



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

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CPC & SWL RECOMMENDATIONS

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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.

USCIRF Recommendations for State Department CPC & SWL Designations

The U.S. Department of State will soon announce its Country of Particular Concern (CPC) and Special Watch List (SWL) designations based on its [reporting](#) on religious freedom conditions abroad during 2020. This factsheet reiterates the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) [recommendations](#) for this set of designations, highlighting the countries that the State Department did not [designate](#) as CPCs or SWL countries in its designations based on conditions in 2019. For the 2020 reporting period, USCIRF recommended four countries for CPC status that the State Department had not previously designated and ten countries for the SWL that the State Department did not have on that list.

As mandated by the [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\) of 1998, as amended](#), USCIRF monitors religious freedom conditions abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. Government, including recommending to the State Department countries for designation as CPCs or placement on the SWL. USCIRF makes its recommendations by May 1 each year, and the State Department typically announces its CPC and SWL designations by the end of the year.

This factsheet discusses the types of violations set forth in IRFA that, if perpetrated or tolerated by a foreign government, should cause the State Department to designate the country as a CPC or place it on the SWL. The factsheet also lists the countries that USCIRF has recommended for a particular designation, but the State Department did not designate last year, along with a summary of the religious freedom violations in 2020 and major developments so far in 2021 that reflect the overall conditions justifying the designation.

CPC and SWL Standards under IRFA

IRFA was enacted to elevate religious freedom as a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy. Among its [provisions](#), IRFA requires the President — who has delegated this authority to the Secretary of State — to annually review the status of religious freedom in each country and designate the worst offenders and others of concern. These designations are to be made no later than 90 days after the issuance of the State Department’s annual report on international religious freedom, and Congress notified no later than an additional 90 days thereafter.

IRFA’s CPC Standard: IRFA requires the annual designation of CPCs, which are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe violations” of religious freedom during the reporting year. Particularly severe violations of religious freedom are defined as “systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion,” such as prolonged detention without charge and torture or degrading punishment.

IRFA’s Special Watch List Standard: In 2016, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act created the State Department’s SWL. The SWL applies to countries that do not meet all the CPC criteria but nonetheless have “engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom” during the reporting year.

IRFA defines and provides examples of violations of religious freedom and particularly severe violations of religious freedom, which are listed in the following table.

Severity of Violations Defined in IRFA

Level of Severity	IRFA Definition	Examples in IRFA	Designation if country engages in or tolerates
Violations	“Violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and religious belief and practice, as set forth in international instruments” (IRFA §6402(16))	“(A) arbitrary prohibitions on, restrictions of, or punishment for— i. assembling for peaceful religious activities such as worship, preaching, and prayer, including arbitrary registration requirements; ii. speaking freely about one’s religious beliefs; iii. changing one’s religious beliefs and affiliation; iv. not professing a particular religion, or any religion; v. possession and distribution of religious literature, including Bibles; or vi. raising one’s children in the religious teachings and practices of one’s choice; or (B) any of the following acts if committed on account of an individual’s conscience, non-theistic views, or religious belief or practice: detention, interrogation, imposition of an onerous financial penalty, forced labor, forced mass resettlement, imprisonment, forced religious conversion, beating, torture, mutilation, rape, enslavement, murder, and execution.”	Not defined
Severe Violations	Not defined	None provided	Special Watch List (SWL)
Particularly Severe Violations	“Systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion” (IRFA §6402(13))	“(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.”	Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)

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, [and] egregious” standard.

CPC/SWL Differences between USCIRF and the State Department

USCIRF and the State Department agree on many of the countries designated as CPCs or placed on the SWL. There are, however, differences with respect to some countries. The following paragraphs highlight the countries on which USCIRF and the State Department differ, as well as briefly summarize USCIRF's assessment of the religious freedom conditions in each one.

USCIRF Recommended 4 CPCs Not Designated by the State Department: India, Russia, Syria, Vietnam

India

In 2020 and early 2021, the Indian government continued to implement policies that impact religious freedom for members of India's Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Dalit, and Adivasi communities. These policies include the religiously discriminatory [Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act \(CAA\)](#), which provides fast-track citizenship to non-Muslims from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and in conjunction with the government's proposed National Register of Citizens ([NRC](#)) requiring residents to provide [proof of citizenship](#), could subject Muslims and others to statelessness, deportation, and prolonged detention. In [2020](#), nationwide protests against the CAA resulted in deaths and destruction of property, including houses of worship, largely of Muslims.

The passage and ongoing enforcement of [anti-conversion laws](#), intermarriage restrictions, and [anti-cow slaughter laws](#) in various states throughout India undermine freedom of religion or belief; they also contribute to a climate of hate, intolerance and fear. Government officials and nonstate actors also use social media and other forms of communication to intimidate and spread hatred and disinformation about religious communities.

Additional policies implemented by the Indian government to curtail religious freedom include the use of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and the Financial Contribution (Regulation) Act, to silence or restrict [individuals](#) and [NGOs](#) from [reporting](#) on and combating religious persecution, and to restrict support for religious organizations and activities. Religious communities and places of worship are being targeted and surveilled, and those who have advocated for justice and the dignity of religious communities are being silenced and detained.

Russia

For years, the Russian government has conducted a purge of "[non-traditional](#)" religions, frequently labeling as "[extremists](#)" and imprisoning peaceful [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), and readers of the moderate Islamic theologian Said Nursi. Russian courts continue to deliver harsher and more numerous [prison sentences](#) for Jehovah's Witnesses seeking to practice their faith. Those on the government's expansive extremism and terrorism list include many who have not been convicted of a crime. Individuals remain on the list even after serving out sentences, with their finances frozen or restricted as a consequence, and their right to participate in religious activity prohibited. In September 2021, the Church of Scientology was labeled an "undesirable" organization, effectively banning it.

In Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov's brutal regime enforces a strict version of Islam that justifies violence against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and women and uses dubious charges of terrorism and extremism to target political opposition and religious non-conformity.

In addition, Russia has exported its repressive religious regime to the neighboring country of [Ukraine](#). "Authorities" in Russian-occupied Crimea and the Russian-backed Donbas commit widespread religious freedom abuses, including false charges of Islamist terrorism to imprison Crimean Tatars.

Syria

In 2020 and 2021, both the Syrian government as controlled by President Bashar al-Assad and a variety of non-state actors such as Turkish-backed Islamist groups have perpetrated violations of religious freedom. While in regime-controlled areas the government did not crack down on religious minorities if they had no specific record of political opposition, President Assad continued to progressively coopt religious authority. In 2021, the Syrian Ministry of Justice formalized its classification of Yazidism as an Islamic sect rather than a separate religion, subjecting the Yazidis to Islamic law.

In 2021, U.S. government agencies [issued sanctions](#) against non-state entities including Islamist al-Qaeda affiliate Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-supported militia Ahrar al-Sharqiya. Indeed, in 2020 and 2021, Turkey and Turkish-affiliated groups opposing the Syrian government have committed numerous violations against Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and other ethnic and religious

minorities. Violations have included shelling and [destroying](#) traditionally Christian-populated areas such as Tel Tamer in northeast Syria, purposefully driving out residents.

However, the northern and eastern regions have remained a [uniquely promising area](#) in Syria in terms of religious freedom. The U.S.-allied, multiethnic and religiously diverse Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has continued to allow pluralistic religious expression, including conversion.

Vietnam

Despite improved conditions in recent years for government-approved religious groups, in 2020 and 2021 the Vietnamese government continued to violate the religious freedom of members of independent religious groups, particularly ethnic Hmong and Montagnard Christian communities in Vietnam's Northern and Central Highlands. USCIRF continues to receive reports that local authorities [carried out](#) physical assaults, detention, imprisonment, forcible confiscation of church properties and assets, and other abuses against members of Hmong and Montagnard Christian communities, including efforts to force these Christians to [renounce their faith](#). As a form of retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith, authorities have denied them full Vietnamese citizenship by refusing to issue them [household registration documents and ID cards](#). This state-imposed *de facto* statelessness has caused significant hardship for these ethnic minority Christians.

Authorities also have continued to [harass and interfere](#) in the religious activities of independent Hoa Hao Buddhists, members of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Cao Dai followers, and others. In addition, there are ongoing reports of government-orchestrated land disputes targeting the Catholic community that at times have led to violence.

USCIRF Recommended 10 SWLs Not Designated by the State Department: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, Uzbekistan

Afghanistan

Lack of security remains the primary challenge to protecting freedom of religion or belief in the country. Continuous attacks by extremist groups threaten Afghanistan's overall stability and have decimated religious minority groups, particularly the Hindu, Sikh, and Jewish communities, which face [near extinction](#) in Afghanistan, especially after the August 15, 2021, take-over by the Taliban.

In 2020 and early 2021, nonstate actors in Afghanistan such as the Taliban and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) continued to perpetrate brutal attacks against religious minorities and their leadership, neighborhoods, observances, and houses of worship. Numerous attacks were carried out in localities mainly inhabited by the Shi'a Hazara community. Baha'is, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims continued to practice their faith in secrecy due to fear of [reprisal](#), as conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy and punishable by death according to Afghan constitutional law and the Taliban's interpretation of Shari'a or Islamic law.

Algeria

Religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor in 2020 and have deteriorated thus far in 2021. Government violations included increasing detentions and prosecutions of Algerians of diverse faiths under charges of blasphemy or proselytization, including Coptic Christian Abdelghani Mameri (2020), Muslim Yacine Mebarki (2020), Christian Hamid Soudad (2021), free thinker Said Djabelkhir (2021), Christian Rachid Mohamed Seighir (2021), and Muslim Walid Kechidan (2021).

Government authorities also have forcibly closed houses of worship and prosecuted individuals for illegally establishing houses of worship despite the government's refusal to approve their applications for registration. Since 2017, Algerian authorities have ordered the closure of 20 Protestant churches and forcibly closed and sealed 13 of those. Algerian authorities have also prosecuted dozens of Ahmadiyya Muslims for gathering for worship without authorization. The Algerian government refuses to register the Ahmadiyya community as a religious organization.

Azerbaijan

In 2020 and early 2021, the government of Azerbaijan continued to restrict religious freedom through its 2009 religion law: requiring religious groups to register with the government, limiting registration to those communities that have at least 50 members, mandating state approval of all religious literature, and prohibiting foreign citizens from conducting religious ceremonies. Thus far in 2021, the government introduced [new limitations](#), including restrictions on religious leaders and on the ability of religious communities to operate in the absence of a religious leader.

The Azerbaijani government registered 14 religious communities in 2020 but refused to register Jehovah's Witnesses and Lutherans. In 2020, the government held an estimated 43 to 51 religious prisoners of conscience; following 2021 pardons, that number is now down to around 20 prisoners. The government continued to disallow conscientious objection for mandatory military service.

Egypt

In 2020 and 2021, Egypt made some steps toward improving religious freedom, but significant challenges remain embedded in Egypt's laws, judicial system, and social structure.

Positive developments included efforts by President Fattah El-Sisi's administration to renovate historical sites of importance to Christians, Jews, and Shi'a Muslims; the government's September 2021 release of Egypt's first-ever National Strategy for Human Rights; and continued, albeit slow, implementation of 2016 reforms to facilitate government approval of Christian church registrations. The National Strategy reinforces the government's goal of reforming school curricula to promote religious tolerance.

At the same time, blasphemy laws remain part of Egypt's penal code and the government continues to enforce them via the [arrest](#), prolonged [pre-trial detention](#) and indictment of religious freedom activists and prominent members of [religious minority groups](#). Although 2020 and 2021 have seen fewer mob assaults and church attacks targeting Copts, Egypt's indigenous Christian minority, the Egyptian government has taken no concrete action to restrict rural regions' practice of "customary reconciliation councils" that consistently fail to hold accountable attackers and further harm religious minority victims. Additionally, religious minorities remain unofficially excluded from or highly underrepresented in several areas of areas public life, including security, diplomacy, military leadership, and competitive athletics.

Indonesia

While the Indonesian government has promoted dialogue and tolerance among religious communities it recognizes, it also continued to uphold laws that violate international standards specific to freedom of religion or belief. The government also increased its involvement in the regulation and interpretation of Islam, in particular through its promotion of the state ideology of [Pancasila](#), in an effort to counter increasingly hardline Islamist sentiment.

Authorities in the autonomous region of Aceh continued to enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a that includes hudud, stringent laws with corporal punishments that residents are forced to follow.

The Indonesian government has maintained several laws that have allowed the proliferation of [blasphemy](#) allegations, including the 1965 presidential decree (PD No. 1/PNPS/1965) and the Law on Electronic Information and Transaction (No. 11/2008). Despite an ongoing process to update the criminal code, no progress has been made to address the religious freedom violations resulting from existing blasphemy laws. The 2006 joint ministerial decree on houses of worship continued to limit the ability of religious communities to build and maintain their faith centers.

Iraq

Four years after the U.S. government declared the defeat of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Sunni Muslims, Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities continue to face great challenges as they seek to return to their homes from internally displaced person (IDP) and refugee camps. Religious minorities remain forcibly displaced in staggering numbers: approximately one million Sunni Muslims, 200,000 Christians, and 150,000 Yazidis, including nearly 3,000 abducted women and girls.

Operating with [impunity](#), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a Shi'a militia group, targeted and blocked IDPs and refugees seeking to return to their homes. The PMF also regularly undermined religious freedom conditions in Iraq by harassing individuals and deterring them from returning to their communities.

Additionally, Turkish [airstrikes](#) and other military operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq have disproportionately impacted already devastated religious and ethnic minority communities as they seek to recover from years of war. As a result, they often face dire consequences if they return to their homes in former ISIS-controlled territories.

Kazakhstan

In recent years, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan have seen some [improvements](#). Administrative charges for religious offenses have declined steadily since 2018. The government has made admirable efforts to engage with religious communities, including minority groups. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's 2011 Religion Law continued to systematically restrict religious freedom through onerous registration requirements and a mandatory "expert" review of religious documents and literature.

Religious minorities report facing intimidation tactics, including hostile interrogations, threats of future punishment, surveillance, and periodic detention. Scientologists have been denied status as a religion since 2012, and Ahmadiyya Muslims cannot receive official registration unless they remove “Muslim” from their title. Scientologists, Protestant Christians, and Muslims reported ongoing harassment by government authorities in 2020, including the destruction of religious property and the solicitation of bribes under threat of punitive action.

Although the government has declared all religions equal, Hanafi Islam is explicitly linked with Kazakh national identity and no non-Hanafi congregations are officially registered. By equating “foreign” religions with extremism, including non-Hanafi Islam, the government has helped foster an environment hostile to religious minorities.

Malaysia

In 2020, the Malaysian government continued to require members of the Sunni Muslim majority to adhere to a state-approved interpretation of Islam and regulate the internal affairs of Muslims, leaving them little freedom to practice according to their conscience. In most states it is virtually impossible to convert from Islam. Under the country’s dual secular and Shari’a legal system, the Shari’a system is compulsory for all resident Muslims and ethnic Malays, who are constitutionally defined as Muslims, and enforces the Shafi’i school of Sunni Islam. Members of the Muslim LGBTI community face increasing state restrictions on their personal freedom because of their religious beliefs and in some states are forced into religious “rehabilitation” camps.

Members of Ahmadiyya Muslim and Shi’a faith communities are labeled as enemies of Islam in state-written sermons and school textbooks. A court case determining the religious status of [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#) was ongoing and the community continues to face state-sponsored discrimination.

Some political leaders have pressed the federal government to increase limitations on the propagation of non-Muslim faiths, citing threats to the supremacy of Islam. Malaysia’s Malay-majority parties have publicly committed to an ethno-religious nationalism agenda.

Turkey

In 2020 and 2021, Turkish government action, deliberate inaction, and rhetoric fueled a political environment hostile to religious minorities. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s July 2020 decree—ordering Istanbul’s [Hagia Sophia converted into a mosque](#)—epitomized this

trajectory. Government tolerance of hate-speech and acts of violence continued to create a threatening environment for religious minorities. The COVID-19 pandemic fostered new antisemitic conspiracy theories and rhetoric, as well as acts of vandalism against Turkey’s Armenian community.

The Turkish government has made little effort to address ongoing religious freedom issues, including granting minority religious communities legal personality; recognizing [Alevi houses of worship](#); and re-opening the [Theological School of Halki](#). Since 2013, the Turkish government has blocked religious minority foundations from electing new board members, a move that has slowly reduced their numbers through death and illness, increasing the difficulties of day-to-day functioning and dividing communities.

In December 2020, Turkey’s parliament passed a law that human rights groups warned would, when implemented, increase control over civil society, including religious groups, by subjecting them to intensified oversight and new limitations on online fundraising.

Uzbekistan

In 2020, the government registered at least eight non-Muslim religious organizations, ended a de facto ban on children attending mosques, and prevented the eviction and demolition of a synagogue located in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Developments in 2021, by contrast, have raised fears of a [general backsliding](#) on religious freedom in the country. In recent months, Uzbek police forced practicing Muslims to shave their beards; the government recalled up to 1,500 students from religious schools abroad; and an Uzbek court fined a journalist for writing on religious topics.

In July 2021, the Uzbek government enacted a new Religion Law. It had some [positive changes](#), such as lifting the ban on religious attire in public for non-registered clergy and halving the number of adult citizens required for registering a new religious organization. Yet the law also includes a new stipulation that requires citizens registering a religious group to live in the same district, again making it difficult for small religious organizations to register. A [recent report](#) by USCIRF on religious prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan estimated that over 2,000 individuals remain imprisoned for peacefully exercising their religion or belief. Many are serving some of the longest politically motivated jail sentences in the world and have given credible evidence that torture and other forms of abuse are frequently employed by Uzbekistan’s prison authorities.



Conclusion

The analysis and conditions presented for each of USCIRF's country recommendations discussed above are consistent with the State Department's own reporting in its [2020 Report on International Religious Freedom](#), which describes the status of religious freedom in every country and is compiled by U.S. diplomats abroad.

USCIRF urges the State Department to carefully consider the conditions in each of these 14 countries when determining which to designate as a CPC or to place on its SWL under IRFA for religious freedom violations perpetrated in 2020.

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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.