



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **2024 Annual Report**

*Remarks as prepared for delivery*

#### **Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair**

Good morning everyone, and thank you for joining us today for the release of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's, or USCIRF's, 2024 Annual Report. I am Abraham Cooper and I have been honored to Chair the Commission over the past year.

Today, USCIRF is pleased to release its 25th Annual Report, marking 25 years since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA, which created USCIRF. As an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body, USCIRF is dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad.

Under IRFA, the commission issues a report by May 1st each year. The report offers an overview of religious freedom conditions in key countries and highlights important global trends relating to religious freedom during calendar year 2023. It

also sets forth our recommendations to the U.S. president, secretary of state, and Congress on what the Federal government can do to highlight violations, promote accountability, and inspire positive change.

All chapters in the report are approved by a majority vote and reflect the views of a bipartisan group of Commissioners from different religious, political, and professional backgrounds. Each Commissioner, under the statute, has the option to include a statement representing his or her own individual views. This year, several Commissioners included individual or dissenting views in the chapters on the implementation of IRFA, Azerbaijan, and China.

Key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent insights and information that USCIRF gained through hearings, factfinding trips, independent research, and meetings with government officials, nongovernmental organizations, independent human rights advocates, and religious communities.

Before moving into the content of USCIRF's 25th Annual Report, I'd like to take a moment to thank my fellow Commissioners for their unwavering commitment to advancing religious freedom. I would also like to thank the members of our professional staff for their phenomenal work throughout the year and their substantial efforts in preparing this year's report. Each Annual Report is the culmination of a team effort involving each member of USCIRF's staff, as well as our outside copyeditor, Erin Mulligan, and our report designer from the Government Publishing Office Jamie Harvey. Their combined effort made today's release possible.

Before I turn the floor over to Vice Chair Fred Davie, I want to say it has been a true privilege to serve alongside him this past year. During our recent trip to Saudi Arabia, Vice Chair Davie not only stood by me when Saudi officials asked me to remove my kippah in public, he made clear that he is committed to standing up for all individuals facing religious freedom restrictions, no matter their religion or belief. He is a true mensch. I will now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Fred Davie.

**Frederick A. Davie, Vice Chair**

Thank you, Chair Cooper, and greetings to you all.

The Annual Report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: those that USCIRF recommends the State Department designate as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs; and those that USCIRF recommends the State Department place on its Special Watch List, or SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate “systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious” violations of religious freedom. The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of the systematic, ongoing, and egregious test for CPC status.

This year, our report covers 28 countries. Based on 2023 conditions, we recommend 17 of these countries for CPC status, including the 12 that the State Department designated as CPCs in December 2023: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In addition, USCIRF recommends that the State Department

designate five other countries as CPCs: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, India, Nigeria, and Vietnam. Azerbaijan is a new CPC recommendation for USCIRF this year compared to last year's SWL recommendation.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on its Special Watch List one country—Algeria—and add ten countries to that list: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan is a new SWL recommendation for USCIRF this year.

In addition, we recommend for redesignation as Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs, the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, Islamic State Sahel Province, Islamic State in West Africa Province, and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin. To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, be “outside the control of a sovereign government,” exercise “significant political power and territorial control,” and often employ “violence in pursuit of its objectives.”

Before I ask Commissioner Frank Wolf to speak, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the work of the Commission. As my time as a Commissioner is coming to an end, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to not only work with the most dynamic team members at USCIRF but to also meet so many brave individuals fighting for religious freedom for themselves and for others. The work of the Commission is nonstop and we owe much of its creation to Commissioner Frank Wolf. He, along with others in Congress, saw the need for an independent agency to unflinchingly report on foreign governments committing religious freedom violations. We are fortunate and grateful for Commissioner Wolf's vision to protect individuals' inalienable rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights, and belief that the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion needed greater emphasis in U.S. policy. I would now like to ask Commissioner Frank Wolf to talk about the front cover of the Annual Report this year and its significance.

**Frank Wolf, Commissioner**

Thank you, Vice Chair Davie.

As Chair Cooper mentioned, October 27, 2023 marked the 25th anniversary of the enactment of IRFA. This landmark law made promoting the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of religion or belief a priority in U.S. foreign policy. It established the U.S. Department of State's Ambassador at Large and Office for International Religious Freedom and USCIRF. It also required monitoring and annual reporting, created consequences for the worst violators, and incorporated religious freedom concerns into U.S. bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, programs, training, and refugee and asylum policies.

Both as a member of Congress at the time of IRFA's passage and my current service at USCIRF, it has been an honor working with so many individuals dedicated to advancing religious freedom. Religious freedom has always been a bipartisan issue, and Republicans and Democrats came together back in the late 90s to do something about it. Senator Lieberman, Senator Nickles, and Senator Coats were all very, very important to making religious freedom a priority for U.S. foreign policy. In fact, many people do not realize that these three people literally saved the bill that created USCIRF.

Now it is critical that Congress make USCIRF permanent and provide greater to keep its promise to the world that religious freedom is a universal right, and one that the United States is committed to advancing on behalf of all. With that, I want to reiterate again, this is a bipartisan issue, and I encourage Republican and Democratic members to come together, travel to a country where religious persecution is taking place, and experience together the importance of USCIRF's work, so they can come back and work on protecting this universal, God-given right.

In honor of this important anniversary, the cover of this year's Annual 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 in over the past quarter century. Unfortunately, some egregious situations have remained constant or even worsened, and several countries with periods of notable progress have regressed. Yet at the same time, there have been many important successes. My fellow Commissioners will highlight some of these situations in their forthcoming remarks.

Nevertheless, twenty-five years after IRFA's passage, various state and nonstate actors continue to perpetrate or tolerate severe religious persecution. In too many countries, individuals and communities continue to suffer for their religious beliefs, activity, or identity or for their religious freedom advocacy. Those individuals 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.

I will now pass the floor over to Commissioner Gelman who will highlight several of our key recommendations to the Biden administration and Congress to advance religious freedom worldwide. She will also discuss the implementation of some of our previous recommendations during 2023.

**Susie Gelman, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Wolf.

First, I would like to note some key USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government implemented in 2023. USCIRF has consistently called on the U.S. government to increase the use of targeted human rights sanctions to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses. The Biden administration did so throughout the year. For example, the U.S. government sanctioned Nicaraguan judicial officials who falsely convicted Bishop Rolando Álvarez for treason, Iranian officials responsible for violence against demonstrators protesting for greater religious freedom, Taliban officials carrying out religiously inspired repression of the rights of women and girls, and Chinese officials who forcibly separate Tibetan children from their families and seek to eliminate religious traditions in Tibet.

The administration also continued to pursue multilateral engagement on religious freedom abroad, including through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, and at the United Nations.

USCIRF recommended that Congress highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, and other actions. Some notable congressional actions over the course of 2023 included hearings on the dire state of religious freedom around the world, the crisis facing women and girls in Afghanistan, the Nicaraguan government's persecution of the Catholic Church, and antisemitism in Europe. Congress also introduced resolutions supporting USCIRF's recommendation that Nigeria and India be designated as CPCs. USCIRF is pleased to see this evidence of the ongoing commitment to and fulfilment of IRFA by successive administrations and Congress. Nevertheless, we continue to believe that the U.S. government can do more to address the most egregious abuses. For example, we continue to urge the Administration to use the CPC designation tool more effectively. Too many of the State Department's CPC countries are repeatedly named as such each year, but the designations result in little to no substantive change. Accordingly, we recommend that the State Department impose meaningful consequences on violator governments when it names its CPCs. For example, it should not reissue the longstanding waivers based on other U.S. interests that have so far allowed the governments of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to avoid penalties for their abuses.

Furthermore, we recommend the administration continue to increase its use of targeted human rights sanctions against specific religious freedom violators. We also encourage the Biden administration to coordinate with other countries with similar sanctions regimes on such targeted sanctions whenever possible.

Among the recommendations that USCIRF makes to Congress in this year's Annual Report, we urge it to hold oversight hearings on U.S. IRF policy. We also recommend that individual members of Congress advocate for religious prisoners



of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project. Bipartisan support in Congress for religious freedom worldwide is a powerful driver of U.S. leadership on this important issue. Members of Congress continuing to shed light on egregious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief helps ensure that America's commitment to international religious freedom remains strong.

I will now turn it over to Commissioner Curry to discuss a country we are closely monitoring, India.

**David Curry, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Gelman.

USCIRF is again recommending CPC designation for India. In 2023, the Indian government, at the national, state, and local levels, continued to promote and enforce religious nationalist policies—including restrictions on citizenship, religious conversion, interfaith marriage, and cow slaughter. These laws and policies negatively impact Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits and indigenous and scheduled tribal people. They also have created a culture of impunity for nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence, particularly towards Muslims and Christians. In India's northeastern state of Manipur alone, violent clashes between ethnic Hindu Meitei and Christian Kuki communities resulted in the destruction of more than 500 churches and two synagogues, and the displacement of over 70,000 people. During the year, several mosques were destroyed in the presence of police, and hate speech against Muslims continued at an alarming rate ahead of national elections, contributing to vigilante violence.

The national government also increasingly sought to silence dissenting voices, particularly of religious minorities and those advocating for them, both within and beyond India's borders. Domestically, Indian authorities continued to arrest activists and students peacefully protesting discriminatory legislation like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

The Indian government also extended harmful practices abroad to target activists, journalists, and academics. The most extreme example is outlined in the U.S. Justice Department's November indictment alleging the Indian government's involvement in the assassination attempt of a Sikh-American resident in New York, echoing similar accusations by the Canadian government regarding an assassination in Canada.

We were deeply disappointed that the State Department did not designate India as a CPC in 2023, despite the country clearly meeting the standards under IRFA. We urge the State Department to do so this year.

I'd now like to turn to Commissioner Schneck to discuss some of the new recommendations USCIRF made this year.

**Stephen Schneck, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Curry.

Though many of the countries we report on are longtime violators of religious freedom, it is important to note countries where conditions have changed or worsened. I would like to highlight three countries with new recommendations.

In Syria, the government's violations of religious freedom have evolved to become more political and administrative in nature in recent years, including in 2023. As a result, 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. This is especially true of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or HTS, which USCIRF continues to recommend for EPC designation. In 2023, HTS continued to forcibly impose its interpretation of Shari'a in Idlib and other parts of the northwest, including enforcement via detention and alleged torture. In addition, Turkish-backed organizations engaged in checkpoint harassment, detention, torture, rape, and armed attacks against vulnerable groups, including religious minorities. They also intentionally destroyed mosques and Yazidi shrines.

Second, USCIRF is recommending for the first time that Azerbaijan be designated as a CPC. USCIRF previously 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. In our 2022 and 2023 Annual Reports we 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. USCIRF documented a significant and alarming increase in the number of prisoners arrested on the basis of religion or belief in Azerbaijan during the year. In addition, authorities are regularly accused

of torture or threatening sexual violence to elicit false confessions from detainees, with those perpetrating such violations facing no accountability.

Lastly, USCIRF is recommending Kyrgyzstan for SWL status for the first time based on the government's heightened religious repression. In 2023, Kyrgyz authorities increasingly enforced long-existing restrictive legislation regulating religion and penalizing peaceful religious practices such as online religious expression, collective worship, and possessing unauthorized religious materials. The government particularly targeted Muslims who practice a form of Islam that deviates from the state's preferred interpretation, labelling them as "extremist," foreign, or nontraditional. Peaceful religious groups are included on an official list of "extremist" groups and authorities regularly penalize alleged members of such groups through arrests, detainments, and forced renunciations of faith.

Thank you, and I will now turn it over to Commissioner Turkel to talk about China and transnational repression.

**Nury Turkel, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Schneck.

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 even assassinations.

China is the world's most sophisticated and far-reaching perpetrator of transnational repression. In 2023, the Chinese government continued to target 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 two individuals in connection with operating an illegal Chinese overseas police station in New York City.

In addition to its transnational repression activities, the Chinese government continues to egregiously repress religious freedom within China. As the report documents, China persisted in its genocide against Uyghur Muslims, subjecting them to arbitrary detention, imprisonment, forced labor, political indoctrination, mass surveillance, intrusive government homestays, forced interfaith and inter-ethnic marriages, forced sterilization, and forced abortion. China also severely restricted religious freedom for Tibetan Buddhists as well as members of Christian communities, Falun Gong, and the Church of Almighty God.

Furthermore, the Chinese government and its state-affiliated entities have hired former U.S. officials and former members of Congress to lobby on their behalf, undermining religious freedom and related human rights in China. USCIRF recommends that members of Congress support legislation to counter China's malign influence in the United States, particularly through such lobbying efforts.

I will now pass the floor to Commissioner Ueland to speak about Nigeria. Thank you.

**Eric Ueland, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Turkel.

Nigeria is a country that USCIRF particularly focused on in 2023. We continued to see deteriorating religious freedom conditions there, including mass violence, killings, and the enforcement of blasphemy laws.

The State Department had rightly designated Nigeria as a CPC in 2020, an action USCIRF has recommended since 2009. But in 2021, 2022, and disappointingly again in 2023, the State Department chose not to designate Nigeria as a CPC. It did not even place the country on its SWL, thereby indicating that, in its view, Nigeria is a country with no severe or particularly severe religious freedom violations as defined by IRFA.

Based on the State Department's own reporting, we know this is simply not true. Central government failure, state-level government repression, and religiously-motivated violence by non-state actors have turned parts of Nigeria into areas of extreme persecution—particularly in the north. The State Department did continue to designate Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province as EPCs for the reign of terror they have unleashed on religious communities. However, that designation does not account for the imprisonments and mob violence for alleged blasphemy, the mass killings in Nigeria's Middle Belt, and the consistent failure of the Nigerian government to prevent or punish widespread violence impacting

religious freedom. USCIRF maintains that the country should return to CPC status in 2024. USCIRF also recommends the appointment of a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to oversee U.S. efforts to promote greater religious freedom in the region.

I would also like to take a moment to acknowledge worsening religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua. USCIRF recommended Nicaragua for CPC status last year for the first time. The situation for people of faith has only continued to deteriorate and we are again recommending the country for CPC designation.

The Nicaraguan government, led by President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo, arbitrarily arrests, imprisons, and expels clergy and laypeople. The most prominent example is Bishop Rolando Álvarez who was sentenced to 26 years' imprisonment on spurious charges in February 2023, and exiled to the Vatican this past January. In addition, the Nicaraguan government in December 2023 arrested 11 pastors associated with the Christian ministry Mountain Gateway on spurious charges of money laundering. In March of this year each pastor received prison sentences ranging between 12 and 15 years. In addition, laypeople have been arrested and imprisoned on spurious charges on the basis of their faith. The Nicaraguan government also systematically and relentlessly targets religious organizations it views as opponents, particularly Catholic charitable and educational organizations.

I will now turn it over to Commissioner Magid who will discuss the implications armed conflicts have on religious sites, as well as USCIRF's concern about the rise of antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred.

## **Mohamed Magid, Commissioner**

Thank you, Commissioner Ueland.

International humanitarian law 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, religious sites were to launch attacks or impermissibly targeted and destroyed in armed conflicts around the globe in 2023. For example, amid fighting in Sudan, mosques and churches were attacked, raided, or expropriated. For example, last May, the Rapid Support Forces, or 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.

Russia's ongoing and unlawful invasion of Ukraine has resulted in the continued destruction of religious sites. Reports indicate more than 600 religious institutions and other religious "objects" were damaged or destroyed since Russia's 2022 invasion. And in Burma, the military junta has destroyed approximately 200 religious sites, including Buddhist monasteries, churches, and mosques, during fighting with opposition forces since seizing power in 2021.

USCIRF has also observed a disturbing global rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred during 2023. In the aftermath of Hamas's violent terrorist attack on Israel on October 7 and Israel's military response, expressions of and incidents based on antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred sharply increased. This has had 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, arson attacks, vandalism of places of religious and historical significance, verbal harassment, and social exclusion. Surging antisemitism has also included the violent targeting of Jews wearing symbols of their faith, and attacks on synagogues.

We urge the U.S. government to raise these issues and concerns in bilateral discussions with relevant governments and multilateral fora for the advancement of religious freedom for all. Thank you, and I'll turn it back over to Chair Cooper for a brief closing.

**Abraham Cooper, Chair**

Thank you very much.

The countries we're mentioning today represent just a sampling of the places where religious freedom faces severe challenges. I hope that each of you will take the opportunity to read the full report. The scope and scale of the violations this report documents are disheartening. But for us at USCIRF, they drive our determination to unflinchingly advocate for the essential right of religious freedom for every person, in every corner of the globe.

Thank you to my fellow Commissioners for their insights, and to all of you for your interest in USCIRF's 2024 Annual Report. The full report is available on our website at [www.uscirtf.gov](http://www.uscirtf.gov). Thank you.