



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Marking 25 Years of the Passage of IRFA

In October 1998, the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) elevated freedom of religion or belief as a U.S. foreign policy priority. This landmark law [mandates](#) that U.S. policy include condemning violations of religious freedom abroad and assisting foreign governments to protect this fundamental right. IRFA 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). Further, it 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.

IRFA is centered on the universal right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, as defined in international documents such as the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). This means the right of every person to believe, or not believe, as their conscience dictates and to live out those beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear.

Twenty-five years later, global religious freedom concerns are more integrated than ever before into U.S. diplomacy, human rights programming, refugee resettlement, development efforts, humanitarian aid, and training. Violations have been documented and exposed and violators sanctioned. Repressive governments have changed laws and policies, and they have released prisoners. Issues of international religious freedom now receive significant media and public attention. And importantly, the United States no longer stands alone in recognizing the significance, for global peace and prosperity, of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for everyone, everywhere. In the past decade, at least eight countries and the European Union have created ambassador or special envoy positions dedicated to FoRB, and governments prioritizing the issue in their foreign policies have established an [international contact group](#), the 37-member [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#), and [regular Ministerial conferences](#). Parliamentarians from around the world work together through [the International Panel of Parliamentarians on FoRB](#). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) cooperate via the [International Religious Freedom Roundtable](#) and [other similar](#) networks.

Yet even with the past 25 years' many accomplishments, various state and nonstate actors continue to perpetrate or tolerate severe religious persecution, in some cases amounting to atrocity crimes. As a result, the ongoing efforts to promote FoRB by governments and civil society, both individually and collectively, remain essential to achieving a world with religious freedom for all.

USCIRF's Role

Under IRFA, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan advisory body mandated to review religious freedom conditions abroad; make policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress; and track the implementation of those recommendations. USCIRF's nine Commissioners are appointed by the President or congressional leaders from each political party and are supported by a nonpartisan professional staff.

USCIRF's key activities include:

- **Monitoring religious freedom abroad** through research, travel, and meetings with foreign officials, international partners, NGOs, religious leaders, survivors of violations, and others.
- **Evaluating U.S. policy** relating to international religious freedom (IRF) and developing recommendations for U.S. government action to combat persecution and promote FoRB abroad.
- **Issuing an *annual report* and other *publications*** that assess foreign governments' violations and progress; highlight thematic issues; evaluate U.S. policy; make recommendations to the U.S. government; and track implemented recommendations.
- **Raising public awareness** by holding *hearings*, hosting *events*, releasing *statements* and *op eds*, and speaking out through traditional and *social media*.
- **Engaging the Executive Branch** by regularly meeting with U.S. officials to share information, highlight situations of concern, and discuss USCIRF's policy recommendations.
- **Advising Congress** by working with congressional offices, convening and testifying at hearings, and holding briefings on countries and thematic issues.
- **Advocating for victims** of FoRB violations and calling for the release of prisoners through USCIRF's *Frank R. Wolf FoRB Victims List* and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's *Defending Freedoms Project*.

USCIRF's Impact

USCIRF's work and recommendations over the past 25 years have influenced U.S. IRF policy, FoRB conditions abroad, and the international promotion of FoRB. Key examples include:

Improving the Implementation of IRFA

- The State Department has added the following nations to its lists of Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) or Special Watch List (SWL) countries based on prior USCIRF recommendations: China (CPC, 1999), North Korea (CPC, 2001), Eritrea (CPC, 2004), Saudi Arabia (CPC, 2004), Vietnam (CPC, 2004), Uzbekistan (CPC, 2006), Turkmenistan (CPC, 2014), Tajikistan (CPC, 2016), Pakistan (CPC, 2018), Nigeria (CPC, 2020), Russia (CPC 2021), Cuba (SWL, 2019) Algeria (SWL, 2021), and the Central African Republic (SWL, 2022).
- The State Department has added the following nonstate actors to its lists of Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) based on prior USCIRF recommendations: al-Shabaab (2018), the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (2018), the Taliban (2018), and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (2020).
- USCIRF pushed Congress for dedicated funding for State Department IRF programming, which was envisioned in IRFA but not provided until 2008.
- Congress adopted multiple USCIRF recommendations in the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, including non-state actor designations, timeframes for CPC decisions, limitations on waivers of sanctions, elevated placement of the Ambassador at Large in the State Department hierarchy, and mandatory religious freedom training for foreign service officers.
- USCIRF has long recommended that new Presidents promptly nominate their Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. After much longer delays in prior administrations, the current and previous Ambassadors at Large, Rashad Hussain and Sam Brownback, were each nominated six months into the Biden and Trump administrations' respective tenures, in July 2021 and July 2017.

- In 2020, then President Donald J. Trump’s Executive Order 13926 on Advancing International Religious Freedom adopted several of USCIRF’s longstanding recommendations, including increasing foreign assistance related to IRF promotion and developing an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad and country-specific action plans. Since this Executive Order, the State Department has dedicated \$50 million annually to IRF-related programming.
- IRFA calls for a National Security Council (NSC) staff position focused exclusively on international religious freedom issues, but most administrations have not implemented that provision. In 2020, consistent with IRFA’s intent and USCIRF’s longstanding recommendation, President Trump appointed the first ever Senior Director for IRF on the NSC staff.

Building Networks and Capacity to Promote FoRB and Combat Religious Intolerance

- USCIRF helped found the IRF Roundtable in 2010 and remains actively engaged with its civil society participants and Secretariat.
- USCIRF was the catalyst that led to the creation of the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB (IPPFoRB) in 2014 and continues to collaborate with its members and staff.
- USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government encourage foreign governments and the United Nations (UN) to create positions like the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism. Since 2020, the UN and countries including Canada, the Netherlands, Romania, Croatia, and Portugal have created such positions.
- Since 2021, the Biden administration has maintained the United States’ leadership role in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) founded by the Trump administration in 2020 and has continued U.S. participation in the international Ministerials on FoRB, as USCIRF recommended.

Engaging Bilaterally and Multilaterally

- USCIRF has met with high-level government officials from many of the countries the Commission recommends for CPC or SWL status to press them on IRF issues.
- Various foreign governments have made improvements on religious freedom issues in response to USCIRF’s concerns. For example, both Sudan, during its period of civilian-led transitional rule, and Uzbekistan engaged closely with USCIRF in their efforts to amend restrictive laws and make other changes, resulting in progress sufficient for USCIRF to conclude that CPC recommendations were no longer warranted for either country as of 2020.
- In 2018, USCIRF was the first U.S. government delegation to meet with the Saudi “religious police” (the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice).
- Since 2019, USCIRF has participated in bilateral discussions with Kazakhstan through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group to inform its legislative and other reform efforts.
- USCIRF has encouraged, and provided advice to, other governments on how to emphasize IRF in their foreign policy.
- In collaboration with the State Department and Congress over several years, USCIRF helped defeat the defamation of religions resolutions at the United Nations in 2011.

Responding to Genocide

- The State Department adopted USCIRF recommendations to formally recognize the genocides and crimes against humanity committed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria against Yazidis, Christians, and Shi’a Muslims (2016); by the Chinese government against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims (2021); and by the Burmese military against Rohingya Muslims (2022).
- In 2021, the U.S. government announced that officials would boycott the Beijing Olympic Games because of the Chinese government’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses, as USCIRF had recommended.
- Congress adopted the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act in 2018, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in 2021, and the Burma Act in 2022, as recommended by USCIRF.

Sanctioning Egregious Violators

In 2005, the State Department denied a U.S. visa to then Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, for his complicity in the killing of Muslims in 2002 riots in the state, as recommended by USCIRF.

- In 2010, Congress included targeted sanctions for Iranian religious freedom violators in the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), as urged by USCIRF.
- In 2012, the Senate included Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov on the list of gross human rights violators in the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, as recommended by USCIRF.
- Since 2017, the U.S. government has increased its use of targeted sanctions under human rights-related financial and visa authorities specifically related to severe religious freedom violations, as recommended by USCIRF. Individuals, officials, and/or entities in Afghanistan, Burma, Central African Republic, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria, Russia, and Russian-occupied Crimea have been sanctioned on this basis.
- In 2022, Congress permanently reauthorized the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, consistent with USCIRF's recommendation.

Improving U.S. Refugee and Asylum Policies

- Congress has repeatedly reauthorized the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States, as consistently recommended by USCIRF for many years.
- The 2008 Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act created a new priority category in the U.S. refugee resettlement program for persecuted Iraqi religious minorities, allowing them to apply directly to the program, as recommended by USCIRF.
- Since 2021, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden has increased the annual U.S. refugee resettlement ceiling from 15,000 to 125,000, which is more consistent with its historic levels, as USCIRF had recommended.
- USCIRF is the only entity to have issued public reports based on first-hand observations of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal (reports in 2005 and 2016).

- In 2022, the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice issued a rule allowing U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officers to consider the asylum applications of individuals subject to Expedited Removal found to have a credible fear of persecution, rather than having to refer all such applications to immigration judges, as USCIRF had long recommended.

Other Selected Examples of USCIRF Recommendations Implemented by the Executive Branch

- In 2001, then President George W. Bush created a special envoy position for Sudan.
- In 2008, the State Department held a conference at George Washington University on issues for religious minorities in Iraq.
- The State Department conducted a review of Saudi Arabia's 2011–2012 school textbooks for messages of religious intolerance.
- In 2012, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) designed a program to provide conflict mitigation and management assistance in northern and Middle Belt states in Nigeria.
- In 2021 and 2022, the State Department withheld \$130 million of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) aid to Egypt for the country's failure to make progress on human rights.
- In 2022, the Treasury Department issued General License No. 22, authorizing wider forms of economic activity in areas of northeast and northwest Syria outside the control of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and liberated from ISIS.
- In January 2023, President Biden filled the position of Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues, and the Senate confirmed the nomination in July 2023.

Working with Congress

- USCIRF has served as a resource to numerous congressional offices, providing information, expert testimony, and support in developing legislation or engaging in other activities based on our recommendations.
- Legislation passed pursuant to USCIRF recommendations, in addition to the examples already cited, includes:
 - The Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act in 2018
 - The Tibet Policy and Support Act in 2020
 - A House Resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws in 2020
 - A House Resolution on human rights and religious freedom violations in Nicaragua in 2020

Advocating for Religious Prisoners of Conscience

- USCIRF co-founded the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project in 2012 and continues to partner with the TLHRC in that effort.
- USCIRF has long advocated for religious prisoners of conscience of diverse faiths imprisoned in a range of countries; those who have been released in recent years include:
 - Abdul Shakoor, released by the government of Pakistan in March 2019
 - Pastor A Dao, released by the government of Vietnam in September 2020

- Aramais Avakian, Ruhiddin Fahriddinov, Khayrullo Tursunov, and Habibullah Madmarov, released by the government of Uzbekistan between 2020 and 2021
 - Hamid bin Haydara, released by the Houthis Movement in July 2020
 - Esim Suleimenov, Zhuldyzbek Taurbekov, Azamat Umbetaliyev, Zhasulan Iskakov, and Bolatbek Nurgaliyev, released by the government of Kazakhstan between 2020 and 2023.
 - Seymur Mammadov, released by the government of Azerbaijan in December 2022
 - Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, released by the government of Iran in February 2023
 - Hamid Soudad, released by the government of Algeria in July 2023
 - Patrick Zaki, released by the government of Egypt in July 2023
 - Nguyen Bac Truyen, released by the government of Vietnam in September 2023
- USCIRF developed the [*Frank R. Wolf FoRB Victims List*](#)—an online public database—to track the victims of certain religious freedom violations in countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL status, as mandated by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016. The list also includes such victims located in the de facto territories of nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for EPC status, according to the same criteria. To date, the database profiles more than 2,000 victims—each of whom has suffered for their religious convictions and whose families and communities, by extension, have often suffered repression and reprisals.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.