to mind: "You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you do not know."

Congress cannot look the other way. For the good of our country and religious freedom worldwide, Congress must ban lobbying for the Chinese government and its interests.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained extremely poor. The government maintained an oppressive legal framework that severely restricted peaceful religious activity, regularly harassed religious leaders and worshipers, and continued to wrongfully imprison individuals for their peaceful religious activity.

In May 2023, the Cuban government approved the Social Communication Law, which [codifies](#) broad prohibitions on peaceful expression, including religious expression that is critical of the government. The legislation expands the government’s already extensive authority to target individuals freely expressing their religious convictions. For example, the amended Cuban Penal Code criminalizes “contempt,” “public disorder,” and “resistance,” each of which may be used to [punish](#) the activities of religious leaders and worshipers perceived to be critical of the government. In addition, Decree Law 370 threatens independent journalists reporting on religious freedom with criminal charges and fines.

Throughout 2023, the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) [continued](#) to regulate and control religious institutions. The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice, where the ORA is housed, for registration. Membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime and, despite existing criteria, registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory. The ORA also exercises arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations and requires permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Religious leaders and groups that are unregistered or conduct unsanctioned religious activity are subject to interrogation, detention, threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property.

The government draws on its vast domestic security and surveillance apparatus to harass and intimidate religious leaders and

worshipers, including through the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. For example, Cuban authorities regularly and arbitrarily prevented individuals from peacefully gathering at religious sites and events. In January 2023, the government [prohibited](#) mothers of political prisoners from attending church to pray for their release. In March, police beat and [detained](#) a couple on their way to church after alleging that the couple was going to “take communion against communism.” In June, police [prevented](#) a journalist from attending the funeral mass of a priest whose remains had been transferred to the cathedral of Santiago de Cuba. In October, Cuban authorities [detained](#) two pastors who were scheduled to attend an event on the right to freedom of religion or belief. Additionally, authorities pressured individuals whose religious expressions ran afoul of government orthodoxy. In May, a professor [threatened](#) a university student with expulsion after the student refused to sign a document committing himself to Cuba’s governing ideology for reasons of religious conscience. And in September, police [interrogated](#) a young man who disseminated religiously inspired videos online and pressured him to refrain from speaking critically about the government.

Religious prisoners of conscience remain arbitrarily imprisoned for peacefully following their religious convictions. For example, [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), the pastor and leader of the Monte de Sion Independent Church, has been in prison since 2021 for his peaceful participation in the protests on July 11, 2021. Twins [Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac](#) and [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), members of the Free Yorubas, an independent religious group, also remain imprisoned for their peaceful participation in the July 11 protests. The authorities denied the twins’ application for transfer to a lower-security prison.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Cuba as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Urge Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits to USCIRF, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
  - Impose targeted sanctions on Cuban government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—including the ORA, the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution—by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry to the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Highlight religious freedom concerns in Cuba through hearings and letters and by advocating for the release of religious prisoners of conscience such as Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac, Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac, Donaida Pérez Paseiro, Loreto Hernández García, and Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **Special Report:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Cuba](#)



## Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, [estimates](#) indicate that 60 percent of the country's population of 11 million identify as Catholic. Approximately 40 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion, such as Anglican, Buddhist, Jehovah's Witness, Methodist, Moravian, Muslim, Quaker, Seventh-day Adventist, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An estimated 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more [Santería](#) or other religious practices based in African tradition.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state tightly controls religious institutions through the ORA. All religious organizations must apply for registration with the ORA. Association with or membership in an unregistered religious organization is a crime, and the ORA often arbitrarily denies applications for registration despite existing criteria. Even when the ORA approves a religious organization's application, it exercises arbitrary control over their affairs and requires permission for virtually any activity other than worship services. In December 2022, the [amended Cuban penal code](#) came into force. Article 272 of the penal code criminalizes any religiously inspired actions that oppose "the objectives of education" or the "duty" to "work," "defend the homeland," and "revere [Cuba's] symbols or anything else established by the constitution." In 2019, the government adopted a new constitution that changed the country's religious freedom protections. The constitution includes language that [purports](#) to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief, including through government recognition, respect, and guarantee of religious liberty. However, in reality the constitution allows for severe limitations on religious freedom. For example, the constitution's protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief may be overridden by any piece of legislation in force in Cuba.

## Ladies in White

The [Ladies in White](#) is an organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Cuban authorities actively surveil and violently detain members of the Ladies in White and prevent them from attending religious services on Sundays.

The Cuban regime has aggressively targeted the leader of the movement, [Berta Soler](#). In May 2023, Soler and her husband Ángel Moya were [arrested](#) as they left the headquarters of the Ladies in White. Similar arrests of Soler and Moya occurred in [September](#) and [October](#). Throughout the year, the Cuban regime also detained and arrested members of the Ladies in White. In July, a police operation across several provinces in Cuba resulted in the [arrest](#) of 17 members of the Ladies in White. Another wave of detentions occurred in November when 12 members were [arrested](#) and prevented from attending religious services.

## Adherents of Afro-Cuban Religions

Estimates indicate that approximately 70 percent of Cubans observe one or more religious practices based in an [African tradition](#). As Christian Solidarity Worldwide has [reported](#), Cuban authorities increasingly harassed and intimidated members of Afro-Cuban religious groups in 2023 as part of a broader crackdown on civil society. This harassment and intimidation often involved threatening practitioners with severe consequences if they peacefully practiced their religious beliefs. For example, in August, Cuban authorities interrogated an individual at his home regarding an Afro-Cuban religious ceremony he was planning to hold in honor of one of his children. The authorities warned the individual that continuing with the ceremony would result in him being summoned to the police station for a statement. Also in August, an individual planning to peacefully host an Afro-Cuban religious activity in his home was ordered to cancel it. The authorities expressed concern that the religious activity would encourage counter-revolutionary actions.

The Cuban government continued to arbitrarily hold Afro-Cuban religious leaders in prison. In 2023, President of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), and her husband, [Loreto Hernández García](#), remained in prison after being charged with "public disorder," "disobedience," "spreading the epidemic," and "incitement." Hernández García suffers from several health conditions and in August 2023 reportedly experienced a heart attack. In addition to medical neglect, Hernández García has been held incommunicado and placed in a punishment cell. Prison officials have subjected family members visiting them to humiliating treatment, including forcing visitors to strip naked prior to exiting.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's strained [relations](#) with Cuba continued into 2023. Despite this, U.S. government officials continued to raise religious freedom concerns at intergovernmental forums. In April, the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States delivered [remarks](#) at an [event](#) on violations of fundamental freedoms in Cuba. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [called](#) for the release of all political prisoners in Cuba, some of whom are religious prisoners of conscience profiled in USCIRF's [Victims List](#) who continue to be persecuted for their role in peacefully expressing their views during the protests on July 11, 2021. In November, the U.S. government made a [statement](#) during Cuba's Universal Periodic Review recommending that the Cuban authorities cease arbitrarily detaining persons seeking to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious actors. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$9.5 million for programs in Cuba.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom and reimposed the ongoing restrictions referenced in [31 CFR 515.201](#) and the [Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996](#).



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically detain individuals for their religious beliefs, including minors. The government did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing faiths other than the four officially recognized by the government faced intimidation and prosecution by Eritrean authorities. The Eritrean government recognizes only Eritrean Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim as religious identities. Without formal registration, authorities deny faith groups their freedom of religion or belief and prohibit them from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. Members of officially recognized religions also faced restrictions and government backlash for practicing their faith.

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience in Eritrea are particularly poor. First-hand accounts describe physical abuse, sexual violence, and torture as systematic and ongoing practices. Officials reportedly often denied prisoners medical treatment, and many have died due to severe human rights abuses. Additionally, prison authorities pressured arrested individuals to renounce their faith and banned praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books.

Throughout the year, the Eritrean government particularly targeted Jehovah’s Witnesses. As of December, 36 members of the community remained in prison. The prisoners face unsanitary and

decrepit facilities where they experience violence and intimidation. The government punished families of those who evade military service by evicting them from their homes and denying them food and other basic necessities, especially for women and children.

In March 2023, the Eritrean government [released](#) nine Christian prisoners, most of whom served sentences of more than nine years. These included four from Mai Serwa prison and five in the town of Assab, including house church pastor [Abenet Yemane](#). In August, the government [released](#) 13 unidentified prisoners that had each completed a 10-year sentence. In April, founder and leader of Meserete Kristos Church Pastor Tesfay Sevoum died in Mai Serwa prison five days after authorities took him to Dembe Sembe hospital in Asmara for treatment. His body remained unburied for 10 days, in violation of his religious requirements. The government also arrested 44 Orthodox monks in April, all vocal supporters of [Abune Antonios](#), the Eritrean Church patriarch who died in 2022. Authorities later released them. In February, an Orthodox monk and supporter of Abune, Yeneta Israel, died violently in his monastery in what authorities declared a suicide. The state did not pursue further investigation. The Eritrean government continues to hold more than 500 Christians in prison due to their religious identity, including 103 students arrested in the capital Asmara during a singing and recording session for social media.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Reestablish the 2021 arms embargo referenced in [22 CFR 126.1\(a\)](#) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations as the CPC designation’s corresponding presidential action;
- Reimpose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Engage with the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; and
- Encourage the Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by USCIRF, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea through advocacy for religious prisoners of conscience, legislation, hearings, briefings, delegations, and other activities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in the Horn of Africa](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Eritrea](#)

## Background

Eritrea has a [population](#) of 6.3 million people. Approximately 50 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, 30 percent are Eritrean Orthodox, and 13 percent are Catholic. Faiths comprising less than five percent of the population include Protestants, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'is. Approximately two percent of the population follow traditional indigenous religions. The government continues to allow the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic synagogue in Asmara.

The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to freedom of religion or belief. The law and constitution prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief and the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. However, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country.

Eritrea's geostrategic position by the Red Sea makes it an enticing partner for several influential countries, including [Ethiopia](#), Russia, and [China](#), with Moscow [prioritizing](#) sea trade routes and a base of operations. In 2020, Eritrean military units joined Ethiopian troops to combat the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the Tigray region of Ethiopia. The conflict in Tigray partly reflected groups with often overlapping ethnic and religious identities attacking one another, making the cause of the hostilities more difficult to pinpoint. A November 2022 truce ended the violence.

In March 2023, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) urged the Eritrean government to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee related freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. UNHRC members called upon the government to release all those detained based solely on their religion or belief. The Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights [stated](#) that the human rights situation in Eritrea is dire and shows no signs of improvement, with credible reports of torture, arbitrary detention, inhumane detention conditions, and enforced disappearances. The government uses many such abuses to target religious minorities in particular.

In October, several religious organizations [submitted](#) a joint report on Eritrea to the UNHRC ahead of the Eritrea's 2024 Universal Periodic Review. The report urged the Eritrean government to ratify UN Conventions related to freedom of religion or belief, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, and the Covenant against Torture and Other Cruel Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The report also encourages permitting religious communities to register in accordance with international law, immediately releasing prisoners currently detained for their religious beliefs and practices and putting an end to detention based on religion, and inviting UN working groups to the country to assist in complying with international law.

## Forced Conscription

Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 must serve in the military for 18 months. Authorities grant exemptions only to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. The government [imprisons](#) those who refuse to serve, including those whose refusal is based

on religious belief. The Eritrean government [uses](#) military draft mobilization drives called *giffas*, especially in or near larger cities. In 2023, Eritrean authorities continued to round up and forcibly conscript individuals, including older men. Young people forced into the military are often made to serve far longer than their 18 months of mandatory service. Authorities have increasingly targeted the families of those who sought to evade military service, enforcing severe penalties on family members.

## Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In 2023, conditions for religious minorities were particularly egregious. At least 500 Christians faced extremely long prison sentences and harsh prison conditions. These prisoners include evangelicals [Haile Naizghe](#) and [Kiflu Gebremeskel](#), both imprisoned since 2004 because of their association with a network of banned churches.

As of the end of the reporting period, the Eritrean government was holding 36 [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) in prison. It justifies these detentions on Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to serve in the military, imposing egregiously long sentences on community members who conscientiously object on religious grounds. Jehovah's Witnesses report that the government also continues to deny citizenship to members of the community and refuses to meet with representatives to discuss these concerns. Some of the prisoners include 81-year-old Jehovah's Witness [Tesfazion Gebremichael](#), in prison for more than 12 years; [Yonatan Yonas](#) for 18 years; [Yosief Fessehaye](#) for 17 years; and [Samuel Girmay](#) for 14 years.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has limited diplomatic relations with Eritrea, but U.S. diplomats continued to raise issues of human rights and freedom of religion or belief in official conversations with Asmara. However, the U.S. government is [attempting](#) to build stronger ties with Eritrea that would lessen the country's isolation and deny a foothold to U.S. competitors in the region. In this light, the United States [supported](#) regional efforts such as Eritrea's June [readmission](#) into the East Africa bloc (IGAD) after a 16-year absence.

In March 2023, the U.S. government [renewed](#) sanctions [imposed](#) in 2021 under Executive Order (E.O.) 13818, which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. One of those sanctioned, Filipos Woldeyohannes, is currently the chief of staff of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF). Under his leadership, the EDF arrested and tortured Eritreans who fled military service in their country, including religious conscientious objectors.

In April 2023, the Eritrean government [released](#) a letter concerning broader U.S. foreign policy initiatives with the Afwerki regime. The letter called the initiatives a "Policy of Unremitting Hostility towards Eritrea." It noted further that the use of sanctions and punitive designations against the Eritrean government "waxes eloquent on human rights to vilify Eritrea in the most wicked terms and the document exists to advance [U.S.] perceived global interests at the expense of a sovereign nation."

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA under the existing ongoing restrictions and sanctions referenced in [22 CFR 126.1](#), pursuant to Section 402(c)(5) of the act, for perpetrating particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

## KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate. The government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reinforced discriminatory nationalist policies, perpetuated hateful rhetoric, and failed to address communal violence disproportionately affecting Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Jews, and Adivasis (indigenous peoples). Continued enforcement of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and anti-conversion and cow slaughter laws resulted in the arbitrary detention, monitoring, and targeting of religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf.

Both news media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reporting on religious minorities were subjected to strict monitoring under FCRA regulations. In February 2023, India's Ministry of Home Affairs suspended the FCRA license of the Centre for Policy Research, an NGO dedicated to reporting on social issues and state capacity, including discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities. Similarly, authorities raided the offices and homes of NewsClick journalists, including Teesta Setalvad for her reporting on anti-Muslim violence during the 2002 Gujarat riots.

In 2023, NGOs reported 687 incidents of violence against Christians, who continued to be detained under various state-level anti-conversion laws. In January, Hindu mobs attacked Christians in Chhattisgarh in eastern India, destroying and vandalizing churches and attempting to “reconvert” individuals to Hinduism. An estimated 30 people were beaten for refusing to renounce their faith. The same month, two Christians were detained without bail, accused of forcibly converting individuals of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes.

In June 2023, more than 500 churches and two synagogues were destroyed and over 70,000 people displaced during clashes in Manipur State. Home Minister Amit Shah received widespread criticism, including by United Nations (UN) experts, for his delayed response to the violence. Similarly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi

faced a vote of no confidence for his administration's lack of response to the ongoing conflict. In August, India's Supreme Court called for an investigation of the violence, arguing that police had “lost control over the situation.”

In December, the Indian Supreme Court upheld the government's 2019 revocation of Article 370, dissolving special status and autonomy to the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. Indian authorities continued to detain and harass Kashmiri journalists, religious leaders, and human rights defenders. Journalist Irfan Mehraj was arrested in March for his reporting on marginalized religious minorities.

Throughout the year, violence against Muslims and their places of worship continued. Several mosques were destroyed under police presence and vigilantes attacked Muslims under the guise of protecting cows from slaughter, deemed illegal in 18 states. In Haryana's predominantly Muslim Nuh district, communal violence erupted following a Hindu procession in July, where participants carrying swords chanted anti-Muslim slogans. A Muslim tomb and mosque were torched, resulting in the death of at least seven individuals, including Imam Mohammad Hafiz. The violence was in part initiated by “Monu Manesar,” a well-known cow vigilante accused of murdering two Muslim men in January for allegedly transporting cattle. Manesar, who has garnered support from the BJP, publicly called for individuals to participate in the Hindu procession. The same day, an Indian railway guard killed three Muslim men inside a train to Mumbai. The perpetrator reportedly asked the victims their names, which indicated their religious identity, before killing them.

Indian authorities also increasingly engaged in acts of transnational repression targeting religious minorities abroad. In September, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alleged Indian authorities' involvement in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, which was followed by a plot to kill Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in the United States in November.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate India as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Incorporate religious freedom priorities into bilateral and multilateral forums and agreements, such as the ministerial of the Quadrilateral;
- Encourage the U.S. Embassy and consulates to strengthen engagement with religious communities, local officials, and law enforcement and to facilitate meetings with prisoners of conscience and human rights defenders; and
- Encourage review by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to ensure that international recommendations to prevent terrorist financing are not misused by Indian authorities to detain religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom and issues affecting religious minorities in India through hearings, briefings, letters, delegations, and other activities; and
- Condition financial assistance and arms sales to India on improved religious freedom conditions and include measures for additional review and reporting.

## Background

India is the world's most populated country, with an estimated 1.4 billion people. The majority of its [population](#) is Hindu (79.8 percent) with minority Muslim (14.2 percent), Christian (2.3 percent), and Sikh (1.7 percent) communities. Smaller religious groups include Buddhists, Jains, Baha'is, Zoroastrians (Parsis), and an [estimated](#) 6,000 Jews. India's constitution establishes a secular and democratic state, with Article 25 granting freedom of conscience to all. Section 295 of India's Penal Code criminalizes the destruction or damage of houses of worship. In 2023, the Indian government introduced three bills to [reform](#) the country's criminal code, which could target religious minorities by expanding police powers for "preventative action" and punishments for acts of terrorism.

## Violence against Religious Minorities in Manipur

In May, clashes between tribal Kuki and Meitei communities erupted in India's northeastern state of Manipur. Violence began after Manipur's High Court requested that the state government consider providing [Scheduled Tribe](#) status to the majority Hindu Meitei people, granting them expanded access to certain benefits. Manipur's minority Christian Kuki community protested that the move would weaken their political and economic status.

Months of ongoing violence resulted in the destruction of thousands of homes, targeted attacks on places of worship, and the displacement of over 70,000 individuals. Approximately 400 churches belonging to both Meiteis and Kukis were destroyed, and many others looted, illustrating a clear religious dimension to an ethnic conflict. Reports [indicated](#) that two synagogues belonging to the Bnei Menashe community were damaged. Acts of sexual violence, including gang rape [targeting](#) Kuki women by Meitei men, were widely reported and articulated in an August [letter](#) by UN special rapporteurs. UN experts further expressed concern about the role of hate speech and disinformation in inciting violence against the Kuki population. Eyewitness [accounts](#) indicate that Hindu nationalist officials pressured Meitei Christian leaders to [renounce](#) their faith and observe the indigenous Meitei religion, Sanamahism.

Citizens [accused](#) the central government and Manipur police of failing to protect places of worship or dispel communal violence. Prior to the outbreak of violence in May, authorities [destroyed](#) three churches in Imphal, claiming they were illegal. Following clashes in May, Union Home Minister Amit Shah [stated](#) that law enforcement had executed 40 members of the Kuki community deemed as terrorists—charges that Kukis [dispute](#).

## Anti-Conversion Laws

While India's constitution protects the right to publicly share one's faith, 13 out of India's 28 states continued to enforce [anti-conversion](#)

[laws](#) in 2023. Such laws make it difficult for people to convert from Hinduism to another religion and use broad language that leads to the targeting of religious minorities. In January, the state of Himachal Pradesh enacted an [amendment](#) to its Freedom of Religion Act, redefining "mass conversion" as involving two or more people and barring members of Scheduled Tribes and Schedule Castes from obtaining certain benefits if they choose to convert from Hinduism. Throughout 2023, a number of religious minorities were detained under state-level anti-conversion laws. In Chhattisgarh, where a third of the population [identifies](#) as Adivasi and less than two percent Christian, 13 pastors were [arrested](#) for allegedly forcing Adivasis to convert to Christianity. In Uttar Pradesh, as of May 2023, over 855 people were reported to have been [detained](#) under charges of illegal conversion since the promulgation of the state's anti-conversion law in 2020.

Anti-conversion laws increasingly included provisions designed to prevent interfaith marriages and so-called "love jihad." "Love jihad" is a derogatory term used to describe the alleged occurrence of Muslim men marrying Hindu women for the purpose of conversion. In June, the state government of Maharashtra [created](#) a 13-member panel to "investigate" interfaith marriages. Additionally, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist group, [launched](#) a national 11-day "awareness campaign" claiming that interfaith marriage was a form of forced religious conversion.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and India continued to maintain strong bilateral ties in 2023. In March, the U.S. Senate [confirmed](#) Eric Garcetti as the U.S. Ambassador to India, filling the post after 20 months of vacancy. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$130 million for programs in India.

In June, President Joseph R. Biden [hosted](#) Prime Minister Modi for a state visit, where he [addressed](#) a joint session of Congress for the second time during his tenure. In a joint press conference, Prime Minister Modi failed to answer a question about his government's treatment of religious minorities. In September, President Biden traveled to India for the G20 summit, during which he reportedly raised issues of human rights in private meetings with Prime Minister Modi.

In November, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin visited India for diplomatic dialogue on defense cooperation. The same month, the U.S. Department of Justice released an [indictment](#) against an Indian government employee for his alleged involvement in the attempted assassination of a Sikh activist on U.S. soil. U.S. officials announced their expectations of the Indian government to conduct a full investigation into the accusations. In a December hearing, members of the U.S. Congress [reiterated](#) concern about India's involvement in acts of transnational repression. Also in December, the U.S. Department of State failed to [designate](#) India as a CPC despite major [religious freedom concerns](#).

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [India's State-Level Anti-Conversion Laws](#)
- **Hearing:** [Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S.- India Bilateral Relationship](#)
- **Podcast:** [Violence against Tribal Christians in Manipur, India](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Deeply Concerned by India's Transnational Repression against Religious Minorities](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [India](#)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained extremely poor. Protests against mandatory hijab laws and other restrictions on freedom of religion or belief continued despite security forces' violent repression. Officials systematically harassed, arrested, detained, sexually assaulted, raped, and tortured protesters, including [minors](#). In March, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, [said](#) the government's treatment of protesters may constitute crimes against humanity. During the year, Iran executed at least [eight](#) protesters on religiously grounded charges. In May, the government [executed](#) two men on blasphemy charges. In November, it executed [five](#) men in cities including Karaj, Ahvaz, and Zahedan on religiously grounded [charges](#), including "corruption on Earth" and "enmity against God."

In September, Iran's parliament approved the Bill to Protect the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab, which the Expediency Council amended in December. The law [expands](#) the scope of prohibited religious practice and expression. Authorities escalated enforcement of mandatory hijab laws throughout 2023, increasing surveillance and secretly [funding](#) a "morality guard" to harass uncovered women. In November, UN experts [called](#) for an independent investigation into the [death](#) of 16-year-old Armita Geravand, who was beaten into a coma on the Tehran metro, reportedly by security forces, for wearing improper hijab and later died. The government also failed to thoroughly investigate a series of reported gas attacks on girls'

schools and repressed protests by families calling for investigations. Security forces arrested celebrities for voicing opposition to religiously based government restrictions on gender minorities. In October, authorities rearrested lawyer [Nasrin Soutudeh](#), who advocated for Iranian women opposing hijab laws. Following mistreatment in prison, she was released on bail in November. [Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani](#) fled Iran in December after being released on bail in March. She was sentenced to death in 2022 for "corruption on Earth" and "promoting homosexuality."

Security forces violently repressed weekly Sunni Muslim protests following Friday prayers and arrested scores of Sunni religious leaders in Zahedan. The government also continued its campaign against Baha'is, arresting scores of people and sentencing several to lengthy prison terms. Iran [resentenced](#) several members of the *Yaran-e-Iran* (Friends of Iran) in 2023 to years in prison, including Afif Naimi, Enayatollah Naeimi, and Jamaloddin Khanjani.

Iran's government also continued repressive action abroad, including the harassment of religious dissidents and targeting of Jewish sites. In March, Greece arrested and charged two men connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who planned to attack a Chabad house and kosher restaurant in Athens. In June, Cyprus thwarted an IRGC plan to attack Jews and Israelis. In November, Israeli and Brazilian authorities thwarted an attack directed and financed by Iran and executed by Hizbullah on Jewish and Israeli targets in Brazil.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Continue to issue clarifications of [general and specific sanctions licenses](#), expedite the processing of general license applications, and continue issuing new general licenses that facilitate financial and technological [support](#) for Iranians asserting their freedom of religion or belief through peaceful demonstrations and labor strikes; and
- Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) and other international associations to stem the flow of surveillance technology and weapons platforms used to suppress lawful religious expression in Iran, support the UN Fact-Finding Mission to Iran, and support a Security Council referral of the situation in Iran to the International Criminal Court for investigation of crimes against humanity against those asserting freedom of religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Permanently reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran](#)
- **Factsheet:** [SGBV against Religious Freedom Protesters in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Iran](#)



## Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state with restricted political participation. Ninety to 95 percent of the [population](#) are Shi'a Muslim, while Sunni Muslims account for 5–10 percent. Approximately 0.3 percent ascribe to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. While the Jaafari school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution extends respect to the five major Sunni schools and recognizes some Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected minorities. Five of the parliament's 290 seats are reserved for the recognized religious minorities—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. There are two Hindu temples, and Buddhism has historic influences. Iran is home to several other religious groups that face persecution, including Mandeans, Yarsanis, nonbelievers, and spiritualist movements such as Erfan-e Halgheh.

## Baha'is

In 2023, authorities conducted individual and mass arrests of Baha'is across Iran, taking them to undisclosed locations and imposing excessively long prison sentences. Iranian security officials beat and brutalized Baha'is during raids and searches of private homes. In November, Iranian security forces [arrested](#) scores of Baha'is in cities including Hamadan, Mehrshahr, Yazd, Karaj, Alborz, and Tehran. The government has targeted Baha'i women in particular, including 10 arrested in Isfahan in October. Approximately two-thirds of Iranian Baha'i prisoners are women, including [Mahvash Sabet](#) and [Fariba Kamalabadi](#), members of Iran's former Baha'i leadership (*Yaran-e-Iran*). Both are serving a decade in prison after having previously served an identical sentence in the early 2010s. Authorities also [targeted](#) Baha'i cemeteries in Arak, Alborz, and Golestan. Local municipalities seized and confiscated Baha'i land, restricted Baha'i access to burial grounds, and declared intentions to sell Baha'i-owned property exclusively to Muslims.

## Sunni Muslims

Between January and April 2023, Iran arrested several Sunni religious leaders on whom courts ultimately imposed egregiously long sentences. In January, the Urmia Special Court for Clergy sentenced cleric Yunes Nokhah to nearly five years in prison on charges including blasphemy, and the Hamedan Special Court for Clergy sentenced cleric Seifallah Hosseini to 17 years in prison, 74 lashes, and two years of exile. The government repeatedly targeted Zahedan's Sunni prayer leader Molavi Abdolhamid Ismailzahi, who has called for greater religious freedom. Iran escalated the targeting of Sunni clerics ahead of the one-year anniversary of a violently repressed protest following Friday prayers in Zahedan in October 2022. In August, security forces arrested [Fathi Mohammad Naqshabandi](#) in Rask. In September, the Kermanshah Special Court for Clergy sentenced Hadi Ahmadi to six months in prison for "propaganda against the state." In December, Iran detained Sunni prayer leaders Hassan Amini and Mohiuddin Mohammadzadeh in West Azerbaijan Province.

## Christians

Iran released several Christians from Evin Prison in early 2023 but continued to target Christians on the basis of their religion. Between June and July, security forces arrested at least 69 Christians across 11

cities. In February, Iran's Supreme Court ruled that Armenian Christian house church leader [Joseph Shahbazian](#) should be retried on accusations including "promoting Zionist Christianity." His sentence was reduced in May from 10 years to two. Authorities pardoned and released him from prison in September. In May, the Tehran Appeals Court acquitted [Homayoun Zhavah](#) and [Sara Ahmadi](#), who were serving prison sentences related to house-church membership. In July, Iran relocated Pastor [Abdolreza Ali Haghnejad](#) from a prison near his family in Rasht to a facility over 800 miles away in Minab. Haghnejad is serving a six-year sentence for "propagating Christianity." That same month, a court summoned Pastor [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) to appear on charges of undermining state security but took no further action following his official rejection of the charge in court.

## Other Religious Minorities

Iran continued to repress Gonabadi Sufis and target members of the community abroad. In January, a court sentenced [Mohsen Afrouz](#) to a year in prison for "propaganda against the regime." Security officials released [Abbas Deghan](#) from Evin Prison that same month, but two people went missing and were presumed arrested following a ceremony celebrating his release. In April, a Karaj court [sentenced](#) [Hamid Gharehassanlou](#) to 15 years in prison and his wife [Farzaneh](#) to five following their participation in a memorial protest for 23-year-old Hadis Najafi. Gharehassanlou originally faced a death sentence and sustained serious injuries after being beaten in prison. In October, security officers arrested [Arash Moradi](#) in Kashan. In December, the Tehran Revolutionary Court sentenced him to a six-year sentence.

Iran's government reportedly coerced Jewish communities to [protest](#) Israel's military operation in Gaza following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks.

In June, IRGC intelligence forces in Karaj arrested and tortured [Abolfazl Pour-Hosseini](#), a follower of the Erfan-e-Halgheh movement. The Karaj Revolutionary Court sentenced him to three years in prison and a two-year suspended imprisonment.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. [government raised](#) religious freedom [concerns](#) in [Iran](#) consistently [throughout](#) 2023. In August, Iran released five U.S. prisoners in exchange for access to \$6 billion in Iranian assets frozen in South Korea for humanitarian use. In November, the U.S. House of Representatives passed [H.R. 5961](#) to block Iranian access to these funds. That same month, the United States [conducted](#) strikes on Iranian-backed militias responsible for attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq.

Following the October 7 terrorist attacks in Israel, Deputy National Security Advisor Jonathan Finer [stated](#) that Iran was "broadly complicit" in the attacks. Later that month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Hamas members supported by Iran, including Mahmoud Khaled Zahhar, who has threatened "violence against Jewish civilians" in interviews. In January 2023, the Joseph R. Biden administration sanctioned Iranian officials [responsible](#) for repressing peaceful expression of religious views and [surveillance](#) of religious sites in the United States. In 2023, the U.S. Congress introduced [H.R. 589](#) and [several bipartisan](#) resolutions related to religious freedom in Iran. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing sanctions.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua worsened significantly. The government of President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo intensified its efforts to arbitrarily arrest, imprison, and expel Catholic clergymen and laypeople. The government also canceled the legal status of Catholic organizations, confiscated their property, and harassed and intimidated worshippers.

The Nicaraguan government used spurious charges such as spreading “false news” and “conspiracy to undermine national integrity” to justify its arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, and exile of actual or perceived members of the Catholic Church. In February 2023, the government sentenced Bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#) to 26 years in prison and stripped him of his citizenship in retaliation for his criticism of government actions, including during his homilies and sermons. It also expelled 222 political prisoners to the United States and stripped them of their citizenship, including religious prisoners of conscience such as Father [Oscar Benavidez](#), who regularly preached against government abuses, and seminarian [Darvin Leiva](#), who was initially placed under house arrest with Bishop Álvarez. In August, journalist [Victor Ticay](#) was sentenced to eight years in prison for recording and posting online a banned Easter celebration in Nandaime. In October, the government expelled arbitrarily detained clergymen to the Vatican, including [Álvaro Toledo](#), who spoke out about the wrongful imprisonment of priests, and [Osman José Amador Guillén](#), who prayed for Bishop Álvarez in his homilies. In December, Bishop [Isidro Mora](#) was arrested after asking congregants to pray for Bishop Álvarez during Mass.

The Ortega-Murillo regime continued to systematically target religious organizations it viewed as opponents, particularly Catholic charitable and educational organizations. In March, the government canceled the legal status of John Paul II University and Caritas Nicaragua, a Catholic charitable organization. In May, the government canceled the legal status of the Immaculate Conception Catholic University in Managua, a formation center for seminarians, and the Santa Luisa de Marillac Technical Institute, a school run by nuns. The Ortega-Murillo regime’s thinly veiled pretext for these and other cancelations was the organizations’ alleged failures to comply with bureaucratic regulations or alleged voluntary dissolutions. In the case of the Jesuit-run University of Central America, however, the government shuttered the institution after baselessly alleging that it was involved in terrorism. In many cases the government also confiscated the property of these organizations. For example, the government confiscated the University of Central America’s assets, announced its intention to establish a state university in its place, and evicted Jesuits living near the campus. In October, the government canceled the legal status and ordered the confiscation of property belonging to the Company of Franciscan Friars Minor.

The ongoing harassment of worshippers took many forms. Uniformed and plain clothes government agents intimidated clergy and parishioners by conspicuously monitoring religious services. The Ortega-Murillo regime banned the public observance of Catholic traditions such as street processions during Holy Week. President Ortega and Vice President Murillo also used disparaging language to demonize the Catholic Church, referring to it as a “mafia” and calling priests “representatives of the devil.”

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nicaragua as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for particularly severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa

authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Support the work of the United Nations (UN) group of human rights experts on Nicaragua to investigate religious freedom violations in Nicaragua and identify those perpetrating them.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Advocate for religious prisoners of conscience, including those profiled on the [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), through letters, congressional

delegations, floor speeches, and briefings; and

- Support legislation, such as the [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024](#), which expands the legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators and mandates that the U.S. government oppose international financial institutions’ extension of assistance to Nicaragua unless the assistance addresses basic human needs or promotes democracy.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Condemns Nicaragua’s 26-Year Prison Sentence for Bishop Rolando Álvarez](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Condemns Nicaragua’s Expulsion of Arbitrarily Detained Priests](#)
- **Special Report:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Nicaragua](#)



## Background

President Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government and the electoral process. Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started after the government's repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The Ortega-Murillo administration began persecuting the Catholic Church after it provided sanctuary to demonstrators and individual clergy voiced opposition to the government's human rights abuses, even though Nicaragua's constitution states that all people, individually or collectively, have the right to express their religious beliefs in private or in public, through worship, practices, and teaching. Government actors and pro-Ortega groups have engaged in increasingly repressive retaliatory measures against the Catholic Church. In March, the UN group of experts on Nicaragua [stated](#) that the widespread violations amount to crimes against humanity.

Catholics [account](#) for about 43 percent of the population; Evangelical Protestants comprise 41 percent; religious believers without any affiliation 14 percent; and Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, nonbelievers, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Moravian Lutheran Church together two percent.

## Persecution of Clergymen and Laypeople

The Nicaraguan government's persecution, imprisonment, and mistreatment of [Bishop Álvarez](#) was illustrative of its crackdown on Catholic clergymen and laypeople across the country. In April, it arbitrarily expelled two nuns running a nursing home. In July, it expelled an additional group of nuns responsible for running a Catholic charitable organization called the Sisters Poor of Jesus Christ. In October, the government [expelled](#) a group of clergymen to the Vatican. Some of those expelled, such as [Jaime Iván Montesinos Saucedo](#), had been detained since May. In November, the government sentenced two former Catholic university students, [Adela Tercero](#) and [Gabriela Morales](#), to imprisonment on dubious drug trafficking charges.

The Ortega-Murillo regime ended this year of persecution of the Catholic Church with an intense crackdown during the Christmas season. On December 20, police arrested Bishop [Isidro Mora](#) after he offered prayers for Bishop [Álvarez](#) during Mass. Two seminarians who reportedly attended the Mass, [Tony Palacios](#) and [Alester Sáenz](#), were also detained. On Christmas Eve, the government sentenced six former employees of the Catholic charity Caritas in the Diocese of Estelí to six years' imprisonment on dubious money laundering charges. Between December 26 and 31, the government arbitrarily arrested many additional clergymen—particularly those who have criticized the religious freedom and human rights conditions in Nicaragua—such as Father [Pablo Villafranca](#), Father [Silvio Fonseca](#), and Father [Miguel Mántica](#). Amid this wave of arrests and imprisonments, Vice President Murillo launched an [invective](#) against clergy, calling them “representatives of the devil.” The Nicaraguan police also [warned](#) priests against organizing traditional *posadas* (outdoor Nativity scenes). In January 2024, many of the clergy arrested during the Christmas crackdown were [exiled](#) to the Vatican.

## Government Closure of Catholic Organizations

President Ortega's attempt to excise Catholic organizations from Nicaragua heightened in 2023. Catholic educational institutions

such as the John Paul II Catholic University, the Immaculate Conception Catholic University of the Archdiocese of Managua, the Santa Luisa de Marillac Technical Institute, and the Jesuit-run University of Central America were all shuttered on a variety of dubious charges, including money laundering and terrorism. In addition, the Nicaraguan government closed Catholic charitable organizations such as the Sisters Poor of Jesus Christ and Caritas. Following these closures, the government often seized the organizations' assets and property. The government also amended Law 89, the Autonomy Law of Higher Education Institutions, and Law 582, the General Education Law, to formally strip all higher education institutions—including shuttered Catholic universities—of their autonomy and to bring them under the control of the government's National Council of Universities.

## Key U.S. Policy

In February 2023, the Joseph R. Biden administration [negotiated](#) the release of 222 political prisoners from Nicaragua to the United States. Among those released were religious prisoners of conscience. The U.S. government continued to impose robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials responsible for religious freedom violations. In April, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, pursuant to [Executive Order 13851](#), [sanctioned](#) three judicial officials responsible for stripping Nicaraguan citizenship from clergymen and for falsely convicting Bishop Álvarez for treason, undermining national integrity, and spreading false news. In [July](#) and [December](#), U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken transmitted reports identifying Nicaraguan officials who are ineligible for visas and admission to the United States because of their work to confiscate the property of, retaliate against, and strip citizenship from critics of the Ortega-Murillo administration, as required by [Section 353\(b\)](#) of the Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, as amended. In August, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on 100 municipal officials involved in closing civil society organizations, including the Jesuit-run University of Central America, and detaining human rights and religious freedom advocates pursuant to [Presidential Proclamation 10309](#). In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$27 million for programs in Nicaragua.

The U.S. Congress took significant steps in 2023 to highlight the particularly severe religious freedom violations occurring in Nicaragua, including through [hearings](#), letters, and legislation such as the [Nicaragua Prisoner Support Act](#). In January 2024, the [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024](#) was introduced. The legislation would provide for sanctions against religious freedom violators by reauthorizing and amending the [Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act of 2018](#) and the [Reinforcing Nicaragua's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021](#). The legislation also would mandate U.S. government support for the UN group of human rights experts on Nicaragua, which is comprehensively investigating religious freedom and human rights violations in the country.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed the ongoing restrictions referenced in Section 5 of the [Nicaragua Investment Conditionality Act of 2018](#).

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained extremely poor. Violence across Nigeria impacted freedom of religion or belief as the government failed to prevent attacks against faith-based organizations or worshipers, with some accusing it of fomenting such attacks. Nigerian government officials were often slow to react to information about possible [attacks](#) or to respond after attacks occurred. In some cases, those impacted by violence directly criticized a lack of government accountability and called for further steps to protect religious freedom. Both the police and army drew criticism for not stemming the activities of violent insurgent groups such as Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), and Fulani gangs that often worked in collaboration with them.

Those states where violence was most prevalent include Borno, Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, Adamawa, and Benue. Additionally, multiple attacks during the year targeted religious leaders. For example, in January 2023, bandits [killed](#) Father Isaac Achi of the Minna Diocese, while others shot and injured assistant parish priest Father Collins Omeh at the Saints Peter and Paul Church in the Paikoro region. In May 2023, insurgents in Benue State [killed](#) pastor Dominic Dajo of St. Peter Catholic Church and his wife. In Nasarawa State, Fulani herders [killed](#) pastor Daniel Danbeki of the Evangelical Church Winning All, along with his wife and 41 others.

In Yobe State, Boko Haram insurgents [killed](#) at least 37 people in February 2023 and [killed](#) another 40 people in October. In May, the Nigerian army [rescued](#) two women Boko Haram had kidnapped in 2014 from a Chibok secondary school. In November, Boko Haram [killed](#) 15 farmers in the Muslim-majority Borno State and at least 10 [Christians](#) in Taraba State.

In 2023, the government detained individuals accused of blasphemy and often failed to hold accountable perpetrators of violence related to blasphemy allegations. The Nigerian penal code includes a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for acts "persons consider as a public insult on their religion, with the intention that they should consider the act such an insult." Twelve states in northern Nigeria have [implemented](#) Shari'a legal frameworks since 1999. In May, a Sokoto State magistrate [released](#) two suspects arrested for the May 2022 mob murder of Christian Deborah Samuel for alleged blasphemy, eliminating any accountability for her death. In June, a mob in Sokoto State stoned to death Usman Buda after he made a remark misunderstood as a slur against the Prophet Muhammad. At least five prisoners remain in state custody on blasphemy charges, including humanist [Mubarak Bala](#) and Sufi Muslim [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#). At a November 27 hearing in a Bauchi State high court, a judge rejected Christian [Rhoda Jatau's](#) appeal that the court dismiss the blasphemy charges against her; however, on December 10, a Bauchi court judge released her on bail.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Redesignate Boko Haram and ISWAP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
  - Appoint a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S. diplomatic efforts to address religious freedom violations and atrocity risk in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin; and
  - Diplomatically, financially, and administratively support Nigerian civil society organizations to coordinate a national dialogue on implementing United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHCR) Resolution 16/18 and to promote religious freedom while safeguarding freedom of expression.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Revitalize the bipartisan caucus on Nigeria to place due focus on religious freedom and other related human rights challenges in addition to security and crimes against humanity and atrocity risk in Nigeria; and
  - Request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate the effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in achieving religious freedom objectives in the country.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Religious Freedom in the Sahel Region of Africa](#)
- **Factsheet:** [African Traditional and Indigenous Religions](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Ethnonationalism and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Abuses against Fulani Muslim Civilians](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S.-Nigeria policy must prioritize religious freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Nigeria](#)

## Background

Nigeria is the most populous [country](#) in Africa, with around 231 million people. Approximately 46 percent of the population are Christian, and roughly 46 percent are Muslim. About eight percent of Nigerians practice African traditional religions. Other communities, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, make up less than one percent of the population.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the government from establishing an official religion. The constitution recognizes Shari'a courts for noncriminal proceedings, but state laws do not theoretically compel participation in them. Nigeria again saw historically reoccurring [electoral violence](#) during the February 2023 [election](#) of Bola Tinubu as national president.

Twelve northern states utilize Shari'a criminal and family codes alongside civil and customary laws. The Shari'a codes prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on Islamic law as interpreted by each state's high court. Shari'a courts utilize a special penal code, including for serious criminal offenses, specifying punishments such as caning, amputation, and stoning. In November, a Kano Shari'a court [sentenced](#) eight men to 10 lashes each and a fine for wearing women's attire at a wedding in violation of Islamic moral standards. Although Nigerian Shari'a penal codes do not criminalize [apostasy](#), converts can be at risk. In August, an 18-year-old Christian convert successfully secured a court order protecting her from members of her family who threatened to kill her for leaving Islam.

## Violence Impacting Religious Freedom

The government, at both the federal and state levels, continued to tolerate egregious criminal activity and violence by armed groups that targeted religious communities and negatively impacted religious freedom. The specific perpetrators of and motivation behind individual attacks are often difficult to verify. Nigerian Christian leaders typically blame armed Fulani herders for attacks that are ethnoreligious in nature. It is also difficult to verify precise numbers of victims, with different sources providing varying estimates. For example, a report by the Nigerian nongovernmental organization Intersociety [claimed](#) that violent insurgent groups and armed gangs, along with Nigerian government forces, accounted for 8,222 Christian deaths across Nigeria in 2023. Another report asserted that in 2023, extremists in Benue State [killed](#) 414 people from predominantly Christian communities while injuring, raping, or kidnapping 100 more. Others reported that between May and June 2023, violent groups [killed](#) 450 Christians in three northeastern states.

In June, violent actors in Plateau State reportedly killed at least 29 people, including several Christians, and later in the month [killed](#) 19 villagers, including Christians in Jos South and Mangu. In September, bandits in Kaduna State attempted to kidnap a priest and then set fire to his home, [killing](#) Catholic seminarian Na'aman Danlami. In November, armed gunmen reportedly killed one person and [kidnapped](#) at least 150 people in Zamfara State for ransom. In Plateau State, assailants [attacked](#) Christian villages killing over 190 people the weekend before Christmas, including Baptist minister Solomon Gushe and his family. Intersociety [claimed](#) that the coordinated Christmas week massacre was so deadly because of collusion between armed groups and government officials.

Muslim leaders have [criticized](#) the Nigerian government for the lack of response to the violence. In January, a bomb blast [killed](#) at least 50 Islamic cattle herders in the north. The state has also at times issued policies broadly [targeting](#) innocent Fulani Muslims.

Threats against the nonreligious in Nigeria are common, and atheists [face](#) challenges, especially in the northern states. [Atheists](#) in Nigeria have been subject to attack, arrest, and murder for "blaspheming Islam." It is also reported that "life as a nonbeliever in Nigeria is also difficult for women, who already are severely underrepresented in government and other key sectors."

## Counterinsurgency Campaign

In 2023, the Nigerian government, ISWAP, and Boko Haram [continued](#) to wage operations against one another in the Lake Chad region, resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians. In July, ISWAP assailants [killed](#) 25 Muslim Fulani herders in Borno State. In November, over 60 people [died](#) during a Lake Chad battle between the insurgent groups. Also in November, ISWAP forces [killed](#) 17 people, including Christian farmers and herders in Yobe State after they refused to pay a tax. In December, a military drone meant to target insurgents [killed](#) 85 Muslims at a religious celebration in Kaduna State.

## Traditional Religions

In Ilorin, ethnic Yorùbá organizers of the popular annual Isese festival [protested](#) against the harassment of traditional religion practitioners and government complicity by canceling the event. The International Council for Ifa Religion (ICIR) subsequently asserted that harassment of indigenous practices and the state's inaction were in violation of Nigeria's constitution. In July, ICIR [wrote](#) a letter to incoming President Tinubu protesting any consideration of an official state religion.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Nigeria maintained a strong bilateral relationship in 2023. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$911 million for aid programs in Nigeria. In February, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [traveled](#) to Abuja to discuss the country's upcoming presidential election. In August, Assistant Secretary Phee [visited](#) Nigeria to discuss U.S. support for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In December, she [met](#) with leaders in Abuja to address the ongoing political turmoil with regional leaders gathered for the ECOWAS Heads of State Summit.

In January 2023, members of Congress introduced [H.Res. 82](#) calling for the U.S. Department of State to designate Nigeria as a CPC and for President Joseph R. Biden to appoint a special envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region, in line with USCIRF's recommendations. In June, several members of Congress [wrote](#) to the president of Nigeria advocating for the release of Mubarak Bala. As of December 31, 2023, the Senate had yet to [confirm](#) the Biden administration's nominee for ambassador to Nigeria, [Richard Mills, Jr.](#)

On December 29, 2023, the State Department designated Boko Haram and ISWAP as EPCs. However, it did not [designate](#) Nigeria as a CPC for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, despite [documentation](#) of such violations in its own reporting on the country.

# NORTH KOREA

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in North Korea remained among the worst in the world. Protestant Christians continued to be especially [vulnerable](#) to persecution. According to a 2023 South Korean government report, the North Korean government [regards](#) Christians as “counter-revolutionaries” and “traitors”—which are political crimes—who must be eliminated. Possessing a Bible, practicing the faith, and simply being a Christian could lead to [severe punishment](#), including torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution. In April 2023, authorities in Tongam village, South Pyongan Province, [arrested](#) a group of five Christians for their religious activities and confiscated dozens of Bibles. The Christians reportedly refused to renounce their faith and disclose the Bibles’ origin.

The government has intensified [persecution](#) of North Korean citizens who practice “superstitious activities” such as shamanism and fortune telling, which are classified as “unsocialist behaviors.” Authorities criminalize and crack down on these religious activities, and practitioners can be executed by firing squad or sentenced to a maximum 10-year imprisonment in addition to forced labor and administrative penalties. Information on religious freedom conditions for practitioners of other religious traditions in North Korea—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism—remains severely limited.

The overarching ideological and enforcement framework for restricting religious freedom remained in force. North Korea’s ruling

ideology, known as [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism](#), [forbids](#) competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. The country’s most fundamental legal document, known as the [Ten Principles](#) for the Establishment of a Monolithic Leadership System, requires absolute loyalty and obedience to the teachings of North Korean leaders. The Ten Principles contradict the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law and in the country’s own [constitution](#), which nominally grants religious freedom. The ruling Workers’ Party of Korea actively [enforces](#) the Ten Principles at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to religious freedom.

North Korea’s discriminatory [songbun](#) system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state. Religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving “discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.” The government attempts to [provide](#) an illusion of freedom of religion to the outside world through state-controlled religious sites and organizations, which include the Buddhist Federation, the Korean Christian Federation, and the Korean Catholic Association. In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent as authorities actively and systematically target and [persecute](#) religious groups and adherents.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward—and in bilateral and multi-lateral negotiations with—North Korea;
- Impose targeted and broad sanctions—including coordinated, multilateral sanctions with international partners—as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea and consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress on religious freedom and related human rights; and
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to ensure the safe passage of North Korean refugees—especially those with religious ties—to the country through China and relevant Southeast Asian countries.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2023 ([H.R.3012/S.584](#)).

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the Right to Freedom of Religion, Thought, and Conscience in North Korea](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [North Korea](#)

## Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. Historically, North Koreans followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). The country was also home to a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East,” but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated [two percent](#) of the total population. Shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are also prevalent.

## North Korean Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. In recent years, however, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has decreased significantly due to tightened security along the borders between China and North Korea as well as between China and Southeast Asian countries. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, only 196 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2023—one of the lowest numbers in over 20 years.

The Chinese government [views](#) all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them if discovered, disregarding their risk of persecution upon return and violating its international obligations. North Korean refugees in China who engage in religious activities and have contact with Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organization workers—who play an instrumental role in helping the refugees escape—[face](#) severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. In 2023, Chinese authorities held roughly [2,000](#) North Korean refugees in detention centers and repatriated as many as 600 of them in October, with more facing imminent repatriation. North Korean refugees caught by authorities in Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, also [risk](#) deportation to China and then repatriation to North Korea. The U.S. and South Korean governments have repeatedly [raised](#) this issue with China and [urged](#) the country to stop forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees. In addition to China, North Korea also [engages](#) in transnational repression, such as abduction and forced repatriation, against its own citizens and foreign nationals in other countries.

## International Accountability in the United Nations

In March, United Nations (UN) experts, the United States, and other Western countries [held](#) a UN Security Council meeting on North Korean human rights, including the right to freedom of religion. During the meeting, a senior official in the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea underscored the links between North Korea’s dire human rights situation and international peace and security. China and Russia blocked the United States from broadcasting the meeting. In August, the United States [led](#) a UN Security Council

meeting on the human rights situation in North Korea, which China and [Russia](#) publicly [opposed](#). Afterward, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [delivered](#) a joint statement on behalf of 52 countries and the European Union, calling attention to North Korea’s human rights violations and urging more UN member states to highlight linkages between the country’s human rights abuses and international peace and security.

In April, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses committed” in North Korea. It expressed grave concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals on the basis of religion or belief; denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to adopt a religion or belief; and discrimination based on the *songbun* system, which classifies and discriminates against people based on religion and other considerations. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to thought, conscience, and religion or belief. In December, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) a resolution condemning North Korea’s “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations of human rights.” The resolution also highlighted concern about China’s forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, which violates the principle of nonrefoulement.

## Key U.S. Policy

There was little to no change in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2023, and the North Korean government again [rejected offers](#) of the United States and allies for [dialogue](#) and [diplomacy](#). In August, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida met and [formed](#) a new trilateral security partnership at Camp David. The leaders also committed to strengthening cooperation on promoting respect for human rights in North Korea and reestablishing dialogue with the country with no preconditions. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) and reimposed the existing, ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.

In July, the U.S. Senate [confirmed Julie Turner](#) as the special envoy for North Korean human rights issues. In October, Special Envoy Turner traveled to Seoul to meet with her South Korean government counterparts, civil society groups, and North Korean defectors. She [reiterated](#) the U.S. government’s commitment to [work](#) with South Korea and the international community on promoting human rights in North Korea and to hold accountable those responsible for human rights violations. In March, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) introduced the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2023 ([S.584](#)). In April, Representative Young Kim (R-CA) and Representative Ami Bera (D-CA) [introduced](#) the House version of the bill ([H.R.3012](#)). Both chambers of Congress took [no further action](#) on the measure during the year.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to deteriorate. Religious minorities were targeted for their beliefs, including accusations of blasphemy, and were subject to mob violence, lynchings, and forced conversions. Attacks on and desecration of places of worship also occurred frequently throughout the year. While the government made some positive reforms, including [approving](#) a new curriculum making Islamic studies non-compulsory for religious minorities, proposed amendments to Pakistan’s blasphemy law risk further escalating persecution against Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Blasphemy cases and associated mob violence remained a substantial threat to religious freedom. In the runup to national elections, political parties leveraged blasphemy laws for political gain. In January 2023, the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, unanimously [passed](#) an amendment to strengthen punishment under the country’s blasphemy law. In February, at least 50 men [stormed](#) a police station in Punjab to kidnap and lynch a Muslim man, Muhammad Waris, accused of desecrating the Qur’an. In August, a mob of hundreds attacked the Christian community of Jaranwala, Pakistan, damaging dozens of churches and homes following accusations of blasphemy. In September, a month of protests and clashes began in Gilgit-Baltistan after a Shi’a cleric was accused of making [blasphemous](#) statements.

Terrorist attacks targeting religious minorities and places of worship significantly increased in 2023. In January, a suicide bomber [attacked](#) a mosque in Peshawar, killing at least 100, the country’s most deadly terrorist attack in recent years. In June,

the Islamic State (IS) claimed [responsibility](#) for killing a Sikh man in northwestern Peshawar, claiming he belonged to a “polytheistic” Sikh sect. In September, suicide bombings targeted two mosques in Balochistan as congregants [assembled](#) to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday. Increasing terrorist attacks prompted authorities to justify the [expulsion](#) of 1.3 million Afghan refugees, including minority Shi’a [Hazara](#) and [Christian](#) communities. The office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights [emphasized](#) that these religious communities “will be at grave risk” of human rights violations by Afghanistan’s de facto Taliban authorities. Estimates [indicate](#) that 500,000 Afghan refugees were deported after the October 1st deadline.

Throughout the year, religious minorities, including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims, faced increased levels of harassment and violence. In total in 2023, three Sikhs were killed by vigilantes or as targets of terrorist attacks. In January, UN human rights experts expressed [concern](#) at the reported increase in forced conversions of [Christian](#) and [Hindu](#) girls in Pakistan. In July, vigilantes [attacked](#) a Hindu temple in Sindh following the news that a Pakistani Muslim woman had married a Hindu man in India. Additionally, the Ahmadiyya community recorded three dozen [attacks](#) on their places of worship throughout 2023, including vandalism, often with police complicity. These actions occurred despite a 2023 court ruling prohibiting the alteration of or damage to mosques built before 1984. Ahmadiyya Muslims also continued to face physical threats. In April, an Ahmadiyya lawyer was assaulted in court for using the religious prefix “Syed.”

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
  - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
  - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until such repeal, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing penal code
- articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
- Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents; and
- Hold accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other religiously based crimes.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations and advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Assessing Blasphemy and Related Laws on Religious Freedom in Pakistan](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by Pakistan’s Expulsion of Refugees and Attacks against Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Pakistan](#)

## Background

Pakistan's population is 96.3 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.2 percent Ahmadiyya) with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.6 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1.0 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956, granting special status to Islam and constitutionally establishing Islam as the state religion. The constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices. Additionally, 10 seats are reserved for religious minorities in the National Assembly, four in the Senate, and 23 in four provincial assemblies. However, a 1974 constitutional amendment declares Ahmadis non-Muslims, excluding them from representation.

## Pending Amendment to Blasphemy Law

In January 2023, Pakistan's National Assembly unanimously [passed](#) an amendment to the country's [blasphemy law](#). Introduced by a member of the religious political party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the private member's bill would expand punishable offenses and offer harsher punishments for blasphemy. Currently, individuals can be charged with blasphemy for using derogatory remarks against Muslim holy personages (Section 295-A), defiling or desecrating the Qur'an (Section 295-B), or insulting the Prophet Muhammad (Section 295-C). Those accused of blasphemy often face lengthy prison sentences on death row and solitary confinement. Blasphemy allegations are also used to settle personal vendettas, with no punishment for those who offer false accusations or perpetrate vigilante violence.

The proposed [amendment](#) seeks to expand and strengthen punishments for condescending remarks against "holy persons," including the Prophet Muhammad's family, wives, and companions and the four caliphs. It seeks to increase the possible punishment to range anywhere from a minimum sentence of three years and a fine up to life imprisonment—while simultaneously making the offense nonbailable. In August, the Senate passed the bill.

## Violence against Christians

In August 2023, a mob of hundreds of individuals attacked the Christian community of Jaranwala, damaging at least 24 churches, raiding homes, and desecrating a cemetery. The attack occurred after two Christians were [accused](#) of committing blasphemy by desecrating a Qur'an. Following the accusations, members of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) made public announcements from mosques for individuals to gather in Jaranwala. Reports indicate the mob was composed of Muslims from outside Jaranwala and that violence lasted for 10 hours without police intervention. As of November 2023, not all damaged churches had been repaired. Despite authorities arresting close to 200 people involved in the attack, reporting indicates that fear among the Christian community persists, particularly among smaller churches that are unable to provide sufficient protection.

## Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

Articles 298(b) and 298(c) of Pakistan's Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis from identifying as Muslim, forcing them to sign a declaration swearing they are non-Muslim to obtain the right to vote or receive national identification cards. They are prohibited from citing the

Qur'an or Hadith, displaying Qur'anic text, sharing their faith, printing or obtaining material related to their faith, or calling their places of worship "mosques."

In a July letter, [representatives](#) from the Lahore High Court Bar Association (LHCBA) asked the Punjab Home Department to prevent the Ahmadiyya community from performing animal sacrifices on Eid al-Adha. That same month, three Ahmadis were [arrested](#) and charged under Section 298-C with "hurting Muslim sentiment" for sacrificing animals inside their homes on Eid. A total of five First Instance Reports (FIRs) were filed against Ahmadis. These charges stand in contrast to a 2022 [judgment](#) by the Supreme Court, which ruled that obstructing "non-Muslims" from practicing their religion within their places of worship is against the constitution.

## Attacks against Places of Worship

In 2023, Pakistan's Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities faced increased attacks against their places of worship. In September, the Lahore High Court [ruled](#) that Ahmadiyya mosques built before 1984 cannot be destroyed or altered. Despite this decision, several structures have been vandalized and threatened, including an April [attack](#) against the Ahmadiyya mosque in Ghooghiat, Punjab. Vigilantes demolished several minarets of the mosque, which is over a century old, in the presence of police. Similarly, in May, a mob of 150 people vandalized an Ahmadiyya mosque in Halqa Rehman, [destroying](#) four minarets. In December, members of Punjab's Hindu community claimed that two Hindu temples were [converted](#) into mosques.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States has considered Pakistan's stability and security a priority for U.S. foreign policy. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$150 million for programs in Pakistan. In 2023, the U.S. government continued to raise religious freedom concerns in the country. Throughout the year, U.S. government officials, including U.S. Ambassador [Donald Blome](#) and U.S. Secretary of State [Antony J. Blinken](#), condemned terrorist attacks against worshipers and religious minorities. In October, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain [traveled](#) to Pakistan where he met with representatives from Jaranwala's Christian community and government officials, including the foreign minister.

Pakistan's caretaker government was formed in mid-August under the leadership of Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar. In September, Kakar visited the United States to attend the 78th UN General Assembly. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Populations, Refugees, and Migration Julieta Noyes [visited](#) Pakistan following the caretaker government's announcement that it would deport undocumented Afghan refugees. In December, Pakistan Army Chief Asim Munir [traveled](#) to Washington, DC, for meetings with the U.S. secretary of defense, the secretary of state, and the White House's national security advisor.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. Consistent with prior years, however, the State Department issued a national interest waiver absolving Pakistan of liability to sanctions or other penalties that otherwise accompany the CPC designation.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation remained severe as authorities targeted members of religious minorities on spurious charges related to their peaceful religious activities. Muslims, including Crimean Tatars detained in Russian-occupied Crimea, faced unsubstantiated terrorism charges for possessing religious materials and meeting together to discuss religion as alleged members of [Hizb ut-Tahrir \(HT\)](#). Human rights organization Memorial reported in December that at least 335 people were in prison, faced prosecution, or were under investigation for such alleged affiliations; of these prisoners, 128 had received prison sentences between 10 and 15 years, and 115 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In June, a court sentenced Crimean Tatar activist [Ansar Osmanov](#) to 20 years in prison on charges related to possessing religious literature and organizing religious meetings. In February 2023, Crimean Tatar [Dzhemil Gafarov](#) died in prison after officials refused to transfer him to a hospital. Imprisoned Muslims [reported](#) experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, and pork-filled food.

Since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses “extremist” in 2017, law enforcement has [subjected](#) the group to more than 2,000 home searches and opened criminal cases against nearly 800 members. In April 2023, a court [fined](#) four Jehovah’s Witnesses \$24,095 (2,195,000 rubles) for gathering. In November, a court sentenced [Yevgeny Bushev](#) to seven years’ imprisonment after he discussed his religious beliefs with an undercover agent. At the end of the year, nearly 150 Jehovah’s Witnesses remained under house arrest or in pretrial detention or prison.

The government prosecuted several individuals on charges of blasphemy, including persons perceived to have insulted Islam. In May, authorities arrested 19-year-old [Nikita Zhuravel](#) after he allegedly burned a Qur’an and mocked Muslims on video. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov’s 15-year-old son Adam Kadyrov beat Zhuravel after he was transferred to a detention center in Chechnya.

Federal officials [refused](#) to investigate the beating, despite the existence of video evidence, and Adam subsequently [received](#) nearly a dozen awards for “defending” faith and traditional values.

The Ministry of Justice waged a relentless campaign against civil society organizations that report on religious freedom issues. In April 2023, a court [liquidated](#) the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that monitors religious freedom violations in Russia and Crimea. Human rights activists similarly faced criminal prosecution in connection with their work. In May, a court sentenced [Bakhrom Khamroev](#), a lawyer who defended Muslims charged in HT cases, to 14 years in prison.

In 2023, state retaliation against those who spoke out against Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine using religious language or on moral grounds continued at startling heights. The government declared the Supreme Lama of Kalmykia and representative of the Dalai Lama in Russia [Telo Tulku Rinpoche](#) and the Chief Rabbi of Moscow [Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt](#) as “foreign agents” for openly opposing Russia’s invasion. In March 2023, a court sentenced Orthodox Christian [Mikhail Simonov](#) to seven years in prison for an antiwar social media post that invoked God.

Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, there has been an increase in antisemitic rhetoric by government officials. In 2023, officials [failed](#) to adequately address rising domestic antisemitism following several alarming incidents, including a mob [attack](#) at a Dagestan airport targeting “refugees from Israel.” Russia also continued to severely curtail religious freedom in the parts of Ukraine that it invaded and occupied. In Russian-occupied territories, de facto authorities banned religious groups, raided houses of worship, and disappeared religious leaders. Russian artillery damaged Ukrainian religious sites, including the [Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral](#) in Odesa. By December, the United Nations (UN) Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [verified](#) damage to at least 125 religious sites, although other organizations [reported](#) damage to approximately 630 sites since the war began in February 2022.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the

United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

- Allocate greater funding to programs supporting civil society and independent media that report uncensored information, counter Russian disinformation and antisemitism, and monitor and document religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Engage with repressed religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Russia’s Closure of the SOVA Center](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in the Russian Federation](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Russia’s Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Russia](#)

## Background

According to a 2022 [poll](#) by the independent Levada Center, 71 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, five percent as Muslim, and 15 percent as having no religious faith. Several other religious groups each constitute one percent or less of the population, including Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Baha'is, Falun Gong practitioners, Scientologists, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Tengrists, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and followers of indigenous religions. Russia's 1997 religion law considers Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. Over time, the Russian government has granted special recognition and privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In 2023, Russia increased the penalties for violating criminal and administrative code [articles](#) commonly used against religious minorities, dissidents, and human rights defenders. President Vladimir Putin signed legislation that [increased](#) the penalties for "discrediting" the armed forces, [deprived](#) the acquired citizenship of those convicted of collaborating with an "undesirable organization," and [criminalized](#) working with unregistered NGOs. In December, the Supreme Court [recognized](#) a so-called "international LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] movement" as an "extremist organization" for inciting "social and religious hatred."

## Religious Minorities

The government harassed, discriminated against, detained, fined, deported, and imprisoned members of religious minorities because of their religious identities, activities, and affiliations.

Individuals and communities incurred fines for so-called "illegal missionary activities" for [possessing](#) unlabeled religious materials or [engaging](#) in unregistered religious activities as a foreigner. Law enforcement searched the homes and meeting places of Falun Gong practitioners and members of the spiritual movement [Allya Ayat](#). Similarly, security forces raided mosques to [force](#) Muslim migrant men to enlist in the military. In June, a Moscow court [sentenced](#) six followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi to as many as six and a half years in prison for gathering to read religious literature.

In July, a court [sentenced](#) two Protestant pastors to three and a half years' imprisonment for affiliating with the banned "undesirable" New Generation Evangelical Christian Church. During the year, the Prosecutor General's Office also banned the [Transformation Center Church International](#) and the religious group [AllatRa](#) as "undesirable." In August, a St. Petersburg court [sentenced](#) Church of Scientology leader [Ivan Matsitsky](#) to six and a half years in prison and fined four others \$44,858 (4,100,000 rubles) for their work with the church. Matsitsky was released on time served.

Also in August, police in St. Petersburg [handed](#) over to Chechen security forces Seda Suleimanova, who had fled Chechnya out of fear her family may kill her for being "insufficiently religious." In November,

an Ulyanovsk court fined and sentenced [Said Abdelrazek](#) to one and a half years in prison for "offending religious feelings" after he desecrated a Qur'an on video. By the end of the year, courts [sentenced](#) at least four men to prison over their refusal to serve in the military on religious grounds.

## Crackdown on Russian Civil Society and Dissent

The Russian government often took legal action to suppress independent media and human rights organizations that monitor and report on violations of freedom of religion or belief. Law enforcement [raided](#) the homes and offices of Memorial activists, and courts imposed hefty fines on several of Memorial's branches. During the year, authorities closed the [Moscow Helsinki Group](#), designated [SK SOS Crisis Group](#) a "foreign agent," and declared [Meduza](#), [Novaya Gazeta Europe](#), and [CrimeaSOS](#) "undesirable." Police fined and sometimes detained religious leaders and individuals who expressed their religiously grounded opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In August, a St. Petersburg court sentenced Orthodox hieromonk [Ioann Kurmoyarov](#) to three years' imprisonment for posting videos condemning the invasion in religious terms.

## Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

De facto authorities in the parts of Ukraine that Russia occupied rigorously persecuted religious minorities in 2023. In Crimea, Russian authorities fabricated terrorism allegations to incarcerate predominantly Muslim Crimean Tatars who opposed Russian occupation. In May, Russian authorities in Crimea [seized](#) the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's (OCU) Cathedral of Saints Volodymyr and Olha. In the Zaporizhzhia region, Russian authorities [banned](#) the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and [closed](#) OCU, Roman Catholic, and Baptist churches. At the end of the year, the whereabouts of several priests whom Russian forces had detained—including Greek Catholic priests [Ivan Levitsky](#) and [Bohdan Geleta](#), OCU priests [Khrystofor Khrimli](#) and [Andriy Chuy](#), and Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) priest [Kostiantyn Maksimov](#)—remained unknown.

High-ranking Russian officials and state media also engaged in Holocaust distortion and antisemitism to justify the country's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. President Putin [referred](#) to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "disgrace to the Jewish people" and [accused](#) the West of putting an "ethnic Jew" in charge to cover up Ukraine's "anti-human nature."

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States [imposed](#) additional rounds of sanctions against Russian individuals and entities supporting the war effort and engaging in human rights violations. The U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Mission to the UN highlighted the Russian government's antisemitic [rhetoric](#) and gross religious freedom [abuses](#). On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing sanctions.

# SAUDI ARABIA

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor in 2023 despite some improvements. Power is highly centralized within the Al Saud ruling family. The ruling monarch, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, holds the title “Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.” The King’s son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is prime minister. Public non-Muslim worship and the construction of houses of worship other than mosques remain prohibited. However, the government permitted a visiting Israeli delegation to [hold](#) Sukkot services in a Riyadh hotel in October. Shi’a Muslims face systematic discrimination in employment and government mistreatment. Ahead of Saudi Arabia’s United Nations (UN) Universal Periodic Review in January 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on summary, extrajudicial, or arbitrary killings expressed [concern](#) over the Supreme Court’s upholding of a death sentence for [Abdullah al-Derazi](#), a Shi’a man arrested in 2014 for crimes he was alleged to have committed as a minor.

In recent years, the Saudi government has made changes to the male guardianship system, a set of laws and regulations [rooted](#) in the government’s official interpretation of Islam and imposed on women regardless of their religious beliefs. The government has also begun to codify aspects of its religiously grounded penal code, making these punishments more standardized and transparent. In February 2023, the governor of Mecca Governorate approved plans for a committee to reconcile disputes over *qisas* crimes (a religious category of crimes for which retaliatory punishment is permitted). The Kingdom has permitted gender mixing and relaxed religious dress codes at specific nightlife and music events. A May [study](#) of Saudi textbooks noted “further progress and improvement” with regard to the removal of religiously intolerant content, while noting that some such content still remained, including passages using religious interpretations to equate homosexuality and atheism with terrorist ideology.

The Saudi government continues to issue egregious prison sentences for those expressing dissenting religious views on social media. In March, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced [Salma al-Shehab](#) to 27 years in prison—a reduction from 34—over tweets supporting activists peacefully challenging the guardianship system. That same month, al-Shehab and other activists undertook a three-and-a-half-week hunger strike to protest their detention conditions. In June, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention expressed [concern](#) over the use of antiterrorism and cybercrime laws to target al-Shehab—whose cybercrime charges were dropped in March 2023—and activist [Nourah al-Qahtani](#). The SCC charged al-Qahtani for possessing a banned book by jailed dissident religious scholar [Salman al-Ouda](#). In October, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [determined](#) that al-Ouda’s detention was arbitrary. In August, the SCC sentenced Mohammed al-Ghamdi to death after holding him incommunicado in solitary confinement for four months and charging him with “supporting a terrorist ideology” over tweets calling for the release of religious clerics. Regarding this decision, the crown prince [told](#) a U.S. journalist in September, “I cannot tell a judge [to] ... ignore the law... But do we have bad laws? Yes. We are changing that.” Al-Ghamdi’s brother Saeed is a United Kingdom-based religious scholar and dissident, indicating that the sentence is part of the broader Saudi campaign of [transnational repression](#) of those who challenge the official interpretation of Islam. In July, a court sentenced Malik al-Dowaish, son of cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaish](#), to 27 years in prison after he posted a video inquiring about his father’s mistreatment.

During a USCIRF visit to Saudi Arabia in March 2024, government officials asked Chair Rabbi Abraham Cooper to remove his kippah at the Diriyah UNESCO World Heritage Site and for all other times when out in public. After being escorted from the site, the USCIRF delegation [truncated the trip](#).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation; and
- Identify legal options for penalizing U.S. companies complicit in the Saudi government’s religious freedom violations, including those enabling electronic surveillance of cellular phones, emails, social media accounts, and the private messages of religious minorities and religious dissidents.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify bipartisan concerns over religious freedom violations in Saudi Arabia, including the prolonged detention of religious prisoners of conscience, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for them and other prisoners of conscience to be released.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Leaves Saudi Arabia After Government Official Insisted Chair to Remove Kippah](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Saudi Arabia](#)

## Background

Out of [34 million Saudis](#), 85–90 percent are Sunni Muslim, and 10–15 percent are Shi'a Muslim. An estimated 38 percent of the population are expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Under Saudi law, the constitution is the Qur'an and the sunna (traditions of the Prophet), and the judicial system enforces an official interpretation of Shari'a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence. Apostasy and blasphemy are both capital crimes. Same-sex relations are legally punishable by death, but the government has conducted no such executions in recent years.

## Shi'a Muslim Discrimination

Shi'a Muslims face discrimination in housing, employment, and the judiciary and lack access to senior positions in the government and military. The government continues to prosecute those involved in 2011 protests against religious discrimination in the predominantly Shi'a Eastern Province. In March, a court sentenced Shi'a activist [Mariam Al Qisoom](#) to a 25-year prison sentence and subsequent travel ban. In June, authorities arrested Shi'a Bahraini cleric Sheikh Jamil al-Baqari for posting a social media video in which he recited a prayer for the deliverance of Imam Mahdi. Official religious interpretations in Saudi Arabia oppose venerating religious figures.

## Social Media Crackdowns

The Saudi government actively surveilles social media. It has arrested citizens over their peaceful religious expression, accusing them of offenses including sending material that may "harm public order and religious values." These include "explicitly denying the Qur'an," "contempt for the teachings of the Islamic religion," and "opposition to the provisions of Islamic Shari'a." In January, Riyadh police arrested four people for posting a dancing video on TikTok and referred them to the Public Prosecutor for violating the Law on Information Crimes and Public Morals. They were later released. In September, the General Authority for Media Regulation summoned a female blogger over a tweet deemed "insulting to the Prophet of Islam and his wife." In March, Sheikh Imad al-Mubayed disappeared after posting a video on Twitter criticizing the government's interpretation of Islam, which he later recanted. He posted a [video](#) later that month claiming he had found refuge in a "safe country."

In January, the Riyadh Criminal Court heard charges against social media influencer [Manahel al-Otaibi](#). They included publishing content related to abolishing the guardianship system that allegedly violated "public morals," supporting activists who oppose guardianship, and dressing "improperly" according to religiously grounded guidelines. The court transferred the case to the SCC, where al-Otaibi faced charges under the 2017 counterterrorism law. In July, the SCC postponed her scheduled court hearing without setting a new date. In September, she alleged physical and psychological abuse during her ongoing detention at Malaz Prison, including unjust solitary confinement. al-Otaibi was held incommunicado from November 5 through the end of the reporting period. Manahel's sister Fouz, who was charged with similar crimes, is outside Saudi Arabia and posted a video in August [criticizing](#) the targeting of Saudi women for wearing

clothing defying religious notions of modesty while permitting more lenient requirements for foreign female performance artists.

## Religious Guardianship

Saudi women have benefited from recent legal reforms but continue to face restrictions on their religious freedom. Many activists who advocated for now-implemented changes to these laws were arrested and—in some cases—subjected to harassment, sexual assault, and abuse in prison. Several women punished for religious expression on social media wrote in support of reforms to the guardianship system and activists who have advocated for its abolition.

## Transnational Repression

Outside its borders, Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents. It also imposes punishments, including travel and media bans, on family members of religious dissidents living abroad to encourage self-censorship. [Abdulrahman al-Sadhan](#), whose sister is a U.S. citizen and critic of Saudi policy, remains jailed on a 20-year sentence for satirizing religious officials. [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), an activist against the religious guardianship system, remains unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite her travel ban expiring in 2023, likely related to her sister Lina's activism. In March 2023, USCIRF expressed [concern](#) and the U.S. Department of State [said](#) it was "studying" indications of Saudi government involvement in the repatriation under duress and subsequent suicide of Eden Knight. A 23-year-old Saudi citizen, Knight flew to Saudi Arabia from the United States in December 2022 despite a fear of religiously grounded persecution on the basis of gender. In text messages, she explicitly cited her religious beliefs as the source of this fear. She committed suicide in March 2023 after being subjected to familial abuse and fearing her attempt to obtain a new passport via the governmental *Absher* app would result in a notification being sent to her father.

## U.S. Policy

The United States continued close [security](#) coordination with Saudi Arabia on regional security issues, including discussions of defense guarantees. This coordination continued following the outbreak of conflict in Israel and Gaza in October. In March, the U.S. Senate [confirmed](#) Michael Ratney as ambassador to Saudi Arabia. That same month, Senators Chris Murphy (D-CT) and Mike Lee (R-UT) introduced a [privileged resolution](#) that would require the Joseph R. Biden administration to issue a report on Saudi Arabia's human rights record. In August, Senator Murphy [tweeted](#) expressing concern for Mohammed al-Ghamdi. In October, Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman met with [senior](#) U.S. [officials](#) during a visit to Washington, DC. Also in October, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to Saudi Arabia and met with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister [Mohammed bin Salman](#) and Saudi Foreign Minister [Faisal bin Farhan](#) to coordinate a response to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In FY 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) over \$112,000 in foreign assistance to Saudi Arabia. On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA but reimposed the longstanding waiver on taking any presidential action as a consequence of the designation.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained dire as the government continued to restrict and penalize the religious activity of its citizens, including those living abroad. Under the law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), the government prohibits unregistered religious activity, limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, and maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, among other actions. As in years prior, the Tajik government retaliated against persons who violated the religion law, punishing them with imprisonment, torture, fines, and harassment. While this repression impacted all religious groups, authorities particularly targeted Muslims. Notably, the government increasingly directed such actions against Ismaili Shi'a Muslims during the year.

In line with the “extremism law,” the government maintained a list of arbitrarily defined “extremist” organizations, which included peaceful religious and political organizations. The government banned Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2007, and in August the Supreme Court rejected an appeal to reverse that ban. Officials also harassed Jehovah’s Witnesses for their religious activities. For example, authorities interrogated Jehovah’s Witnesses in Sughd region and Dushanbe about fellow Jehovah’s Witnesses. In June, two women were detained overnight and fined \$311 (3,400 somonis) on charges of “inciting religious hatred” for sharing their religious beliefs. In May, Jehovah’s Witness [Shamil Khakimov](#) completed his sentence and was released. Khakimov was wrongfully imprisoned in 2019 for his peaceful

religious activities and suffered medical neglect throughout his time in prison.

The government routinely accused individuals of “extremism” for dissenting against or criticizing Tajik President Emomali Rahmon’s administration, and it similarly banned the activities of groups such as the religiously based Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) as “extremist.” As part of its efforts to suppress these groups, the government engaged in transnational repression to forcibly return their members living abroad to Tajikistan, in part by submitting fraudulent “Red Notices” to the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). In January 2023, the German government [deported](#) Abdullo Shamsiddin, the son of an IRPT founder, to Tajikistan where he received a seven-year prison sentence on sedition charges for reportedly liking a social media post. Also in January, the Tajik government requested that Belarusian authorities [deport](#) former Group-24 member Nizomiddin Nasriddinov partly due to his alleged online engagement with IRPT content. A court later [sentenced](#) him to eight and a half years in prison on charges of attempting to forcibly change Tajikistan’s constitutional order. In August, 63-year-old Jaloliddin Makhmudov [died](#) while serving a prison sentence in Tajikistan for his affiliation with the IRPT.

Authorities reportedly closed down or destroyed the mosques of communities that did not provide enough enlisted men for the military. In Isfara city, authorities [closed](#) a mosque during Ramadan to coerce military conscriptions. In October, authorities [destroyed](#) a mosque in Vahdat city, reportedly because not enough men volunteered for the military.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
  - Condition U.S. security assistance to the Tajik government on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law improving conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajik officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism;
  - Impose targeted sanctions on Tajik government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
  - Press the Tajik government at the highest levels to account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience; immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajik prisons.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Tajikistan’s transnational repression with counterparts in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and press member states to take measures to ensure that individuals seeking asylum due to religious persecution and facing unfounded accusations of extremism are not subject to deportation.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [The Repression of Religious Freedom in Authoritarian Tajikistan](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Welcomes Tajikistan’s Release of Shamil Khakimov and Calls for U.S. Policy Action](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Will Tajikistan Meaningfully Engage on Religious Freedom?](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Tajikistan](#)



## Background

Around 90 percent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim, with the majority [adhering](#) to Hanafi Sunni Islam. Around four percent are ethnically Pamiri, adhere to Ismaili Shi'a Islam, and reside in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (commonly known as GBAO). The remainder of the population includes Christian denominations, such as Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious communities include Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

In 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, [Nazila Ghanea](#), and on minority issues, [Fernand de Varennes](#), separately visited Tajikistan and noted several religious freedom violations impacting all religious groups, including specific targeting of Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, a stringent registration process for all religious organizations, and bans on women from attending mosque and all those under 18 from engaging in religious activity.

## State Targeting of Sunni Muslims

The Tajik government continued to target individuals who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. Authorities often justified the penalization of peaceful religious activities as a means to prevent "extremism," a broadly defined term arbitrarily used to repress those that the government views as threatening to its authority.

In 2023, authorities accused independent Muslims of adhering to Salafism, which the government has banned as an "extremist" movement and [characterized](#) as a "direct threat to society." In March, authorities [sentenced](#) imam [Mukhammad Mukhammarov](#) to eight years in prison on extremism charges for allegedly teaching Islam to a group of 12 Muslims, but also likely due to his affiliation with the "Salafi movement." His students were similarly sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. In April, a Khatlon region court [sentenced](#) imam Abdullahannon Usmonov to six years in prison on charges of participating in a banned extremist organization and obstructing his daughter's education. Authorities initially arrested Usmonov for disrupting a wedding, but the prosecutor's office later [found](#) that Usmonov watched and distributed "extremist" "Salafi movement" materials online. USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) includes other Muslims who remained in prison in Tajikistan on falsified extremism charges for their peaceful religious activities.

The government continued to retain the right to approve the appointment of imams and targeted unsanctioned imams. In October, the Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) warned that an unauthorized imam in Hisar city provided funeral services instead of the state-appointed imam and announced an investigation into whether this individual "degraded the dignity of the dead body." In November, the CRA announced it was investigating an individual who reportedly addressed a mosque congregation in the absence of the state-appointed imam.

In early 2023, Islamic bookstores in Dushanbe reopened after authorities had forcibly closed them in late 2022 for printing and/or

importing religious materials without state approval. However, the reopened bookstores allegedly are no longer [permitted](#) to sell the same Islamic books.

Tajik officials also continued to monitor and penalize religious activity through use of the "traditions law," which prohibits "excessive" religious ceremonies and rituals. For example, in January 2023, the Vahdat city court fined an individual an unknown amount for providing food at a religious ceremony.

## Crackdown on Shi'a Muslims

In 2023, authorities further restricted Ismaili Shi'a religious activity in GBAO. In an effort to curtail the influence of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, the government nationalized Aga Khan Foundation social service facilities, such as the [Aga Khan Lyceum](#), and upheld a decision to nationalize the [University of Central Asia](#). Security officials also [harassed and threatened](#) instructors for teaching "Ethics and Knowledge" courses, which included information about Islam and Ismailism.

In a January 2023 meeting with local elders, authorities [announced](#) that it was prohibited to study at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, hang portraits of the Aga Khan, and hold group prayers in private homes, even though there is only one operating Ismaili prayer house in GBAO. At least two individuals were fined without a court hearing for hosting prayers in their homes in January and February.

In April 2023, President Rahmon [signed](#) into law a decree banning funeral rites for those killed in "anti-terrorist operations," which it has violently enforced. Activists said the decree is intended to punish the families of protesters in GBAO who were killed by military forces. Families of the deceased were forbidden from knowing the burial locations of their loved ones or erecting gravestones. In May, authorities [tortured](#) the relative of an individual killed during the protests for placing their loved one's name on a gravestone.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States continued to partner with the Tajik government to address regional security concerns, like terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and provided over \$60 million for [programs](#) in Tajikistan in 2023. In February, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin. In September, President Rahmon met with President Joseph R. Biden under the auspices of the C5+1 Presidential Summit. Along with the other Central Asian leaders, President Rahmon signed onto a [joint statement](#) that passingly mentioned human rights. In December, Chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [wrote](#) a letter to President Rahmon urging him to respect human rights in Tajikistan and stop practicing transnational repression.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States."

# TURKMENISTAN

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government maintained strict control over all aspects of religious life and prosecuted individuals who did not adhere to it. Authorities routinely targeted devout, peaceful Muslims as “extremist” because of their appearance, possession of unapproved religious materials, or disciplined religious practice. The government perceived such forms of religiosity as foreign and divergent from its conceptions of traditional Turkmen religious practice. Police and officials from the Ministry of National Security reportedly [interrogated](#) Muslim women—particularly those who went to mosque, wore hijab, or prayed with *tasbeih* (Islamic prayer beads)—and searched their phones to determine if they belonged to “radical” religious groups. Police in Dashoguz reportedly [detained](#) “en masse” men with beards—a sign of religiosity for many Muslim men—and forced them to shave at police stations. In a separate instance, a man was blocked from boarding his flight until he shaved his beard. In August, police in Turkmenbashi and other regions [raided](#) Muslim homes, seizing religious literature. That same month, law enforcement reportedly detained an elderly Muslim man for teaching Islam to dozens of children without state approval.

Muslim prisoners of conscience remained jailed under unsubstantiated national security pretenses for engaging in peaceful religious activities. USCIRF has [identified](#) at least nine prisoners—though this number is [suspected](#) to be greater—serving between 12 and 15 years in prison for a range of reasons connected to the exercise of their freedom of religion or belief. In a positive development, Turkmen officials provided USCIRF with information about the latest whereabouts and statuses of these nine prisoners. Concerns remained, however, about the wellbeing of such prisoners given the notoriously inhumane living [conditions](#) of prisons in Turkmenistan,

especially Ovadan-Depe Prison, where [allegations](#) of torture, medical neglect, and enforced disappearance persisted.

Turkmenistan targeted its Muslim citizens living abroad. In August, Russian authorities deported Turkmen Muslim [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#) to Turkmenistan in violation of a 2017 European Court of Human Rights decision to suspend his extradition. Turkmen officials placed Bekiev, who had lived in Russia since 2009, on the country’s wanted list in 2015 after accusing him of promoting Islamic extremism to other Turkmen citizens in Russia. In October, a Turkmen court reportedly sentenced Bekiev to 23 years in prison. Earlier in the year, Russian officials also [detained](#) Bekiev’s brother Tachmyrat Bekiev in St. Petersburg.

Exiled Turkmen activists claimed that the state retaliated against their family members living in Turkmenistan. Hamida Babajanova alleged that in April 2023, Ashgabat airport officials [prohibited](#) her mother Yakutjan Babajanova from boarding a plane to Saudi Arabia to go on Umra. At the time, authorities provided no explanation to Babajanova, despite her having all the required paperwork. Babajanova was eventually allowed to travel five months later. Moreover, people applying to go on Hajj reportedly must [prove](#) they have no relatives with criminal records or pay a bribe to falsify such records.

The government has still not allowed Jehovah’s Witnesses to register, nor has it provided an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. While authorities in the past have imprisoned Jehovah’s Witnesses for refusing to serve in the military, no Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned in 2023. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported nearly a dozen instances in which police briefly detained, questioned, or ordered Jehovah’s Witnesses not to share their beliefs with others.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under [IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#) to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Encourage Turkmen authorities to extend an official invitation for an unrestricted visit by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Raise religious freedom and other human rights concerns with Turkmen counterparts, including at C5+1 meetings, and urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide an acceptable civilian alternative to military service.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List: [Turkmenistan](#)



## Background

Turkmenistan has an [estimated](#) population of 5.6 million. According to the U.S. government, 89 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni); nine percent is Eastern Orthodox, which largely means either Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic; and the remaining two percent includes small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is, Roman Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Protestants, and Jews.

Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most repressive countries, making documenting religious freedom violations challenging. The state has [deprived](#) its citizens of virtually all political and civil rights and [imprisoned](#) civil society activists for their work and perceived criticism of authorities. Turkmenistan [ranks](#) at the bottom for press freedom, as no independent media exists within the country, and journalists risk [criminal prosecution](#) and other forms of [retribution](#) for their work. Turkmen citizens, furthermore, faced significant obstacles communicating with the outside world. The government has [blocked](#) foreign media, social media, and messaging websites and rendered unblocked websites practically useless due to internet speeds that were among the slowest in the world. Turkmens living abroad risked [deportation](#) or retaliation against their families members who remained in Turkmenistan if they criticized the Turkmen government or raised concerns about human rights.

## Legal Framework for Controlling Religious Activity

While Turkmenistan's 2016 religion law [established](#) the country as a secular state and guaranteed the right to freedom of religion, it ultimately provides the government a comprehensive legal basis to systematically restrict religious activities. Only registered religious organizations are legally allowed to practice. In order to register, religious groups must submit an application to the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), which oversees all religious affairs in Turkmenistan. During the review process, SCROEERIR determines if a religious group's goals and activities "contradict Turkmenistan's constitution." This vague standard allows the government to deny registration to religious groups on an arbitrary basis. Furthermore, religious organizations must acquiesce to SCROEERIR's all-encompassing power to regulate a community's religious affairs, including the appointment of religious leaders, the importation and publication of religious literature, and building houses of worship.

Recognized religious communities must reregister every three years and are prohibited from receiving foreign financial support, conducting religious education and worship in private, and wearing religious garb, with the exception of government-approved clergy. The government forbids unregistered religious organizations from engaging in religious activities, producing or distributing religious materials, proselytizing, and gathering for religious services, even in private residences.

## Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Documenting arrests of religious prisoners of conscience in 2023 proved difficult due to Turkmenistan's vast repression. However,

several Muslims sentenced in years prior because of their peaceful religious activities remained in prison throughout the year. Authorities leveraged vague accusations of inciting religious enmity or attempting to violently change the constitutional order, prosecuting individuals in trials that lacked any semblance of transparency or due process. In 2013, authorities arrested and sentenced [Bahram Saparov](#) to 15 years in prison for organizing unregistered religious meetings to teach about Islam at the homes of his followers. After his initial sentencing, prison authorities brought additional charges against Saparov, resulting in two additional 15-year sentences that he is serving concurrently with his first. He is now expected to be released in 2031. Authorities arrested approximately 20 others from his religious community as well, but many of their sentences remain unknown. In 2017, Turkmen authorities arrested and sentenced [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetdurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) to 12 years in prison each for studying the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

Muslims who exercise their right to practice or discuss their religion when living outside of Turkmenistan have faced imprisonment for those religious activities upon returning home. In 2016, Turkmen authorities arrested and sentenced [Annamurad Atdaev](#) to 15 years in prison after he returned to Turkmenistan from Egypt where he had been studying at al-Azhar University. In 2018, Turkmen authorities detained and sentenced both [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) to 15 years in prison for possessing religious materials and discussing religious topics with other Turkmens living in St. Petersburg, Russia.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States engaged with the government of Turkmenistan on a range of issues, including border and regional security, economic cooperation, and efforts to curb methane emissions. In April 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov to discuss the bilateral relationship. In September, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedow among other Central Asian heads of state at a C5+1 meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly. In November, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) the launch of Business 5+1 to promote economic security and development between the United States, Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian states. During Turkmenistan's Universal Periodic Review at the UN, the United States [commended](#) Turkmenistan for its efforts to work with Jehovah's Witnesses on a mutually agreeable alternative civilian service. However, it also recommended Turkmenistan address its vast repression of civil society and provide greater transparency concerning prisoners and the prison system. In FY 2023, the U.S. government obligated around \$3.2 million for [programs](#) in Turkmenistan.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States," which it has done since 2014.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom violations in Vietnam remained relatively the same as last year. Authorities continued to persecute independent religious communities—many of which officials designate as “strange, false, or heretical” religions—that did not comply with state control. The government maintained state-controlled alternatives—such as the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Cao Dai 1997 Sect, Hoa Hao Administration Council, and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam-South—and pressured independent groups to join them. Authorities interfered in the appointment of religious leaders, confiscated religious artifacts, and restricted access to houses of worship.

Authorities continued to persecute ethnoreligious minority groups, such as Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Khmer Krom Buddhists, and Hmong adherents of Duong Van Minh. Authorities actively restrict independent Montagnard Protestants’ religious activities, forcing them to renounce their faith and arresting and sentencing them on charges of “[undermining national unity](#)” and “[abusing democratic freedoms](#).” Authorities pressured Hmong and Montagnard Protestants to join state-controlled Protestant religious organizations, surveilled them, and prevented their access to churches. Following the June attack on local government offices in Dak Lak Province that [killed](#) nine people, civil society groups raised [concerns](#) that the government would use this incident to extend persecution of the local Montagnard Christian community. Authorities [deployed](#) security and military forces to the Central Highlands and detained, charged, and [convicted](#) 100 ethnic minorities in January 2024 after the reporting period.

In 2023, the government implemented Directive 78 to “eradicate the Duong Van Minh sect.” During its trip in May 2023, USCIRF saw videos allegedly showing authorities forcing members of Duong Van Minh to renounce their faith. Authorities also forced ethnic minorities to use Vietnamese, as opposed to their

own ethnic minority languages, in religious worship and literature. In November, nonuniformed Vietnamese authorities [disrupted](#) a Khmer language class at a Khmer Krom Buddhist temple, attacking the abbot and two Buddhist followers. Reports from independent religious groups noted that the government restricts the import of religious literature printed in certain Hmong alphabets to the Central Highlands.

Despite the Vatican-Vietnam [agreement](#) on appointing the resident papal representative in Vietnam in 2023, Vietnamese Catholics [expressed](#) concern that the government will maintain control over Catholic leaders, including during religious services. The government also continued to harass Catholic priests, including in ethnic minority areas. In April, authorities in Kon Tum Province [prevented](#) a Catholic priest from conducting religious activities. In August, authorities [prevented](#) two Hmong Catholic priests from publicly holding religious services.

The government pressured the independent Cao Dai, Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, and Hoa Hao Buddhists to join their state-controlled counterparts, preventing them from practicing their faith freely. Authorities seized religious properties and gave them to state-controlled religious groups. In December, authorities in An Giang Province banned Hoa Hao Buddhists from celebrating their founder’s birthday.

The government continued to persecute other religious movements, [preventing](#) Falun Gong practitioners from disseminating religious materials and forcing members of the unregistered [World Mission Society Church of God](#) and [San Su Khe To](#) to renounce their faith. In early 2023, authorities in Long An Province [summoned](#) two of the five lawyers defending Peng Lei Buddhists who were sentenced in 2022 and accused them of “abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interests of the state.” In June, three of the five lawyers [fled](#) to the United States.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Engage with the Vietnamese government and relevant academic and civil society stakeholders to encourage amendments to the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decrees to comply with international human rights standards, including by making registration only necessary to maintain a legal personality;
  - Assess whether Vietnam has violated the terms of the 2005 U.S.-Vietnam binding agreement and hold Vietnam accountable for religious freedom violations as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC);
  - Press Vietnam to allow relevant United Nations (UN) special procedures and staff from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights unfettered access to the country to monitor and investigate religious freedom and other human rights violations; and
  - Direct the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to highlight and monitor the conditions of religious prisoners of conscience and to advocate for their wellbeing in prison and for their release.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Support legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, including the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)).

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Vietnam](#)
- **Hearing:** [Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Vietnam](#)

## Background

Vietnam's constitution states that citizens "can follow any religion or follow none" and that "all religions are equal before the law." It also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, government authorities continue to monitor all religious activity closely, often harassing, detaining, or otherwise preventing unregistered faith communities from exercising their fundamental right to religious freedom. Of Vietnam's population of approximately 100 million, around 86.3 percent [identify](#) as nonreligious, 6.1 percent as Catholic, 5.8 percent as Buddhist, one percent as Protestant, and 0.8 percent as adherents of other religions. As of August, Vietnam recognized 46 religious organizations and 16 religions.

## Enforcement of the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and Policy Development

Vietnam's 2018 Law on Belief and Religion restricts religious freedom and requires religious groups to register with the government in order to function legally. Additionally, religious groups must register and receive approval for all activities for the coming year. Throughout 2023, authorities used this law to shut down religious services of unregistered independent groups. Groups wishing to register continued to experience difficulty, and many unregistered groups complained that authorities have rejected or ignored their registration applications without explanation.

Enforcement of the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion is plagued by uneven and inconsistent application throughout the country. While religious groups experience relatively greater freedom in urban areas, regardless of their registration or recognition status, serious challenges are pervasive in rural areas and provinces with significant ethnic minority communities, such as those in the Central Highlands and An Giang Province. As of December 2023, the Vietnamese government had not released drafts of the law's two implementing decrees, which would clarify how the government interprets and enforces it.

In March, Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs [released](#) a "white book" on religious policies—its first such document in 16 years—to detail the state of religious communities within Vietnam as well as governmental attitudes and current laws on religious freedom. However, reports from independent religious groups indicate that this document fails to reflect the government's persistent violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and that it instead demonstrates how the country's [trajectory](#) is similar to China in terms of its regulation and control of religion.

## Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Conditions for religious prisoners of conscience remained dire in 2023, despite some high-profile releases. In April, the UN special rapporteurs on arbitrary detention [requested](#) a response from Vietnam

on Y Khiu Nie and Y Si Eban, who were detained in part due to their participation in the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference in November 2022. In May, authorities [arrested](#) [Nay Y Blang](#), a member of the Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ, for allegedly proselytizing and organizing illegal religious activities. In July, authorities arrested Khmer Krom Buddhists [Danh Minh Quang](#) and [Thach Cuong](#)—with whom USCIRF had met during its May visit to Vietnam—and in August they arrested [To Hoang Chuong](#), charging all three for violating Article 331 of the Vietnam Criminal Code. In August, authorities in An Giang Province arrested Nguyen Hoang Nam, a member of the independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, for posts on social media, charging him with disturbing public order and undermining religious and national unity. In September, a court in Gia Lai Province [sentenced](#) religious freedom advocate Rian Thih to eight years' imprisonment for "undermining unity policy," a charge authorities often use to suppress religious freedom activists in ethnic minority communities. In a positive development, the government in September released Hoa Hao Buddhist and religious freedom advocate Nguyen Bac Truyen, who was serving an 11-year sentence while suffering from health conditions. It also released An Dan Dai Dao Buddhist Le Duc Dong, who [completed](#) his 12-year sentence in February.

## Key U.S. Policy

In April 2023, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [celebrated](#) 28 years of diplomatic relations and 10 years of comprehensive partnership with Vietnam, noting human rights as a feature in the growing bilateral relationship in addition to other areas of mutual concern, such as security cooperation and climate issues. Also in April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken visited Vietnam and [held](#) a press conference to celebrate U.S.-Vietnam relations, emphasizing human rights as a core feature in the ongoing dialogue between the two countries. In September, President Biden [visited](#) Vietnam and signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the country. The Biden administration released a statement underscoring the importance of bilateral cooperation to advance human rights and enhancing commitment to meaningful human rights dialogue, including on freedom of religion or belief. In November, the United States [hosted](#) the 27th U.S.-Vietnam human rights dialogue in Washington, DC.

In May, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) reintroduced the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)), which prioritizes the protection of human rights and the development of the rule of law in bilateral relations between the United States and Vietnam.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [maintained](#) Vietnam on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to IRFA. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) approximately \$174 million for programs in Vietnam.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor, with major impacts on Christians and Muslim minority communities. Authorities continued to close churches and prosecute individuals on religion-based charges, including blasphemy, proselytization, and unauthorized worship. The government also continued to deny religious minority groups, specifically the Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA), authorization to worship collectively as stipulated under the law.

Algerian law regulates the manifestation of religion or belief through various [legal mechanisms](#) penalizing unregistered religious activity and expression. While the constitution grants the right to freedom of religion or belief, the government [limits](#) the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor a particular interpretation of Islam and restrict other religious activities. Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize blasphemy and proselytization. Punishments include imprisonment for up to five years and a fine up to \$7,500 (one million dinars).

In 2023, the Algerian government brought religiously grounded [blasphemy and proselytization](#) charges against several individuals, including Christians, Muslims, and freethinkers. In November, an [individual](#) in Bejaia was charged with blasphemy for social media posts and sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment and a fine of \$370 (50,000 dinars). In February, a court sentenced two employees of a Christian broadcast company to two months' imprisonment for "the production, storing, or distribution of printed documents, audio-visual materials, or using any other support or means with the intention of agitating/shaking the faith of a Muslim." After serving suspended prison terms, they were released with a lifelong ban from practicing Christian activities. In May, authorities raided the home of a Tizi Ghenif pastor, seizing his computer and subjecting him to multiple rounds of interrogation. In November, the pastor and four other unnamed Evangelical worshippers from the same church were

sentenced and fined for "inciting Muslims to change their religion" and "agitating the faith of Muslims," among other unauthorized worship charges. In March, a Bejaia court [dissolved](#) the nongovernmental Cultural Association of Aokas for "shaking the faith" in its distribution of various Christian-themed materials.

In 2023, 11 EPA churches were either forcibly closed or voluntarily shuttered their doors due to fears of government targeting, raising the total number to at least 41 since 2017. The few remaining open churches operate in a severely limited way. At least 10 Christians face ongoing court cases on religious-based charges, including EPA Vice President Pastor Youssef Ourahmane, whose case is illustrative of the government's ongoing [targeting](#) of senior EPA leaders. EPA clergy and members continue to face government surveillance, property searches, confiscation of worship materials, and interrogations without pretense.

Since 2016, the government has repeatedly rejected the authorization forms of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community to register as a religious association under law. As of late 2023, over 30 members are currently serving prison sentences ranging from six months to three years on charges such as unauthorized worship, distribution of religious materials, proselytization, and harming the safety and unity of the country. Five unnamed members are currently serving multiyear prison sentences. Worshipers of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light have also reportedly been subject to online monitoring and followed by plainclothes police.

With no operational synagogue left in Algeria, ritual observance for the roughly 200 practicing members of its Jewish community remains a challenge. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, [government ministers](#) and the largely state-run media have promoted antisemitic tropes, such as using [defamatory](#) and false language to describe Israel's military campaign in Gaza as "genocidal Zionist aggression."

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Algeria on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Encourage Algeria to continue multi-lateral engagement, including with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance and United Nations (UN) expert delegations, to address religious freedom concerns;
  - Condition financial and technical support to the Algerian government on addressing violations of religious freedom, including decriminalizing blasphemy and proselytization, registering the EPA and the Ahmadiyya community as religious organizations, and reopening closed churches; and
  - Direct U.S. Embassy officials to attend and observe court proceedings on blasphemy charges or cases related to houses of worship to emphasize the U.S. government's concerns about such cases.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to raise the implementation of blasphemy laws and closure of houses of worship with the U.S. Department of State and relevant Algerian counterparts to ensure religious freedom concerns are incorporated into the U.S.-Algeria bilateral relationship.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Special Report:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **Podcast:** [The State of Religious Freedom in Algeria](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Algeria](#)

## Background

Algeria is home to [nearly 45 million people](#), approximately 99 percent of whom are Sunni Muslim. The remaining one percent of the population includes Jews; nonbelievers; Ahmadiyya, Shi'a, and other Muslim minorities; and Christians (including Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians). Algeria's [constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official state religion. With national elections set to take place in 2024, the Algerian government has continued to [crack down](#) on civil society and repress peaceful [protests](#).

Algeria's criminal code censors publications by prohibiting content "contrary to Islamic morals." [Ordinance 06-03](#) requires all non-Muslim organizations to register with the Minister for Non-Muslim Affairs to conduct activities and establish places of worship. The registration process has been opaque and poorly implemented, creating legal uncertainty for some non-Muslim religious communities and allowing the government to repress and prosecute religious minorities. Ordinance 06-03 also criminalizes proselytization by non-Muslims, with punishments of up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of roughly \$7,500 (one million dinars). A new information law that came into effect in August 2023 requires all media activities to respect "the Muslim religion, Islam in the national context" and "the moral and cultural values of the nation."

## Restrictions on Christians

Christians, particularly members and institutions affiliated with the EPA, faced significant religious freedom restrictions in 2023. Authorities continued to withhold Christian worship materials from distribution at a port and rejected repeated attempts by the EPA to formally register as a religious association. Security officials continued to forcibly close EPA churches across Tizi Ouzou, interrogate church leaders, raid members' homes, and seize worship materials. In November, EPA Vice President [Pastor Youssef Ourahmane](#) was sentenced to one year in prison and fined \$725 (100,000 dinars) for holding an unauthorized gathering of Christian families in an unregistered church.

In January, authorities shuttered a Methodist church in Larbaa Nath Iraten, forcing members to worship in private. In October, a Tizi Ouzou court sentenced the pastor of a Methodist church in Oucaif to two months in prison. In July, an Algiers appeals court confirmed a three-year prison sentence and fine against Christian convert and activist [Slimane Bouhafis](#) on multiple charges, including "belonging to a terrorist organization," "receiving funds from abroad for the purpose of political propaganda," and "conspiracy."

Despite ongoing violations in 2023, positive developments included the release of Christian convert [Hamid Soudad](#) and an unnamed Ahmadiyya Muslim man as part of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune's [general amnesty](#) in July. Authorities also dismissed the case against [Dr. Saïd Djabelkhir](#), an Islamic scholar previously charged with blasphemy. The government allowed the Catholic community to air holiday programs on public radio, [granted citizenship](#) to the Catholic Archbishop in March, and offered to help renovate the Sacré-Cœur Cathedral in Algiers. In November, a high administrative court

removed the seals from seven Evangelical churches in Tizi Ouzou and Bajaia; however, they remain inoperable, lacking permission from the National Commission for Non-Muslim Worship.

## Restrictions on Muslim Minorities

Non-Sunni Muslims continued to face significant pressures in 2023. Some of the 230 remaining members of Algeria's Ahmadiyya Muslim community reportedly have been subject to government surveillance and passport seizures. Efforts to formally register the community remain stalled on the government's precondition that Ahmadiyya Muslims renounce their identity as Muslims. Legal repression against members remains systematic and widespread, with over 50 cases against individuals from 26 provincial courts still pending in the Supreme Court. Members have been sentenced for multiple alleged offenses, including unauthorized worship, unlicensed fundraising, undermining national unity, and "desecrating the Qur'an."

The estimated 50 members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light faced major obstacles. In May, authorities launched an investigation into Othmane Mouchal for "mocking Islam." In November, police searched for the whereabouts of [Redouane Foufa](#), a community leader previously imprisoned for "participation in an unauthorized group" and "denigrating Islam." A government [fatwa](#) remains in effect, calling Ahmadis a "misguided group" of heretics "out of the Islamic faith" who "should be condemned and punished according to the law." While the religious decree was ruled by a local court, it extends to all Ahmadiyya Muslims throughout Algeria. It not only forbids Ahmadis from publicly discussing a 2022 Bejaia court prosecution against members but also has imposed a severe economic strain on the community by calling for the suspension of all Ahmadi commercial activities. Furthermore, the religious decree has reinforced an already harsh social stigma on Ahmadis, forcing members to conceal their religious identity and worship in private for fear of targeting or harassment.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States is one of Algeria's top trading partners, and professional exchanges play a valuable role in strengthening the bilateral law enforcement and security partnership at both the senior and working levels. In August 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government obligated \$3 million for [programs](#) in Algeria. The U.S. Department of State's [Middle East Partnership Initiative](#) has supported the work of Algeria's civil society through trainings.

Several U.S. officials visited Algeria in 2023, including Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs [Michelle Sison](#). Topics of discussion included human rights and religious freedom concerns as well as stabilization and development assistance. U.S. Ambassador to Algeria Elizabeth Aubin continued to elevate religious freedom as an Embassy priority by engaging with civil society and Algerian officials. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [maintained](#) Algeria on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained consistent with past years. The government gave selective attention to religious diversity and tolerance, but freedom of religion or belief throughout the country did not substantially increase.

Government-enacted or -tolerated restrictions on members of religious minority groups, theological dissenters, [nonbelievers](#), and their advocates remained entrenched. The government maintained severe legal restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, such as longstanding bans on Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’is and enforcement of the criminal blasphemy statute through detention or imprisonment. In July, an emergency state security court sentenced Coptic advocate [Patrick Zaki](#) to three years in prison, prompting [USCIRF](#) and [congressional members](#) to call for his release and resulting in a subsequent presidential pardon. In September, the Ministry of Education announced a new [ban](#) on Muslim female pupils wearing the niqab, or religious face veil, in classrooms during the 2023–2024 academic year.

In [May](#) and [June](#), a Cabinet-appointed committee approved two larger-than-average batches of church legalization permits pursuant to the [2016 Church Construction Law](#). While the law has created a legal pathway for Christian worship sites to achieve status as churches, it has reinforced an inherently discriminatory system, with separate requirements for Christians and no application eligibility at all for other religious minorities, such as Baha’is and Shi’a Muslims. Further, some local communities continued to respond with violence to Christian congregations’ submission of applications to repair or build churches. For example, in September, villagers looted and set [fire](#) to a residential construction site for Copts in Abu-Qurqas, Minya, and in December, rioters in Samalout, Minya, violently [attacked](#) Copts attempting to construct a church under a new legal permit.

While larger-scale violent attacks on religious minorities, especially Copts, did not return to previously high levels, individual incidences of anti-Coptic violence—such as physical attacks on Copts in the workplace—persisted. Against the backdrop of Egypt’s intensifying economic crisis, community liaisons in rural Upper Egypt described an increase in exploitation of women based on their religion, such as lenders pressuring resource-limited Christian widows to convert to Islam in exchange for debt forgiveness. In January 2023, vandals [defaced](#) mosaics of the baby Jesus, Virgin Mary, and Saint Joseph at the Convent of the Holy Virgin in Assiut, following the governorate’s recent restoration of the site to promote tourism.

Although the dwindling Jewish community reported adequate protection by state security forces earlier in the year, the conflict triggered by Hamas’s October 7 terrorist attack on Israel contributed to a rise in anti-Jewish sentiment in Egypt. In October, street protesters in Cairo reportedly chanted a slogan evoking a historical massacre of Jews. In December, Cairo’s Jewish community [canceled](#) public Hanukkah celebrations, citing security concerns.

Amid these and other conditions limiting religious freedom, the government of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi also maintained initiatives to increase public awareness of some types of religious diversity. For example, the Ministry of Education removed some material teaching intolerance toward Christians and Jews from the [textbooks](#) of additional grade levels and added references to interreligious cooperation. However, upper grade textbooks awaiting revision still contained religiously prejudicial content, and the courses of all grades remained [religionized](#) in favor of the government’s interpretation of Sunni Islam. On a positive note, beginning in August, government officials [inaugurated](#) three completed restoration projects for Coptic Orthodox Christian statuary and historic Jewish houses of worship.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
  - Raise religious freedom, including the cases of religious prisoners of conscience, in U.S.-Egypt bilateral engagement by encouraging Egypt to:
    - Formally recognize Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and non-Sunni Muslims;
    - Propose universal “houses of worship” legislation with regulations for the construction, repair, and registration of houses of worship consistent for all religions;
  - Align local authorities with national-level policy to phase out the use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of violence against religious minorities;
  - Repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which punishes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and until that is accomplished, limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail; and
  - Implement independent oversight and appeals mechanisms for travel bans and frozen assets of released prisoners of conscience.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to set conditions on Foreign Military Financing (FMF), requiring specified improvements in religious freedom among other human rights.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Staff Visit:** Cairo and Alexandria in May 2023
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Egypt](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa](#)
- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Egypt](#)

## Background

Under Article 2 of Egypt's [constitution](#), Islam is the state religion, with the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 purportedly provides for "absolute" freedom of belief, followers of only the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) have a formal legal basis to publicly practice religion and build places of worship. Since the 1960s, the government has continued to deny legal recognition to Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, subjecting them and other unrecognized religious minorities to a bureaucratic limbo affecting numerous aspects of daily life, such as marriage licenses and cemetery allotments.

Egypt's population is approximately [109.5 million](#), an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a, Qur'anist, and other non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than one percent. Egypt's Christians account for at least 10 percent of the population, constituting the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. The majority of Christians are Copts (indigenous Egyptian Christians), with over 90 percent belonging to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church; a minority subscribe to Coptic Evangelical Protestantism, Coptic Catholicism, and some smaller denominations. Baha'is may number between 1,000 and 2,000 and Jehovah's Witnesses up to 1,500. Local and international Jewish organizations reported that the Jewish population—which in the 1940s numbered over [80,000](#)—had declined to fewer than 10 people.

## Legislation, Law Enforcement, and the Judiciary

Authorities' enforcement of several laws—including cybercrime and counterterrorism laws, a criminal [blasphemy](#) statute, and a law against "spreading false news"—continue to pose severe and systematic threats to religious freedom. The courts and state security continued to hold in prolonged detention without trial individuals accused of breaching provision 98(f) of the criminal code, which outlaws "insulting the heavenly religions," or blasphemy. In 2023, courts invoked law 98(f), sometimes in combination with other charges, to renew the detention of [Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed Khalifa](#) for blasphemy and desecration of religious symbols and [Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges](#), who had created a Facebook platform for potential converts to Christianity. State security forces also continued the two-year-long detention without trial of [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#). The Yemeni asylum seeker's publicizing of his conversion to Christianity puts him at risk not only in his country of origin—to which Egyptian authorities may deport him—but also in Egyptian prison, where he is forced to hide his religion from fellow inmates for fear of attacks. In July, an emergency state security court sentenced [Patrick Zaki](#), a human rights researcher, to three years in prison for publishing an editorial on discrimination he and other Copts had faced. USCIRF expressed [concern](#) over the sentencing at a public hearing before the U.S. Congress, and the following day, President El-Sisi [pardoned](#) Zaki, leading to his immediate release.

Minority rights lawyers [reported](#) an alarming lack of transparency and consistency in the judicial system, with Egyptian courts making several rulings that negatively affected religious minority communities. In January, the Court of Cassation [rejected](#) two appeals brought by Souad Thabet, a Coptic woman in her 70s contesting the acquittal of three Muslim male defendants who in 2016 allegedly stripped, beat, and dragged her through the street in reprisal for her son's purported relationship with a Muslim woman. The outcome may have resulted in part from other Coptic victims of the same series of hate crimes succumbing to tacit pressure to participate in an extrajudicial "[reconciliation council](#)," which led to them retracting their testimonies against the alleged perpetrators in those cases. Such reconciliation councils remain in use in rural areas, sometimes with the tolerance or active support of local authorities and often putting victims from minority backgrounds at further disadvantage. Although the formal judicial process has presented its own obstacles to justice for the victims of anti-Coptic terrorist attacks and potential hate crimes, in 2023 some courts—including the Supreme State Security [Court](#) and the Court of [Cassation](#), the highest tribunal in the country—departed from customary leniency toward religious-majority defendants, instead convicting and issuing severe [sentences](#), including the death penalty, to Muslim assailants.

Throughout the year, the government deliberated potential changes to laws affecting marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other critical personal status matters that vary for each of the major religious communities in Egypt. The Judicial Committee of the House of Representatives reviewed drafts and new proposed [amendments](#) submitted by a variety of interlocutors, including Muslim and Christian religious institutions. Adoption laws attracted further scrutiny in the ongoing case of the child "Shenouda" after a court returned him to his Christian foster parents, who may remain ineligible for formal [adoption](#) according to Egypt's prevailing interpretations of Shari'a.

## Key U.S. Policy

International attention on the strategic partnership between the United States and Egypt increased following Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel and Israel's response. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met several times with President El-Sisi and other officials on U.S.-Egyptian interests to alleviate conflict-related humanitarian crises and secure peace in the region. Some organizations [criticized](#) the international community's potential post-October 7 strengthening of ties with Egypt, pointing to the country's unresolved human rights violations.

The U.S. Congress [debated](#) the \$1.3 billion annual FMF, which constituted the majority of the [assistance](#) package to Egypt, and discussed potential additional conditions on future aid to address Egypt's human rights issues. Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [pledged](#) in September to withhold the maximum amount of FMF over Egypt's failure to meet Congress's human rights-related conditions.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, Indonesia’s religious freedom conditions remained poor. The country maintains several regulations that either constitute blasphemy laws or effectively function as such: [Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS/1965](#), Criminal Code [Article 156\(a\)](#), and [Law No. 11/2008 on Electronic Information and Transaction](#) (known as the ITE law) Articles 27(3) and 28(2). Blasphemy, hate speech, and other religious freedom violations were further codified in Indonesia’s new criminal code (known as RUU KUHP) Chapter VII, which was signed into law on January 2, 2023, by President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) to be implemented in 2026. In February 2024, after the reporting period, Indonesia held presidential elections. Observers [noted](#) the three leading candidates have troubling human rights records. Additionally, President Jokowi [maneuvered](#) to have his son placed as the vice presidential candidate alongside Prabowo Subianto—the presumptive [winner](#) as of February 2024—likely as an [attempt](#) to ensure the continuation of his policies and his role in politics.

Throughout the year, the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship continued to enable ongoing and systematic violations of religious freedom against minority religious communities. Unrecognized houses of worship are more vulnerable to closure by the authorities. In February 2023, authorities in Bogor, West Java, [disbanded](#) the worship service of a Pentecostal church, stating it did not have a permit to hold services. The law also enables local actors and authorities to block or slow the construction of new houses of worship. Houses of worship in rural locations continued to be particularly vulnerable to social hostility and attacks. In August, around 30 people in Riau Islands Province [blocked](#) a church community from gathering and then severely damaged another church under construction. In Padang, West Sumatra Province, a machete-wielding man [threatened](#) a gathering at a house church. In a positive development, in April, authorities in Bogor permitted a

Christian church to [open](#) after a 15-year dispute. In June, authorities in Pinang, Riau Islands Province, finally permitted the local Catholic community to [open](#) a new church after a 33-year struggle, despite Catholicism’s status as an official religion.

The government promotes [Pancasila](#), an ideology that comprises five principles, one of which—monotheism—pertains to religion. Its promotion of this ideology extends only to officially recognized religions and does not include indigenous religious communities or nontheists. As a result, members of unrecognized religions face legal hurdles in acquiring government jobs and having their marriages officially recognized. Throughout 2023, members of indigenous faith communities [continued](#) to push for government recognition of their religions and for the ability to label their religious identity on official identification cards. In a positive development after the reporting period, the government [added](#) a seventh category of recognized religions to the cards, [kepercayaan](#) (belief), for smaller religious groups that are not part of the other six recognized religions.

In 2023, 73 hijab mandates [remained](#) in effect throughout the country, particularly in the educational system. In some cases, the authorities prevented students who do not comply from attending class and did not address incidences of bullying by teachers and other students. In August 2023, the National Commission on Violence against Women [held](#) a hearing to gather information on the country’s mandatory hijab regulations. At the hearing, two Christian men with daughters noted that non-Muslim female students were not exempt from the regulations, and others testified that Muslim students with a different interpretation of Islam are also forced to comply.

In 2023, Indonesia held the chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and made some [efforts](#) in expanding the conversation on religious freedom.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Indonesia on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the Indonesian government to repeal or amend existing laws to comply with international human rights standards specific to freedom of religion or belief, including Chapter VII of the Criminal Code (RUU KUHP), blasphemy laws, and Indonesia’s ITE law—for example, eliminating the requirement set forth in the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship mandating that faith groups obtain signatures from members of other religious communities to receive approval for constructing a house of worship; and
- Incorporate training on international religious freedom standards into the bilateral partnership.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify congressional concerns over religious freedom violations, including to advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Indonesia.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Rising Authoritarianism in ASEAN Member States](#)
- **Special Report:** [The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia](#)
- **Country Update:** [Legal Impediments to Religious Freedom in Indonesia](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Indonesia](#)

## Background

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Muslims [comprise](#) 87.2 percent of the country's 267 million citizens, with around 99 percent identifying as Sunni, less than one percent identifying as Shi'a, and 0.2 percent identifying as Ahmadiyya Muslim. Protestant Christians comprise seven percent of the population, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent, and 0.9 percent identify with other minority religions such as Buddhism and Confucianism.

Indonesia has a long tradition of religious pluralism, and the government promotes tolerance and religious freedom through religious literacy and education. Article 29 of its constitution "guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." During 2023, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [partnered](#) with an Indonesian organization to train religious leaders for promoting peacebuilding narratives. Religious literacy is also a key [component](#) of Indonesia's counterterrorism strategy to rehabilitate and reintegrate former terrorists. The threat of violent extremism from designated terrorist organizations like Jamaah Ansharut Daulah [persists](#), particularly for Christians [perceived](#) to be proselytizing.

Throughout 2023, Indonesia continued to experience decentralization and greater [autocratization](#) that [contributed](#) to a general decline in human rights, including religious freedom. Meanwhile, the country experienced accelerated [economic growth](#) and expanded its [engagement](#) on human rights in the UN. In 2023, Indonesia held the ASEAN chairmanship and made some efforts in expanding the conversation on religious freedom. However, under Indonesia's leadership, ASEAN continues to be ineffective in providing an effective regional approach to the situation in Burma and in coordinating humanitarian efforts to aid the predominantly Muslim Rohingya fleeing violence and religious persecution there. Moreover, Indonesia repeatedly [prevented](#) Rohingya refugees from landing in Aceh Province.

## Blasphemy and the New Criminal Code

In 2023, the government investigated and, in some cases, prosecuted blasphemy allegations made by individuals and organizations. In March, social media influencer [Lina Lutfiawati](#) posted a video of herself saying an Islamic prayer before eating a meal that included pork. The Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI) lodged blasphemy charges against her. In September, Lutfiawati was [sentenced](#) to a two-year imprisonment and fined approximately \$16,000 (250 million rupiah). In West Java, authorities [charged](#) the head of an Islamic school, Panji Gumilang, with blasphemy for his religious teachings after he had taught students that men and women should be allowed to pray alongside each other and that women should be allowed to become preachers. In November, the Indramayu District Court [held](#) its first session on Gumilang's trial.

Indonesia's new criminal code could expand human rights violations when implemented in 2026. Chapter VII [consists](#) of six articles on "Crimes against Religion, Belief, and Religious/Belief Life." Article 300 criminalizes any person who publicly "commits an act of hostility, makes a statement of hate or hostility, or incites hostility, violence, or

discrimination against a religion, belief, classes of people or groups on the basis of religion or belief." When implemented, this article could further criminalize blasphemy. Article 301 effectively expands and further codifies the ITE Law Article 28(2) to permit blasphemy allegations made on the basis of a person's social media and online presence. Article 302 criminalizes incitement toward apostasy. Articles 303–305 criminalize disturbances or attacks on religious services, houses of worship, and hate speech directed at religious leaders.

## Expansion of Provincial Laws Impacting Religious Freedom

The central government currently exempts [Aceh](#) Province from certain national laws and permits its own implementation of a Shari'a-based legal system enforced through a religious police force. Laws include mandating that women wear hijabs and banning them from straddling motorcycles, among other restrictions, regardless of an individual's faith or personal choice. In August, Aceh further implemented laws based on its state-sponsored interpretation of Islam by [banning](#) men and women from appearing together in public unless they are family members or married.

Government officials and politicians throughout Indonesia increasingly engaged in rhetoric and passed local laws and regulations citing Islamic values that target or ostracize religious, gender, and sexual minorities. In January, the mayor of Medan, North Sumatra, [declared](#) the city "LGBT-free" [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] in an effort to appeal to certain religious actors. In West Java, politicians [inspired](#) by the MUI and other similar religious organizations promulgated municipal- and regency-level laws that used language around "morality" and religion to exclude minorities from the public space.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Indonesia maintain strong bilateral ties through their [Strategic Partnership](#). In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$210 million for programs in Indonesia.

In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [expressed](#) the administration's concerns over Indonesia's criminal code. In September, Vice President Kamala Harris [joined](#) leaders of ASEAN for the annual U.S.-ASEAN Summit in Jakarta. Some observers [noted](#) that the absence of President Joseph R. Biden may have been interpreted negatively by ASEAN leaders, especially Indonesia as the chair. In April, Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) [led](#) a bicameral congressional delegation to Indonesia to discuss bilateral relations and multilateral engagement with ASEAN, including on human rights.

In October, the United States and Indonesia [held](#) their first Senior Officials' Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue between diplomatic and military counterparts, which included reaffirming their commitment to the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity. In November, President Biden [hosted](#) President Jokowi at the White House to discuss shared values of democracy and pluralism but did not publicly mention religious freedom. Also in November, President Biden [nominated](#) Kamala Lakhdir as U.S. Ambassador to Indonesia.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained precarious for religious minorities. Both the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) made some overtures toward the country's diverse religious communities. However, Iraqis of many faith backgrounds, especially religious minorities, faced ongoing political marginalization by the government as well as abuse by both government-affiliated and nonstate actors. The IFG and KRG's continued failure to resolve longstanding jurisdictional disputes over certain northern territories created a power vacuum filled by armed groups, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), defensive Yazidi fighters and Yazidis groomed into PMF [service](#), and remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The IFG's lack of ability or will to curb the increasing power of PMF units remained among the most significant [threats](#) to religious freedom. In 2023, several of these largely Shi'a Muslim and sometimes Iran-backed militias expanded their influence among top officials in Baghdad and within communities throughout the country. Early in the year, [Kataib Babiliyoun](#), a nominally Christian PMF brigade supported by the Shi'a majority of southern Iraq, accelerated its campaign to control Christian properties in the Nineveh Plains region of the north. In March, members of the indigenous Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac churches staged protests in Al-Hamdaniya to resist this takeover. PMF brigades around the country also asserted their power via harassment, physical abuse, detention, extortion, and checkpoint interrogation of religious minorities.

Although Iraq's parliament took some initiatives to advance human rights, such as introducing a draft law against enforced disappearance, it also considered laws that might curtail freedom of religion or belief. The draft Freedom of Expression and Cybercrimes

[bills](#) contained vague language that prosecutors could use [against](#) atheists, Shi'a Muslim theological dissenters, Sunni Muslims, other religious minorities, women, and sexual and gender [minorities](#) for defaming religious sects or leaders or expressing opinions deemed contrary to "public morals" or "public order."

Like their IFG counterparts, leaders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) took some steps in support of religious minorities. For example, in June, the U.S. Consulate in Erbil [praised](#) the KRI government's efforts to find and rescue the estimated 2,700 Iraqi Yazidi girls and women kidnapped by ISIS who are still missing. However, Christian residents of the KRI decried authorities' refusal to settle claims for confiscated properties, threats to prosecute a [blasphemy](#) complaint against a clergy member in Duhok, and tolerance or use of militia checkpoints to harass and restrict the movements of Christians near Alqosh.

At year's end, the IFG's [implementation](#) of the Yazidi Survivors Law was still inadequate, and the 2020 United Nations (UN)-brokered agreement between the IFG and KRG to stabilize Yazidis' homelands in Sinjar remained essentially unfulfilled. Some Yazidi survivors of ISIS's 2014 genocide raised their children in displacement camps for fear of returning to an area ruled by competing militias, subject to Turkey's periodic military [strikes](#), and [lacking](#) crucial infrastructure and employment prospects. In April 2023, a social media [campaign](#) spread hate speech against Yazidis, seeking to incite violence against them. The IFG's 2023 budget law established a reconstruction fund of \$38 million for Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains but faced criticism for failing to apportion adequate amounts. Religious minorities continued to cite the perilous security situation as a key reason for their internal displacement and reluctant emigration.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on PMF and other militia units or leaders responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Assist Iraq with building institutional capacity to safeguard vulnerable

religious minority communities by creating or improving independent oversight mechanisms for PMF and other militias and by integrating religiously affiliated militias; and

- Use diplomatic channels to encourage the IFG and KRG to help kidnapped and displaced Yazidi genocide survivors return and reintegrate into Iraqi society; to resolve conflicts over disputed areas per Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution while including all religious and ethnic minorities; to comprehensively implement the Sinjar

Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community; and to conduct a national and regional dialogue on potential constitutional and statutory reforms to more effectively protect religious freedom and ensure religious communities' political representation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns in Iraq through hearings, letters, and delegations and by linking development funding to Iraqi officials delivering on their promises to religious minority communities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iraq](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commemorates the Ninth Anniversary of the Yazidi Genocide](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Iraq](#)

## Background

Article 2 of the [federal constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms “the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice.” However, personal status laws restrict conversion from Islam, prohibit Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men, and reclassify Christian minors as Muslim if a parent converts to Islam. A 1970s-era ban on the Baha’i religion remained in place, as did statutes criminalizing [blasphemy](#). Some Evangelical Christians in both IFG areas and the KRI reported each government’s intolerance of perceived proselytizing activities and refusal to officially recognize their denominations.

Out of an estimated [population](#) of 41 million, 95–98 percent of Iraqis are Muslim, with Shi’as constituting 61–64 percent and Sunnis 29–34 percent. Christians of all denominations, including Chaldean and other Catholics, the Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, and Evangelical Protestants, together comprise about one percent of the population. The Jewish [community](#) of Iraq is virtually nonexistent following decades of government discrimination and expulsion.

The KRI and other territories in the north are home to several indigenous religious and ethnic groups, including Christians, Yazidis, Kaka’is, Sabaeen Mandeans, Turkmen, and Shabaks. Minority communities include internally displaced persons (IDPs) from elsewhere in the region or greater Iraq. Some religious minorities voiced apprehension over the IFG’s [closure](#) of IDP camps and aim of reintegrating not only IDPs from vulnerable religious groups but also IDPs with family connections to ISIS fighters who committed atrocities against minorities.

## Political Representation of Religious Communities

Entrenched sectarianism jeopardized relations among ethnoreligious political groups, including Iran-linked Shi’a Muslim parties and their Shi’a rivals, Sunni Muslim politicians of both Arab and Kurdish background, and religious minority groups with few allotted parliamentary quota seats. In November 2023, the Federal Supreme Court ruled to end the parliamentary speakership of Mohammed Al-Halbousi, the highest Sunni Muslim Arab officeholder in Iraq. The decision prompted Sunni concerns of renewed political marginalization. In March 2023, Christian politicians objected to the [reactivation](#) of a 2016 ban on the sale, import, or production of alcohol, restricting the livelihoods and religious practice of primarily Christian and Yazidi communities. A civil society [coalition](#) announced efforts to secure parliamentary support for a proposed Law to Protect Religious Freedom and Prevent Discrimination.

Iraq’s Provincial Council political quota system reserves 10 total seats for Christian, Sabean-Mandaean, Faili Kurd, Yazidi, and Shabak blocs or “components.” In December 2023, each group [participated](#) in long-awaited provincial elections. Christian community members expressed alarm that Rayan al-Kildani—a U.S.-[designated](#) human rights abuser for his brigade’s past “persecution of religious minorities”—led the political arm of Kataib Babiliyoun to a “[clean sweep](#)” of the four Christian quota seats in Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Basra. The

wins reflected that people of any religious background may vote for candidates filling religious quota seats. By exploiting these loopholes in Iraq’s election laws, al-Kildani’s party coopted the four seats intended to remedy the inadequate representation of Iraq’s Christian community. In February 2024, after the reporting period, the Supreme Court of the IFG issued a ruling that would eliminate religious minority quota seats in the Kurdish parliamentary system.

In July 2023, the IFG revoked the administrative authority of the patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Cardinal Louis Raphaël Sako, stripping him of his custodianship of Christian endowments. In November, the Supreme Court [dismissed](#) Cardinal Sako’s complaint over President Abdul Latif Rashid’s revocation. Reports indicate President Rashid made his decision under advice from al-Kildani. Christian advocates characterized as a double blow Cardinal Sako’s loss of power and deficiencies in the government’s response to a fatal wedding reception fire in Al-Hamdaniya in September. Some Christian residents, survivors of ISIS who had attempted to rebuild communities in the Nineveh Plains, cited the two incidents as examples of Christians’ lack of political agency and motivating factors in their intention to permanently emigrate from Iraq.

## Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration maintained its strategic relationship with Iraq, highlighting security and economic development as priorities. In August 2023, the U.S. Department of Defense and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense led the [inaugural](#) U.S.-Iraq Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue in Washington, DC, where they “reaffirm[ed] their commitment to security cooperation and shared interest in regional stability.” Top U.S. and Iraqi [officials met](#) several times in 2023, including during U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken’s [visit](#) to Iraq in November.

Throughout the year, the United States announced sanctions against nonstate and state-affiliated actors in Iraq who committed human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations. In June, the U.S. Department of State designated several ISIS leaders involved in funding and [operations](#) in Iraq and who had [perpetrated](#) sexual violence against Yazidi women and girls as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

In the aftermath of Hamas’s October 7 attacks, Iraqi nonstate actors with support from Iran conducted drone strikes and other attacks on U.S. targets in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring countries. In November, the U.S. Departments of State and the Treasury concurrently [designated](#) PMF brigade Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS) and individuals affiliated with the Iran-aligned Kata’ib Hizballah (KH) as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.

In fiscal year 2023, the United States [obligated](#) \$360 million for programs in Iraq. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded programs throughout the year, such as a series of 45 [videos](#) preserving Yazidi heritage and the inauguration of a [memorial](#) commemorating the Yazidi genocide.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan did not improve as the government continued to enforce a religion law that restricted the activities of all religious groups and penalized individuals from groups considered “nontraditional.”

In May, a USCIRF delegation visited Kazakhstan to assess the religious freedom situation and meet with government officials, religious communities, human rights defenders, and other members of civil society. The visit confirmed that the Kazakh government continued to violate Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Kazakhs tried to exercise their faith. For example, authorities continued to penalize unauthorized but peaceful religious activities—such as leading prayers, maintaining prayer rooms, and distributing religious materials—through prison sentences, fines, and the imposition of exit bans. As in years past, Muslims faced restrictions on practices such as studying religion abroad or wearing religious clothing in schools. Government surveillance and intimidation of all religious groups created fear of arbitrary punishment for religious activity and led some unregistered groups not to seek official registration, as mandated by law, for concern of further unwanted government attention. In addition, members of the media reported they felt pressured to self-censor their journalism related to religious freedom issues.

At least seven religious prisoners of conscience, all of whom are Muslim, remained imprisoned in Kazakhstan under unjust sentences for their peaceful, online religious activity. In 2023, three men imprisoned for their participation in a WhatsApp group on Islam, [Nazim Abdrakhmanov](#), [Bolatbek Nurgaliyev](#), and [Samat Adilov](#), were released. However, this development came almost two years after the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called for their release in September 2021. Two men from that group remained in prison at the end of 2023.

In May 2023, a district conscription office forcibly recruited Jehovah’s Witness [Daniil Smal](#) despite his conscientious objection

on religious grounds. In August, Smal filed an administrative claim to the Military Court of the Almaty Garrison. After Smal spent months in detention, the court ruled that his conscription was illegal and released him.

The government also penalized religious activities in retaliation for public activism. As reported in May 2023, authorities [interfered](#) in the construction of a mosque after one of the key planners of the construction, Zhandos Saduakasov, advocated for free and fair elections.

Authorities continued to restrict the activities of Kazakh activists who oppose the genocide of Uyghurs and other ethnic Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, China. In December 2023, Kazakh police [prevented](#) those protesting the detainment of their relatives in Xinjiang from approaching the Chinese consulate in Almaty. Ethnic Kazakhs who fled oppression in China faced intimidation campaigns by alleged Chinese Communist Party (CCP) security forces in Kazakhstan, which at times included physical assault. Many of these individuals still [live](#) in legal limbo with refugee status, as the Kazakh government refused requests for citizenship or travel to a third country. Moreover, the government enforced an informal rule that prohibited Uyghur imams and others from leading prayers or giving sermons in Uyghur and languages other than Kazakh.

In response to an October 2023 parliamentary inquiry “on the issue of religion,” then Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov [raised](#) potential reforms to the set of legislation regulating religion. Such reforms included restrictions on religious head coverings in public, further regulation of the distribution of religious materials, and the introduction of additional legal concepts that could have broad, negative repercussions, such as “destructive religious movements” and “religious radicals.” By early 2024, these provisions, among other restrictive measures, were [included](#) in fully formulated draft amendments to the religion law that were to be considered in parliament.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Engage with the government of Kazakhstan to further revise the 2011 religion law, as amended in 2021, and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards,

- including repealing or amending registration requirements, ending all expert mandatory review of religious materials, and removing or reducing administrative fines for religious activities; and
- Call for Kazakhstan to release all those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs immediately, permit all incarcerated individuals to practice their religion, and investigate and cease all torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Condition granting Normal Trade Relations (NTR) status to Kazakhstan related to any decision to repeal Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment) on meaningful improvement to freedom of religion or belief, including removing exit bans on individuals penalized for their peaceful religious activities.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Commission Delegation Visit: [Astana and Almaty in May 2023](#)
- Issue Update: [Prosecuting Online Religious Activity in Kazakhstan](#)
- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List: [Kazakhstan](#)



## Background

According to a 2021 census, more than 69 percent of Kazakhs [adhere](#) to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Smaller Muslim groups in Kazakhstan [include](#) Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Seventeen percent of the population identify as Christian, most of whom are Russian Orthodox but who also include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups in Kazakhstan include Jews, Baha'is, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. There is also a small percentage of individuals who prefer not to share their religious affiliation or who identify as atheist.

While the constitution characterizes Kazakhstan as a secular state, it also recognizes certain religions—such as Hanafi Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity—as traditional to Kazakhstan. The government considers other religious groups and those who subscribe to a different interpretation of “traditional” religions, particularly Islam, to be nontraditional. Authorities are more likely to target members of these groups related to their religious activity.

## Administrative Fines

In 2023, authorities increasingly fined people for their peaceful religious activities. During the year, there were over 160 cases of administrative fines for such activities, [compared](#) to about 140 cases in 2022.

According to the 2011 religion law, only registered religious associations may request to hold religious activities outside of their registered place of worship. Individuals and groups that have attempted to engage in unregistered religious activities, like maintaining an unregistered prayer room, have faced fines. For example, in February, the Kordai District Court [fined](#) the owner of a café 50 monthly financial indicators (MFIs)—equivalent to an average monthly wage of \$380 (172,500 tenge)—for operating an unauthorized prayer room. In a case in March, the Shymkent City Court fined the owner of an unregistered prayer hall 50 MFIs. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the Shymkent City Court fined another individual 50 MFIs for leading Tarawih prayers at a deregistered mosque.

Individuals were also penalized for attempting to import and distribute religious literature without state authorization. At the Shymkent airport in February, officials [fined](#) an individual for attempting to travel with 24 religious books. At the Turkestan airport in March, officials [fined](#) a traveler for attempting to import 77 religious books. Also, in the city of Shymkent, officials fined a woman in October for selling religious literature in a gift shop. In July, officials [fined](#) a Jehovah's Witness for distributing religious materials at a café in eastern Kazakhstan.

## Restrictions on Religious Clothing

A 2014 Ministry of Education decree bars students from wearing religious clothing to school, an order that the state has continued to

enforce at most schools, both public and private. Prior to the first day of school, many parents expressed concern about whether schools would permit their daughters to wear a hijab to class. There were reports that school directors were initially pressured to enforce the hijab ban under threat of termination. As a result, some students were reportedly [expelled](#) from school, and Ministry of Education officials threatened to punish parents who allowed their children to attend school with a hijab. Government officials from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture and Information have [maintained](#) that schools should prohibit religious clothing on their premises. At the same time, the government has generally downplayed the scope of the issue, despite [reports](#) from human rights activists that over 13,000 girls in Kazakhstan would like to wear a hijab to school. The debate has led some government officials and politicians to call for the government to strengthen the religion law to better address the threat of rising “extremism,” a phenomenon they partly correlate with the increasing number of young people wearing religious clothing.

## Key U.S. Policy

U.S. and Kazakh officials continued to prioritize security, trade, and good governance in bilateral relations. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$20 million for programs in Kazakhstan. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [visited](#) Astana to meet with senior Kazakh officials and to participate in the C5+1 Ministerial with officials from each Central Asian state to strengthen bilateral relationships and reaffirm U.S. security support to the region. In September, President Joseph R. Biden met with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and other Central Asian leaders under the auspices of the C5+1 Presidential Summit to discuss security and economic matters. Following the summit, all participants [signed](#) the C5+1 Joint Leaders' Statement, which included, among other things, an affirmation of their commitment to human rights. In November, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Astana for the fifth annual U.S.-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue (ESPD). During the ESPD, U.S. officials reaffirmed support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty and discussed shared priorities that included human rights and U.S. support for the implementation of President Tokayev's reform plans.

In May, Representative Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) introduced [H.R. 3611](#), which would authorize permanent NTR status with Kazakhstan through the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 Trade Act. The Jackson-Vanik amendment [restricted](#) free trade between the United States and the Soviet Union (and afterward its successor states) due to the latter's restriction on the free emigration of Jews. The president has repeatedly certified Kazakhstan as compliant with the Trade Act's freedom of emigration requirements and granted conditional NTR status on a biannual basis after submitting the required reports to Congress.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan worsened as authorities increasingly enforced long-existing restrictive legislation regulating religion. Authorities rigorously penalized religious practices, including online religious expression, collective religious worship and studies, and, relatedly, the possession of unauthorized religious materials.

Authorities have particularly targeted Muslims who practice a form of Islam that deviates from the state's preferred interpretation. The government often penalized such individuals for their peaceful religious activities and labeled them and their beliefs as "extremist," foreign, or nontraditional. During the year, the government maintained a list of "extremist" groups, which included peaceful religious organizations, and detained alleged members under the guise of combating "extremism," a concept vaguely defined in Kyrgyz law. Authorities also conducted a mass inspection of religious institutions and ultimately fined, suspended the activities of, and closed hundreds of mosques and *madrasas* across the country. In one case, three men who criticized these government actions were placed in pretrial detention on charges of "inciting religious enmity," accused of belonging to the banned religious group *Hizb ut-Tahrir*.

Throughout the year, government officials also targeted and penalized non-Muslims, including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and devotees of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), for their religious activity. Authorities fined individuals for participation in prayer services, closed churches, prevented the import of religious materials, and denied certain religious groups registration or intimidated others from even attempting to apply. Sources continued to report that members of certain religious groups were reluctant to report religiously based hate crimes for fear of government retaliation or non-response.

In July, a court [sentenced](#) Aytbek Tynaliyev, a Protestant Christian, to six months in prison for "inciting religious enmity" through his online activity. In social media posts, Tynaliyev shared

his religious beliefs and criticized official religious policies, which, according to authorities, insulted Islam. Tynaliyev was released in September after completing his sentence. Authorities had previously targeted Tynaliyev for his online activities criticizing the government's religious policies. In another case, authorities [detained](#) Arstanbek Abdyl daev for "inciting religious enmity" in December. According to officials from the State Committee for National Security (SCNS), Abdyl daev owned books and brochures and authored social media pages that contained calls for religious hatred. In such materials, Abdyl daev called himself a "new God" and a "savior" and criticized other religions. On January 5, 2024, Abdyl daev reportedly [killed](#) himself while in detention, although the circumstances around his death remain unconfirmed.

In November, a member of parliament [proposed](#) a draft law to ban face coverings and long beards under penalty of a fine or community service to maintain "the rules of public security." The same month, the chairman of the SCNS [compared](#) those who engage in "religious fanaticism" with individuals who "wear different clothes," claiming that they collectively differed from the "traditional Islamic religion practiced by our forefathers." In response to the proposed law, the Council of Scholars of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan, under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), [stated](#) that "it is appropriate for each person to dress in accordance with the customs of the state in which they live."

Also in November, the official State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) introduced to parliament a new draft religion law that, if passed, would further restrict and securitize peaceful religious practices. In December, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on freedom of peaceful assembly and association, on minority issues, and on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism [expressed](#) their concerns regarding the draft legislation in a joint letter to President Sadyr Japarov, urging his government to comply with international human rights law.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kyrgyzstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise religious freedom conditions with the Kyrgyz government, such as at C5+1 meetings and other bilateral engagements;
- Condition U.S. aid on meaningful government efforts to improve religious freedom

conditions, including amendments to the religion law, investigation, and punishment of those who commit religiously based hate crimes, and increased transparency regarding security measures taken against individuals belonging to religious groups unjustly labeled as "extremist"; and

- Work with the government of Kyrgyzstan to revise the 2008 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards and urge

the government to seek a legal opinion on the draft religion law from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom concerns with the Kyrgyz government through hearings, letters, and congressional delegation trips abroad.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Landscape in Kyrgyzstan](#)

## Background

Since the beginning of President Japarov's presidency, the Kyrgyz government has rapidly eroded existing democratic mechanisms and increasingly enforced legislation regulating religion that violates the rights of all religious groups, especially Muslims. The 2008 law "About Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic" prohibits unregistered religious activity, mandates burdensome registration processes to engage in religious activity, restricts religious materials, and requires religious organizations to submit periodic activity reports. A draft religion law proposed in November 2023 would additionally require religious organizations to reregister every five years, introduce a tiered registration system, affirm that the SAMK is the spiritual governing body of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan, mandate the registration of prayer rooms, and ban religiously oriented political parties.

Of a population of about six million people, approximately 90 percent of individuals identify as Muslim, with most adhering to Hanafi Sunni Islam and one percent adhering to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population is composed of Christians, who make up seven percent of the population. About 40 percent of Christians identify as Russian Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The remaining three percent of the population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, ISKCON members, and Tengrinists.

## Crackdown on Independent Muslims

In 2023, Kyrgyz authorities dramatically expanded a campaign targeting independent Muslims by conducting mass inspections of mosques and arresting those who allegedly belonged to organizations that the government had arbitrarily labeled as "extremist." For example, the SCNS reported arresting at least 23 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members and at least 16 alleged Yakyn Inkar members between January and June 2023, surpassing the total reported arrests in 2022. Authorities often only pointed to the possession of "extremist" religious materials to justify such detainments. Per SCNS reports, some individuals in detention renounced their beliefs after speaking with officials, while others did so on video, warning others not to succumb to the same beliefs. It is unclear how long these individuals remained detained, as officials are often reluctant to share information about "extremism"-related cases due to purported national security concerns. In June, the Manas District Court sentenced a man to two years in prison for owning "extremist" religious materials and attempting to purchase additional religious materials.

Beginning in May, the government began an interdepartmental mass inspection of Islamic institutions throughout Kyrgyzstan. According to June reports, officials [found](#) 60 illegal Islamic institutions in Jalal-Abad region. In July, officials [investigated](#) and suspended the activities of 39 mosques and 21 *madrasas* in Osh region, imposing fines on 39 institutions. In August, officials [began](#) an investigation in Bishkek and [issued](#) fines against religious institutions that totaled close to \$1,791 (160,000 soms) in Sverdlov district alone for violating "sanitary standards." Also in August, officials investigated 192 Islamic

institutions in Talas region and [found](#) that 172 violated registration requirements, safety standards, and/or sanitation standards. At the end of the year, officials were still expected to [inspect](#) Islamic institutions in Chui. In October, authorities [arrested](#) and placed in pretrial detention three individuals who criticized the closure of their mosque on video, accusing them of "inciting religious enmity."

## The Status of Non-Muslims

The Kyrgyz government also penalized the peaceful religious activities of non-Muslims. In March 2023, authorities raided religious services at St. Nicholas Catholic Church in Talas region based on accusations that two foreign nuns were illegally preaching. The authorities blocked churchgoers from leaving the building until the nuns signed a document that stated their guilt, and they fined each nun \$98 (8,733 soms) for violating the religion law. Authorities similarly raided a registered Protestant church and fined foreign churchgoers for engaging in "illegal missionary activity." Additionally, authorities [closed](#) several Protestant institutions in Chui region and Bishkek during the year due to alleged building standards violations.

In June, authorities raided an ISKCON wedding rehearsal and fined the host \$84 (7,500 soms). Officials also canceled the visas of Indian students who participated in the event. Authorities have continuously denied ISKCON devotees registration as a religious group. In a July meeting with the SCRA, authorities told ISKCON representatives that they needed to follow the requirements of the religion law and gather 200 adult founders to register. However, devotees are reluctant to provide the personal information required to become a founder for fear of state retaliation.

Jehovah's Witnesses likewise have faced government restrictions on their religious practices. In addition to an ongoing refusal to grant local-level registration, authorities this year denied Jehovah's Witnesses' request to import a faith-based children's book.

## Key U.S. Policy

In 2023, the United States engaged with Kyrgyzstan to support its sovereignty and ensure compliance with international sanctions instituted against Russia, [providing](#) about \$49 million or programs in Kyrgyzstan. During the reporting period, high-level officials from the U.S. Department of State, including Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu, met with Kyrgyz officials to discuss security and economic issues and sometimes human rights. In September, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Japarov and other Central Asian leaders on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly for the C5+1 Presidential Summit. A resulting joint statement only passingly [mentioned](#) the countries' "commitment to protecting human rights."

In August, then Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) [sent](#) a letter to President Japarov, calling on Kyrgyzstan to uphold international sanctions against Russia and to respect human rights.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia remained poor. Federal and state governments continued to compel Muslim citizens to obey government-approved interpretations of Sunni Islam according to Shafi'i jurisprudence. The government [requires](#) all citizens to register their religion on their official identification card known as [MyKad](#), which the Ministry of Home Affairs oversees. MyKad states whether an individual is Muslim and encrypts their registered religious identity in the card's chip. Policing religion through MyKad, federal and state governments enforce the official interpretation of Islam and its dual legal system for all Muslim citizens.

Article 160 of the constitution mandates registering all ethnic Malays as Muslim. Through the enforcement of this article, the Shari'a legal system (known domestically as Syariah) prevents Malays and other registered Muslims from exercising their rights to pursue their own religious interpretation and identity. Domestically, the Shari'a system [maintains](#) strong support among a majority of Muslims.

The Shari'a courts enable the phenomenon of unilateral conversions—when a parent converts to Islam and then also converts their child or children. Through such conversions, child custody becomes a matter decided by the Shari'a courts, where non-Muslims do not have legal standing. In July 2023, a Malaysian woman, Loh Siew Hong, [took](#) the issues of child custody and unilateral conversion to court. Following divorce, Loh, a non-Muslim, spent three years searching for her children, who were taken by their father. The father had unilaterally converted their children to Islam to prevent Loh from gaining custody. At the end of 2023, this case had not been resolved.

Throughout 2023, political observers expressed concerns that the slim-majority unity coalition led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim could break apart, giving way to the rule of Perikatan Nasional, an ethnoreligious nationalist coalition. By the end of 2023,

this unity government rule [appeared](#) to remain stable. This stability may be in part the result of Prime Minister Ibrahim's attempts to entice Malay Muslim votes from Islamist parties through initiatives such as increased funding for [Islamic schools](#) and a [commitment](#) to increase the "criminal powers" of the Shari'a courts—which the royal Conference of Rulers [supported](#).

Malaysia's Penal Code Sections 298 and 298A [criminalize](#) blasphemy, and government authorities use Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 (CMA) as a blasphemy law as well. At least five states criminalize apostasy with fines, imprisonment, or detention in a "rehabilitation" center. In August 2023, after a lengthy court process, the federal High Court [rejected](#) a woman's bid to switch her official religious identity from Muslim to Christian following her divorce from a Muslim man.

Federal and state religious affairs departments continued to take an active approach to managing the internal affairs of Muslims and those legally defined as Muslims according to their MyKad. In February, a Hindu family [took](#) the Selangor State Islamic department (MAIS) to court in order to bury a deceased member in a Hindu cemetery. MAIS had previously determined the deceased member had converted to Islam. In March, the Court of Appeal [rejected](#) a challenge to MAIS's 2014 fatwa labeling the Islamic women's rights group Sisters in Islam as deviant.

Throughout 2023, the government continued to withhold the 2019 [Special Taskforce's report](#) examining cases of enforced disappearances, including [Pastor Raymond Koh](#), [Amri Che Mat](#), and others. Malaysian security forces and religious affairs departments likely targeted these individuals, at least in part, for their religious identity and practices. On December 11, the Court of Appeal [moved](#) to review the classified report by the Special Taskforce as it relates to the disappearance of Amri Che Mat. On December 14, wife of Pastor Koh, Susanna Liew, [testified](#) in High Court to compel the police to reveal his whereabouts.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Malaysia on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise at every opportunity with the Malaysian government that it should ratify international treaties on human rights that directly or indirectly impact religious

freedom—including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1951 Covenant on Refugees—to regulate the Malaysian government's obligations to refugees and asylum seekers; and

- Prioritize raising religious freedom concerns, including releasing the Special

Taskforce's report investigating cases of enforced disappearances, in all bilateral engagement with Malaysia.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Malaysia's ongoing religious freedom concerns in all engagement, hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [Rising Authoritarianism in ASEAN Member States](#)
- **Special Report:** [The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Malaysia](#)

## Background

Malaysia is a pluralistic society. Around [63.5 percent](#) of the population identify as Muslim, the vast majority of whom adhere to state-sponsored Sunni Islam. Buddhists comprise 18.7 percent; 9.1 percent are Christian; 6.1 percent are Hindu; 0.9 percent practice Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions; and about 1.8 percent identify with no religion. Although Malaysia was founded as a secular state, Article 3 of the 1957 Constitution places Islam—interpreted as Sunni Islam—as the federation’s official religion. Article 11(4) provides that federal and state law “may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or beliefs among persons professing the religion of Islam.”

## Rising Islamic Fundamentalism and Its Mainstreaming throughout Malaysia

Following the 2022 elections and the rise of the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), which won the most seats of any individual party but was locked out of the governing coalition, growing ethnoreligious nationalism remains a concern throughout Malaysia. In February 2023, youth supporters of PAS in Terengganu [marched](#) purportedly in support of militant Islam. PAS [continued](#) to use social media, such as TikTok, to appeal to supporters for elections in August. Observers have noted that PAS and other political leaders have used TikTok to spread hate speech directed at ethnic and religious minorities. In PAS-controlled states, Shari’a systems police moral issues such as [dress codes](#) and [adultery](#).

## Dual Legal System and State Control of Muslims

Malaysia’s dual legal system acts to propagate and protect official interpretations of Islam. A 2022 lawsuit [filed](#) in Kelantan challenged 20 provisions introduced in the Kelantan Shariah Criminal Code (I) Enactment 2019. The provisions [criminalize](#) certain behaviors for Muslims through the Shari’a system, including premarital pregnancy, giving away a Muslim child to non-Muslims, intoxication, and sodomy. During 2023, around 300 nongovernmental organizations acting through the “Save Shariah Movement” submitted a memorandum in support of Kelantan and its Shariah Criminal Code. Outside the reporting period in February 2024, the Federal Court [ruled](#) in favor of the lawsuit and declared the 16 Shari’a laws in question as “void and invalid” for intruding on federal authority.

Women and girls remained particularly vulnerable in Malaysia’s dual legal system. In November 2023, the Kelantan state government [reported](#) that 533 underage married couples were recorded in Kelantan over the last four years. Consent of a Shari’a court enables Muslim families to bypass the minimum age requirement of 16 years and to marry underage girls.

In May, the Malaysian government [withdrew](#) its appeal—initially filed in 2021—against a High Court ruling permitting non-Muslims to use the word “Allah.”

## Ethnic, Religious, and Gender Issues and Sexual Minorities

State religious departments take an active role to expand and preserve the official Islamic identity of individuals and society. In February, the Perlis Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MAIP) [attempted](#) to intervene in the case of the religious identity of Loh Siew Hong’s children in Family High Court to maintain Islamic religious instruction, despite the individual wishes of the three children and Loh to not enroll in religious classes. In October, the High Court rejected MAIP’s attempt. In March, MAIS [declared](#) Muslims could not participate in activities or visit non-Muslim houses of worship, noting the authorities could punish violators with up to one-year imprisonment or a fine of approximately \$2,000 (10,000 ringgit).

The role of religious departments in advancing the official Islamic identity can negatively affect the rights of ethnic and religious minorities as well as Muslim members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community. Throughout 2023, Malaysian authorities continued to use the legal system in the name of defending Islam to [prosecute](#) businesses and to [police](#) social media use. In August, a representative of the government [described](#) being queer as “a perverted lifestyle” that went against the teachings of Islam to justify the detention of eight Ahmadiyya Muslim protesters who were campaigning for LGBTQI+ rights. In November, Johor State [announced](#) it would open the country’s first permanent “rehabilitation center” for individuals found guilty in Shari’a court of same-sex relations in order to [assist](#) “deviant” people to “get back on the right path.”

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States is Malaysia’s third-largest [trading partner](#), and the two countries [maintain](#) strong bilateral ties. In September, the U.S. Navy [concluded](#) its annual multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief preparedness mission in Malaysia, where it held nursing and veterinary training for local nurses and students. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$6 million in assistance for programs in Malaysia.

In October, U.S. Ambassador at Large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, Cindy Dyer, [visited](#) Malaysia to meet with local stakeholders, including the government, to discuss human trafficking. Malaysia [hosts](#) at least 186,490 refugees and asylum seekers originating from Burma, a significant number of whom are fleeing in part from violence targeting their ethnic and religious communities and many of whom are vulnerable to or have been victims of human trafficking. In November, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [appointed](#) Edgard Kagan as the U.S. Ambassador to Malaysia.

Through the International Visiting Leadership Program and the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, the United States hosts leaders from Malaysia in programs that often include religious freedom issues. The United States is actively engaged with civil society in Malaysia to promote tolerance and counter violent extremism.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka continued to decline. Throughout the year, the government continued to harass and threaten religious minorities and at times deny them access to their places of worship. Christian communities continued to face obstacles in registering churches. The government also used discriminatory legislation to target, monitor, and detain religious minorities. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been [criticized](#) for its broad powers to search, arrest, and detain individuals, particularly Muslim citizens, following the [2019 Easter Sunday attacks](#). Independent experts at the United Nations (UN) and human rights groups expressed [concern](#) over a new terrorism bill, stating that it fails to address flaws in existing legislation, including a vague definition of terrorism and limited judicial oversight.

Throughout 2023, the Sri Lankan government shrank religious freedom by continuing to arbitrarily detain individuals under the PTA and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\) Act](#). Enacted in 2007, the ICCPR Act is designed to incorporate the international treaty into law, but authorities widely use it to restrict religious freedom and limit freedom of expression. In January, Youtuber Sepal Amarasinghe was [arrested](#) and remanded for his allegedly derogatory comments about the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Lord Buddha. In May, stand-up comedian [Nathasha Edirisooriya](#) was [arrested](#) under the ICCPR Act for making a joke allegedly insulting Buddhism and Christianity. Following her arrest, the Minister of Buddhist, Religious, and Cultural Affairs said he [intended](#) to submit a draft bill to prevent distortion of religion, arguing that no individual has the right to offend any religion. President Ranil Wickremesinghe additionally [called](#) for the establishment of a special police unit to combat “religious disharmony.”

During the year, the Department of Archeology, in coordination with Buddhist clergy and local authorities, continued to expropriate land from Hindus and Muslims in the Northern and Eastern provinces for the construction of Buddhist sites. In March, Buddhist monks, representatives from the Department of

Archeology, and Sri Lankan security forces attempted to [install](#) a Buddhist statue in Trincomalee, threatening to shoot Tamil and Muslim protesters if they disrupted the process. In July, Judge T. Saravanarajah [ordered](#) the eviction of Buddhist monks from a Tamil Hindu temple in Kurunthumalai after they [prevented](#) Hindu worshipers from gathering. In September, the Department of Archeology violated a 2022 court order issued by Saravanarajah, which [halted](#) the construction of a Buddhist temple at the Hindu site. Subsequently, citing threats to his life for presiding over these cases, Saravanarajah [resigned](#) and reportedly fled the country.

In several instances, authorities failed to address tensions and violence instigated by Buddhist monks towards religious minorities. In August, for example, a Buddhist monk led approximately 50 Sinhala men armed with knives and swords to intimidate [journalists](#) and an [interfaith group](#) in Batticaloa. The group harassed a Hindu priest, two Catholic priests, and one Muslim scholar, and attacked the Hindu priest. The same month, a group of Buddhist monks in Trincomalee [stormed](#) a district committee meeting, violently threatening the Governor of the Eastern District if he failed to reverse an [order](#) to halt the construction of a new Buddhist temple in the Tamil-majority district. The Minister of Buddha Sasana similarly [expressed](#) dissatisfaction with the Governor’s order but argued the situation should be left up to the courts.

In October, the government published the [Online Safety Bill](#), which experts argue could exacerbate the targeting and detention of minority religious communities. The bill seeks to establish an Online Safety Commission, with broad powers to determine whether an online statement is “false [...] threatening, alarming or distressing.” The bill mandates that any individual who “voluntarily causes disturbance to any assembly lawfully engaged in [...] religious worship or religious ceremonies” can face up to three years in prison. It further criminalizes the publication of statements intended to harm or “outrage” religious feelings or insult religious beliefs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Sri Lanka on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Direct U.S. Embassy officials to urge the Sri Lankan government to repeal or significantly reform the PTA, such that it requires a higher threshold of evidence for charges and a definition of “terrorism” that complies with international standards; and
  - Advocate for the full implementation of UN Human Rights Council [Resolution 51/1](#) to promote reconciliation, accountability, and religious freedom in Sri Lanka.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and congressional delegations to the country to better incorporate religious freedom concerns into U.S. policy towards Sri Lanka.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** [Colombo, Trincomalee, and Jaffna in October 2023](#)
- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Special Report:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Sri Lanka](#)



## Background

Sri Lanka is a democratic republic under the leadership of President Ranil Wickremesinghe. The constitution recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. While the constitution recognizes freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, [Article 9](#) offers Buddhism the “foremost place” in society and requires the government to “protect and foster the Buddha Sasana.”

Sri Lanka’s population is an [estimated](#) 23.3 million, which is both religiously and ethnically diverse. Buddhists compose approximately 70 percent of the population, followed by Hindus at 12.6 percent, Muslims (mostly Sunni) at 9.7 percent, Roman Catholics at 6.1 percent, Protestant and other Christian denominations at 1.3 percent, and “other” religions at 0.05 percent. Most Sri Lankans are Sinhalese and adhere to Buddhism. Tamils are the second largest ethnic group and are primarily Hindu with a significant Christian minority. The next smallest ethnic group is referred to as Sri Lankan Moors, who are mostly Muslim. Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims, Indian Tamils, and other small ethnic groups also reside in the country.

## Land Disputes and Places of Worship

Under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Department of Archeology collaborated with the Ministry of Defense’s Task Force for Archeological Heritage Management to identify cultural sites across the country. In the Northern and Eastern provinces, authorities have used this mandate to expropriate Hindu and Muslim land for the construction of Buddhist sites. In 2023, Tamil political parties reported increased attacks and vandalism against Hindu temples and damage to statues. A 2023 [report](#) identified 37 cases in the north and east in which the Department of Archeology attempted to construct Buddhist temples on Tamil land, despite the lack of Buddhist populations in those locations. Human rights groups additionally [report](#) as many as 68 instances of land disputes in Batticaloa, as of September 2023. In July, President Wickremesinghe [instructed](#) officials to prioritize and expedite the construction of Buddhist temples and cultural sites, including the Anuradhapura Sacred Site Development Plan and Maha Viharaya Development Plan in the Northern Province. In his remarks, Wickremesinghe identified Sri Lanka as a “Buddhist nation,” and emphasized the “national importance” of completing the Maha Viharaya (temple).

According to civil society organizations, police and military personnel fail to address land disputes or to intervene in instances of tension between Buddhist clergy and religious minorities. In October, a Buddhist monk led a Sinhalese procession to install a Buddhist statue on disputed land in Batticaloa. At the order of President Wickremesinghe, police removed the statue, after which Buddhist monk Ampitiye Sumanaratna [threatened](#) to kill Tamils. No action was taken by authorities against Sumanaratna. In January, high-ranking Buddhist monks [requested](#) President Wickremesinghe not to remove security personnel assigned to monitor locations identified by the Archeology Department as Buddhist religious sites in the north and east. The letter highlighted the role of the military in “safeguarding and maintaining important places of Buddhist worship.”

## Surveillance and Detention of Religious Minorities

Surveillance, intimidation, and detention of religious minorities continued in 2023, under the premise of national security concerns. As of August 2023, 21 detainees were on [remand](#) under the PTA, and 25 individuals were serving prison terms on terrorism charges. In April, three detainees, who had been held in pretrial detention for 14 years, were released after determining that their confessions had been coerced. In June, human rights organizations and international lawyer associations expressed concerns about witness intimidation and coercion in PTA trials, specifically [Hejaaz Hizbullah](#), who was detained for 20 months before being charged and ultimately granted bail in 2022. In March, the government proposed the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), which introduced some positive reforms, including improved access to bail; however, it still contains a broad definition of terrorism, which human rights groups fear could result in continued arbitrary detention of religious minorities. In December 2023, the ATA remained under further review, leaving the PTA in effect.

In January 2023, the Sri Lankan Parliament [passed](#) the Bureau of Rehabilitation Bill. While this bill focuses primarily on rehabilitating “drug-dependent persons,” it mandates the “rehabilitation” of individuals deemed part of “violent extremist groups” or individuals engaged in “extreme or disruptive acts of sabotage.” Human rights groups expressed concerns that it could be [broadly applied](#) to “rehabilitate” individuals, including religious minority communities, arrested but not convicted of a crime.

Human rights groups continued to report authorities monitoring expression on social media. In November, however, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court [determined](#) that Section 3 of the ICCPR Act should not be interpreted as criminalizing blasphemy, including in online contexts. It cited the [case](#) of Ramzy Razik, a Muslim man who was detained for five months without charges in 2020 for writing a Facebook post expressing his views of challenges faced by Muslim communities.

## Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy towards Sri Lanka has historically focused on democracy building and post-civil war transitional justice. In FY 2023, the U.S. government provided \$78 million for [programs](#) in Sri Lanka. In April, the U.S. Department of State [leveled](#) sanctions against Wasantha Karannagoda, Governor of the North Western Province, for human rights abuses during his time as a Naval Commander. In a September [letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, 12 members of Congress condemned Sri Lanka’s violation of international human rights law and democratic principles. In November, U.S. Ambassador to Sri Lanka Julie Chung [condemned](#) the continued use of the PTA to target peaceful protesters. In December, members of Congress introduced a [bipartisan resolution](#) urging increased transparency and investigations of human rights abuses, including against religious minority groups.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Syria remained poor, though many of the worst violations occurred in areas under the control of nonstate entities. While the government of President Bashar al-Assad committed a range of other human rights abuses, its violations of freedom of religion or belief were generally political and administrative in nature. Nonstate entities in conflict with the Assad government, including the U.S.-designated [terrorist](#) organization [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and several Turkish-supported Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs), were the primary drivers of severe religious freedom violations in Syria.

In the 70 percent of territory under the Assad government's control, political threats to religious freedom included continuing favoritism toward members of the president's Alawi Muslim community and pursuing bureaucratic control of Sunni Muslim religious authority. The government continued to style itself as a protector of religious minorities, although some faith communities diverged from their longstanding acquiescence to the Alawi Muslim-dominated administration. For a second year, Druze in the southern city of Suweida staged antiregime protests, this time with more visible support from prominent Druze religious leaders such as Sheikh Hikmat Hajri. In government-controlled parts of the Hama governorate in the west, authorities did not adequately address social hostilities against religious minorities or the apparent religious dimensions of some crimes. For example, community liaisons reported that the August killing of a young Christian man in Hama occurred after his assailants professed outrage that a Christian had attempted to break up their street fight. In a December speech, President Assad

falsely claimed there was no evidence that six million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

Parts of northern Syria remained among the last territories still in the hands of rebel groups opposed to the Assad regime. These included TSOs as well as HTS, the de facto governors of Idlib in the northwest and whose Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) administers the territory. In 2023, HTS continued its campaign to erase its former ties to al-Qaeda and reposition itself as a state-like administrative regime that acknowledges religious diversity. The group publicized its tolerance of the first Christian liturgy celebrated in Idlib in over a decade and pledged to redistribute property it had confiscated from Christians and Druze. However, HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents of Idlib. In August, the SSG invoked its interpretation of Shari'a in new rules for Idlib's schools, and HTS security forces continued their arbitrary and unlawful [detention](#) of human rights advocates and private individuals critical of HTS's "rule or religious doctrine."

In Kurdish-majority areas in the north and east outside of rebel control, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), supported by its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), continued to highlight religious freedom as a governing principle. The SDF led missions to locate and rescue Yazidi women and girls whom ISIS kidnapped from Iraq as part of its 2014 [genocide](#). Almost 2,700 women and girls remained missing, with an unidentified number presumed still in Syrian detainee camps and ISIS enclaves.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Syria on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Redesignate HTS as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Impose targeted sanctions on additional Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of TSOs responsible for violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Support religious freedom in Syria by: 1) fully implementing General License No. 22 in areas the AANES governs and encouraging the inclusion of the AANES in a political solution to the Syrian conflict; 2) assisting the efforts of local partners to ascertain the whereabouts of kidnapped and missing Yazidi women and girls; and (3) taking diplomatic action in multilateral fora to facilitate the flow of humanitarian and reconstruction aid and ensure its effective disbursement to vulnerable communities, including religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom and issues affecting religious minorities in Syria-related legislation and in hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **Special Report:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#)

## Background

Under Article 3 of Syria's [constitution](#), the president must be Muslim, and Islamic jurisprudence is a major source of legislation. Although the constitution provides for respect toward all religions and protection of different religious communities, the government has wide latitude to limit religious rituals if they appear to "prejudice public order." Bans on Jehovah's Witnesses remain in place, and other laws [prohibit](#) interfaith marriage and the conversion of Muslims to other religions.

Thirteen years of violent conflict have shaped Syria's current population through mass internal displacement and dispersal of refugees throughout the world. The [population](#) of 22.9 million is estimated at 87 percent Muslim, of whom 74 percent are Sunni, with Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a Muslims together constituting 13 percent. Druze are approximately three percent of the population. Estimates of Christians—believed to have fallen to between 2.5 and 10 percent—and Yazidis were obscured by these groups' displacement and emigration and the government's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam. The Jewish population is now nonexistent, reflecting decades of government persecution and forced emigration.

## Threats to Religious Freedom in Non-Regime Areas

The Assad government continued its partnerships with Russia and Iran to renew its offensive against nonstate entities in areas outside regime control. Observers reported that regime and allied forces' attacks on civilian areas affected some houses of worship. On February 6, 2023, two high-magnitude earthquakes decimated large areas of the same region, which is home to religious minority communities. The Assad regime allegedly [mismanaged](#) and embezzled external aid to earthquake victims, and advocates for religious minorities expressed concern over potentially discriminatory distribution of aid.

Turkey posed one of the most significant threats to religious freedom in Syria via its occupation of territory and its military strikes in and near AANES jurisdictions, in pursuit of what the Turkish government termed Kurdish [terrorists](#). Beginning on October 5, 2023, Turkish forces intensified their attacks on civilian infrastructure in Hasakah, Raqqqa, and Aleppo. Human rights advocates reported patterns of Turkish shelling, drones, and airstrikes targeting communities with religious minority populations. Factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) destroyed mosques in Afrin and bulldozed the Yazidi shrine of Chal Khaneh and other religious monuments and cemeteries. The Turkish government's permissive stance toward the brutality of these TSOs against civilian populations and their targeting of religious minorities—such as confiscating property and forcing at least two Yazidis in Afrin to [convert](#) to Islam—rendered

Turkish-controlled areas among the least secure and most damaging to religious freedom in Syria.

## Key U.S. Policy

While the Arab League readmitted Syria in May 2023 after more than a decade of suspension, the United States avoided normalization of [relations](#) with Syria. In May and September, Congress introduced the bipartisan [Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act](#), which would bar the United States from recognizing any government led by Bashar al-Assad and allow for additional sanctions, reinforcing and expanding the 2019 [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act](#). In August, U.S. lawmakers [visited](#) rebel-held northwest Syria in what was U.S. politicians' first publicly reported trip to the country in six years.

The United States supported regional [stability](#) via an ongoing counterterrorism program and implementation of the USCIRF-[recommended](#) General License No. 22, which [authorizes](#) U.S. economic activity in areas controlled by the AANES. Throughout the year, Iran-linked attacks on U.S. military targets increased, sometimes prompting U.S. retaliatory strikes and intensifying following Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and the resulting conflict in Gaza.

The United States continued to designate terrorists with links to Syria and maintained its robust sanctions program against Syria and related individual actors, pursuant to the Caesar Act and various [executive orders](#). In April, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) a leader of Hurras al-Din (HaD), which shares HTS's roots as an al-Qaeda affiliate, as a global terrorist, citing his group's responsibility for "violence targeting members of religious minority groups." In May, the U.S. Department of the Treasury, in coordination with the government of Turkey, applied joint [sanctions](#) on potential fundraisers for militant groups, including HTS. In August, the Treasury Department announced [sanctions](#) against TSOs with records of serious human rights abuses.

In June, the State Department [welcomed](#) the initiation of legal proceedings by Canada and the Netherlands at the International Court of Justice to "hold Syria accountable for the reported torture of thousands of individuals at the hands of the Assad regime." That same month, the United States announced [\\$920 million](#) in additional humanitarian assistance for Syria, the largest aid package to date. The allotment, expanded in response to the February earthquakes, brought U.S. humanitarian [assistance](#) to [\\$1.1 billion](#) in fiscal year 2023 and almost \$16.9 billion since the 2011 onset of the civil war.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department renewed its [designation](#) of HTS as an EPC under IRFA, in alignment with USCIRF's [recommendation](#). However, it did not designate Syria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) or place it on the Special Watch List for particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained largely the same as in the previous year, although government officials increasingly engaged in rhetoric that targeted or ostracized religious minorities. The Turkish government continued to deny legal status to religious communities, refused to recognize the places of worship of certain religious minorities, and prohibited the reopening of the Theological School of Halki and other religious educational institutions crucial to the continued existence of several religious traditions in the country. The government also did not recognize the right to conscientious objection and fined some individuals who refused to carry out compulsory military service due to their beliefs.

Alevi, who make up Turkey’s largest religious minority community, continued to lack official recognition and [faced](#) widespread discrimination. Many Alevi [viewed](#) government overtures—such as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s late 2022 announcement of the creation of a state-run Alevi-Bektaşî Culture and Cemevi Directorate—as either a political gesture to gain votes ahead of elections or an effort to co-opt and assimilate Alevism. In the course of campaigning, President Erdoğan [lashed out](#) at main opposition party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who had released on social media a video in which he [discussed](#) his own identity as an Alevi. Alevi, along with members of other religious minority communities, continued to object to religion courses required for students grades four through 12 that disproportionately focused on Sunni Islam.

The Turkish government detained individuals throughout the year for allegedly insulting Islam and in some cases prosecuted them for committing blasphemy under Article 216(3) of the Turkish Penal Code. In October 2023, a man [received](#) 7.5 months in prison for “insult[ing] the religious values of a section of the public” when he posted to social media a photo showing alcohol inside a mosque. That same month, authorities detained three 16-year-olds on charges of insulting religious values on social media. In

July, police [detained](#) and then released a man who purportedly made fun of *namaz* (prayer) in a video that he posted to social media. In yet another case of official censorship, in February, a court banned theologian İhsan Eliaçık’s translation of the Qur’an because it “contain[ed] elements that are objectionable in terms of the fundamental qualities of Islam.” Likewise, in May, the Istanbul governor for the second year in a row [prohibited](#) an event to commemorate the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

Many religious communities remained concerned by instances of societal violence, intolerant rhetoric, and discrimination. In November, unknown assailants [murdered](#) nonagenarian Syriac Gevriye Akgüç in the courtyard of his home in the southeastern province of Mardin. Designated terrorist organizations like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reportedly [planned](#) to carry out attacks on churches and synagogues during the year that Turkish police prevented. In August 2023, the nongovernmental organization Freedom of Belief Initiative (*İnanç Özgürlüğü Girişimi*) [found](#) that most religion-based hate crimes in the country targeted Alevi and Christians, including Armenian Apostolics, Armenian Catholics, and Syriac Orthodox. Members of some religious and ethnic minority communities who fled persecution in other countries to seek refuge in Turkey remained concerned that Turkish authorities could deport them.

The year also [saw](#) an alarming rise in antisemitism. In October, local Justice and Development Party (AKP) council member Süleyman Sezen [praised](#) Adolf Hitler and spoke of the day when “Jews are cleansed from the earth.” In the same month, progovernment media outlets [employed](#) antisemitic language, a bookshop in Istanbul [posted](#) a sign that said “Jews not allowed,” and an unidentified vandal [graffitied](#) the Etz Hayim Synagogue in Izmir. In December, President Erdoğan also [compared](#) Israel’s leadership and military campaign in Gaza to Hitler and the Nazis.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
  - Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary) and for full compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
  - Track and comprehensively document in the U.S. Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report religious communities’ efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historical importance; include information on the vandalization, damage, and destruction of such sites; and work with the Turkish government to ensure their protection.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Incorporate consideration of Turkey’s treatment of religious minorities and broader human rights issues into its continued evaluation of the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship, including in the context of proposed legislation.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [An Examination of Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)
- **Event:** [Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)

## Background

The population of Turkey is [estimated](#) at approximately 83.5 million. The overwhelming majority—at slightly more than 99 percent—reportedly identifies as Muslim. Most Muslims in Turkey are Sunni and follow the Hanafi school of Islamic thought, but this figure includes Alevi, who number between 10 million and 25 million and constitute the country's largest religious minority. There is also a small population of Shi'a Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent of the population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Yazidis, and others.

The constitution [describes](#) the country as *laik*, or secular, and protects in theory the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. Nonetheless, the government plays an increasingly active role in overseeing various aspects of religious affairs through official bodies such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*).

## Government Promotion of Islam

In 2023, the Turkish government increasingly implemented policies that sought to privilege and promote its interpretation of Sunni Islam and to discourage attitudes or practices that it characterized as “perversions against moral values.” During the year, the Diyanet began to [move forward](#) with a cooperation protocol it had signed with the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Youth and Sports to allow Diyanet personnel to educate students on “values,” arrange meetings with parents, and organize religious events and activities. Another aspect of the project [appointed](#) imams to elementary and secondary schools to serve as “spiritual counselors,” which many parents, politicians, and others objected to as violating the constitution. In July, the European Parliament [expressed concern](#) with “the increasing weight of the Islamist agenda in law-making and in many spheres of the administration, including through an extension of the influence of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in the education system.” In late November, the government indicated it would likely further increase the budget of the Diyanet for the following year by an estimated 151 percent.

## Religious Sites

Throughout 2023, several religious communities encountered obstacles related to opening, regaining, and protecting their places of worship and other religious sites. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in many cases remained unable to secure official recognition for their churches and Kingdom Halls, respectively, as places of worship. This lack of status put religious communities that used unrecognized buildings for worship at risk of site closures or fines. In July, local authorities in the central Anatolian city of Konya closed a Kingdom Hall that had opened a few months earlier after receiving complaints from neighbors. Other religious communities continued to seek the return

of properties that the government had forcibly expropriated from them in preceding decades. Those efforts were often protracted, as even when the government recognized such properties were wrongly seized, it did not immediately return them. For instance, although the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) in January that the government had wrongly registered to the Ministry of Treasury and Finance multiple properties—including churches and cemeteries—belonging to two Armenian foundations, foundation representatives nonetheless had to pursue the return of those properties through other courts.

Some places of worship also received threats or experienced attacks throughout the year. In early November, a man [assaulted](#) the pastor of a Protestant church during a service in the city of Eskişehir. Later that month, two individuals [broke into](#) the same church, attacked the pastor and others with him, demanded to know whether those within the church were Jewish or Israeli, and threatened to “set them on fire” if they called the police.

In a positive development, President Erdoğan in October [inaugurated](#) the Mor Ephrem Syriac Orthodox Church in Istanbul, which is widely considered the first church to be officially constructed in the history of the Turkish Republic. The government also announced it would [repair](#) the St. George Greek Orthodox Church in Antakya after it was damaged by an earthquake.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey consider each other close allies and partnered on a range of issues, including defense cooperation, Euro-Atlantic security, bilateral trade, and continued support for Ukraine. During the year, high-level representatives met for the [fourth](#) and [fifth](#) iterations of the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism Dialogue to discuss—among other subjects—modernizing Turkey's F-16 fleet, advancing Finland and Sweden's applications to join the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO), and maintaining stability in the Mediterranean. U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to Turkey in [February](#) to express U.S. support for the country in the wake of devastating earthquakes and in [November](#) to discuss the situation in Israel following Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack. In FY 2023, the U.S. government obligated over \$93 million for [programs](#) in Turkey.

Over the course of the year, the U.S. Department of State generally did not publicly raise religious freedom or broader human rights concerns in Turkey. Although both the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom [Rashad Hussain](#) and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Ambassador [Deborah E. Lipstadt](#) met with President Erdoğan in September as part of a roundtable discussion, public reporting did not indicate whether either ambassador raised the Turkish government's religious freedom violations.

Congress closely followed developments in the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship and frequently raised regional geopolitical matters involving Turkey. As part of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project, Representative Jamie B. Raskin (D-MD) [advocated](#) on behalf of imprisoned opposition politician Selahattin Demirtaş.

# UZBEKISTAN

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended negatively as the government continued to tightly control all aspects of religious practice and subject Muslims to particularly harsh punishments for their religious activities and expression. The country's Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations mandated that religious communities obtain registration to legally engage in worship and other religious activities, required that a government agency review and approve religious literature and related materials, and prohibited missionary activity and the private teaching of religion. During the year, the government [passed](#) amendments to the administrative code that penalize the "propaganda" of superiority on religious grounds and wearing clothes that prevent a person's identification.

Various government agencies continued to police and censure Muslims for their religious activities. In October 2023, law enforcement authorities in Tashkent raided and [closed](#) several halal restaurants, reportedly questioning employees about their religious beliefs and telling the proprietors that they could reopen if they agreed to sell alcohol. Throughout the country, mosques also [lowered](#) the volume of the call to prayer, a practice that the government had previously loosened restrictions on to signal its increased respect for religious freedom. The official Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) sought to control media reporting on Islam and in one instance [instructed](#) media outlet Kun.uz to cut or change sections of a story it had produced on religious matters. In August, the founder of Azon.uz, a popular website that focused on Islam, suddenly and inexplicably [announced](#) the closure of the site and its television and radio broadcasting, which many [attributed](#) to government pressure. The government continued to rigorously oversee the performance of the Hajj and Umra and [warned](#) its citizens against undertaking either pilgrimage "illegally" by traveling with an unauthorized organization. In November, the government additionally [restricted](#) the

ability of minors to perform pilgrimages and allegedly continued to involve *mahallas* (local neighborhood committees) to determine who would be allowed to go on pilgrimage.

The government increasingly detained, arrested, fined, and sentenced Muslims to prison for the illegal dissemination of religious materials or participation in illegal religious organizations. Authorities particularly [targeted](#) young men who had downloaded or shared songs with alleged "religious extremist" content. In January, a court [sentenced](#) Sardor Rakhmonkulov—whose mother claimed he experienced torture while in custody—to five years' imprisonment on extremism-related charges for "distributing religious songs." In May, another court [gave](#) Jahongir Ulugmurodov three years in prison for posting a song to social media. Both individuals were released from prison later in the year pursuant to court decisions. In May, a woman [received](#) a three-year prison sentence for "liking" a religious lecture on social media five years prior, which a court decided constituted "distributing" the material to her friends online. A court later changed her sentence to a form of house arrest. Officials with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Security Service engaged in transnational repression by attempting to forcibly or coercively [return](#) citizens living abroad to Uzbekistan, where they faced criminal extremism charges.

Religious minorities continued to encounter significant obstacles in their ability to practice their religion or beliefs. Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses in many regions remained unable to register and therefore legally worship due to a burdensome and discriminatory registration process. In February, customs officials [detained](#) a Baptist foreign national who attempted to cross the border with numerous unauthorized religious books that they seized for review. In April, police raided two Baptist churches meeting for Easter service, detained several church members, and beat and applied electric shocks to other worshippers.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 2021 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards, including by removing registration requirements on religious communities, permitting the

possession and distribution of religious literature, and permitting the sharing of religious beliefs;

- Press the government of Uzbekistan, at the highest levels, to immediately release individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Allocate funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S.

Embassy in Tashkent to provide litigation support to individuals and religious communities prosecuted in connection with their peaceful religious activities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Advocate on behalf of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations through letters, floor speeches, hearings, delegations, and other engagements with or about Uzbekistan.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Deeply Troubled by Uzbekistan's Backsliding on Religious Freedom](#)
- **Event:** [Evaluating Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Uzbekistan](#)



## Background

The population of Uzbekistan is [estimated](#) at approximately 35.8 million people. Different estimates place the percentage of the population that identify as Muslim at between 88 and 96.3 percent. While most Muslims in the country are Hanafi Sunni, there are also small numbers of Shi'a Muslims. Slightly more than two percent of the population are Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 1.5 percent are atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholics, and Protestants. In September, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov reportedly [asserted](#) that civil servants in the country must choose between their beliefs and their careers.

During the year, several international observers expressed concern about the situation for religious freedom in Uzbekistan. In March 2023, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief released a report that [found](#) the government had only partially implemented many of the recommendations made in 2018 and failed entirely to implement others. In May, Human Rights Watch characterized the country as "backsliding on [its] religious freedom promises" and [documented](#) widespread violations, including the continued prosecution of Muslims under overly broad extremism provisions. In October, the European Parliament adopted a resolution that called on Uzbekistan to protect the right to freedom of religion, amend its religion law, protect Christian converts, and [release religious prisoners](#).

## Retaliation for Religious Expression

The government increasingly cracked down on bloggers and others who expressed their opinion on religious matters publicly or through social media posts. In February, a court fined a man who had criticized a shop display on social media on the grounds that he had [shared](#) unauthorized religious content. Local officials [stated](#) that "people cannot judge or otherwise interfere with others based on their personal religious and moral views. The action of any person against this order will be strictly prosecuted in accordance with the law." In a similar incident in April, a court [sentenced](#) blogger Hojiakbar Nosirov to 15 days' administrative arrest on charges of "inciting religious hatred" after he said in a video that Muslims should not consume certain brands of yogurt due to their ingredients. In May, former imam Shavkat Hasan had to [pay](#) a fine of nearly \$575 (6.6 million so'm) for discussing religious matters on social media without the CRA's permission. During the year, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan—a nominally independent entity responsible for overseeing Islamic practice in the country—reported [firing](#) multiple imams related to their unapproved commentary.

Relatedly, there were also reports that authorities continued to forcibly shave the beards of men and [demand](#) that women wear their

headscarves a certain way. In September, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty [reported](#) that law enforcement conducted a number of raids throughout Tashkent to detain bearded men, force them to shave, and subject at least some of them to brief periods of administrative arrest.

## Transnational Repression of Muslims

Although the current administration has sought to distance itself from the legacy of the previous government under Islam Karimov—which brutally repressed freedom of religion or belief—it nonetheless continued to [pursue](#) individuals who had fled that regime due to religious persecution. Police and security services have reportedly pressured and coerced Uzbek Muslims living abroad to return to Uzbekistan, in some cases even promising them that they will not face prosecution upon their return. In March 2023, a court reduced Alijon Mirganiyev's prison sentence he received on religious extremism-related charges from seven years to six years and six months. He was arrested upon his return to the country and sentenced in October 2022 despite having [received](#) assurances he would not be detained. In September, France [deported](#) Muhsinjon Ahmedov, who was in the process of seeking asylum given the criminal charges that he faced in Uzbekistan related to his religious practice. In November, authorities in Uzbekistan arrested Ahmedov on the allegation that he was involved in "extremism." In December, a French court ruled that his deportation was conducted illegally and that French authorities should immediately seek his return to France.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan [engaged](#) closely on efforts related to regional security, economic development, people-to-people ties, and human rights. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$41 million for programs in Uzbekistan. In February 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) to Uzbekistan, where he [met](#) with President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and [urged](#) the government to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. During that visit, Secretary Blinken [asserted](#) that "real progress has been made on protecting religious freedom" in Uzbekistan and [added](#) that the United States "supports the full implementation of President Mirziyoyev's reform agenda. That includes delivering on commitments to defend religious freedom." In September, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Mirziyoyev for the C5+1 Presidential Summit, which public reporting indicated did not include substantial discussion of human rights. In November, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu also [visited](#) Uzbekistan to participate in the U.S.-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue. While in the country, he met with civil society groups working to promote human rights.





# KEY GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

This section highlights some important developments and trends that impacted religious freedom conditions around the world in 2023, particularly—but not only—in countries and regions not covered elsewhere in this report. These developments are not exhaustive, and the omission of specific countries or cases is not indicative of a lack of religious freedom violations in those regions.

## Transnational Repression

In addition to perpetrating religious freedom violations within their own countries, several governments engaged in transnational repression to silence religious minorities and their advocates abroad. These governments used intimidation, harassment, and violence to target political and human rights activists, journalists, and members of religious and ethnic minority groups living outside their borders. In extreme cases, tactics included detention, reprisals against family members, kidnapping, and assassinations.

China is the world's most "prolific," "sophisticated, comprehensive, and far-reaching" perpetrator of transnational repression, according to Freedom House. In 2023, the Chinese government continued its transnational repression campaigns, targeting diaspora ethnic and religious communities with ties to China, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, Protestant Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners in countries such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. For example, China operates over 100 overseas police stations in at least 53 countries. In April 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice arrested and charged Lu Jianwang and Chen Jinping in connection with operating an illegal Chinese overseas police station in New York City. Lu has a history of engaging in transnational repression on behalf of the Chinese government, targeting religious groups and dissidents on U.S. soil. In May, the Justice Department charged two individuals for furthering the Chinese government's transnational repression against Falun Gong practitioners in the United States. Furthermore, the Chinese government used its economic and geopolitical influence to pressure foreign countries, including Turkey, Morocco, Thailand, Nepal, and Pakistan, to repatriate Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Protestant Christian refugees to China, where they could face severe human rights abuses. In 2023, USCIRF discussed its concerns about China's transnational repression with U.S. and foreign government officials, including in Japan.

*"In addition to perpetrating religious freedom violations within their own countries, several governments engaged in transnational repression to silence religious minorities and their advocates abroad."*

The Indian government similarly engaged in increased acts of transnational repression to target religious minorities living in the diaspora. In addition to allegations of involvement in an assassination and assassination attempts of Canadian and American Sikh citizens, Indian government officials facilitated harassment campaigns to silence dissidents critical of religious freedom conditions in India. Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to the United States in June, comments from the head of India's Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Information and Technology Department, Amit Malviya, prompted an online campaign against U.S. Wall Street Journal journalist Sabrina Siddiqui for posing a question to Prime Minister Modi about religious freedom conditions in the country. The Indian government also continued to deny entry and cancel overseas citizen of India (OIC) status to members of the diaspora.

Transnational repression also increased in Southeast Asia as governments shared information and tracked down human rights and religious freedom activists outside of their borders. In 2023, Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) governments increasingly used digital surveillance software and practices originating from countries such as China and Israel to spy on diaspora communities, including religious minorities.

In addition, USCIRF received reports confirming that Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, engaged in transnational repression to forcibly return their citizens from abroad. Tajikistan, one of the worst perpetrators of transnational repression, continued to abuse the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Red Notice system to target Tajiks living in Europe, including Ismaili Shi'a Muslim Pamiris and those affiliated with the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a religiously based political opposition group. Other major perpetrators of transnational repression against religious communities and religious freedom advocates include Egypt, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

## Laws Restricting Religious Freedom

In 2023, governments across the world retained legislation or are considering legislation inconsistent with an individual's right to freedom of religion or belief, including blasphemy laws, anti-conversion laws, and restrictions on religious garb or traditions, such as ritual slaughter.

Blasphemy laws remain one of the most significant challenges to religious freedom by punishing acts or expressions deemed insulting

or offensive to religious feelings, figures, or symbols with the death penalty, compulsory labor, imprisonment, or fines. In 2023, USCIRF identified 96 [countries](#) around the world that retain national-level blasphemy legislation, a number of which are recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) or Special Watch List (SWL) designation. As described in their respective chapters, many countries, such as [Pakistan](#) and [Nigeria](#), use blasphemy laws to foment violence toward religious minorities and to settle personal vendettas.

A number of European states passed and enforced laws that restrict expression deemed insulting to religion, in violation of international protections for freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. For example, the Danish government [passed](#) a new blasphemy law that bans the inappropriate treatment of texts and objects of religious significance and justified its actions in a way that reinforced harmful Muslim stereotypes. In Poland in June, the Lublin Court of Appeals [upheld](#) a [2021 court ruling](#) that Protestant Pastor Paweł Chojecki serve eight months of community service after being found guilty of “offending religious feelings” for critical comments he made about Catholics and the president. In April, another Polish court [found](#) two women guilty of “offending religious feelings” for participating in an lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) rights march with an image depicting the Virgin Mary and Jesus with rainbow haloes. The court fined one woman about \$500 (2,000 zloty) while sentencing the other woman to five months of community service.

USCIRF documented 46 [countries](#) with one or more national-level laws that impermissibly restrict an individual’s ability to convert from one religion to another or to believe in no religion at all. These laws may limit or prohibit proselytism, interfaith marriage, or an individual’s ability to change his or her religious affiliation on government documentation. They may also punish alleged acts of “apostasy” or renunciation of one’s faith. For example, [Nepal’s anti-conversion law](#) is enforced in ways to prevent individuals from converting to a disfavored religion.

[Religious garb restrictions](#) involve government legislation either prohibiting or mandating the wearing of religious attire or symbols. For example, laws in Austria, France, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, among others, prohibit individuals from wearing religious garb, including the hijab, burqa, and niqab, in public spaces. In November, the European Union (EU) Court of Justice [ruled](#) that governments may ban public employees from wearing religious dress or symbols, such as Islamic headscarves, in public workplaces in the interest of neutrality. Meanwhile, the government of Iran and the Taliban mandate individuals to wear religious garb in public. Individuals who violate religious garb laws face punishments such as fines and imprisonment. They may also face brutal treatment, including death, at the hands of the authorities.

### **Attacks against Religious Sites in Armed Conflict**

International humanitarian law (also called the law of war or the law of armed conflict) protects places of worship and other religious sites

from being targeted for destruction or used for military purposes by state or nonstate actors during armed conflict unless strict conditions are met. Despite these protections, houses of worship and religious sites continued to be utilized to [launch attacks](#), and impermissibly targeted and destroyed in armed conflicts around the globe in 2023.

For example, during the conflict between Israel and Hamas after Hamas’s violent terrorist attack against Israel in October, a rocket [damaged](#) the Convent of the Missionaries of Charity in Gaza. Other [churches](#) and monasteries were damaged as well. Gaza’s oldest mosque, the Omari Mosque, was largely [destroyed](#) in an airstrike. Military vehicles have [damaged or destroyed](#) parts of 16 cemeteries in Gaza.

Amid fighting in Sudan, mosques and churches were the targets of attacks, raids, and expropriation. In May, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) [attacked](#) a Coptic Christian monastery in Wad Madani. Neighborhood battles between the army and the RSF also destroyed 12 mosques and killed five civilians. Similarly, in Ethiopia, fighting between separatist groups and the federal government included attacks on places of worship. During a gathering on Christmas morning, for example, a [drone strike](#) hit the grounds of the Full Gospel Church in Baro village of Kombolcha.

Russia’s ongoing and unlawful invasion of Ukraine resulted in the continued destruction of houses of worship and other religious sites. Religion on Fire, a Ukrainian project documenting the war’s impacts on religious communities, [reported](#) in November at least 495 religious institutions and other religious “objects” damaged or destroyed since Russia’s 2022 invasion, and the Ukrainian nongovernmental organization Institute for Religious Freedom [reported](#) at least 630 religious buildings damaged or destroyed as of December. In July, the Russian military [bombed](#) Odesa’s historic Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral, which is a part of a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage site.

Since seizing power in 2021, the military junta in Burma has [destroyed](#) approximately 200 houses of worship and religious sites such as Buddhist monasteries, churches, and mosques during fighting with opposition forces.

### **Risks to Religious Minorities during Elections**

In 2023, levels of discrimination, hateful rhetoric, and attacks against religious minorities increased prior to and during elections in a number of countries. In many instances, religious parties targeted religious minorities to sow divisions and gather political support while denying electoral rights to certain groups. For example, religious minorities under both the federal and Kurdistan Regional governments of Iraq expressed alarm over growing threats to their political representation in the December 2023 federal provincial elections and February 2024 Kurdistan parliamentary elections.

In South and Southeast Asia, governments dominated by ethnic and religious groups exploited societal divisions for political gains. In Burma, the military junta’s State Administration Council attempted

to legitimize its rule through the sponsorship of Buddhism, and it indefinitely [suspended](#) elections in August. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) [campaigned](#) and won certain state legislatures during the 2023 state elections on its commitment to Islamic nationalist tenets and Malay privileges. In Bangladesh, religious minorities [criticized](#) the ruling Awami League for failing to protect the Ahmadiyya Muslim community against violent attacks perpetrated by Islamist party supporters. Prior to Pakistan's general election in February 2024, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party called for the [destruction](#) of minarets on Ahmadi mosques, used anti-Ahmadi rhetoric, and supported the death penalty in blasphemy cases. Meanwhile, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and affiliated groups were responsible for [increasing](#) levels of hate speech against Muslims and other religious minorities as they began campaigns for forthcoming 2024 elections.

Growing Hindu nationalist sentiment also emerged in the leadup to national assembly elections in Nepal. Members of the Rashtriya Prajatan Party (RPP) called for the restoration of a Hindu state and constitutional monarchy, a sentiment that is gathering [support](#) among tens of thousands of Nepalis. The RPP [claimed](#) that religious conversion must be controlled, arguing that religious groups have deceived Nepalis into converting to other faiths. In August, September, and October, spates of communal violence perpetrated by Hindu groups led to government-imposed [curfews](#).

Additionally, continued deferral of nationwide elections in Libya prolonged the authority of the interim Tripoli government in western Libya and [jeopardized](#) freedom of religion or belief throughout the country. Tripoli officials used arrest, interrogation, detention, forced confession, and death penalty sentences against Muslim theological dissenters, suspected atheists, converts from Islam, and both Libyan and foreign national Christians accused of proselytizing. Rival government actors in eastern Libya asserted their own dominance through legislation and enforcement of religiously justified restrictions on Libyans' online speech and other expression unaligned with officials' interpretations of Islam. Both government-affiliated security actors and nonstate militias exploited the lack of elections and resulting governance gaps to target religious minorities—especially vulnerable migrants—for harassment, torture, and kidnapping for ransom.

In 2023, antisemitic tropes were weaponized during elections in a number of European countries. In Italy, Elly Schlein, who is of Jewish descent, faced a barrage of antisemitism both leading up to and following her election as head of the Democratic Party. Social media users [circulated](#) memes that employed antisemitic tropes, like the “happy merchant,” and derogatorily described Schlein as a puppet of the Soros and Rothchild families, who have long been used as antisemitic symbols of “Jewish power.” Additionally, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his political party, Fidesz, continued to employ antisemitic rhetoric referencing the Soros family to gain public favor during election campaigns and discredit political opposition.

More than 50 national elections are [scheduled](#) in 2024, including several countries recommended for CPC or SWL designation. Given

the global trend of targeting and scapegoating religious minorities during elections in 2023, religious communities may be especially vulnerable in 2024. If governments fail to uphold their responsibility to protect religious minorities, including their equal participation in electoral processes, religious freedom violations are at risk of escalating.

## Rise of Antisemitism and Anti-Muslim Hatred

USCIRF observed a disturbing global rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred during 2023. For example, in France in September, perpetrators [targeted](#) a Jewish student wearing a kippah, threatening and robbing him while hurling antisemitic insults. Holocaust memorials were also desecrated throughout the year in [Latvia](#), the [Netherlands](#), and [Sweden](#). Muslims similarly experienced a rise in hate crimes, particularly against mosques and Muslim community spaces and women wearing hijabs. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK) in January 2023, a man on a bus called a woman and her child terrorists for wearing hijabs and [threatened](#) to shoot them. In Germany in May 2023, a man [attempted](#) to set a Dresden mosque on fire, while in France, two mosques were [vandalized](#) in Bordeaux in February along with a halal [butcher shop](#) in Rhône in March. In Belgium in April, perpetrators [ransacked](#) the offices of the Collective for Inclusion and Against Islamophobia, a nongovernmental organization that combats anti-Muslim hatred.

In the aftermath of Hamas's violent terrorist attack in Israel on October 7 and Israel's military response, expressions of and incidents based on antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred sharply increased, with immediate, serious consequences for members of both communities throughout the world. Jews were collectively blamed for the actions of the Israeli government and Muslims for the actions of Hamas, resulting in physical assaults, deaths, arson attacks, vandalism of places of religious and historical significance, verbal harassment, and social exclusion. For example, perpetrators [vandalized](#) and set on fire a Jewish cemetery in Austria, [branded](#) Jewish homes

in France with stars of David, and [covered](#) Jewish schools in the UK with red paint. Hundreds of rioters also descended upon the [El Hamma synagogue](#) in Tunisia, burning the building, vandalizing the walls with graffiti, and desecrating the burial site of a historic Jewish leader. Additionally, synagogues and Jewish cemeteries were vandalized in [Portugal](#), [Spain](#), and [France](#).

Several alarming antisemitic incidents were also [reported](#) out of Russia's North Caucasus region in October. Unknown persons set fire to a Jewish cultural center under construction in Nalchik and wrote “Death to Jews” on the walls. An anti-Israel rally in Cherkessk resulted in participants calling for the expulsion of Jews from the region. In Khasavyurt, a mob demanded to inspect all the guests of a hotel after rumors online suggested the hotel was housing Israeli refugees. In the most disturbing instance, an angry mob of hundreds of people stormed an airport in Makhachkala, shouting antisemitic diatribes and searching for Jews following false reports that a plane had been carrying “Israeli refugees” from the Middle East. While Russian authorities arrested dozens involved in the mob attack, officials failed

*A number of European states passed and enforced laws that restrict expression deemed insulting to religion, in violation of international protections for freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression.*

to condemn the incident as antisemitic and instead falsely accused Ukraine and Western countries of inciting the attack.

Acts of anti-Muslim hatred also rose following the October 7 terrorist attack. In Germany, multiple mosques [received](#) threatening packages that included burnt pages of the Qur'an and feces. A German politician with Kurdish-Syrian heritage also had his windows [broken](#) and received hate-filled fliers and feces. A pig's head was [left](#) outside the proposed site of a mosque in the UK, and a mosque in France [received](#) a written arson threat. In France, staff at a hotel [asked](#) a woman wearing a hijab to leave so as not to "scare other customers," citing concerns due to current events.

In positive developments, some European institutions and governments worked to address religious intolerance during 2023, especially rising antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred. In February, the European Commission [nominated](#) Marion Lalisse to fill the vacant position of EU Coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred. Bulgaria for the first time [adopted](#) a national action plan to combat antisemitism. Spain [approved](#) a national plan to implement the European Strategy to Combat Antisemitism for 2023–2030. [Croatia](#) and [Latvia](#) adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. Additionally, Portugal [appointed](#) a National Coordinator of the European Strategy to Combat Antisemitism and Promote Jewish Life.

### Other Religious Freedom Concerns in Europe

During the year, several European governments targeted individuals for their peaceful religious expression. In England in March, authorities in Birmingham [arrested](#) and launched an investigation against Isabel Vaughan-Spruce for silently praying outside an abortion clinic within a "buffer zone" where a city council order prohibits protests, including prayer. By the end of September, the city announced that it would not charge Vaughan-Spruce. In Finland in November, the Helsinki Court of Appeals [upheld](#) a lower court ruling acquitting member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland on charges of hate speech against members of the LGBTQI+ community for expressing their religious views on sexuality and marriage. As of January 2024, the state prosecutor was [seeking](#) to appeal the ruling to the country's Supreme Court.

France continued to target religious minorities it pejoratively labeled as "sects" or "cults." In January 2023, the French government [passed](#) a new law that empowers authorities to use "special techniques" outlined in the criminal code to investigate "sects." Those found guilty of exploitation through "sectarian" activities may face up to \$1.06 million (one million euros) in fines and seven years in prison. In December, the French Senate [completed](#) an initial reading of a law "aimed at strengthening the fight against sectarian aberrations," which would create a new criminal offense of "psychological subjugation" and allow the anti-"sect" government organization MIVILUDES (Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Drifts) to participate in criminal trials as a civil party.

Other religious communities in Europe also continued to experience hate crimes and discrimination on a societal level during the reporting period. For example, churches were vandalized in countries including the [Netherlands](#), [France](#), and [Germany](#). In March, a gunman shot and [killed](#) six worshipers at a Jehovah's Witness hall in Hamburg, Germany, during religious services.

Various countries in the [European Union](#) maintained restrictions on religious head coverings, such as the Jewish yarmulke and the Islamic hijab, and prohibitions on ritual slaughter, a foundational practice in both Judaism and Islam. In a positive development, the Finnish government this year rejected attempts to ban ritual slaughter. In February, the Constitutional Committee of the Finnish Parliament [found](#) that a proposed set of amendments to the animal welfare act included a ban on ritual slaughter that violated religious freedom in a manner "not proportionate to the goal of protecting animals." As a result, the government passed the amendments to the act in March 2023 without such a provision.

Religious freedom conditions in Belarus [remained](#) concerning as the government ramped up its crackdown on religious groups, religious leaders, and human rights organizations. In addition, in December, Belarus's parliament passed a new religion law that maintained several problematic provisions of the country's 2002 religion law and introduced new requirements and other restrictions that violate Belarus's human rights commitments under international law. The new law—which President Alyaksandr Lukashenka [signed](#) in January 2024 after the reporting period—will reinforce the government's role in regulating all aspects of religious life and expand its ability to prosecute any activities, including peaceful expression of religious beliefs, that it perceives as a threat to its control.

Ukrainian authorities continued to treat the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC)—which is historically and ecclesiastically linked to the Moscow Patriarchate—with suspicion after several of its clergy collaborated with Russian intelligence and spread pro-Russian propaganda. However, some government measures to address these concerns risked imposing collective punishment on the entire religious group, including peaceful, law-abiding citizens. In October, the Ukrainian parliament [passed](#) in its first reading draft law 8371, which would ban the activities of religious organizations "that are affiliated with the centers of influence of a religious organization, the management center of which is located outside of Ukraine in a state that carries out armed aggression against Ukraine." While this version of the draft law did not explicitly impose an outright ban on any particular religious group, it is clearly [intended](#) to target the UOC. USCIRF has urged the Ukrainian government to ensure that this legislation complies with international standards on freedom of religion or belief and will continue to monitor developments on this issue in 2024.

### Religious Freedom Concerns for Refugees

In 2023, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees [estimated](#) that 110 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide and

*Various countries in the European Union maintained restrictions on religious head coverings, such as the Jewish yarmulke and the Islamic hijab, and prohibitions on ritual slaughter, a foundational practice in both Judaism and Islam.*

that 35.3 million of them were refugees. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol define a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. Many of those displaced face religious persecution or discrimination in their home countries.

Refugee issues remained particularly concerning in South and Southeast Asia. The majority of ASEAN member states are not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, resulting in refugees often being classified as “illegal immigrants.” In June, Cambodia, one of the few ASEAN members who have signed the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, [allegedly](#) pushed all Montagnard Christian communities back to Vietnam following an outbreak of violence in the border region. Thailand hosts a number of individuals and communities fleeing religious freedom violations from the surrounding region, including Burma, China, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. Reports from civil society working with these communities expressed concern that the Thai government coordinates surveillance and potentially extradites individuals who have fled religious persecution. Additionally, following the Burmese military’s 2017 attempt at genocide, for example, over one million Rohingya

refugees have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The Taliban’s 2021 takeover of Afghanistan similarly forced many religious minorities to seek refuge in India and Pakistan. In 2023, while Afghan Hindus and Sikhs reported being able to practice their faith in India, they also faced harassment and stigmatization from local communities, according to the Global Federation of Societies for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs (SAHAS). In October, the Pakistani government began forcibly returning undocumented Afghan refugees, posing a serious threat to religious minorities, including Hazara Shi’a Muslims, who have been [persecuted](#) by the Taliban.

Nepal continued to serve as the closest destination for Tibetan refugees fleeing persecution from Chinese authorities engaging in systematic arrests, suppression, and punishment of those protesting China’s influence in Tibet. The Nepali government continued to deny Tibetan refugees identity cards,

preventing them from securing work and educational opportunities in the country and abroad. It enforced this prohibition through ongoing surveillance of refugees, including home visits and searches.

A number of Eritrean Christians have sought [refuge in Ethiopia](#), Sudan, Egypt and Libya, while others have sought asylum in [Israel](#) or crossed the [Mediterranean](#) into Europe. Similarly, Christians have fled ongoing violence in Nigeria, with some seeking safety in [Niger](#).

*Given the global trend of targeting and scapegoating religious minorities during elections in 2023, religious communities may be especially vulnerable in 2024.*





# KEY USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS IMPLEMENTED

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended, mandates USCIRF to make independent policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. The recommendations are based on USCIRF’s research on religious freedom conditions abroad and assessment of U.S. policy. In addition, USCIRF’s mandate includes tracking the U.S. government’s implementation of USCIRF’s recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, the effectiveness of such implemented recommendations in advancing religious freedom internationally. While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF’s recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights the key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2023. The list, which is not exhaustive, is meant to showcase the effectiveness of USCIRF’s recommendations. Unless otherwise noted, the recommendations highlighted here were included in USCIRF’s 2023 Annual Report.

## Designating the Worst Violators

- On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) 12 countries as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) under IRFA. USCIRF [recommended](#) that the State Department designate each of those countries as CPCs.
- Alongside the CPC designations, the State Department placed five countries on its Special Watch List (SWL) under IRFA. USCIRF recommended three of these countries—Algeria, Azerbaijan, and Central African Republic—for such placement. Azerbaijan was added to the SWL for the first time.
- At the same time, the State Department also designated eight nonstate actors as “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs, seven of which USCIRF recommended for such designation.

## Increasing the Use of Targeted Sanctions

- USCIRF has consistently called on the U.S. government to increase the use of human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses. Over the course of 2023, the U.S. government issued sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and other authorities against individuals and entities specifically for religious freedom abuses. Significant sanctions issued during the year for religious freedom abuses are listed below.
  - In [January](#), [March](#), [April](#), [June](#), and [twice](#) in [September](#), the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned Iranian officials

for their 2022 crackdown on demonstrators protesting Mahsa Zhina Amini’s death in police custody for wearing an “improper hijab” and for related human rights violations, including against women and girls.

- In April, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) three Nicaraguan judicial officials responsible for stripping Nicaraguan citizenship from clergymen and for sentencing Bishop Rolando Álvarez to 26 years in prison for his criticism of government actions. In August, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on 100 municipal officials involved in shuttering civic spaces, including the Jesuit-run University of Central America, and detaining human rights and religious freedom advocates.
- In August, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials for their involvement in the forcible assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in government-run boarding schools. Among other objectives, these assimilation policies seek to eliminate religious traditions prominent in Tibet.
- In December, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) Taliban officials responsible for religiously inspired repression of the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

## Raising IRF Issues in Multilateral Engagement

USCIRF recommended that the:

- Joseph R. Biden administration maintain the United States’ leadership role in the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) (IRFBA). In 2023, the United States continued to serve as the secretariat for IRFBA. During the year, IRFBA made multi-country statements on [combating](#) antisemitism, the [persecution](#) of Christians worldwide, and Chinese [religious prisoner of conscience Wang Yi](#).
- U.S. government support international investigations into religious freedom violations occurring in China and in Iran, including at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). At the UNHRC, the U.S. government delivered a [statement](#) referencing the violations the Chinese government commits against Uyghurs. At the UN Third Committee, the U.S. government joined a multicountry [statement](#) on the Chinese government’s persecution of Uyghurs and other Muslim communities in Xinjiang. At the UNHRC, the U.S. government [delivered multiple statements](#) condemning the Iranian government’s crackdown on protesters following Mahsa Zhina Amini’s death in police custody and its continued violations against women and girls.

## Raising IRF Issues in Bilateral Engagement

USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government:

- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to withhold a portion of the Foreign Military Financing for specified international religious freedom violations. Congress conditioned up to \$320 million of the \$1.3 billion annual Foreign Military Financing aid package to Egypt on human rights improvements, including religious freedom. In September, the administration chose to withhold only \$85 million, prompting the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's announcement that it would block the release of the remaining \$235 million to Egypt.
- Provide financial, administrative, and diplomatic support to the Special Criminal Court and other investigations into ethno-religious targeting and human rights abuses by state actors or state-backed foreign fighters in the Central African Republic. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continues to [fund](#) programs to empower the populations of the Central African Republic to prevent and respond to human rights violations.

## Advocacy for Religious Prisoners of Conscience (RPOCs)

- USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government strengthen advocacy on behalf of individuals persecuted on the basis of religion. Pursuant to this recommendation, U.S. officials engaged on RPOC cases around the world.
  - In January 2023, the State Department launched the [Without Just Cause Political Prisoners Initiative](#), which seeks to raise international awareness and advocate for the release of political prisoners. The initiative includes diplomatic engagement in Washington, DC, and by U.S. embassies abroad. Some of those individuals [featured](#) are RPOCs included in USCIRF's Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List such as [Gulshan Abbas](#), [Rolando Álvarez](#), [Ekpar Asat](#), and [Go Sherab Gyatso](#).
  - In February, the U.S. government secured the [release](#) of 222 individuals who had been unjustly imprisoned by the government of Nicaragua, including RPOCs.
  - In April, the State Department [condemned](#) the Burmese government's sentencing of RPOC [Reverend Dr. Hkalam Samson](#) to six years in prison.
  - In May, U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain [called](#) on the Vietnamese government to immediately release Christian leader [Nay Y Blang](#).
  - In July, Ambassador Hussain [called](#) on Cuban authorities to unconditionally release religious leaders [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), [Loreto Hernández García](#), and [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#). Also in July, the [State Department](#), [members of Congress](#), and [USCIRF](#) called on the Egyptian government to release religious prisoner of conscience [Patrick George Zaki](#). Within days, the Egyptian government [pardoned](#) and released Zaki.

## Implementation of Executive Order 13926 – Advancing International Religious Freedom

- USCIRF has called on the Biden administration to continue to implement the [executive order](#) on [Advancing International Religious Freedom](#), signed by then President Donald J. Trump in June 2020. The executive order included several of USCIRF's longstanding recommendations related to the prioritization of religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. This included increasing related foreign assistance and developing an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad and country-specific action plans. In 2023, the Biden administration implemented the executive order in the following ways:
  - The State Department continued to pursue country-specific action plans, dedicated approximately \$20 million to IRF-related programming, and continued to provide training on IRF issues to foreign service officers.
  - USAID continued to advance religious freedom within its priorities and programming, including by [launching](#) the agency's first-ever strategic [religious engagement](#) policy to strengthen USAID's collaboration with religious communities to improve development and humanitarian assistance outcomes.

## Congressional Action Promoting Religious Freedom

- USCIRF recommended that Congress highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, and other actions.
  - Congress held several hearings on international religious freedom issues. Those hearings included House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on the [crisis](#) facing women and girls in Afghanistan, the [Nicaraguan](#) government's severe [persecution](#) of the Catholic Church, and antisemitism in [inter-governmental organizations](#) and in [Europe](#). In addition, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China held hearings on preventing [forced](#) assimilation in Tibet, [implementing](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, [countering](#) China's transnational repression, and examining Uyghur [forced labor](#). Also, the Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party held hearings on the [ongoing](#) Uyghur genocide and the Chinese government's [transnational repression](#). The Senate Foreign Relations Committee held a [hearing](#) on transnational repression as well.
  - Members of Congress introduced resolutions on the Burmese military's [gross](#) human rights violations; India's [violations](#) against Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other religious minorities; Iran's state-sponsored [persecution](#) of the Baha'i minority; the need to [designate](#) Nigeria as a CPC; and Sri Lanka's [targeting](#) of religious minorities.
  - Members of Congress advocated for [religious prisoners and other prisoners of conscience](#) through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedom Project](#).

## Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

- USCIRF recommended that the Joseph R. Biden administration address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in expedited removal. USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in comprehensive reports released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#) that document major problems successive administrations have not addressed. Specifically, USCIRF found that U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials often [fail](#) to follow required procedures to identify asylum seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations; that they detain asylum seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions; and that funding disparities and a lack of high-level oversight hamper the complicated, multiagency process.
- In May, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [announced](#) changes that may allow families seeking asylum in expedited removal proceedings to access alternatives to detention while awaiting the processing of their claim.

## Refugee Resettlement

- USCIRF has consistently recommended that the U.S. government maintain a robust refugee resettlement program and that victims of the most severe forms of religious persecution be prioritized. In September 2023, the Biden administration [maintained](#) the annual refugee ceiling at 125,000 for fiscal year 2024. Also in September, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) [extended](#) temporary protected status for Afghan nationals living in the United States. The administration also designated members of religious minority groups in Eurasia, the Baltics, and Iran for priority access. In December, at the Global Refugee Forum, the U.S. government [announced](#) new pledges, including increasing the resettlement of Rohingya to the United States.



# APPENDIX 1 COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES



## Abraham Cooper, Chair

APPOINTED BY  
Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2024. Associate Dean and Director of Global Social Action for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a leading Jewish human rights organization.



## Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair

REAPPOINTED BY  
Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2024. Senior Strategic Advisor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and Senior Fellow at Interfaith America.



## David Curry, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
Hon. Kevin McCarthy (R), then House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2024. President and CEO of Global Christian Relief, which provides aid and advocacy for those suffering from religious persecution, particularly those affected by violence for practicing their Christian faith.



## Susie Gelman, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
President Joseph R. Biden (D), for a term expiring in May 2025. Activist and Philanthropist, previously Board Chair of Israel Policy Forum and past President of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.



## Mohamed Magid, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2024. Executive Religious Director and Imam of All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center, Chairman of International Interfaith Peace Corps, member of the Muslim Jewish Council, Co-President of Religions for Peace, and Co-Founder of the Multi-faith Neighbors Network.



## Stephen Schneck, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2024. Political philosopher and retired professor from The Catholic University of America. Catholic advocate for social justice and serves on the governing boards of Catholic Climate Covenant and Catholic Mobilizing Network.



## Nury Turkel, Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY  
Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for a term expiring in May 2024. Lawyer, author, human rights advocate, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, and Life Member of the Council on Foreign Relations.



## Eric Ueland, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2024. Visiting Fellow at the Heritage Institution, and member of the Board of Advisors at the Center for Constitutional Liberty at Benedictine College.



## Frank Wolf, Commissioner

APPOINTED BY  
Hon. Kevin McCarthy (R), then House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2024. Retired U.S. Member of Congress, Founder and former Co-Chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.





# APPENDIX 2 FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF VICTIMS LIST

## Introduction

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, requires USCIRF to:

make publicly available, to the extent practicable . . . lists of persons it determines are imprisoned or detained, have disappeared, been placed under house arrest, been tortured, or subjected to forced renunciation of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a country of particular concern [CPC] . . . or by a nonstate actor that the Commission recommends for designation as an entity of particular concern [EPC].

USCIRF developed the [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#)—an online public database—to implement this provision for countries USCIRF recommends for Country of Particular Concern (CPC) or Special Watch List (SWL) status. The list also includes such victims located in the de facto territories of nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) status, according to the same criteria.

Due to limited resources, USCIRF is unable to identify and document all victims that meet the statutory requirement to be included on the FoRB Victims List and generally relies on receiving submissions from outside individuals and organizations. As such, the information contained in the database does not reflect country, regional, or global trends. Furthermore, percentages highlighted in this section should not be used for extrapolation purposes nor interpreted as a particular group experiencing greater violations than another or a particular country committing violations at a greater rate than others.

To support this project, USCIRF invites those with credible information on FoRB victims to submit information using the [Victims List Intake Form](#). Additional information about the FoRB Victims List can be found in USCIRF's [FoRB Victims List Factsheet](#).

## Perpetrators

By the end of 2023, the FoRB Victims List included more than 2,200 individuals targeted by 27 different countries and entities. More than 1,300 victims remain in some form of custody, while more than 600 have been released. The detention status of approximately 300 cases remains unknown, and nine individuals are listed as deceased after dying in state custody.

Perpetrator	Not Released	Released	Died in Custody	Unknown	Total
Algeria	1	4			5
Azerbaijan	4	6	1		11
Burma	2	1	2		5
China	520	44	231		795
Cuba	5	3	3		11
Egypt	4	13	1		18
Eritrea	36	24		1	61
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)			2		2
Houthis	1	2			3
India	26	27	1	1	55
Indonesia	5	1	2		8
Iran	79	251	14	3	347
Iraq			2		2
Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)			1		1
Kazakhstan	8	8			16
Malaysia			4		4
Nicaragua	12	21			33

Perpetrator	Not Released	Released	Died in Custody	Unknown	Total
Nigeria	5	4			9
North Korea	3		8		11
Pakistan	61	25		1	87
Russia	371	105	6	1	483
Saudi Arabia	43	6			49
Sri Lanka		1			1
Tajikistan	9	4			13
Turkmenistan	10	21			31
Uzbekistan	49	38			87
Vietnam	57	9	12	2	80
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,311</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2,228</b>

The most documented violation on the FoRB Victims List was imprisonment, followed by detention, house arrest, enforced disappearance, and forced renunciation of faith. USCIRF also documented a case of forced psychiatric treatment and another involving compulsory labor. The chart below does not reflect whether a victim is in custody or released.

Perpetrator	Imprisonment	Detention	House Arrest	Enforced Disappearance	Forced Renunciation of Faith	Other	Total
Algeria	5						5
Azerbaijan	7	4					11
Burma	3	2					5
China	572	213	4	6			795
Cuba	6	1	4				11
Egypt	3	15					18
Eritrea		60	1				61
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)		2					2
Houthis	2	1					3
India	1	53	1				55
Indonesia	6	2					8
Iran	198	140	9				347
Iraq		2					2
Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)				1			1
Kazakhstan	15	1					16
Malaysia				4			4
Nicaragua	18	15					33
Nigeria	3	6					9
North Korea	8	3					11
Pakistan	31	50			6		87
Russia	383	57	30	11		2	483
Saudi Arabia	31	16		2			49
Sri Lanka		1					1

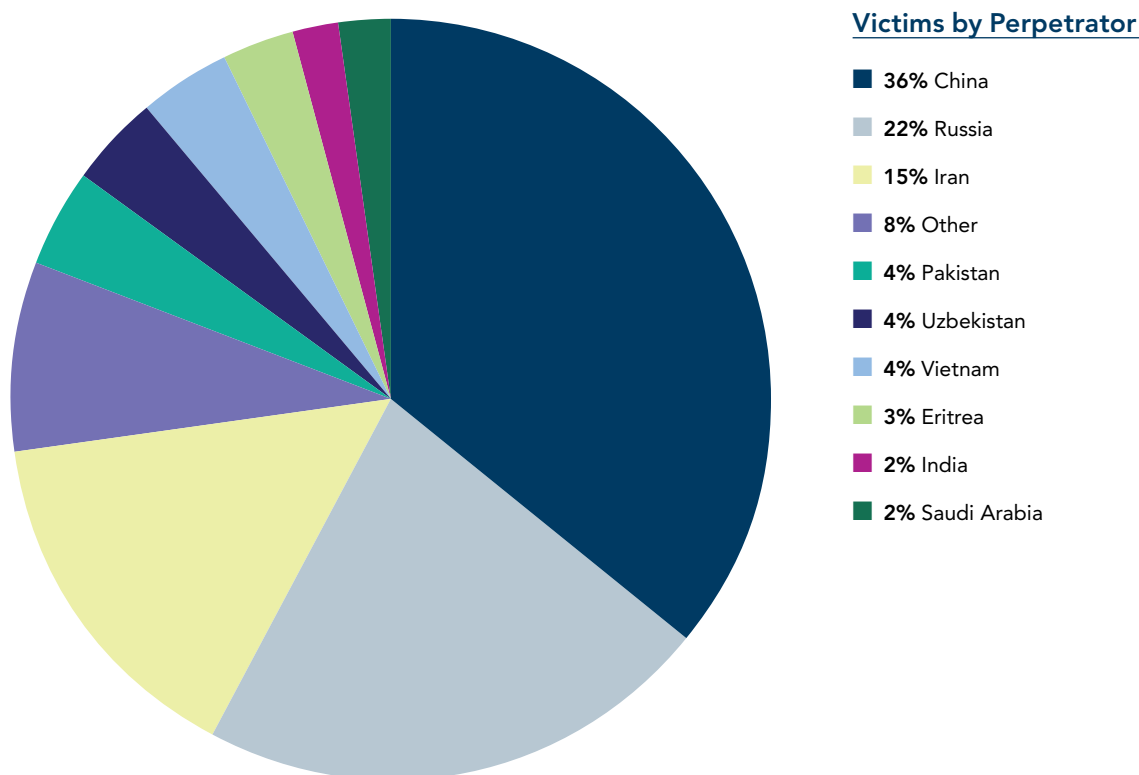
Perpetrator	Imprisonment	Detention	House Arrest	Enforced Disappearance	Forced Renunciation of Faith	Other	Total
Tajikistan	12	1					13
Turkmenistan	31						31
Uzbekistan	85	1	1				87
Vietnam	71	8	1				80
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,491</b>	<b>654</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2,228</b>

In addition to these abuses, USCIRF has documented 190 cases in which torture was reported. Countries and entities accused of torture included China (77), Uzbekistan (28), Iran (20), Saudi Arabia (18), Russia (16), Vietnam (6), Pakistan (5), Eritrea (3), Azerbaijan (2), Cuba (2), Egypt (2), Houthis (2), Kazakhstan (2), India (2), Tajikistan (2), Turkmenistan (2), and Algeria (1). USCIRF has also documented 144 cases in which medical neglect was reported. Countries and entities accused of medical neglect included Iran (62), China (17), Russia (17), India (14), Saudi Arabia (7), Vietnam (6), Pakistan (5),

Egypt (4), Eritrea (4), Houthis (3), Uzbekistan (2), Cuba (1), Nigeria (1), and Tajikistan (1).

Based on the information maintained in the database, the following chart reflects the percentage of individuals imprisoned by country. Among the violators included in the database, China imprisoned the most FoRB victims, followed by Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Eritrea, India, and Saudi Arabia. Victims from all other countries and entities each individually constituted one percent or less than one percent of the victims in the database.

### VICTIMS BY PERPETRATOR

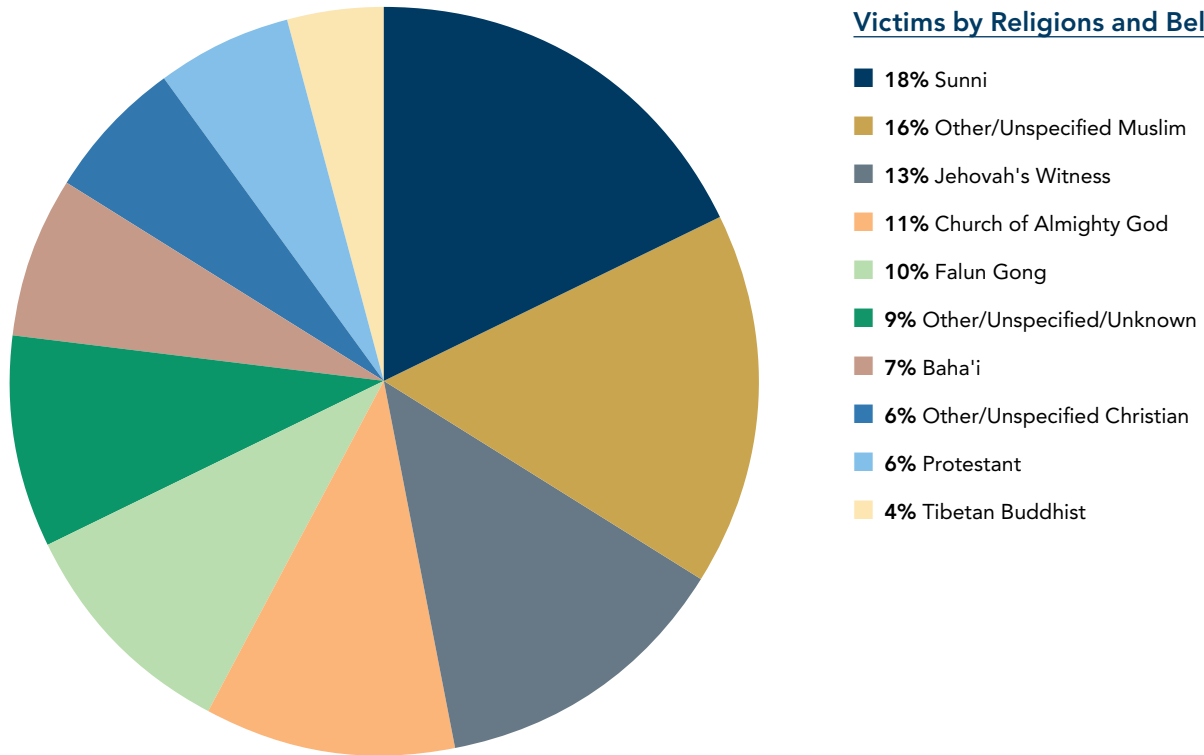


## Religions and Beliefs

The FoRB Victims List includes individuals with a wide variety of beliefs and religions, as reflected in the following table.

Religion or Belief	Number of Victims Documented
Adivasi	1
Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light	3
Baha'i	166
Bon	1
Buddhist - Hoa Hao	6
Buddhist - Theravada	3
Buddhist - Tibetan	93
Buddhist - Unspecified/Other	32
Christian - Catholic	57
Christian - Church of Almighty God	236
Christian - Jehovah's Witness	282
Christian - Orthodox	20
Christian - Protestant	139
Christian - Unspecified/Other	64
Duong Van Minh	4
ECKist (Eckankar)	1
Erfan-e Halgheh Practitioner	3
Falun Gong	217
Hindu	10
Humanist	1
Jewish	1
Muslim - Ahmadiyya	20
Muslim - Qur'anist	1
Muslim - Shi'a	39
Muslim - Sufi	63
Muslim - Sunni	406
Muslim - Unspecified/Other	232
Santería	5
Scientologist	1
Shaman	1
Sikh	1
Yarsani	38
Unknown/Unspecified	81
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,228</b>

## VICTIMS BY RELIGIONS AND BELIEFS





## Nature of Charges

Individuals included on the FoRB Victims List face a range of charges in several different legal contexts. USCIRF created groupings for similar charges to identify how foreign governments and entities justify the incarceration of the individuals included on the FoRB Victims List. USCIRF's categories are not mutually exclusive, and individuals are often included in more than one category based on varying charges brought against them. While USCIRF excludes from the FoRB Victims List individuals known to have committed or promoted violence, many individuals on the list face unsubstantiated accusations of violent crimes by the foreign government.

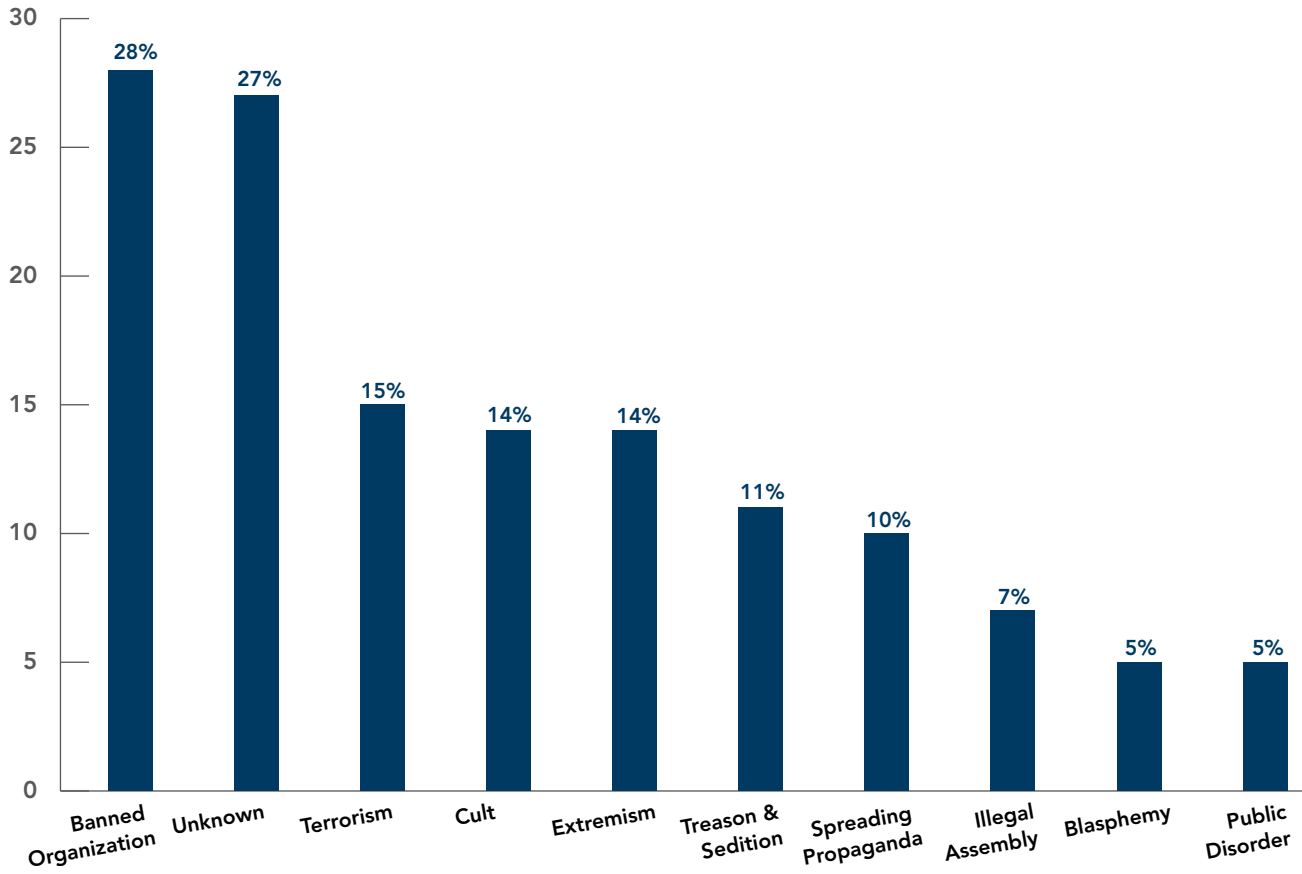
USCIRF is in the process of identifying charges for more than a quarter of the victims. Dozens of victims are not facing any charges, yet they remain imprisoned or have been subjected to other violations included on the FoRB Victims List that may not involve legal charges, such as enforced disappearance or forced renunciation of faith.

Nature of Charges Categories	Number of Individuals Charged	Percentage of Individuals Charged
Abuse (Physical, Sexual, Psychological)	1	<1%
Aid & Abetment	14	1%
Apostasy	4	<1%
Arms Trafficking & Illicit Use of Weapons	19	1%
Assault & Battery	10	<1%
Banned Organization	616	28%
Blasphemy	112	5%
Breach of Privacy & Disclosure	2	<1%
Conversion	29	1%
Crimes Involving Minors	5	<1%
Criminal Premeditation & Conspiracy	25	1%
Cult	312	14%
Defamation	2	<1%
Drug Trafficking & Illicit Drug Use	12	1%
Embezzlement & Fraud	20	1%
Environmental Crimes	1	<1%
Espionage	7	<1%
Extremism	306	14%
Fabricating & Destroying Evidence	3	<1%
Filing a False Police Report	1	<1%
Forgery	5	<1%
Harboring a Fugitive	5	<1%
Hate Speech	110	5%
Illegal Assembly	152	7%
Illegal Business Activity	5	<1%
Illegal Migration & Entry/Exit of Country	7	<1%
Illicit Financing	65	3%
Immorality	12	1%
Incitement to Commit Crime & Violence	54	2%

Nature of Charges Categories	Number of Individuals Charged	Percentage of Individuals Charged
Insulting Public Officials & Institutions	33	1%
Leaking State Secrets	5	<1%
Mercenarism	2	<1%
Miscellaneous Religious Crimes	15	1%
Murder & Attempted Murder	28	1%
Negligence	1	<1%
Not Applicable	76	3%
Public Disorder	118	5%
Refusing & Absconding Military Service	25	1%
Separatism	31	1%
Spreading Propaganda & False or Misleading Ideas, Information, or Materials	218	10%
Subversion	85	4%
Terrorism	328	15%
Theft & Robbery	4	<1%
Threat	3	<1%
Treason & Sedition	248	11%
Unknown	603	27%
Unlawful Disobedience	51	2%

The following chart highlights the top 10 most common types of charges for individuals on the FoRB Victims List.

### TOP TEN MOST COMMON CHARGES



# APPENDIX 3 HIGHLIGHTS OF USCIRF'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES IN 2023

In addition to releasing an Annual Report by May 1 of each year, USCIRF produces research and additional information related to international religious freedom throughout the year. This includes work to monitor, report on, and advocate against foreign governments that engage in or tolerate violations of religious freedom or whose laws and policies permit or condone violations of human rights of minority groups and other vulnerable communities on the basis of religion. This Appendix highlights USCIRF's events and other materials from calendar year 2023. USCIRF's 2023 [press releases and statements](#) and [op-eds](#) are available on USCIRF's website at [www.uscifr.gov](http://www.uscifr.gov). USCIRF's 2023 Tweets can be found [here](#).

## Hearings

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- **January 2023:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Iran](#)
- **February 2023:** [Two Years after the Coup: Religious Freedom in a Contested Burma](#)
- **March 2023:** [Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for Religious Freedom](#)
- **May 2023:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **June 2023:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **July 2023:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern](#)
- **September 2023:** [Vietnam: Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom](#)
- **September 2023:** [Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S. - India Bilateral Relationship](#)
- **December 2023:** [Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq](#)

## Events

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- **January 2023:** [Townhall on Women and International Religious Freedom](#)
- **March 2023:** [Rising Authoritarianism in ASEAN Member States](#)
- **May 2023:** [2023 Annual Report: Key Findings and Recommendations](#)
- **June 2023:** [Evaluating Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)
- **October 2023:** [The First 25 Years: IRFA Accomplishments and Next Steps](#)
- **November 2023:** [Religious Freedom in the Sahel Region of Africa](#)

- **November 2023:** [Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)
- **December 2023:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)

## Publications

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- **January 2023:** [Religious Freedom amid Iraq's Political Crisis](#)
- **February 2023:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in the Horn of Africa](#)
- **February 2023:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in Central Africa](#)
- **March 2023:** [India's State-Level Anti-Conversion Laws](#)
- **April 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions for Followers of African Traditional and Indigenous Religions](#)
- **April 2023:** [Sexual and Gender Based Violence Against Religious Freedom Protesters in Iran](#)
- **April 2023:** [Abuses against Fulani Muslim Civilians: Religious Freedom Implications in West and Central Africa](#)
- **May 2023:** [USCIRF's 2023 Annual Report](#)
- **May 2023:** [Religious Freedom in Houthi-Controlled Areas of Yemen](#)
- **June 2023:** [Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America](#)
- **June 2023:** [Ethnonationalism and Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)
- **July 2023:** [Russia's Religious Freedom Violations in Ukraine](#)
- **July 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in the Russian Federation](#)
- **July 2023:** [Religious Freedom Concerns in the European Union](#)
- **August 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Egypt](#)
- **August 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nepal](#)
- **August 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea](#)
- **August 2023:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Afghanistan](#)
- **September 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Vietnam](#)
- **September 2023:** [The Bureaucratization of Religion in Southeast Asia](#)
- **September 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran](#)
- **September 2023:** [Blasphemy Law Compendium](#)
- **September 2023:** [Blasphemy Legislation Update](#)
- **September 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iraq](#)

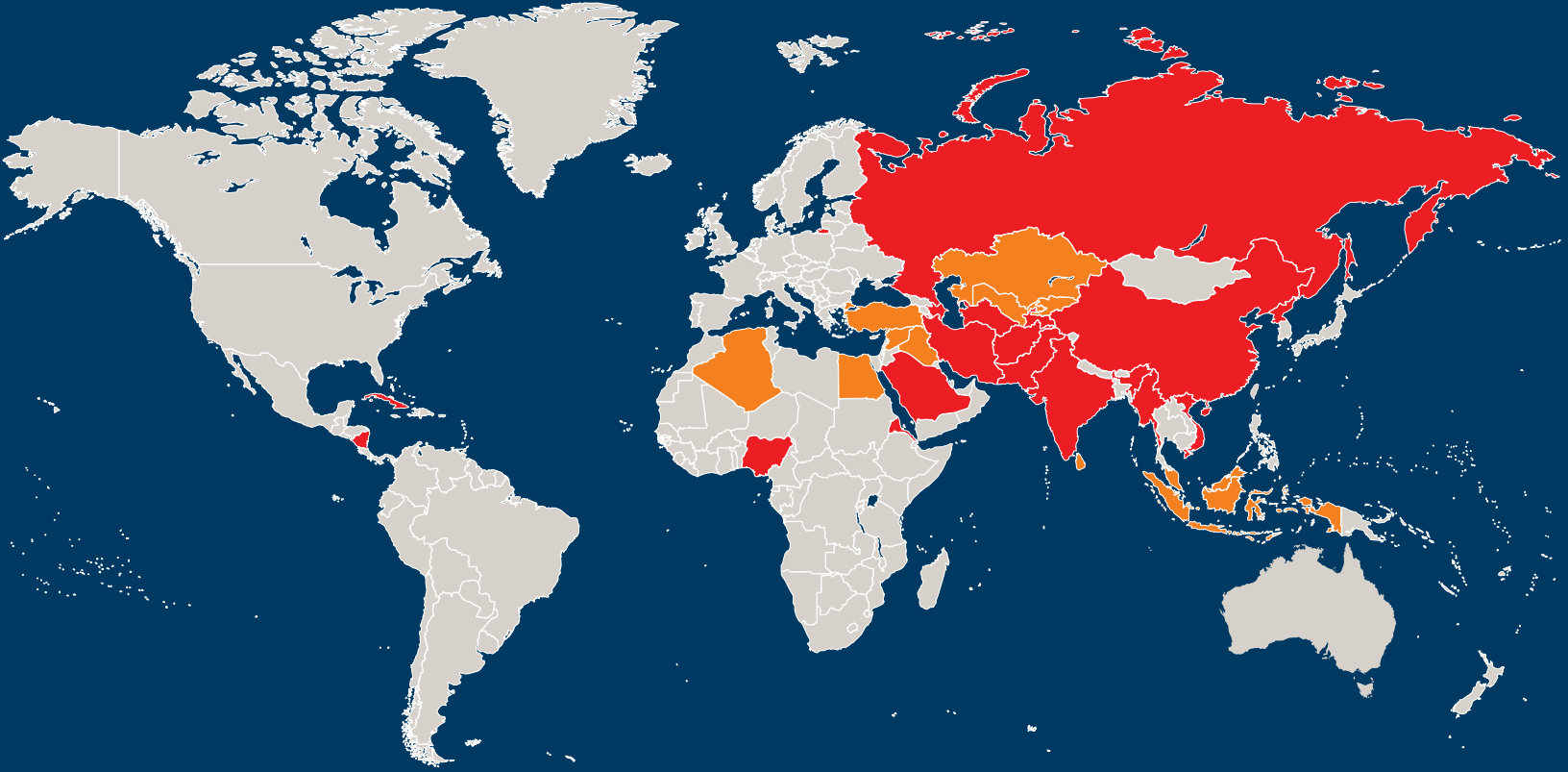
- **September 2023:** [Personal Status and Family Law in the Middle East and North Africa](#)
- **October 2023:** [Prosecuting Online Religious Activity in Kazakhstan](#)
- **October 2023:** [Religious Freedom Landscape in Kyrgyzstan](#)
- **October 2023:** [25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act](#)
- **November 2023:** [Examination of Threats to Religious Sites in Turkey](#)
- **November 2023:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Sahel Region of Africa](#)
- **November 2023:** [Religious Garb Restrictions](#)
- **November 2023:** [Anti-Conversion Laws Compendium](#)
- **December 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Belarus](#)
- **December 2023:** [State Control of Religion in Azerbaijan](#)

- **December 2023:** [The Repression of Religious Freedom in Authoritarian Tajikistan](#)
- **December 2023:** [Assessing Blasphemy and Related Laws on Religious Freedom in Pakistan](#)
- **December 2023:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Libya](#)

### **Spotlight Podcast Episodes**

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- **January 2023:** [Differences Between Religious Tolerance and Religious Freedom](#)
- **January 2023:** [State Favored Religions' Impact on Religious Freedom](#)
- **January 2023:** [USCIRF's FoRB Victims List: Background and 2022 Updates](#)
- **February 2023:** [The State of Religious Freedom in Algeria](#)
- **June 2023:** [Violence Against Tribal Christians in Manipur, India](#)



## 2024 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

### ■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN ■

Afghanistan	Eritrea	North Korea	Turkmenistan
Azerbaijan	India	Pakistan	Vietnam
Burma	Iran	Russia	
China	Nicaragua	Saudi Arabia	
Cuba	Nigeria	Tajikistan	

### ■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES ■

Algeria	Iraq	Malaysia	Turkey
Egypt	Kazakhstan	Sri Lanka	Uzbekistan
Indonesia	Kyrgyzstan	Syria	



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