



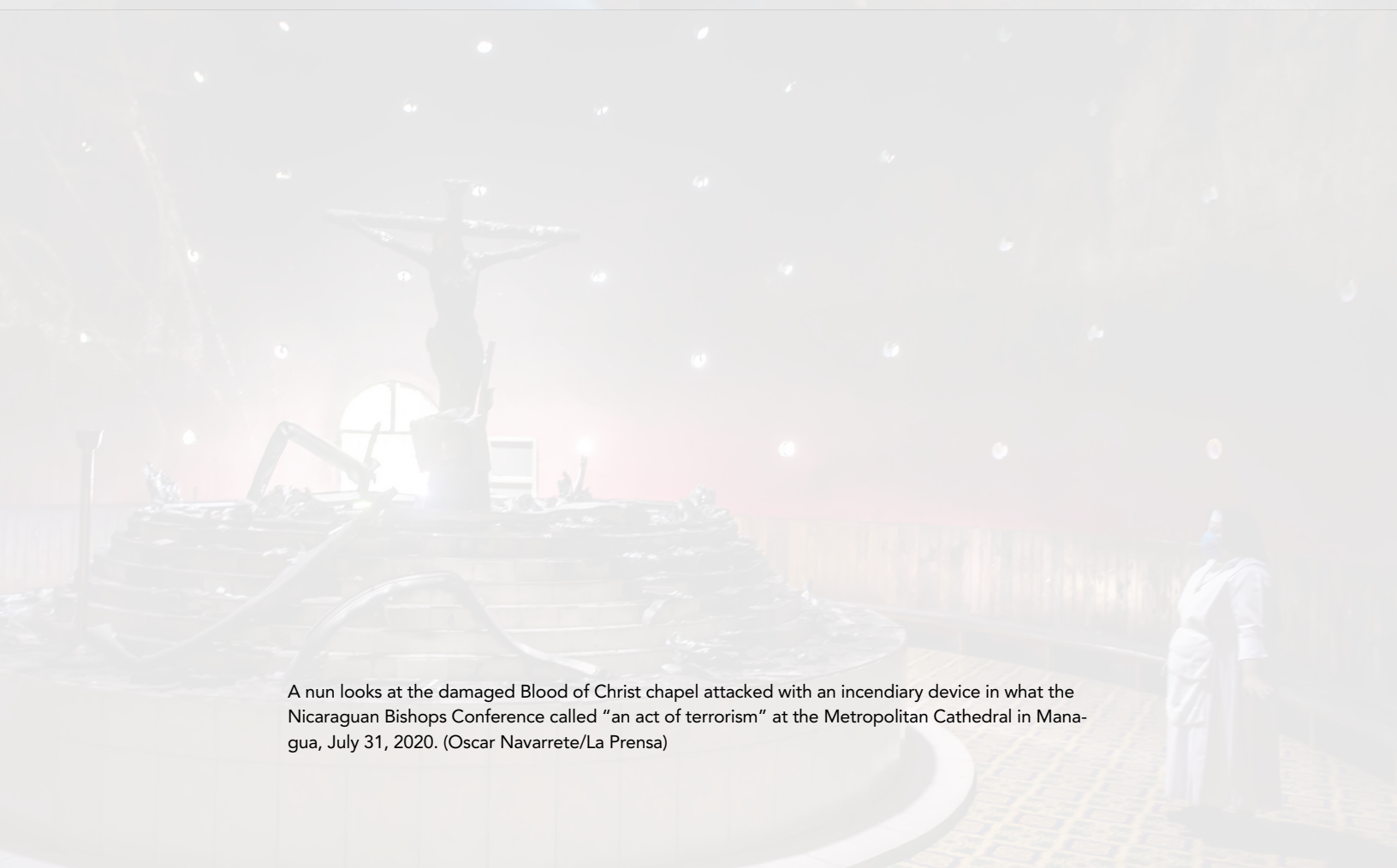
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
**INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM**

2025 ANNUAL REPORT





Nicaraguan exile Francisco Alvicio, right, a deacon of Nicaragua's Moravian Church, prays in his rented room alongside fellow exile and Miskito leader Salomon Martinez Ocampo in San Jose, Costa Rica, Sunday, Sept. 22, 2024. (AP Photo/Carlos Herrera)



A nun looks at the damaged Blood of Christ chapel attacked with an incendiary device in what the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference called "an act of terrorism" at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Managua, July 31, 2020. (Oscar Navarrete/La Prensa)

ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The smell of ash lingers in the ruins of the Roman Catholic sanctuary, although it is far from Ash Wednesday. Yet sunbeams stream through the skylights above—rays of hope in the darkness.

Nicaragua’s Ortega-Murillo regime has increasingly sought to stifle dissent. It has harassed, arrested, tried, and deported numerous members of the Catholic clergy—leaders of the country’s largest religious community. It has used intimidation and manipulation to force into exile leaders of the indigenous Moravian Church, including those who appear on the cover of this year’s United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report. It has arrested members of the Mountain Gateway ministry, including U.S. citizens—despite that community’s historically positive relationship with the government. The regime has permitted violent attacks on houses of worship, including an arson attack that destroyed the 400-year-old crucifix inside the Chapel of the Blood of Christ in Managua, depicted on the cover.

Religious communities in Nicaragua have continued to show remarkable resilience in the face of such threats. Their members meet discreetly—sometimes in the middle of the night—to exercise their freedom of religion or belief. They continue to provide aid to each other while meeting communal spiritual needs, although the Nicaraguan government views each of these modest acts as deplorable. Like the light streaming through the church skylights, they represent the government’s failure to extinguish the human desire for freedom. Ultimately, the tragedy of religious freedom in Nicaragua is not found in the intimidation, arrests, or deportations; it is rather the tragic short-sightedness of a government lacking the moral courage to allow accountability from its own people or to respect as basic a right as freedom of religion or belief.

Unfortunately, such persecution and religious freedom violations are not unique to Nicaragua. In many other parts of the world, a common denominator of authoritarian rule continued to drive restrictions on religious freedom in 2024. In Afghanistan, the Taliban implemented dozens of religious edicts severely limiting the religious freedom of women and girls while disproportionately restricting the same for Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians. China continued its corrosive sinicization policy, forcing the Chinese Community Party’s (CCP) ideological agenda into every facet of religious life for Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, Taoists, and others. Russia continued to deploy antisemitism and Holocaust distortion, ban Jehovah’s Witnesses, target and harass vulnerable communities, and persecute groups such as the Protestant Word of Life Church and the Church of Scientology.

Governments also failed to adequately protect religious minority communities from mobs or individuals taking out their anger over such conflicts, perhaps most evident in antisemitic harassment and attacks on Jews—despite the remarkable resilience of Jewish communities in the face of such threats. In Tunisia, protesters attacked and destroyed a Jewish religious site, while a spate of attacks on synagogues systematically targeted Canada’s Jewish community. In Germany, Berlin’s police chief warned Jews to hide their identity in certain parts of the city to avoid danger. Governments moved quickly to respond to antisemitic threats and violence in each of these cases, and yet Jewish communities around the world continued to experience a worsening environment of fear that impeded their free practice of their religion or belief.

Armed conflicts contributed to the displacement of many individuals, forcing them to seek refuge while causing destruction to houses of worship and severely impeding the ability of many individuals, families, and communities to practice their religion or belief. State and nonstate actors alike invoked religion or belief to justify atrocities that, in many cases, disproportionately impacted or even targeted religious groups.

As a result of religious persecution around the world, including ongoing armed conflicts, scores of refugees and internally displaced persons fled their homes in fear for their lives. Many faced immense restrictions on their freedoms, even after fleeing intolerable conditions in their places of origin. While some governments made efforts to

house and temporarily provide for these refugees, they also threatened to refoul them back to their home countries at grave risk to their personal safety.

In June, Pakistan began a mass deportation of Afghans, including religious minorities, women, and girls who face serious religious restrictions or even mortal peril upon their return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Nigeria’s government has continued to forcibly close camps hosting displaced Christians who fled violence by Boko Haram, despite persistent security concerns in their communities of origin. In July, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on India to refrain from the forcible deportation of predominantly Muslim Rohingya refugees to Burma. Waves of refugee displacement continued to prompt religious intolerance and acts of violence as in prior years, particularly against Muslims and Muslim diasporas.

These Muslim communities demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of state and societal harassment, assaults, and violence throughout the year. In June, State Security Service officers in Uzbekistan arrested an estimated 100 Muslim men in the Kashkadarya region. In 2024, some United Kingdom (UK) government officials engaged in anti-Muslim rhetoric, contributing to a worsening climate of intolerance.

“Ultimately, the tragedy of religious freedom in Nicaragua is not found in the intimidation, arrests, or deportations; it is rather the tragic short-sightedness of a government lacking the moral courage to allow accountability from its own people or to respect as basic a right as freedom of religion or belief.”

During the summer, rioters across the UK chanted anti-Muslim slogans and attacked [mosques](#). In Sri Lanka, Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups targeted Muslims throughout the year with threats, intimidation, and coercion. Officials in France [forbade](#) Muslim women members of its own Olympic team—competing in their own capital city—from wearing the hijab during competition at the Paris Summer Olympic Games.

Now more than ever, U.S. support for the right to freedom of religion or belief must remain a priority as both a strategic national interest and a reflection of our national identity. Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and in practice well before, the United States has stood unreservedly on the side of individuals freely asserting their religion or belief, which includes the right to hold a belief and the right to express it through practice, teaching, or worship according to one’s own convictions. American support for religious freedom abroad remains a bedrock of bipartisan conviction—a common cause and indivisible commitment that inspires governments and facilitates burden-sharing in the advancement of freedom of religion or belief.

The administration of President Donald J. Trump faces a complex international environment in which to build on its previous success of centering religious freedom as a cornerstone of foreign policy and global leadership. Confirming this commitment to advancing freedom of religion or belief will require calibration and joint action with like-minded governments, and this report outlines concrete policy recommendations for this administration to maximize the success of its efforts as such. These recommendations begin with the prompt appointment of an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, who leads initiatives through the U.S. Department of State to highlight and address religious freedom concerns around the world.

The new Congress, too, must prioritize continuing the vital, bipartisan work of advancing religious freedom abroad, as reflected in this report’s congressional recommendations. It should introduce—or reintroduce, in some cases—and pass legislation to fully resource and fund programming to help individuals, families, and communities around the world who face persecution and other threats because of their religion or belief.

About This Report

Created by the International Religious Freedom Act (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 2025 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress in 28 countries during calendar year 2024 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 hearings, meetings, briefings, and travel. The annual report is 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 to disagree with some aspect of the report. This year, the

chapters on Implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act and Azerbaijan include individual or dissenting views.

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 religious freedom abroad. It includes a section providing background on nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for EPC designation as well as a section discussing key global trends and developments in religious freedom during the reporting period, including in countries that are not recommended for CPC or SWL status. This year, that section covers topics including trends in areas of conflict or political upheaval, increased targeting of Muslims in Europe, antisemitism targeting Jews, artificial intelligence and new technologies limiting freedom of religion or belief, and other issues. 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” (FoRB) 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

“Now more than ever, U.S. support for the right to freedom of religion or belief must remain a priority as both a strategic national interest and a reflection of our national identity.”

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 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 threshold—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.

As USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions abroad, its reporting documents violations of FoRB 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.uscifr.gov.

USCIRF’s 2025 CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

For 2025, based on religious freedom conditions in 2024, 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 four countries: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Vietnam;
- **Maintain** on the SWL the following two countries: Algeria, Azerbaijan;
- Include on the SWL the following 10 countries: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan; and
- **Redesignate** as EPCs the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (also referred to as ISIS-West Africa), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

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, while the same for other EPC recommendations are included in a standalone section later in this report.

It should be noted that the State Department did not issue CPC, SWL, or EPC [designations](#) by the end of 2024 or the conclusion of the administration of President Joseph R. Biden in January 2025, thereby leaving 2023 designations in effect.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

The following description of U.S. government efforts to implement requirements of the International Religious Freedom Act specifically reflects calendar year 2024. However, USCIRF acknowledges that the transition to a new U.S. administration beginning in January 2025 has involved a number of policy shifts that will likely have a direct impact on international religious freedom engagement and advocacy across the U.S. government—and those shifts will continue to evolve and take shape in the months to come.

Key Developments

Despite many religious freedom violations and atrocities around the world in 2024, the year brought a number of significant accomplishments related to the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. government played a central role in securing the release of individuals imprisoned abroad for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In August, the U.S. Department of State worked with other U.S. government partners to [negotiate](#) for the release of [Oleg Orlov](#), co-chair of the human rights organization Memorial, which has advocated for and documented the cases of FoRB prisoners in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea. In September, the State Department [secured](#) the release of 135 political prisoners, including some imprisoned for their religious beliefs or practices, whom Nicaraguan authorities had unjustly detained. Among these were Catholic laypeople as well as a group of pastors and other individuals affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry. In September and November, respectively, the U.S. government [secured](#) the release of American Pastor David Lin, who spent nearly two decades in a Chinese prison for

his religious activities, and the resettlement of three members of the predominantly Muslim Uyghur community, whom Chinese authorities had unjustly subjected to travel bans.

The U.S. government continued to serve as secretariat for and on the Steering Committee of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), which rebranded during the year as the [Article 18 Alliance](#) (Alliance). Throughout the year, the Alliance issued a number of joint statements, including on the [Russian](#) government’s killing of religious leaders and destruction of religious sites in Ukraine; the [10th anniversary](#) of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) genocide against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria; and FoRB prisoners in [Tibet](#), [Cuba](#), and [North Korea](#). The Alliance also issued statements on FoRB violations against [women](#), [Muslims](#), and [nonreligious individuals](#).

In addition, the State Department [presented](#) international religious freedom (IRF) awards to individuals who made exceptional contributions to religious freedom abroad in the prior year. Those honored include a Nigerian lawyer

who defends religious freedom cases and challenges the constitutionality of the country’s blasphemy laws, a Nicaraguan religious freedom advocate who documents the government’s violations against the Catholic Church, and a Tibetan activist whose work has shed light on how the Chinese government impedes the FoRB rights of Tibetan Buddhists.

Then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken did not issue

CPC, SWL, or EPC designations by the end of 2024 or the conclusion of the administration in January 2025, thereby leaving 2023 designations in effect. Despite that failure to comply with IRFA in regard to those designations, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden otherwise engaged in many initiatives supporting or advancing IRF, as noted throughout this report.

“. . . the transition to a new U.S. administration beginning in January 2025 has involved a number of policy shifts that will likely have a direct impact on international religious freedom engagement and advocacy across the U.S. government. . . .”

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, the Houthis, ISIS – Sahel (formerly known as Islamic State in Greater Sahara), the Islamic State in West Africa, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION:

- Promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill [key roles](#) relevant to U.S. IRF policy, including the Special Adviser to the President on IRF on the National Security Council staff and the Ambassador at Large for IRF, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, and Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues at the State Department, and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to elevate FoRB issues in engagements with foreign governments;
- Swiftly determine and announce CPC, SWL, and EPC designations, according to USCIRF’s latest recommendations as delineated in this report;
- 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 that region;
- Review U.S. policy toward countries designated as CPCs for which waivers on taking any action based on those designations are in place—currently Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—and make appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change, such as lifting existing waivers or not issuing waivers following future CPC designations or redesignations;
- Develop a working group in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau of Democracy, Rights, and Governance to deploy the BRIDGES religious community engagement strategy begun and then developed in the last two administrations;
- Deepen vital U.S. leadership and/or engagement on religious freedom with entities such as the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, C5+1, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation;
- Resettle refugees who have fled countries with the most egregious forms of religious persecution, in cooperation with like-minded countries and through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and other humanitarian protection programs, and maintain a robust annual USRAP admissions ceiling for refugees in order to contribute to alleviating the [ongoing crisis](#) involving around 43.7 million refugees worldwide—many of whom escaped religious persecution; and
- Establish a plan to fully comply with asylum laws, including addressing flaws that USCIRF has documented in its reporting on [Expedited Removal](#) since 2005, to enhance the quality and oversight of the processing of asylum seekers and to improve overall interagency coordination.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS:

- Prioritize the confirmation of key IRF-related [appointments](#), including the Ambassador at Large for IRF, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, and Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues;
- Sponsor FoRB prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s Defending Freedoms Project and advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners, including those documented in USCIRF’s [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), in multilateral fora and bilateral meetings with relevant governments;
- Advocate for IRF through existing task forces or caucuses such as the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism, the House IRF Caucus, or the Ahmadiyya Muslim Caucus;
- Introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy such as:
 - The bipartisan Transnational Repression Policy Act ([H.R. 3654](#)) to strengthen U.S. efforts to counter foreign governments’ transnational repression on the basis of religion or belief;
 - Prohibiting any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments of countries that the State Department designates as CPCs;
 - Conditioning—for countries the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL—U.S. security assistance and economic or budget support to those governments on improvements in religious freedom conditions;
 - Countering foreign governments’ use of [misinformation and disinformation](#) or exploitation of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance, and other technologies to target communities particularly vulnerable to IRF-related restrictions and violence;
 - Amending IRFA to permanently reauthorize USCIRF, mandate the State Department to provide specific rationale for not implementing USCIRF recommendations on CPC and SWL designations, and require the president to appoint a Special Adviser on IRF on the National Security Council staff; and
- Reauthorizing on a permanent basis the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment to allow individuals legally residing in the United States to sponsor the resettlement of members of persecuted religious minority groups from their countries of residence to the United States.
- Request the Government Accountability Office to conduct an:
 - Assessment of the use of the Global Magnitsky Act and other human rights-related financial and visa authorities to hold accountable severe religious freedom violators;
 - Accounting of all U.S. foreign assistance provided to countries that the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL; and
 - Analysis of available tools to strengthen and enhance U.S. government policy and U.S. collaboration with allies to deter and counter transnational targeting of religious communities and religious freedom advocates.

- Allocate funding, consistent with Executive Order (E.O.) [13926](#), through USAID and relevant U.S. embassies to support:
 - Efforts to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious heritage sites in areas where they are particularly vulnerable or under threat; and
 - Civil society organizations and human rights defenders who document and monitor religious freedom violations, including those who lead efforts to counter the malign activities of “entities of particular concern” (EPCs) and other nonstate actors, in countries where civil society is repressed.
- Conduct congressional delegations to countries USCIRF recommends for designation as CPCs or placement on the SWL to address religious freedom concerns.

Legal Framework

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as amended by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#), provides that the president—who has delegated this power to the secretary of state—has 90 days after the release of the State Department’s annual IRF Report to make each year’s CPC and SWL designations, and another 90 days to notify Congress of the designations and accompanying actions. The State Department released the IRF Report on June 26, 2024, meaning that this 180 day period expired on December 23, 2024 without a new determination of designations. As outlined in IRFA, the previous December 2023 designations therefore remained in force at the end of the reporting period, and the accompanying actions will expire in December 2025 in the absence of their renewal for a two-year period.

IRFA seeks to make religious freedom a 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 [Office of International Religious Freedom](#), and a special adviser on the White House’s National Security Council staff); ongoing monitoring and annual reports on religious freedom violations abroad; the imposition of consequences for the worst violators; and a public list of victims of certain violations of religious freedom. The consequences set forth in IRFA consist of CPC designations and related policy actions or placement on the State Department’s SWL for governmental violators, 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 outlines additional policies the U.S. government may adopt in response to official religious freedom violations abroad, including public condemnation in multilateral fora; the reduction or cancellation of foreign assistance funds; the delay or cancellation of cultural exchanges; and the delay or cancellation of working, official, or state visits.

IRFA requires that State Department foreign service officers and U.S. immigration officials undergo training on religious freedom and religious persecution. Furthermore, it includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy, and it 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.

Alongside IRFA, other laws provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions 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. [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.

As previously mentioned, IRFA added a provision to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), contained in INA Section 212(a)(2)(g), making foreign officials who perpetrated particularly severe religious freedom violations ineligible for visas to the United States. Other visa ineligibilities found in [Section 212\(a\)](#) may also apply to religious freedom violators in some cases, particularly the bars on foreigners who perpetrated genocide, torture, or extrajudicial killings (INA 212(a)(3)(E)(ii) & (iii)) or whose admission the secretary of state determines would have serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States (INA 212(a)(3)(C)). In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department’s fiscal year (FY) 2024 annual appropriations (P.L. 118-47) 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 provisions contained in the INA, the names of those subject to visa bans under this provision may be announced publicly.

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](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Cautions against Rising Antisemitism on International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls Attention to Prevalence of Anti-Muslim Hate around the World](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Protection of Religious Sites during Armed Conflict](#)
- **Special Report:** [Revisiting the CPC Designation](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Factsheet:** [International Religious Freedom Act](#)
- **Event:** [Women in FoRB: Making a Difference](#)
- **Hearing:** [Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Nonstate Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom](#)

Key U.S. Administration IRF Positions

Then Ambassador at Large for IRF [Rashad Hussain](#) continued to implement his mandate through public speeches and meetings, including with the nongovernmental organization IRF Roundtable and other stakeholders. In addition, Ambassador Hussain traveled to [New Zealand](#), [The Gambia](#), [Cameroon](#), [Switzerland](#), and [Germany](#) to meet with governmental officials and religious communities to advance FoRB and combat religious intolerance.

Then Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism [Deborah E. Lipstadt](#) traveled to [Germany](#), the [United Kingdom](#), [Romania](#), [Malta](#), [Slovakia](#), [Austria](#), [Hungary](#), [Norway](#), [Sweden](#), [Argentina](#) and [Brazil](#), [France](#), [Switzerland](#), the [Netherlands](#), [Canada](#), [Egypt](#), [Bahrain](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and the [United Arab Emirates](#). During her travel to Argentina and Brazil, she [launched](#) the [Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism](#) and commemorated those killed in the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina. In addition, she [commemorated](#) the victims of the Holocaust and [emphasized](#) the importance of Holocaust education at the UN in New York. She also [testified](#) before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on antisemitism in Latin America. Both Ambassador Hussain and Special Envoy Lipstadt participated in a USCIRF [event](#) highlighting the crucial roles women play in promoting FoRB abroad.

Then Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights [Uzra Zeya](#), who served concurrently as the U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, [met](#) with the Dalai Lama to reaffirm the U.S. government's commitment to advancing Tibetans' human rights and to support efforts to preserve their distinct historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. She also spoke about protecting human rights and religious freedom for Tibetans before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC). Under Secretary Zeya also convened meetings with representatives from Iraq's diverse religious communities and visited key Christian and Yazidi sites during her visit to that country in May.

Multilateral Engagement

In 2024, the United States served the third of a three-year term as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). In that capacity, the U.S. government [supported resolutions promoting](#) FoRB; protecting the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities; and mandating investigations into human rights violations in Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Ukraine. It also joined multi-country statements on religious freedom and human rights violations occurring in [Xinjiang](#) and [Afghanistan](#) and cosponsored a side event on violations occurring in [Tibet](#). As part of the UN's Universal Periodic Review process, the U.S. government made recommendations on improving religious

freedom conditions in [Afghanistan](#), [China](#), [Eritrea](#), [Malaysia](#), [Nicaragua](#), [North Korea](#), and [Vietnam](#). In addition, it delivered statements at the UN Security Council on violations occurring in [Afghanistan](#) and [North Korea](#) and at the UN General Assembly on [anti-Muslim hatred](#).

Sanctions on Individual Violators

There were no known visa denials to foreign officials in 2024 for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2) (G) of the INA, the provision added by IRFA. However, in December, the State Department [established](#) two new visa restriction policies to promote accountability for wrongful, abusive, and unjust detention practices under INA Section 212(a)(3)(c). These policies allow the State Department to impose visa restrictions on individuals who wrongfully detain people or violate detainees' fundamental freedoms, including individuals responsible for the wrongful treatment of those profiled in USCIRF's [FoRB Victims List](#).

The U.S. government continued its use of the [Global Magnitsky Act](#) and the related [E.O. 13818](#), bringing the total number of individuals and entities sanctioned under these authorities for human rights

abuses or corruption to 745. In December, the State Department and U.S. Department of the Treasury [imposed sanctions](#) on a Houthi entity and its leader for their roles in committing human rights violations against detainees in Houthi-run prison systems.

The U.S. government also used non-Global Magnitsky Act tools to hold religious freedom violators accountable. Pursuant to [E.O. 14014](#), the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) entities that support the Burmese military's ongoing violence against civilians. Pursuant to [E.O. 13851](#),

the Treasury Department [imposed sanctions](#) on Nicaragua's attorney general for his complicity in that government's religious freedom violations and on a Russian government entity that trains the Nicaraguan National Police for its responsibility in such abuses. Pursuant to [E.O. 13553](#), the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) individuals involved in the Iranian government's violent and religiously based repression of the Iranian people. In addition, the State Department—pursuant to [Section 7031\(c\)](#) of the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act—[imposed](#) visa restrictions on an Indonesian government official involved in the killing of a Christian pastor in 2020.

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." During 2024, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor issued requests for proposals to advance religious freedom and/or provide

“. . . the U.S. government supported resolutions promoting FoRB; protecting the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities; and mandating investigations into human rights violations in Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Ukraine.”

protection for Indigenous and Afro-descendant [communities](#) in the Western Hemisphere or South Asia as well as to combat religious discrimination in [Kenya](#).

As in prior years, the United States continued to obligate substantial funding to programs around the world that benefited efforts—often through civil society organizations—to advance FoRB, reinforce broader human rights, support democratic governance, provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance, and implement other initiatives. Many of those initiatives included explicit or implicit support for religious freedom and other human rights in countries that USCIRF has recommended for CPC designation or SWL inclusion. However, U.S. assistance has also at times supported the governments of some of those same countries, often for the purposes of economic development as well as local or regional security through counterterrorism programs, foreign military financing, and other forms. Detailed and up-to-date information on U.S. assistance is available at [ForeignAssistance.gov](#), including a more comprehensive differentiation of assistance that supports civil society programs versus assistance that goes directly to foreign governments for development, security, and other purposes.

The Biden administration also continued to fund humanitarian aid for members of religious groups that have faced persecution or genocide. In May and September, USAID announced \$31 million and \$199 million, respectively, in additional humanitarian assistance to address the needs of primarily Muslim Rohingya refugees located in Bangladesh and the region. In July, USAID announced \$2.2 million in aid to support internally displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees. In September, USAID announced nearly \$535 million in humanitarian assistance to support the people of Syria. In November, USAID announced the launch of an initiative to support Tibetan communities in Southeast Asia, including by preserving their arts, language, and culture.

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

According to U.S. law, any noncitizen who is physically present or who arrives in the United States may apply for asylum, a legal protection for those who can establish that they fled their country and cannot return “because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of” one of five specific grounds established in U.S. and international law, which include religion. IRFA authorized USCIRF to examine the U.S. government’s treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers to quickly deport—without immigration court hearings—noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documentation, unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution. As mandated by Congress, USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in reports it released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#) that documented major problems that successive administrations have failed to address. Specifically, USCIRF found that DHS officials often failed to follow required procedures to identify those who fear persecution if returned and refer them for credible fear determinations; that they detained asylum seekers in inappropriate conditions; and that funding disparities and a lack of high-level oversight hampered the complicated, multiagency process. These flaws raise concerns—especially given the expanded use of Expedited Removal in recent years—that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution in violation of both U.S. and international law.

In June, the Biden administration put in place the [Securing the Border](#) (STB) policy, which suspended and limited the entry of certain noncitizens at the southern border of the United States and restricted their access to asylum, unless certain exceptions were met. Under this policy, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses a new process known as the “shout test” in which officers are no longer required to ask noncitizens mandatory questions about whether they fear persecution if returned as part of the initial screening process. This change increases the risk that bona fide asylum seekers may not be receiving the opportunity to access legal protection. Additionally, noncitizens who successfully manifest a fear of persecution on their own volition and are referred for a credible fear interview only have four hours to prepare for that interview, which is conducted in CBP custody.

Refugee Resettlement

Under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), a small number of the tens of millions of individuals displaced abroad—who cannot return home due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on one of the five grounds that U.S. and international law provide, which include religion—may be eligible for resettlement to the United States. The president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year and, pursuant to Section [1157\(d\)](#) of Title 8 of the INA, provides an annual report to Congress on that ceiling. Under Section [6472\(d\)](#) of IRFA, the president is required to include information in that annual report on the religious persecution of refugee populations eligible for consideration for admission to the United States. In September, the White House [announced](#) that it was maintaining the admissions ceiling for refugees at 125,000 for FY 2025. For FY 2025, the Biden administration’s annual report [designated](#) Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox religious adherents in the Baltics and Eurasia with close family ties in the United States for priority consideration for refugee resettlement. The Biden administration also designated religious minorities in Iran for priority consideration.

In March, Congress [reauthorized](#) the bipartisan Lautenberg amendment for FY 2024, as this legislation is not yet permanent. The amendment is a family reunification program providing a legal path for resettlement for religious minorities from Iran and former Soviet Union countries who are fleeing government persecution.

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

Members of the U.S. Congress continued to engage in efforts to promote IRF throughout the year, including the 37 members who advocated for prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s (TLHRC) [Defending Freedoms Project](#). The House Foreign Affairs Committee held hearings on human rights and religious freedom in [Nigeria](#) and [Cuba](#) and on antisemitism in [Latin America](#). The TLHRC held hearings on [transnational repression](#) as well as on human rights and religious freedom conditions in [Afghanistan](#), [India](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Turkey](#). The CECC held [hearings](#) on [China’s](#) human rights and religious freedom violations and historical revisionism and culture erasure.

Members of Congress also participated in the USCIRF [hearing](#) on religious freedom in Southeast Asia. In addition, Congress

[reauthorized](#) USCIRF’s mandate through FY 2026 to ensure that robust religious freedom monitoring and reporting continues. Congress further passed the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act ([S. 138](#)), which mandates that the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues works to combat Chinese government disinformation about the history, people, and institutions of Tibet, including the Dalai Lama. Finally, the House of Representatives passed [H.R. 554](#), which affirms the nature and importance of U.S. government support for religious and ethnic minority survivors of genocide in Iraq.

Additional View on Implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act by Chair Stephen Schneck, Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik, and Commissioners Ariela Dubler, Mohamed Elsanousi, Maureen Ferguson, Susie Gelman, Vicky Hartzler, and Asif Mahmood

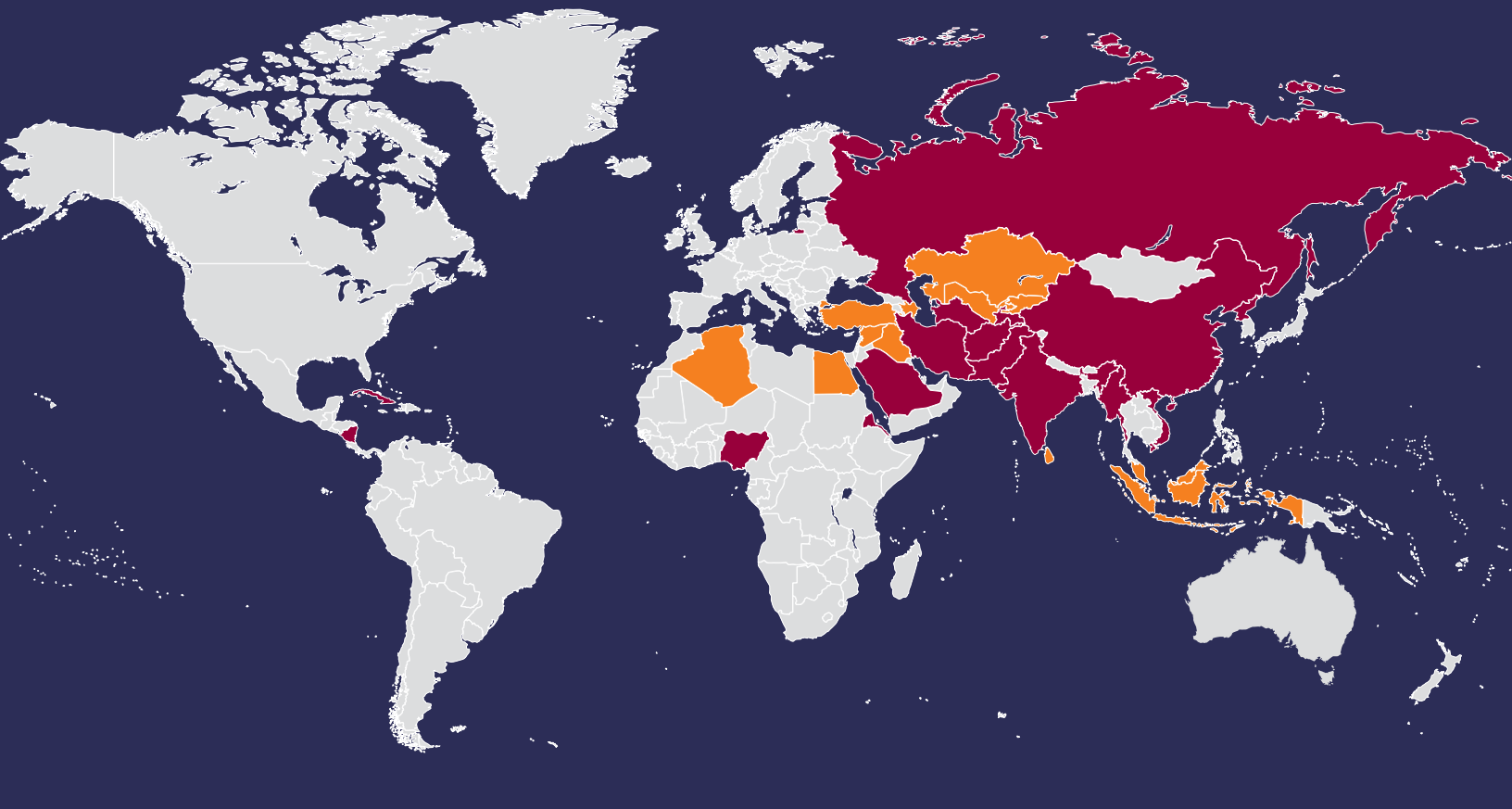
Congress must end lobbying by CPC countries. Lobbyists paid to represent the interests of governments that kill, torture, imprison, or otherwise persecute their populations because of what religion they practice or what beliefs they hold should not be welcome in the halls of Capitol Hill.

As Commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, we call upon Congress to prohibit all lobbying on behalf of those countries designated as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) by the Department of State. This prohibition should include not only representatives of the governments of CPC countries, but also representatives of such governments’ state-affiliated commercial entities and their interests.

Lobbyists representing Chinese official and commercial interests, for example, actively work the offices of Congress, despite the Chinese government’s ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims, cultural genocide of Tibetan Buddhists, and egregious persecution and repressive “sinicization” of other religious faiths. And China is but one example of CPC countries whose representatives lobby Congress today.

The privilege that Congress grants lobbyists to promote the governmental and commercial interests of foreign nations cannot be divorced from the highest values of the American people. Not only is freedom of religion or belief an inalienable and universal right for all, but it is also the first freedom of our beloved Bill of Rights, and it must be a first measure for that privilege.

2025 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

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

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Boko Haram	Islamic State – Sahel Province	Al-Shabaab
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	Islamic State in West Africa Province	
The Houthis	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin	

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, Afghanistan experienced a continual and significant [decline](#) in religious freedom conditions under de facto Taliban rule. The Taliban continued to enforce its strict interpretation of Shari'a throughout the country, directly impacting the religious freedom of all Afghans—including those with differing interpretations of Islam. Its draconian religious edicts continued to disproportionately target women and girls as well as religious minorities who remain in the country, including Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians. Human rights advocates have increasingly [warned](#) of the “devastating impact” of Taliban rule on these vulnerable communities through its “widespread and systematic” use of physical and sexual violence (in particular against women and children), arbitrary detention, torture, corporal punishment, and other egregious abuses.

De facto Taliban authorities continued to impose their interpretation of religion to severely restrict the religious freedom and daily lives of Afghan women, limiting their movement, dress, education, and speech. Beginning in January, authorities reportedly detained dozens of women in Kabul and Daykundi Province for failing to observe what the Taliban deemed “proper hijab,” as outlined in a May 2022 decree that mandated women and girls to fully cover themselves in public. Before releasing the detained women, authorities [required](#) male guardians to sign letters promising future compliance with the decree. The Taliban also continued to enforce its religiously justified ban on education for women and girls over the age of 12.

In August, the Ministry of the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) [issued](#) a new “morality law,” expanding and reinforcing religious policies for all Afghans, including gender

segregation in public spaces. The law grants the ministry broad powers to arrest and detain individuals perceived to have violated the Taliban's religious edicts. It further prevents women from speaking or singing outside of their homes and imposes mandatory dress and appearance codes for men, including beard length. It severely restricts the rights of religious minorities by forbidding all “non-Islamic” religious ceremonies and preventing association with “non-believers,” including Shi'a Muslim and Christian communities. The law additionally criminalizes wearing or “popularizing” crucifixes, neckties, and other “un-Islamic” symbols.

Taliban authorities also resumed using corporal and capital punishment to penalize violations of their interpretation of Shari'a. Punishments included public executions, lashings and floggings, stoning, beatings, and acts of public humiliation, such as forced head shaving. In February, for example, the Taliban carried out a public double execution of two men at a stadium in Ghazni city “according to the Islamic concept of *qisas*, or retributive justice.” In April, Taliban officials publicly flogged 63 individuals, allegedly for adultery, apostasy, same-sex relations, and other acts considered to be “immoral.” In August, the Taliban publicly flogged a man accused of blasphemy and “insulting religious sanctities.”

Throughout the year, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) conducted violent attacks against Shi'a Muslim communities and their places of worship, including Hazara communities whom both ISIS-K and the Taliban consider “infidels” and “unbelievers.” For example, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for an explosion near the Abu Muslim Khorasani Mosque in January, and it attacked a mosque in a predominantly Shi'a community of Herat Province in April, killing six worshippers.

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);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations, including members of the MPVPV, by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities—citing religious freedom violations—and coordinate with allies to impose similar sanctions;
- Work with like-minded partners, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to address the Taliban's religious freedom and other human rights violations;
- Re-Appoint a Special Representative for Afghanistan and Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights to engage with Afghan religious minorities and encourage their inclusion in international meetings on Afghanistan and expand the Special Envoy's mandate to explicitly include advocating for religious minorities; and
- Update the [2019 Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security](#) to include explicit reference to protecting women's right to religious freedom, prioritize security for women belonging to religious minority communities, and make Afghanistan a focus country for related program implementation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Introduce and pass legislation to create a [Priority 2](#) (P-2) designation—reserved for groups of special humanitarian concern—to include members of religious groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban to allow them to apply for resettlement to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom under Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Afghanistan's population is an estimated 39.2 million and encompasses 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.

While many religious minorities fled following the Taliban takeover in 2021, small numbers of Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists remain in the country. Following that takeover, de facto authorities dissolved the country's 2004 constitution and made their interpretation of Shari'a the basis for all law in the country. In 2024, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid emphasized this ideological stance by insisting that the group's form of Shari'a has "specified everyone's duty in society." The MPVPV, which existed during previous Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 and was recreated following the 2021 takeover, enforces the Taliban's religious edicts and decrees.

Attacks and Abuses against Religious Minorities

Both de facto Taliban authorities and ISIS-K continued to target religious minority communities in 2024, particularly the Shi'a Hazara population. In September, for example, ISIS-K attacked a group of Hazara pilgrims in Daykundi Province upon their return from Karbala in Iraq, killing 14 people. Meanwhile, Taliban authorities arrested Hazara women throughout the year on charges of "bad hijab" and subjected them to harassment, torture, and violence while in custody. The country's other, dwindling religious minority communities also experienced attacks; in May, for example, an ISIS-K gunman opened fire on Christians and Shi'a Muslims at a market in Bamiyan Province, killing two Afghans and three Spanish nationals.

According to the United Nation's (UN) [Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan](#), Taliban security forces conducted arbitrary house searches in Shi'a majority areas and neighborhoods during the month of Muharram, which involved beatings, destruction of property, and unlawful killings. The Taliban further imposed restrictions on the Shi'a minority prior to that month, banning religious processions and ceremonies in public spaces and flag-raising for Ashura rituals—activities that the Taliban's information and culture department described as "political heresy" from abroad. In addition, it reportedly pressured Ismaili Shi'a Muslims to convert to Sunni Islam and detained 15 members of that community in May. In June, the acting minister of higher education denied the existence of other Muslim communities in the country, stating that every Afghan follows Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence.

Control of Literature and Education

The Taliban expanded its efforts to censor religious ideas that differ from its official interpretation of Islam and to restructure Afghanistan's education sector to conform with that ideology. The education minister declared in 2024 that questioning Taliban policies was a punishable act. Throughout the year, the Taliban's Ministry of Higher Education enforced a December 2023 decree to review and remove books from

university libraries and bookstores that conflict with its interpretation of the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence. In January, de facto authorities seized thousands of books from bookstores and publishing houses in Kabul, claiming they violated "national and Islamic values." The Taliban's deputy minister of information and culture justified these actions as preventing the spread of "harmful ideologies."

Even as it repressed higher education, the Taliban continued to facilitate the establishment of Islamic schools (*madrasas*) that promulgate its interpretation of Islam throughout the country, increasing the total four-fold to an estimated 7,000—ostensibly designating 380 of them for girls. In March, Taliban officials announced they may never reopen secondary schools for Afghan girls, despite global criticism from Muslim clerics that such a restrictive education ban was un-Islamic. In December, the Taliban reportedly extended the education ban to prevent women from attending medical school, which was widely viewed as women's last opportunity for higher education in the country.

Broadly, human rights defenders, academics, lawyers, journalists, and members of civil society continued to face threats, intimidation, harassment, arrest, and detention. Authorities have particularly targeted journalists for reporting on religious freedom issues and criticizing the Taliban's religious edicts. Notably, in February, authorities sentenced university professor Mohammed Atef Daie to a year in prison for his advocacy for women's rights, including girls' education.

Key U.S. Policy

While the U.S. government did not recognize de facto Taliban authorities as the official government of Afghanistan, several delegations of U.S. officials participated in international forums with Taliban members in 2024. In February, then U.S. Department of State Special Representative for Afghanistan Tom West and then Special Envoy for Women, Girls, and Human Rights in Afghanistan Rina Amiri traveled to Qatar for the second round of UN-lead Doha meetings on Afghanistan. Both officials participated in subsequent meetings in Doha in June, which drew criticism from human rights groups for excluding Afghan women and religious scholars. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, then Special Representative West, and then Special Envoy Amiri all testified before separate congressional hearings on Afghanistan during the year, including one on the rights of [women and girls](#). In December, U.S. special representatives for Afghanistan met with international partners and [condemned](#) the Taliban's edicts preventing women from receiving medical training.

Throughout the year, U.S. government officials, including Ambassador Dorothy Shea, [reiterated](#) support for UN Security Council [Resolution 2721](#), which calls for a UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan. Additionally, in November, the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) Authorization Act ([H.R. 8368](#)) passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support, requiring the State Department to appoint a Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts responsible for relocating and resettling eligible Afghan allies.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) for particularly severe religious freedom violations.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Burma continued to worsen amid the country's ongoing civil war. The country has seen the [displacement](#) of over 3.5 million people in recent years, including more than [90,000](#) in Christian-majority Chin State, 237,200 in Kachin State, and [one million](#) Muslim-majority Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Most of those displaced had fled a 2017 crackdown by Burma's military—known as the Tatmadaw—in Rakhine State, and its subsequent coup in 2021. The Tatmadaw prohibited critical aid from reaching displaced people in many ethnic enclaves, and its forces targeted and destroyed religious sites throughout the year with airstrikes, shelling, and arson—killing more than 100 religious clergy and civilians sheltering in these places of worship. It continued to [deliberately](#) assault religious communities across the war-ridden nation to instill fear and retaliate against any potential resistance.

In January, the Tatmadaw launched airstrikes in the Sagaing region, killing 17 worshipers—including nine children—at the St. Peter Baptist Church in Kanan village. In April, a warplane bombed a Buddhist monastery sheltering displaced civilians in Karen State's Papun town, resulting in eight deaths and 15 injuries. One month later, an airstrike targeting a monastery in Ahkyipanpalun village in the Magway region killed a monk and 14 children. Other deadly attacks targeted churches, religious schools, monasteries, and pagodas in the Bago and Mandalay regions, as well as Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Rakhine, and Shan states. Human rights groups and activists called for investigations into these attacks on civilians and religious sites as war crimes.

The Tatmadaw reportedly continued to target clergy, especially those it suspected of ties to resistance forces. In April, amid intensified conflict between the Tatmadaw and local resistance forces,

two masked gunmen—likely military-linked—shot and seriously injured a Catholic priest who celebrated Mass at the St. Patrick's Church in Mohnyin town, Kachin State. In June, the military shot dead two Buddhist monks in Mandalay, causing hundreds of monks and laypersons to organize a mass protest against the military-run government known as the State Administration Council (SAC).

While ostensibly proclaiming itself the protector of Theravada Buddhism and the Bamar ethnic group, the SAC desecrated Buddhist sites, reportedly killing and sexually assaulting civilians. In May, the Tatmadaw gunned down 33 people sheltering at two Buddhist monasteries at Lethtoketaw village in the Sagaing region. Since August, the military and allied Shanni Nationalities Army have also detained 140 people at a monastery in Indaw township, Sagaing region, reportedly raping dozens of female detainees.

As of December, the SAC detained at least 128 religious persons, including 113 monks, one imam, and 14 Christians. In April, the Tatmadaw granted amnesty to Rev. [Hkalam Samson](#), a former leader of the Kachin Baptist Convention, but re-arrested him hours later and again released him in July. In November, the SAC arrested and held Burmese American monk U Pinnya Zawta in Insein Prison during his visit to Yangon for religious purposes, accusing him of defamation, "terrorism," and violating immigration law.

Escalated [fighting](#) between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State resulted in renewed displacement of thousands of mainly Rohingya Muslim civilians while also impacting Hindu and ethnic Rakhine communities. The military's targeted atrocities against predominately Muslim Rohingya, including beheadings and the burning of their homes, led United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres to [call for](#) accountability for those responsible for the violence.

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 National Unity Government, ethnic armed organizations, and prodemocracy organizations—as outlined in the BURMA Act of 2022—and establish respect for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including voluntary repatriation and restored citizenship for the Rohingya

community, as a prerequisite for recognition and/or ongoing and substantial engagement;

- Work with the governments of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand to assist Rohingya and other refugee communities from Burma in receiving aid, livelihood training, and education; and
- Extend and redesignate Burma for [Temporary Protected Status](#) (TPS) after that designation [expires](#) on November 25, 2025, if the country's human rights situation remains dire.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reintroduce and pass legislative efforts, such as the BRAVE Burma Act ([H.R. 8863](#)), to bring targeted sanctions against members of the junta and limit its ability to use military aircraft on civilians; and
- Hold hearings on Burma's religious freedom and human rights issues, including sanctions considerations, through the U.S. Congressional Caucus on Burma and relevant congressional committees.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [A Disintegrating Nation and Adverse Impact on Religious Freedom](#)
- **Special Report:** [Revisiting the CPC Designation: Improving Accountability and Engaging Productively to Advance Religious Freedom Abroad](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Approximately [88 percent](#) of Burma's population practice Theravada Buddhism. Christians— primarily Baptists, Catholics, and Anglicans— comprise around six percent, while Muslims (excluding Rohingya, due to unavailable data) represent around four percent. Additionally, small communities of Hindus, Jews, adherents of traditional Chinese religions, and animists live in the country. While the constitution does not endorse any state religion, it grants Buddhism a special status. The surge of ultra-nationalist Buddhist ideology in recent years, which receives support from the Tatmadaw's goal to "protect Buddhism" from outside threats, has fueled anti-Muslim violence and intensified interreligious tensions in the country.

Since the successful launch of a joint counteroffensive by resistance groups and ethnic armed organizations in October 2023, the SAC has reportedly lost control of 86 percent of the country's territory. It imposed a conscription law in February to fill the military's depleted ranks, drafting Burmese men from ages 18 to 35 and women from 18 to 27 into the armed forces for two years. The SAC has attempted to target Rohingya men for conscription despite long denying that community citizenship. Caught between the rebel AA and the Tatmadaw, Rohingya men have faced persecution from both sides as militias, too, have reportedly attempted to forcibly recruit Rohingya men through threats and abduction.

International Efforts toward Accountability

International efforts to hold accountable those responsible for FoRB violations, human rights abuses, and atrocities in Burma continued to evolve in 2024. These include the [case](#) of *The Gambia vs. Myanmar* at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as well as criminal proceedings in Argentina and the [Philippines](#). In June, the Argentine prosecutor petitioned the Federal Criminal Court to issue 25 arrest [warrants](#) for Burmese officials who committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya population. In July, the ICJ unanimously agreed to permit Maldives, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) to intervene in *The Gambia's* ongoing genocide case against Burma. Slovenia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgium, and Ireland also [filed](#) declarations of intervention in the ICJ proceedings later in the year.

The UN also continued to raise concerns about the worsening situation in Burma. In April, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva [adopted](#) a resolution to extend the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Burma. On the same day, senior UN officials [urged](#) the UN Security Council to call for an immediate end to violence, the release of [arbitrarily detained](#) prisoners, and improved humanitarian access. In September, the head of the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar, Nicholas Koumjian, presented the group's annual [report](#) to the UNHRC and

[called](#) on UN member states to end the downward cycle of impunity in Burma.

In October, Canada, the European Union, and the United Kingdom announced the imposition of further sanctions on the Tatmadaw, targeting six entities involved in providing it aviation fuel or restricted goods, including aircraft parts. The United States had previously sanctioned two of those same entities. In November, the International Criminal Court sought an arrest warrant for the Tatmadaw's military chief, Min Aung Hlaing, in connection to his crimes against humanity for deporting and persecuting predominantly Muslim Rohingya.

Key U.S. Policy

The BURMA Act, as included in the 2023 [National Defense Authorization Act](#), continued to guide the U.S. government's engagement with Burma, especially in relation to resistance forces. In January, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned two entities closely associated with Burma's military and four "cronies." In February, then President Joseph R. Biden [extended](#) Executive Order 14014, maintaining the national emergency with respect to the situation in Burma. In December, the U.S. Department of Commerce [added](#) two companies to its Entity List for their role in arming the military and enabling attacks on the civilian population.

In March, then U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas announced the 18-month extension and redesignation of Burma for TPS, through November 25, 2025. In October, then U.S. Ambassador at Large for Global Criminal Justice Beth Van Schaack [traveled](#) to Bangkok to discuss justice and accountability for victims of atrocities in Burma with the Government of Thailand. Also in October, during the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-U.S. Summit and the East Asia Summit in Laos, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [expressed](#) support for the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on Burma and called on the Tatmadaw to end the violence and engage in inclusive dialogue. In September, the United States further [announced](#) nearly \$199 million in additional humanitarian assistance to address the needs of Rohingya refugees and their host communities in Bangladesh and the region.

In February, Representative Betty McCollum (DFL-MN) and Representative Bill Huizenga (R-MI) announced the [establishment](#) of the first-ever Congressional Caucus on Burma to foster congressional support for the Burmese people in their fight for democracy and human rights against the Tatmadaw and the SAC. In June, Representative Huizenga introduced the BRAVE Burma Act ([H.R. 8863](#)) to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis by cutting off the Tatmadaw from its primary sources of revenue.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Burma as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in China remained among the worst in the world. Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping continued to lead efforts to update and enforce China’s “[sinicization of religion](#)” policy, which requires the complete loyalty and subordination of recognized religious groups to the CCP, its political ideology, and its policy agenda. February amendments to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulations reinforced sinicization policy and continued to impose stringent restrictions. In March, Ma Xingrui, CCP secretary of Xinjiang, insisted on sinicizing Islam in that province, calling it an “inevitable trend.”

China continued to use [high-tech surveillance](#) outside places of worship and other means to repress religious freedom throughout the country. It also weaponized transnational repression and disinformation by using emerging technologies to quash voices critical of the country’s religious freedom and related human rights violations. Chinese authorities threatened Uyghur and Tibetan diaspora communities with surveillance, blackmail, and threats against their families living in China to force them into silence. Authorities further promoted tourism to Xinjiang to whitewash its genocidal violations there and dismiss international criticism.

In August, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [acknowledged](#) the lack of progress on human rights for religious minorities in Xinjiang, citing existing problematic laws and policies, limited access to information, and fear of reprisals against individuals cooperating with the United Nations (UN). Authorities continued to imprison Uyghur Muslims for their religious activities, including for charitable contributions and religious instruction. In February, 96-year-old Imam Abidin Damollam died in prison while serving a nine-year sentence for allegedly “promoting religious extremism.”

Officials persisted in restricting religious activities of Tibetan Buddhists. Authorities reportedly banned admission of new monks at a monastery in Chamdo prefecture, prohibited religious activities during Saga Dawa in Lhasa, and forced residents to remove religious symbols displayed outside their homes in Sichuan Province. Authorities closed Tibetan monastery schools and enrolled students in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them, while police arrested and imprisoned Tibetan Buddhists for public and private [mentions](#) of the Dalai Lama. Authorities indicated that they intend to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession process and punish Tibetans who oppose.

Chinese authorities detained, forcibly disappeared, or refused to disclose the [whereabouts](#) of underground Catholic clergy who declined to join the state-controlled Catholic organization. Independent house church Protestants faced similar retribution from law enforcement for refusing to join the state-controlled Protestant organization, as police raided house churches and harassed, detained, fined, and imprisoned members on reportedly fabricated charges, including “fraud” and “subversion.” In January, a court sentenced Protestant Pastor [Kan Xiaoyong](#) to 14 years in prison on groundless allegations.

The government continued to target [Falun Gong practitioners](#), the Church of Almighty God (CAG), and other unrecognized religious groups as illegal “cults.” Falun Gong and CAG sources documented thousands of adherents—including Falun Gong practitioner [Xu Na](#) and CAG member [Mo Xiufeng](#)—who faced arrest, imprisonment, and mistreatment, including deaths resulting from abuse in custody.

Human rights activists continued to express concerns about Hong Kong’s new national security law, Article 23, and its impact on religious freedom. Some imprisoned Hong Kong activists have alleged that prison authorities deny them access to religious materials.

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);
 - Coordinate with international partners to sanction Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, including those engaging in transnational repression against religious minorities on behalf of the Chinese government as well as CCP officials who interfere in the Dalai Lama’s plan of succession; and
 - Work with like-minded partners to address China’s use of technology to
 - commit religious freedom violations by establishing binding multilateral export controls to counter China’s economic coercion, reduce economic and trade dependence on China, and diversify supply chains, including rules governing the development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies such as genetic sequencing and collection.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Consider legislation to tighten restrictions on China’s use of technologies that facilitate human rights abuses and suppression of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB),
 - including through amendments to the Uyghur Forced Labor Act and the Export Control Act of 2018;
 - Ban paid lobbying in the United States by agents representing the Chinese government and its state-affiliated commercial entities that undermine religious freedom and related human rights; and
 - Raise China’s religious freedom conditions through delegation visits, meetings, and hearings, including through the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, and Select Committee on the CCP.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Sinicization of Religion: China’s Coercive Religious Policy](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion of Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

According to U.S. government [estimates](#), 18 percent of China's 1.4 billion population are Buddhist (including Tibetan Buddhist), five percent are Christian, and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religious practices. Although China is officially an atheist state, the government formally recognizes five religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism—and regulates them through state-controlled religious organizations.

Sinicization

Religious groups who refuse to submit to the government's all-encompassing control over religious affairs face widespread [persecution](#). State-controlled religious organizations implement sinicization through intrusive oversight and "Five-Year Sinicization Work Plans" which emphasize loyalty and conformity to CCP ideological requirements. Authorities used sinicization as a pretext to commit gross religious freedom violations against ethnoreligious minorities, including predominantly Muslim Uyghurs, Hui Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists. Authorities forcibly sinicized many Hui Muslim mosques by replacing domes and minarets with Chinese-style pagodas and other CCP-approved architecture, including the Grand Mosque of Shadian. In Xinjiang, the government reportedly turned religious occasions into celebrations of communism, and it banned Muslims from fasting and breaking fasts collectively during Ramadan. State-controlled churches continued to push similar CCP subordination on Christian places of worship and religious activities among both clergy and laity. China also continued to prohibit minors from engaging in religious activities or receiving religious education.

International Accountability

In 2024, the UN Human Rights Council conducted its [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) of China. UN member states [urged](#) China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; respect FoRB; allow UN Special Procedures to visit Xinjiang and Tibet; repeal policies persecuting, discriminating against, and forcibly assimilating ethnoreligious minorities, including in Xinjiang and Tibet; and implement the OHCHR's 2022 [recommendations](#) for Xinjiang. In March, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called on China to implement the OHCHR and other UN bodies' recommendations to address fundamental rights violations, including in Xinjiang and Tibet. Human rights organizations accused several Western and Chinese companies of complicity in employing government-backed Uyghur forced labor in their supply chains.

Transnational Repression and Malign Activities

The Chinese government continued to engage in transnational repression against diaspora religious communities and activists with ties to China. In September, reporting emerged that pro-CCP diaspora groups with ties to the United Front Work Department and support from Chinese diplomats engaged in strategic, coordinated, and violent suppression of Uyghur, Tibetan, and Hong Kong activists protesting President Xi's 2023 visit to San Francisco. Chinese authorities

sought to crack down on diaspora activists and dissidents through collective punishment, such as targeting their families in China with intimidation, forced evictions, travel bans, and criminal proceedings.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. officials across the government regularly elevated religious freedom and other related human rights issues in China. In July, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on unnamed Chinese officials involved in repressing marginalized religious and ethnic communities in China. Both the State Department and Congress [condemned](#) China's persecution of Falun Gong and called for the release of FoRB prisoners, including [Jimmy Lai](#), [Ilham Tohti](#), [Gedhun Choekyi Nyima](#), and [Gulshan Abbas](#).

In January, the United States [participated](#) in China's UPR, joining its call for an end to transnational repression, forced assimilation, genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, and human rights abuses in Tibet and Inner Mongolia. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [raised](#) similar concerns during his trip to China in April. Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Senator Jeff Merkley (D-OR) [urged](#) then Secretary Blinken to impose a Level 4 travel advisory to Xinjiang due to China's ongoing genocide against Uyghurs and its promotion of tourism in the region.

Congress raised concerns about ongoing violations of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [blacklisted](#) additional China-based companies for [violating](#) the UFLPA. In September, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden [placed](#) new rules on the de minimis exemption following requests from [Congress](#) to curb such exemptions from China that violated the UFLPA. The administration also issued new [export controls](#) on advanced technologies to protect "national security and foreign policy interests." In December, Congress [renewed](#) the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act for another five years.

In July, federal prosecutors [indicted](#) U.S. citizen Ping Li for providing information to a Chinese state security official about U.S.-based Falun Gong practitioners. That same month, U.S. residents John Chen and Lin Feng [pleaded](#) guilty to charges in relation to similar Falun Gong targeting. In September, federal prosecutors [charged](#) Linda Sun, a former high-ranking New York State government employee, with several crimes, including failure to register as a foreign agent for China. The accused reportedly [prevented](#) the governor of New York from publicly addressing China's mass incarceration of Uyghurs based on feedback from a Chinese government official.

In March, the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva highlighted China's efforts to [erode](#) the "unique linguistic, cultural, and religious identity of Tibetans." In June, members of Congress met with the Dalai Lama in India, and U.S. administration officials met with him in New York in August. In July, then President Biden signed into law the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act ([S. 138](#)), which instructs the State Department to combat Chinese propaganda and disinformation about Tibetan institutions, including the Dalai Lama.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained dismal. The government supplemented its oppressive legal framework with legislation further restricting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), harassed religious leaders and congregations, and wrongfully imprisoned individuals for their peaceful religious activity.

In July, the Cuban Parliament approved the Citizenship Law, which empowers the government to strip Cuban citizenship from individuals if they reside abroad and engage in acts “contrary to the political, economic, or social interests” of the country. The provision’s broad language places individuals at risk of denationalization if the government perceives their peaceful religious activity as conflicting with national interests. In October, the Social Communication Law came into force, which tightly restricts the right to freedom of opinion and expression—including by prohibiting religious expression that the government perceives as untruthful or out of step with its ideology. These new laws supplement Decree Law 370 and the Cuban Penal Code that, respectively, threaten independent journalists reporting on religious freedom conditions with fines and property confiscation and criminalize “public disorder” and “resistance,” each of which may punish worshippers perceived as critical of the government.

The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), where the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) is housed, for legal registration. Registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory, and membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. As a result, members of unregistered religious groups, such as the Free Yoruba Association, regularly face interrogation, detention,

threats of prison sentences on false charges, and confiscation of property. Even if a religious organization is legally registered, the ORA exercises arbitrary control and requires permission for virtually any activity beyond regular worship services.

Throughout the year, the government drew on its vast domestic security and surveillance apparatus to harass religious leaders and worshippers. The Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police, and the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, among others, shared in this harassment. In March, prison authorities denied a political prisoner access to religious materials and prevented a priest from providing pastoral care to an ill hospital patient. In March and April, local officials arbitrarily prohibited Holy Week and Easter processions in various parts of the country. In May, authorities prohibited a Catholic priest from ringing church bells during a blackout to protest the Cuban government’s human rights violations. Throughout the year, the Cuban authorities prevented members of the Ladies in White, a peaceful protest group, from attending religious services on Sundays through harassment and arbitrary detentions.

FoRB prisoners remained arbitrarily imprisoned and subject to harsh treatment. [Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#), pastor of the independent Monte de Sion Church, remained imprisoned on a seven-year sentence for peacefully participating in July 2021 [protests](#) for greater freedom. In February, the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [found](#) Pastor Rosales Fajardo’s imprisonment arbitrary and in violation of numerous articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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);
- Impose Section 7031(c) visa bans against Cuban government officials who have engaged in gross human rights violations against the Ladies in White, unregistered religious groups such as the Free Yoruba Association, and FoRB prisoners profiled in USCIRF’s [Victims List](#) and publicly identify those sanctioned; and

- Convene a side event at the UN Human Rights Council on Cuba’s human rights violations against FoRB prisoners and unregistered religious groups to include following up on the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention’s [finding](#) about Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo’s wrongful imprisonment.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold hearings through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Tom Lantos Human

Rights Commission to highlight Cuban government violations against individuals engaging in peaceful religious activities, unregistered religious groups, and FoRB prisoners, with a focus on how U.S. policy should address these violations; and

- Hold biannual public calls through the bipartisan Cuba Democracy Caucus to explain how Section 7031(c) may be used to hold religious freedom violators in Cuba accountable and to solicit information that could lead to the imposition of visa bans.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

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 Roman Catholic. Estimates also indicate that Cuba is home to a variety of religious minorities that include Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Anabaptists, Quakers, Moravians, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, Jews, Rastafarians, and members of the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches. An [estimated](#) 70 percent of Cubans observe 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 constitution includes language that purports to protect FoRB, including through government recognition, respect, and guarantee of religious freedom. However, the same constitution allows any piece of legislation that is in force to override those same protections. The state tightly controls religious institutions through the ORA, including through registration requirements. The Cuban government also maintains close and cooperative ties with repressive regimes, including Russia and China. In 2024, the Cuban government announced that its police force will receive training in Russia; the police forces in both countries engage in particularly severe religious freedom violations.

Ladies in White

Cuban authorities used arbitrary detentions and other tactics to regularly prevent the Ladies in White, an organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, from attending religious services on Sundays. During such detentions, police subjected members of the group to beatings and unsanitary conditions in cells that lack necessities such as drinking water. In January, Cuban authorities arrested 20 members of the Ladies in White as they tried to peacefully attend church services, and they threatened to imprison Berta Soler, the group's leader. In February, police arbitrarily detained 16 members of the Ladies in White and more in March, including at least one whom they held for 18 hours and later fined. Such incidents continued with regular frequency throughout the year.

Harassment of Members of Unregistered Religious Groups

As Christian Solidarity Worldwide has reported, Cuban government officials harassed, intimidated, and fined members of unregistered religious groups. The ORA regularly and arbitrarily denied or failed

to respond to registration applications from religious groups. The government then used a lack of registration as a pretext to target unregistered religious groups. In March, authorities interrogated an Afro-Cuban religious leader because he conducted "illegal" religious activities in his home. They later fined him 10,000 pesos (\$415) for "providing spiritual services without the relevant permits." In another case, the pastor of an unregistered church received a fine of 30,000 pesos (\$1,245) for leading an "illegal, unregistered church."

FoRB Prisoners

The Cuban government continues to arbitrarily incarcerate FoRB prisoners, including worshipers who peacefully participated in the July 2021 protests for greater freedom and for relief from the country's economic crisis. Among those prisoners are [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), president of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association, and her husband [Loreto Hernández García](#), both of whom remained arbitrarily imprisoned at the end of the reporting period for their peaceful participation in those 2021 protests. Throughout García's confinement, prison authorities have denied him medical treatment he needs to manage several serious conditions. Family members seeking to visit other FoRB prisoners have also been subject to mistreatment, including interrogations and forced nudity. Twins [Lisdani Rodríguez Isaac](#) and [Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac](#), both members of the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were arrested and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment after their peaceful participation in the 2021 protests. However, Cuban authorities provided the former with a temporary release after she was diagnosed with a pregnancy-related medical condition.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's relationship with Cuba remains strained over human rights issues, although U.S. public efforts to promote religious freedom in the country were limited. In June, the U.S. government joined a multicountry [statement](#) through the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance on the arbitrary arrest, wrongful imprisonment, and violence against Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo. In July, the U.S. Department of State [commemorated](#) the July 2021 protests and called for the release of all those wrongfully imprisoned for their peaceful participation in the protests, some of whom are FoRB prisoners profiled in USCIRF's [Victims List](#). In December, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a [hearing](#) on Cuba's human rights violations.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically persecute individuals for their religious beliefs. It did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing religions other than the four that the government officially recognizes faced intimidation and prosecution. The government only recognizes the Tewahedo Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and evangelical Lutheran churches, along with Sunni Islam. Without formal registration, the government can prohibit religious communities 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 religion, including stripping of citizenship. The government used its diplomatic missions to intimidate members of the Eritrean diaspora who criticize its human rights abuses, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The Eritrean government continued to incarcerate FoRB prisoners under egregious conditions in dozens of facilities across the country, including police stations, civilian and military prisons, and undisclosed detention facilities. FoRB prisoners in Eritrea endure particularly severe mistreatment, including physical abuse, sexual violence, torture, and denial of medical treatment, sometimes resulting in death. Additionally, prison authorities pressure arrested individuals to renounce their faith and ban praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books. Many facilities are severely dilapidated concrete structures, while others are metal cargo containers that hold hundreds of prisoners or are simple holes in the ground.

As of May, over 350 Christians were imprisoned, including more than 80 whom authorities arrested during the first five months of the year. Another estimate places 10,000 prisoners of conscience of all types in over 300 facilities around the country. Government authorities targeted several communities, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and others, for persecution and arrest, calling them “agents of the West.” As in prior years, the government encouraged community surveillance of nontraditional Protestant Christians, labeling them “unpatriotic.” The state sometimes temporarily releases prisoners but re-arrests them if they do not renounce their faith and regularly report to authorities. Police at times arrest entire Christian families, including children, during the early morning hours. The month of May marked the 20th [anniversary](#) of the arrests of Pastors [Kiflu Gebremeskel](#) and [Haile Naizghe](#), both associated with the banned Full Gospel Church of Eritrea.

Sixty-three Jehovah’s Witnesses remained in prison as of October. The government incarcerates Jehovah’s Witnesses in both Mai Serwa or Adi Abeto prisons but rarely formally charges or sentences them. Authorities refused to meet with Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives to discuss the status of prisoners from that community. In September, police raided a private residence during worship and arrested 24 Jehovah’s Witnesses, including two children. Authorities sent three men over 80 years old and a pregnant woman from this group to Mai Serwa Prison. In October, Jehovah’s Witnesses marked the 30th anniversary of the Eritrean president’s 1994 revocation of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ citizenship, which resulted in the group’s subsequent ban and mass imprisonment for refusing on religious grounds to participate in the country’s independence referendum.

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);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government officials, including those in the police, judiciary, and correctional system, who are 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;
- Engage with the Eritrean government specifically to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities with the return of a nonmilitary, national service option for Jehovah’s Witnesses as a path toward gaining full citizenship; and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; and
- Support the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human

rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Committee of the Red Cross in their missions to advance the situation of at-risk religious minority communities in Eritrea.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea, with an emphasis on FoRB prisoners, through legislation, hearings, briefings, delegations, and other activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [Two Decades of Violations in Eritrea](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Eritrea has an estimated [population](#) of 6.3 million people. Approximately 51 percent of the population identifies as Sunni Muslim, 41 percent as Eritrean Orthodox, and five percent as Roman Catholic. Protestant and unaffiliated Christians, atheists and nonbelievers, indigenous practitioners of traditional religion, Shi'a Muslims, and Baha'is make up less than five percent of the population. The government allows the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic but nonfunctional synagogue in Asmara.

Eritrea acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in January 2002. The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to FoRB, while the law and constitution both ostensibly prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. However, the government regularly violates these rights in practice, favoring certain denominations when applying registration requirements and obstructing the religious practices of minority groups. The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice party engages in coercion, intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and killing as part of a strategy to divide and control different religious groups.

Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 permits the government to exert full control over religious activities in the country by separating political and faith-based affairs, and it grants the state the right to regulate religious institutions. The law also strictly limits foreign financial resources for churches, only allowing local donations. Furthermore, the law institutionalizes formal scrutiny of faith-based groups using an Office of Religious Affairs, which itself requires religious groups to register with the government or cease activities.

Conscientious Objection

The government justifies some detentions of Jehovah's Witnesses on the basis of their refusal to serve in the military and imposes egregiously long sentences on community members who conscientiously object on religious grounds. Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 are subject to forced conscription and must serve in the military for 18 months, and there is no national service alternative to military duty. Authorities, however, grant exemptions to service to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. The government uses military draft mobilization drives, called *giffas*, in or near larger cities. Authorities often make conscripted young people serve far longer than their 18 months of mandatory service, and they harass the family members of those who seek to evade military service by enforcing severe penalties on them.

Multilateral Observations of Religious Freedom Violations in Eritrea

International organizations confirm the presence of particularly severe religious freedom violations in Eritrea. In February, UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Ilze Brand-Kehris reported that the Eritrean government holds an "iron grip on its people using widespread repression and systematic impunity for grave human rights violations." She [delivered](#) a statement to the UN Human Rights Council, reporting that "our office continues to receive credible reports of torture; arbitrary detention; inhumane conditions of detention; enforced disappearances; restrictions of the rights to freedoms of expression, of association, and of peaceful assembly." Brand-Kehris raised further concerns over "numerous reports of dissenting voices being subjected to systematic repression and silencing, including through the detention or enforced disappearance of thousands of religious leaders and members of religious groups . . . evading mandatory and indefinite military service." In March, the Eritrean government responded to the speech, claiming without evidence that the reports were unsubstantiated. In June, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea Mohamed Babiker [reported](#) to the Human Rights Council that the Eritrean government continues to "use arbitrary and incommunicado detention, ongoing enforced disappearances, indefinite military or national service that amounts to forced labor and is linked to torture, and systemic repression of fundamental freedoms."

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has diplomatic relations with the Eritrean government and maintains an embassy in the capital Asmara, but the two governments have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. At the same time, the Eritrean economy remained [closed](#) to American investment and trade due to existing economic sanctions, the lack of an Eritrean commercial code, little connectivity with international financial systems except for government-to-government transactions, and strict government control of all imports and exports. In 2024, the regime continued to maintain strong bilateral ties with China and Russia, reflected in a five-day Russian naval delegation visit to the Massawa port in April. That same month, the Eritrean government declared that the United States used UN resolutions to prevent the Eritrean anti-colonial independence movement for decades because independence "overrode U.S. strategic interests." In May, in its official statement at the Universal Periodic Review of Eritrea, the U.S. government [recommended](#) that Eritrea "allow country visits by the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and cooperate with international human rights mechanisms" and release those arbitrarily detained for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, "including the[ir] inability to conscientiously object to Eritrea's compulsory, indefinite national service."

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate as attacks and discrimination against [religious minorities](#) continued to rise. Prior to national elections in June, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) members, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, propagated hateful rhetoric and disinformation against Muslims and other religious minorities to gather political support. Such rhetoric fueled attacks on religious minorities that continued after the election, including vigilante violence, targeted and arbitrary killings, and demolition of property and places of worship. Authorities continued to exploit antiterror and financing laws, including the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) to crack down on civil society organizations and detain members of religious minorities, human rights defenders, and journalists reporting on religious freedom. The government also replaced its criminal code with new legislation, leaving religious minorities susceptible to targeting if it deemed them as “endangering the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India.”

In March, the BJP introduced rules for implementing the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), [offering](#) fast-track citizenship to non-Muslim minorities fleeing Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Several individuals remained in detention under the UAPA for peacefully protesting the CAA in 2019, including [Umar Khalid](#), [Meeran Haider](#), and [Sharjeel Imam](#). In combination with the National Register of Citizens (NRC), requiring all residents to provide proof of citizenship, the CAA sparked fear among Muslim communities that the authorities may strip them of their citizenship—as in July, when Foreigners’ Tribunals in Assam declared 28 Muslims “non-citizens” and sent them to deportation centers.

Throughout the year, various authorities, including the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), facilitated the expropriation and demolition of places of worship, including the construction of Hindu

temples atop razed mosques. Notably, in January, Prime Minister Modi led the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, which stands on the ruins of the Babri Masjid that a Hindu mob demolished in 1992. Following the consecration, attacks against religious minorities erupted across six states. Authorities also repeatedly violated Section 295 of India’s Penal Code, which criminalizes the destruction or damage of houses of worship, by bulldozing Muslim-owned property including mosques deemed “illegal.”

Authorities wielded discriminatory state-level anti-conversion laws and cow slaughter laws to target religious minorities. In June and July, police in Uttar Pradesh detained 20 Christians, including four pastors, under accusations of violating the state’s anti-conversion law. In July, the Uttar Pradesh government tabled a bill to strengthen that law, expanding punishment for conversion to life imprisonment, allowing anyone to file a First Instance Report (FIR) against suspected violators, and making religious conversion a nonbailable offense. Uttar Pradesh’s High Court subsequently sentenced Muslim cleric Kalim Siddiqui and 11 others to life in prison for allegedly participating in forced conversions. Additionally, Uttarakhand passed a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill requiring registration and allowing for greater policing of interfaith couples.

The Indian government also continued to expand its repressive tactics to target religious minorities abroad, specifically members of the Sikh community and their advocates. Journalists, academics, and civil society organizations documenting India’s religious freedom violations reported denial of consular services, including the revocation of Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards as well as threats of violence and surveillance. International reporting and intelligence from the Canadian government corroborated allegations linking an official in India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and six diplomats to the 2023 assassination attempt of an American Sikh activist in New York.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate India as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA):
 - Encourage the U.S. Embassy and consulates to incorporate religious freedom into public statements and speeches, as outlined in the U.S. Department of State’s [Guidelines to Support Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders](#).
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities, such as Vikash Yadav and RAW, for their culpability in severe violations of religious freedom by freezing their assets and/or barring their entry into the United States; and
 - government targeting religious minorities in the United States;
 - Conduct a [review](#) assessing whether arms sales to India, such as [MQ-9B Drones](#) under Section 36 of the [Arms Export Control Act](#), may contribute to or exacerbate religious freedom violations; and
 - Request and prioritize meetings with religious minority communities and faith-based civil society organizations during congressional delegations to India.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reintroduce, pass, and enforce the [Transnational Repression Reporting Act of 2024](#) to ensure the annual reporting of acts of transnational repression by the Indian

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Increasing Abuses against Religious Minorities in India](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Raises Alarm Over India’s Exclusionary Citizenship Amendment Act During Congressional Hearing](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

India is the world's largest democracy, with an estimated population of 1.4 billion. The majority 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 Jews. Article 25 of India's constitution grants all individuals freedom of conscience, including the right to practice, profess, and propagate religion.

The BJP has led the Indian government since 2014 and was reelected in June. Throughout its 10 years in power, it has increasingly enforced sectarian policies seeking to establish India as an overtly Hindu state, in contrast with the secular principles of the constitution.

Hate Speech, Misinformation, and Disinformation

Ahead of the June elections, government officials wielded hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric against Muslims and other religious minorities. Prime Minister Modi repeatedly claimed that the opposition party would "wipe out [the] Hindu faith from the country" and he referred to Muslims as "infiltrators." Union Home Minister Amit Shah similarly claimed that opposition leaders would impose Shari'a if elected—despite the fact that the opposition election manifesto included no such mention. Such misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech by government officials frequently fueled and incited various forms of attacks against religious minorities. Attacks against Muslims in Mira Road, for example, erupted following inflammatory speeches by two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Nitesh Rane and Geeta Jain.

Anti-Conversion Laws

Throughout the year, 12 out of 28 states attempted to introduce or strengthen existing [anti-conversion laws](#). In February, the state of Chhattisgarh announced it would introduce legislation to address "illegal conversion," claiming that Christian pastors forcibly converted Hindus. The Assam government similarly passed the Assam Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Bill, banning individuals or groups from performing "nonscientific" healing, such as prayer, to treat illnesses. In April the government of Gujarat issued a circular mandating that Hindus wishing to convert to Buddhism, Sikhism, or Jainism obtain approval from their district magistrate under the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act.

In June, the BJP-led government in Rajasthan withdrew its 2008 anti-conversion law in favor of new legislation aimed at "curbing alleged cases of 'love jihad,'" a harmful conspiracy theory that disproportionately impacts Muslims. Similarly, Assam's Chief Minister announced in August that his government was drafting a law to ensure stricter punishment for "love-jihad," including life in prison. Authorities in Uttar Pradesh enforced such harsh punishments, as a fast-track court sentenced a 25-year-old Muslim man to life in prison for allegedly conducting religious conversions.

Attacks against Religious Minorities

In 2024, violent attacks against religious minorities and places of worship persisted with impunity. In August, a Hindu mob of over 200 people attacked 18 Christian families in Chhattisgarh as police did not intervene. In December, eight village councils in Chhattisgarh passed a joint resolution requiring Christians to renounce their faith or leave the village. In the northeastern state of Manipur, deadly clashes between the Christian Kuki community and the majority Hindu Meitei community contributed to a hostile climate that prevented religious communities from congregating. In November, four individuals were killed in Uttar Pradesh following a dispute over whether a 16th century mosque was built over the site of a Hindu temple.

Additionally, Muslims continued to face communal violence under the guise of imposing cow slaughter laws. An estimated dozen attacks involving "cow vigilantism" took place following national elections, including one in August in which a group of cow vigilantes beat a Muslim migrant worker to death, falsely accusing him of eating beef. A day later, a group of Hindu men violently attacked a 72-year-old Muslim man because they believed he was carrying beef in his bag. The same month, a group of "cow protectors" shot and killed a 19-year-old Hindu student, believing he was a Muslim smuggling cows.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the U.S. and Indian governments continued to strengthen their bilateral relationship, despite [concerns](#) over religious freedom violations. In February, then Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Chair Ben Cardin (D-NJ) [considered](#) placing a hold on the sale of MQ-9 drones to India in response to that country's use of transnational repression. In March, then State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller [expressed](#) concern about the CAA. Additionally, during a September SFRC [hearing](#) on laws against nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) criticized India's use of the FCRA to restrict NGOs from receiving foreign funding.

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) continued its investigation into the 2023 plot to kill a U.S.-based Indian American Sikh activist. In September, a New York district court issued summons to the Indian government's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and former RAW chief Samant Goel. In October, DOJ published a second [indictment](#), alleging the involvement of an Indian government employee, Vikash Yadav, in the assassination attempt. The same month, India's Enquiry Committee [traveled](#) to Washington, D.C. as part of the ongoing investigation.

In September, then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to India to co-chair the [U.S. India 2+2 Dialogue](#); he [returned](#) to the country in December to discuss security and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Later that month, then President Joseph R. Biden hosted members of the Quad, including Prime Minister Modi. The [agenda](#) focused on addressing natural disasters, technology, and health security but failed to address human rights issues in depth.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained poor, particularly for religious minorities, religious dissidents, and women and girls. Authorities subjected prisoners detained on religious grounds to torture and severe punishment, including by denying them [medical care](#). The government also continued to systematically harass, intimidate, and target religious minorities through its arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, forced closure of businesses, destruction of property, and promotion of online hate speech.

Iran’s government carried out over 900 [executions](#) in 2024 and issued scores of [death sentences](#) for religiously based charges. In January, authorities executed [Mohammed Ghobadlou](#) on charges of “corruption on Earth” and “waging war against God” for participating in the 2022 protests against the government’s religiously oppressive policies. In May, authorities executed Sunni Muslim Khosrow Besharat on the same charges, after he had already served 14 years in prison. In August, the government [executed Reza Rasaei](#), a member of the Yarsani religious minority, for his religious association and involvement in the 2022 protests. In November, authorities hanged Arvin Ghahremani, a 20-year-old Iranian Jew, for killing a Muslim in apparent self-defense, despite irregular judicial proceedings because of his religion.

The government continued targeting Sunni Muslims through executions, arrests, disappearances of prominent clergy, destruction of homes, and denial of building permits. In August, the Special Clerical Court in Hamedan issued Sunni cleric Mamusta Saber Khodamoradi a 15-month sentence for “propaganda against the state.” In July, authorities reportedly attacked a Sufi house of worship in Saqqez, killing three. In June, Vakilaband Prison authorities denied medical treatment to [Farzaneh Gharehassanlou](#) in response

to her hunger strike protesting the deliberate medical mistreatment of prisoners arrested for objecting to mandatory hijab laws. In July, after rejecting multiple requests for a retrial, Judge Abbasali Houzan of the Tehran Court of Appeals sentenced [Neda Fotouhi](#), a follower of the Erfan-e-Halgheh movement, to nearly seven years in prison for her religious identity and participation in protests.

In April, the government launched the “Nour” campaign, which intensified its [crackdown](#) on women and girls dissenting from the country’s religiously grounded mandatory hijab laws. Morality police violently arrested and assaulted women not in compliance with these regulations and also penalized businesses that allowed patronage by women not wearing the hijab. In July, authorities shot and paralyzed Arezoo Badri after using closed-circuit television footage to identify her and other women who were driving without a hijab. In September, the United Nations (UN) Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Iran released a [report](#) criticizing the government for “endorsing human rights violations against women and girls” dissenting from mandatory hijab laws. In November, UN Special Rapporteur on Iran Mai Sato [called](#) for the release of [Ahoon Daryaei](#), a university student whom authorities assaulted and arrested after she publicly disrobed down to her undergarments in protest of the country’s hijab laws. In December, Iran’s National Security Council announced a [pause](#) on the implementation of a new law that the Islamic Consultative Assembly had passed to expand penalties for all Iranian women who refuse to comply with hijab laws, following a call from [UN experts](#) to repeal it.

Iran’s government also continued to engage in transnational repression, harassing religious dissidents abroad and reportedly recruiting organized crime networks to violently attack Jewish sites in Sweden and Denmark.

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);
 - Work with like-minded governments, as well as multilateral organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, to impose coordinated sanctions against judges presiding over freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)-related cases and security forces leaders violently enforcing hijab laws and to stem the flow of surveillance technology and weapons platforms used to suppress peaceful religious expression in Iran; and
 - Support the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran and other international accountability mechanisms to investigate the government’s possible culpability for crimes against humanity by systematically targeting those asserting their freedom of religion or belief.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Permanently reauthorize and exercise oversight of the bipartisan [Lautenberg Amendment](#), which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States; and
 - Hold hearings through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission about Iran’s and its proxies’ transnational repression and other malign activities impacting religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Condemns Severe Medical Mistreatment of Imprisoned Gonabadi Sufi in Iran](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls for Additional Sanctions amidst New Harsh Enforcement of Iran’s Mandatory Hijab Law](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls for Accountability for Iran’s Crimes against Humanity](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state with limited participatory governance under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Around 90 to 95 percent of Iran's population of nearly 88.4 million is Shi'a Muslim, while Sunni Muslims account for five to 10 percent. Approximately 0.3 percent of the population identifies as non-Muslim, including adherents of the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. While the Ja'fari school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution ostensibly extends respect to the four major schools of Sunni thought and designates some Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected minorities. Five of the Parliament's 290 seats are reserved for recognized religious minorities—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyro-Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Iran is also home to several smaller, persecuted religious groups, including Mandeans, Yarsanis, nonbelievers, and spiritualist movements such as Erfan-e Halgheh.

Baha'is

Authorities conducted raids and arrests of Baha'is across Iran throughout the year, including the seizure, confiscation, and destruction of their farmland. In September, Judge Mehdi Raskhi from Branch 3 of the Rasht Revolutionary Court sentenced [Mojgan Samimi](#) to two years in prison and a fine for "promoting the Baha'i faith." In October, judicial authorities overturned the appeal of [Payam Vali](#), detained since 2022 for speaking about persecution of Baha'is. Throughout the year, authorities further restricted Baha'i access to cemeteries, razed their gravestones in the Khavaran cemetery, and tolerated vandalism at the community's Semnan cemetery. In August, assailants set fire to a Baha'i cemetery in Ahvaz, and the government pursued no formal investigation into the incident.

The government has particularly targeted Baha'i women, including sentencing 10 in October for "propaganda against the Islamic Republic" and "promotional activities against Islamic Shari'a." In January, the Revolutionary Court of Semnan affirmed [Shahdokht Khanjani's](#) 11-year sentence for "forming groups to act against national security" and deemed that charge inseparable from "propagating the Baha'i sect." In November, security forces arrested 11 Baha'is in Isfahan, and in December, authorities transferred former Baha'i leader [Mahvash Sabet](#)—serving a 10-year sentence alongside [Fariba Kamalabadi](#) for leading an "illegal group"—from Evin Prison to a hospital for open-heart surgery.

Jews and State Antisemitism

In March, assailants threw Molotov cocktails at the Tomb of Mordecai and Esther, a historic Jewish religious site, but the government pursued no formal investigation. During Iran's 2024 presidential election, authorities reportedly set up Jewish-only ballot stations to identify how many Jews voted and for whom. In July, assailants vandalized the historic Jewish Giliard cemetery. In November, an Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) official speaking on a state-owned media channel claimed that "the holy Qur'an . . . says that the Jews are our biggest enemies" and held Jews collectively responsible for Israeli actions in Gaza. Also in November, Iran's Deputy President for Strategic Affairs Javad Zarif claimed that Israel "cannot represent

Judaism" since it "does not uphold the 10 Commandments" and admonished Jews to save their faith "from Zionist forgeries." Zarif also described Israel as the "reincarnation of the darkness of Nazism." The government's antisemitic rhetoric not only continued to threaten Jews in Iran but also legitimized criminal networks' targeting of Jewish sites around the world, particularly in Europe.

Christians

Although a Tehran appeals court released Pastor [Anooshavan Avedian](#) and Christian convert Mehdi Akbari in September after overturning spurious national security charges against them, at least 21 Christians remained imprisoned in Iran. In January, a court sentenced Armenian Christian [Hakop Gochumyan](#) to 10 years in prison for "engaging in deviant proselytizing activity" and leadership in "a network of evangelical Christianity." That same month, authorities summoned 60-year-old Christian convert Mina Khajavi to begin a six-year prison sentence for "promoting Zionist Christianity." Judicial authorities sentenced Christian convert Laleh Saati to two years in prison in March and eight Christians from Izeh to decades in prison in June for their religious activity and—in an effort to broadly link Christians to Israel—promotion of so-called "Zionist" Christianity. In August, a Bandar Anzali court detained and later released Christian converts on charges related to allegedly insulting "divine religions or Islamic schools of thought" for attending a 2022 Christmas gathering. Authorities released one of the detainees, Pastor Abdolreza Ali-Haghejad, in December. In September, security officials arrested three Christian converts in Nowshahr and continued to hold them incommunicado by the end of the year.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government [raised](#) religious freedom [concerns](#) in Iran throughout 2024. In March, Congress [reauthorized](#) the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment. In April, the United States [co-sponsored](#) a UN resolution to renew mandates of the Special Rapporteur and Fact-Finding Mission on the human rights situation in Iran. That month, then President Joseph R. Biden [signed](#) into law the MAHSA Act—named for Mahsa Zhina Amini—which, if enforced, would impose sanctions on top leaders and entities responsible for human rights violations. In May, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [updated](#) the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR) by clarifying General Sanctions License D-2, which gives a waiver to technology companies seeking to help Iranians coordinate protests against FoRB restrictions and related human rights violations. In August, Representatives Eric Swalwell (D-CA) and Claudia Tenney (R-NY) introduced the IRAN Act ([H.R. 9299](#)), which would mandate a comprehensive strategy to promote internet freedom in Iran, and then Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and Senator James Lankford (R-OK) [introduced](#) similar legislation in September. Neither bill passed before the conclusion of the 118th Congress. In December, the Senate unanimously adopted a bipartisan [resolution](#) condemning Iran's state-backed persecution of Baha'is.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

NICARAGUA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained abysmal. The government of President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo continued its crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arbitrarily arresting, imprisoning, and exiling religious leaders and adherents, canceling the legal status of religious organizations, and harassing and intimidating worshipers. In February, the United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) corroborated this downward trajectory by reporting that these particularly severe violations have “moved the authorities closer to their goal of removing the obstacle of organized Christian voices critical of the government.”

These concerning trends were evident in a series of arrests and deportations during the year. In March, authorities arbitrarily sentenced 11 pastors affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry to 12 to 15 years’ imprisonment and fined each of them around three billion cordobas (\$80 million) on spurious money laundering charges. The government then exiled all 11 pastors and additional FoRB prisoners to Guatemala, including former Catholic university students [Adela Tercero](#) and [Gabriela Morales](#) as well as journalist [Victor Ticay](#). Congressional [advocacy](#) and U.S. Department of State [engagement](#) were key to the pastors’ later release. In August, authorities arrested several Catholic clergy members without explanation and exiled them to the Vatican. In November, the government arbitrarily arrested and exiled Bishop Carlos Herrera to Guatemala, and it ordered all nuns remaining in Nicaragua to leave the country by December.

The Ortega-Murillo regime continued to target religious charitable and educational organizations that it viewed as opponents. It arbitrarily canceled the legal status of a variety of Catholic and Evangelical organizations in January and that of Radio Maria, a Catholic broadcasting company, in July. In August, authorities canceled the legal status of 1,500 nongovernmental organizations, many of which were religious in nature. That same month, authorities arbitrarily canceled the legal status of Caritas of Matagalpa, a Catholic charitable organization. The government often seizes and repurposes related property following such cancellations.

The government continued to employ a variety of tactics to intimidate Christian worshipers and impede their peaceful religious practices. It arbitrarily prohibited many religious observances and processions, including deploying approximately 4,000 police officers to Catholic churches around the country in March to prevent public Holy Week processions. In May, police interrogated and searched pilgrims traveling to the National Sanctuary of the Virgin of Cuapa, preventing some from reaching the sanctuary. In November, authorities prohibited congregants in Masatepe from observing All Souls’ Day.

The Ortega-Murillo regime also harassed religious leaders and worshipers through threats, conspicuous monitoring of religious services, and acts of vandalism, including against members of the primarily indigenous [Moravian Church](#). Vice President Murillo has repeatedly mocked and derided religious leaders and worshipers facing imprisonment and exile, calling them “evil,” “servants of Satan,” and “false representatives of God.”

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);
- Lead efforts to renew the UNGHREN’s mandate at the UN Human Rights Council and publicly invite the UNGHREN to conduct a delegation to the United States to consult with U.S. policymakers on holding Nicaraguan government officials accountable for repression of FoRB;
- Impose financial sanctions, pursuant to Executive Order 13851 and Section 203 of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), against Nicaraguan officials responsible for exiling religious adherents, and investigate whether any Nicaraguan government entities

associated with religious freedom violations maintain property in the United States, including in association with the Instituto de Previsión Social Militar; and

- Work with like-minded Organization of American States (OAS) member states to provide humanitarian protection to victims of FoRB violations, including those who were exiled to third countries and stripped of their Nicaraguan citizenship.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold hearings through the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and/or the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere on the Nicaraguan government’s religious freedom violations against specific communities, including against the primarily indigenous Moravian Church;

- Reintroduce and pass legislation to advance religious freedom in Nicaragua, 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’ assistance to Nicaragua except under limited conditions; and
- Release statements on religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua through a revitalized, bipartisan International Religious Freedom Caucus, including calling for investigations into whether any Nicaraguan government entities associated with religious freedom violations maintain property in the United States and recognizing the anniversary of the September 5 exile of Nicaraguan FoRB prisoners to Guatemala.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Nicaragua’s Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities](#)
- **Hearing:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

President Daniel Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua, while his wife, Rosario Murillo, serves as vice president; they and their party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government. As part of its effort to maintain a stranglehold on power, the Ortega-Murillo regime has used repressive laws on cybercrime, money laundering, registration requirements for not-for-profit organizations, and sovereignty to provide legal pretext for the government's particularly severe religious freedom violations.

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

Denationalization and Entry Denial

The Ortega-Murillo regime stripped Nicaraguan citizenship from many religious leaders and religious adherents to punish them for engaging in peaceful religious activities and to eradicate potential sources of opposition. In January, the government exiled Bishop [Rolando Álvarez](#) to the Vatican after wrongfully imprisoning him since 2022 and stripping him of citizenship for criticizing its actions. In September, authorities exiled 135 political prisoners to Guatemala, seized their property, and stripped them of their citizenship. Among them were many FoRB prisoners, including [Carlos Alberto Bojorge Martínez](#), a layman whom the government had imprisoned for peacefully voicing opposition to its crackdown on the Catholic Church; [Freddy Quezada](#), a professor imprisoned for criticizing the government's treatment of Bishop Álvarez; and the 11 Mountain Gateway Ministry pastors. In addition, the government arbitrarily prohibited many religious leaders and religious adherents from entering the country, including by prohibiting a Catholic priest and member of the indigenous Miskito community from returning to the country in July.

The government's denationalization of and entry denials against perceived opponents left many religious leaders and adherents stateless, cut off from support networks and resources, and deprived of essential legal documentation, including birth records. As part of this abusive process, authorities permanently deleted from the civil register many of those victims' legal records.

International Accountability

International organizations condemned Nicaragua's religious freedom violations throughout the year, calling for accountability for violators. In February, the UNGHREN released a [report](#) reiterating that the Ortega-Murillo regime's widespread violations amount to crimes against humanity. In September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a [report](#) noting that human rights and religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua "continued to seriously deteriorate." In November, the UNGHREN released another [report](#) condemning the Nicaraguan government's violations against academic freedom, including against religious educational institutions and their students.

The OAS and its autonomous human rights body, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), closely monitored religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua. In January, the IACHR [welcomed](#) the release of Bishop [Álvarez](#) from prison but deplored his arbitrary expulsion from Nicaragua. In April, the IACHR [granted](#) precautionary measures to the 11 pastors affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry following their wrongful imprisonment. In June, the OAS General Assembly adopted a resolution expressing deep concern about the violations occurring in Nicaragua and mandating that the IACHR continue monitoring the human rights situation in the country. In July, the IACHR's Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression [noted](#) concern regarding the arbitrary closure of media outlets, including a Catholic radio station. In August, the IACHR [urged](#) the Nicaraguan government to "immediately cease the widespread repression and religious persecution in the country."

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the State Department [imposed](#) visa sanctions on over 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials responsible for human rights violations, while the U.S. Mission to International Organizations in Geneva [welcomed](#) the UNGHREN's related report that same month. In March, the State Department [imposed](#) restrictions on the import and export of U.S.-origin defense articles and services destined for or originating in Nicaragua, while the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Nicaragua's attorney general for her complicity in the regime's oppressive actions. In May, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on 250 members of the Nicaraguan government for supporting human rights violations in the country, and the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) a Nicaragua-based subdivision of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Internal Affairs that trains Nicaraguan authorities on techniques of repression. In September, the State Department [secured](#) the release of 135 political prisoners, including many FoRB prisoners. In November, the State Department [imposed](#) visa restrictions on over 350 members of the Nicaraguan National Police. Also in November, then President Joseph R. Biden extended for one year [Executive Order 13851](#), which declares a national emergency with respect to the human rights conditions in Nicaragua. The declaration grants the president the authority to impose financial sanctions against and investigate the property interests of Nicaragua government officials and entities. In December, the State Department [imposed](#) visa sanctions on Nicaraguan government officials responsible for canceling the legal status of and seizing property from the Jesuit-run University of Central America, among other independent educational institutions.

Throughout 2024, then Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA), and Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA) maintained their co-sponsorship of the [Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024](#). The legislation would provide for sanctions against religious freedom violators by reauthorizing and amending the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act of 2018 and the Reinforcing Nicaraguan's Adherence to Conditions for Electoral Reform Act of 2021.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor. Federal and state governments continued to tolerate attacks or fail to respond to violent actions by nonstate actors who justify their violence on religious grounds. These actors include Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram) and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Bandit groups also participated in attacks against religious communities as well. Violent Islamist groups and some Fulani militants sought to impose a singular interpretation of Islam on individuals and communities in their areas of operation, regardless of these individuals' or communities' own religion or belief. Security forces sometimes remained slow to respond to violence by these groups, resulting in injury or death for members of targeted religious minority communities. In January, suspected JAS insurgents killed 14 people in Yobe State, including the local pastor of the Church of Christ in Nigeria. In May, al-Qaeda-affiliated Ansaru gunmen reportedly kidnapped 160 mainly Christian children and killed eight people in Niger State but later released the abducted children. ISWAP assailants also reportedly executed three Christians and shared images of the executions on social media. In November, Lakurawa group assailants—seeking to impose their interpretation of Shari'a—reportedly killed 15 people in Kebbi State. In May, bandits killed at least 49 people in Zamfara State, including a Muslim imam. In Niger State, suspected bandits killed 10 farmers, including Christians, and in August, bandits reportedly killed 70 Christians and kidnapped 20 students in separate attacks in Benue State.

The Nigerian federal government also continued to enforce blasphemy laws that include a penalty of up to two years'

imprisonment for acts "persons consider as a public insult on their religion." Several state governments also enforced their own more stringent blasphemy laws to prosecute and imprison individuals perceived to have insulted religion, including Christians, Muslims, and humanists. At least five prisoners remained in state custody on blasphemy charges at the end of the year, including [Mubarak Bala](#), [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#), [Isma'ila Sani Isah](#), [Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#), and [Abdulazeez Inyass](#). Authorities charged Bala, a humanist, for "insulting the Prophet Muhammad" in 2021 and sentenced him to 24 years in prison in 2022. However, in May, judicial authorities reduced the sentence to five years. In 2020, a court convicted Sharif-Aminu, a Sufi Muslim, for "insulting the religious creed" and sentenced him to death, but a high court ordered a retrial in 2021, and he remains in prison after filing an appeal. Kabara and Inyass remain imprisoned under death sentences that courts imposed in 2022 and 2016, respectively.

Nigeria's indigenous religious communities—in Muslim-majority and Christian-majority areas alike—came under elevated harassment from state governments that sought to restrict public displays of indigenous practices and rituals. In July, the Anambra State government demolished an indigenous shrine after the governor and Catholic bishops called on the state "to eliminate and banish neo-paganism and the works of darkness and evil." Similarly, the House of Assembly in Ebonyi State banned certain behavior, such as spiritual cleansing, by indigenous priests in the Izzi community. Elected representatives in both locales reportedly feared violence would result if such local priests carried out religious ceremonies.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Redesignate JAS/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;
- Prioritize providing broad support for Nigerian civil society organizations to lead national dialogue efforts on [implementing](#)

United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution 16/18, which advocates that governments must safeguard both religious freedom and freedom of expression in their efforts to combat religious intolerance and discrimination; and

- Redirect U.S. foreign assistance to the government of Nigeria to more effectively address conflict resolution and security sector reform—including enhancing training for officials, the military, and police officers—and link this assistance to specific benchmarks for reducing violence against vulnerable religious communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support efforts through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and others working on human rights in Africa, such as the Congressional Black Caucus, to highlight and address religious freedom and related challenges in Nigeria, including insecurity and atrocity risks; and
- Request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) investigate the efficiency and effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Nigeria in advancing religious freedom and reducing religiously based violence in the country.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nigeria](#)
- **Hearing:** [Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Non-State Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Nigeria is the most populous [country](#) in Africa, with a population of about 237 million people. Approximately 53 percent of the population are Muslim, 10.6 percent are Roman Catholic, and 35.3 percent are part of other Christian denominations. Other communities, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, make up less than one percent of the population. Many Nigerians practice traditional indigenous religions, although related statistics are difficult to ascertain.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing an official religion. The constitution also recognizes common law courts, traditional law, and Shari'a courts for criminal and noncriminal proceedings, but common law civil courts theoretically have preeminence over all other inferior courts.

Twelve northern states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) [utilize](#) Shari'a-based criminal and personal status laws alongside civil and customary statutes. Shari'a-based laws prohibit blasphemy and other offenses as each state's high court interprets them. Shari'a courts also utilize their own version of a penal code, including corporal punishments for serious criminal offenses that include caning, amputation, and stoning. In October, the Nigerian House of Representatives rejected a bill that would have expanded Islamic law beyond private citizens to potentially apply to businesses and civil society groups, including religious organizations.

Violence by Nonstate Actors

Nonstate actors continue to violently and disproportionately target Nigeria's vulnerable religious communities. The federal government has made some effort to respond to such attacks, but local actors, including state governments and police forces, often lack sufficient resources to effectively do so. Insurgent groups that engage in religiously based violence remain active in the northeast and north-central states, in particular.

Approximately 30,000 Fulani bandits operate in several groups in northwest Nigeria, consisting of anywhere from 10 to 1,000 members each. Bandits predominantly target Christian communities in northwest Nigeria. In 2024, this violence drastically affected food production and fomented extralegal bandit-enforced "taxation" campaigns that primarily victimized Christian farmers.

Fulani and other armed bandits, who are often acting based on criminal motives, conducted raids that also targeted religious minorities. Victims' families have accused the government of responding too slowly to resulting abductions or failing to prevent them. In January, bandits in Ekiti State attacked a school bus and abducted five students

from the Emure Apostolic Faith Primary School. In June, bandits kidnapped and then released a Catholic priest in Zamfara State after police paid his ransom. In August, bandits kidnapped at least 20 students, including Christians, who were traveling to a convention in Benue State. In October, gunmen abducted a Catholic priest in Edo State after he offered himself in place of two students from the Conception Minor Seminary School.

Nigerian Government Counterinsurgency Efforts

In March, President Bola Tinubu promised the government would implement more "detailed strategies" to stop such abductions. The Nigerian government has [utilized](#) both U.S. bilateral and regional multilateral assistance to enhance security efforts and facilitate counterinsurgency operations in the country. These efforts are most evident in the northeast Lake Chad region, where the government has sought to combat nonstate actors and reduce such groups' pernicious impact on religious freedom and broader human rights.

In September, army units in southern Kaduna State coordinated operations against several bandit and insurgent groups targeting religious minorities and rescued 13 kidnapping victims taken in a heavily Christian area. Throughout the summer, the army reportedly eliminated 1,937 combatants from JAS, ISWAP, and smaller bandit groups while arresting 2,782 suspected terrorists and criminal elements and freeing 1,854 hostages. In November, military forces killed dozens of JAS assailants in the Lake Chad region after targeting their food storage site. Earlier in the month, the air force eliminated dozens of bandits in Kebbi and Zamfara states.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Nigeria maintained their bilateral relationship throughout the year. In June, Nigerian parliamentarians spoke in Washington, DC, on their role in overseeing and improving security nationwide. In January, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with the Nigerian foreign minister in Abuja and cited the importance of ensuring security and human rights for Nigerians of all religions and beliefs while also acknowledging the coordinated December 2023 Christmas attacks on Christians in Plateau State. In April, then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [emphasized](#) the bilateral Nigerian partnership at the Bi-National Commission in Abuja. In May, the U.S. Senate confirmed [Richard M. Mills](#) as U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State last designated JAS/Boko Haram and ISWAP as EPCs.

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

North Korea remained one of the worst religious freedom violators in the world in 2024. The overarching ideological and enforcement framework for repressing any exercise of religious freedom remained in force. North Korea's ruling ideology, known as [Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism](#), considers former leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as extraordinary beings whose guidance all North Koreans must follow in all aspects of life. It furthermore forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat to the country. North Korea'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 and contradicts the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law. 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 freedom of religion or belief.

North Korea's discriminatory *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state, with religious practitioners belonging to the system's lowest rung, or "hostile" class. The government views Protestant Christians as "collaborators of imperialistic forces and enemies of the nation and revolution," in addition to members of the "hostile" class. Simply possessing a

Bible, interacting with Christian missionaries, or engaging in worship can lead to severe punishment, including torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution.

An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals, many of whom are Christian, are detained in North Korea's prisons. In 2024, authorities continued to imprison South Korean Christian missionaries [Kim Jung-wook](#), [Kim Kook-kie](#), and [Choi Chun-gil](#)—who have each spent more than a decade behind bars—over their religious engagement with North Koreans. In its 2024 World Watch List, the nongovernmental organization Open Doors ranked North Korea as the country where Christians faced the most extreme persecution.

The government has intensified persecution of North Korean citizens who practice "superstitious activities" such as shamanism and fortunetelling, which it classifies as "unsocialist behaviors." According to a 2024 South Korean government report, North Korea's 619 investigation task force (*grouppa*) has been responsible for enforcing the government's intensified crackdown on superstitious activities, with practitioners receiving harsh sentences including forced labor, imprisonment, and even public execution in recent years. Information on religious freedom conditions for practitioners of other religious traditions in North Korea—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondism—remained severely limited.

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);
- 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;
- Maintain and fill the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights issues as a full-time position at the U.S. Department of State and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward North Korea as well as in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with North Korea; and
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to offer protections and/or safe passage of North Korean refugees persecuted on the basis of religion.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act and urge the administration of President Donald J. Trump to appoint a special envoy for North Korean human rights issues.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Delegation Travels to South Korea to Investigate Religious Freedom in North Korea](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and U.S. Policy Options](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) the population of North Korea at 26.2 million, with the exact number of religious adherents difficult to ascertain due to outdated information. Historically, North Koreans followed Buddhism and Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). Shamanism and traditional folk religious practices, such as fortunetelling, are also prevalent. The country was home to a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated two percent of the total population.

While North Korea's constitution purports to guarantee freedom of religion, escapees reported that the government does not tolerate religious activities in the country. Authorities maintain several state-controlled religious organizations and manage a limited number of houses of worship for propaganda purposes.

North Korean Defectors and Refugees

North Korea remained one of the world's most repressive and isolated countries in 2024, making documenting religious freedom violations challenging. Most information about North Korea comes from North Korean refugees who have escaped the country. However, North Korea's harsh border policies following the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in significantly fewer North Koreans leaving the country, thus further limiting information. According to the South Korean government, only 181 North Koreans defected to South Korea in 2024—one of the lowest numbers in nearly three decades.

China continued to play a major role in facilitating North Korea's gross violations of religious freedom and related human rights. The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as unlawful economic migrants and repatriates them if caught in China while attempting to defect to South Korea, disregarding their risk of persecution upon return and violating the international principle of non-refoulement. North Korean refugees in China who engage in religious activities and have contact with Christian missionaries and nongovernmental organization workers face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. China reportedly uses advanced surveillance technology, such as facial recognition devices, and collects North Koreans' biometric data to prevent their escape.

International Attention

The international community repeatedly highlighted North Korea's human rights situation in 2024 and called for accountability for gross violations. In April, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) [adopted](#) a resolution requesting the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to prepare a comprehensive report on the human rights situation in North Korea following the UN Commission of Inquiry's (COI) 2014 report. The COI report [concluded](#) at the time that "there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" in North Korea. The April resolution also called on member states to respect

the principle of non-refoulement and counter North Korea's efforts at transnational repression.

In June, the UN Security Council [discussed](#) the human rights [situation](#) in North Korea, where UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk [outlined](#) several major concerns. In July, the OHCHR [concluded](#) that North Korea's use of forced labor in detention could amount to crimes against humanity and that North Koreans of a lower *songbun* level were at greater risk of more severe forms of forced labor. In November, the UN Human Rights Council [conducted](#) its [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR) of North Korea. UN member states [urged](#) North Korea to allow UN Special Procedures and other UN bodies to visit the country; release all prisoners of conscience, including Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kook-kie, and Choi Chun-gil; end forced labor and torture; implement the COI's 2014 recommendations; and stop persecuting religious groups, including through the *songbun* system. In December, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution on North Korea's human rights situation, urging North Korea to guarantee freedom of religion, among other concerns.

Key U.S. Policy

Although the United States has no diplomatic [relations](#) with North Korea, the U.S. government continued to take steps in 2024 to address that country's appalling human rights record. Then Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues Julie Turner visited [South Korea](#) and other [countries](#) throughout the year to shore up support for efforts to monitor and seek accountability for North Korea's human rights violations. In February, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden [called](#) on North Korea and other states to implement the COI report's recommendations.

In April, the United States and South Korea held [consultations](#) to identify strategies to promote North Koreans' fundamental freedoms and dignity. In October, U.S., South Korean, and Japanese government officials [held](#) the Trilateral Meeting on Human Rights in North Korea, urging the UN to promote accountability for North Korea's human rights violations. The State Department subsequently [announced](#) programming to assist those working on North Koreans' human rights.

During North Korea's UPR, the United States called for a dismantling of the country's political prison camps and the release of prisoners of conscience, among other recommendations. The State Department [continued](#) to [advocate](#) for the [release](#) of Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kook-kie, and Choi Chun-gil. The United States also [engaged](#) with China to address its refoulement of North Korean refugees.

In November, the House of Representatives [passed](#) the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act ([H.R. 3012](#)), which would reauthorize activities to promote human rights in North Korea. The Senate, however, did not vote on the legislation by the conclusion of the 118th Congress (January 2023–January 2025).

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

PAKISTAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to deteriorate. Religious minority communities—particularly Christians, Hindus, and Shi’a and Ahmadiyya Muslims—continued to bear the brunt of persecution and prosecutions under Pakistan’s strict blasphemy law and to suffer violence from both the police and mobs, while those responsible for such violence rarely faced legal consequences. Such conditions continued to contribute to a worsening religious and political climate of fear, intolerance, and violence.

Accusations of blasphemy and subsequent mob violence continued to severely impact religious minority communities. In May, a mob violently attacked and lynched Nasir Masih, a 70-year-old Christian man, following accusations that he desecrated a Qur’an. Following his death, authorities arrested but then swiftly released hundreds of people in connection with the lynching. Christians in Sardogha subsequently declared a day of mourning, gathering more than 500 protesters to pay their respects. In June, an antiterrorism court in Punjab sentenced to death a 22-year-old Christian man, Ehsan Shan, for blasphemy, accusing him of posting photos on social media that showed defaced pages of the Qur’an. Protests erupted in Karachi following the announcement of his death sentence, with individuals carrying banners criticizing the “misuse of blasphemy laws.” Shan remained imprisoned at the end of the reporting period. The same month, a mob broke into a police station in Madyan in northwestern Pakistan and lynched a tourist accused of desecrating the Qur’an. The mob also set fire to the police station.

Violent attacks and systematic harassment against Ahmadiyya Muslims also persisted throughout the year, resulting in four deaths in total. In June, police reportedly killed two members of that

community in separate attacks. In one instance, police allegedly shot and killed a 36-year-old Ahmadiyya doctor while he was in custody for blasphemy charges; in the second, police allegedly killed Syed Khan while holding him in custody on accusations of insulting the Prophet Muhammad. In July, Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa issued a significant ruling that upheld the Penal Code’s rejection of the Ahmadiyya community’s identification as Muslim but affirmed its members’ right—as non-Muslims—to practice their faith within their homes, places of worship, and institutions, as long as they do not use “Muslim terms.” This ruling sparked widespread protest and condemnation from hardline religious and political groups, including Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), which decried the chief justice’s remarks as blasphemous. TLP leader Zaheer ul-Islam further issued a bounty of 10 million rupees (\$35,955) for Isa’s death. The Supreme Court repealed the ruling concerning Ahmadiyya Muslims in August, likely in response to that pressure.

In April, United Nations (UN) experts [expressed concern](#) about the worsening pattern of forced conversions among Pakistan’s minority Christian and Hindu women and girls. They noted that local authorities often dismiss forced marriages, in which women and girls are obliged to convert to Islam, and the court system likewise validates them. The statement highlighted the case of Roshni Shakeel, a 13-year-old Christian girl abducted from her family in March by a 28-year-old Muslim man and forcefully converted to Islam, registering her age as 18. Despite Shakeel’s subsequent escape and return to her family, reports indicate that her family continued to face harassment from police, who arrested her father, detained him for three days, and allegedly beat him to coerce him into revealing his daughter’s location.

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);
- Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani officials and government agencies 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 with the Pakistani government, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, to encourage substantial steps to address violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
 - Releasing blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
 - Repealing blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and until such repeal, enacting reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, conduct proper investigations by senior police officials, and allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations; and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations; and
 - Holding accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversion, 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, resolutions, and congressional delegations and advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners in Pakistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Navigating Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom in Pakistan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Pakistan is an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. Of the country's estimated 252 million people, 96.5 percent are Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a) and 3.5 percent identify with other religious communities, including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. Pakistan's constitution establishes Islam as the state religion while including provisions designed to prohibit faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices, with the exception of Ahmadiyya Muslims. A 1974 amendment to Pakistan's constitution declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims, excluding them from political representation and equal voting rights.

Blasphemy-Related Cases and Restrictions

Blasphemy allegations against religious minorities increased throughout the year, with a notable shift to online accusations. According to an October [report](#) from Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), over 700 individuals remained in prison across the country on related accusations, representing more than a 300 percent increase from 213 the previous year. According to the NCHR, the majority of these cases were registered under the Federal Investigation Agency's Cybercrime Unit, including that of [Shagufta Kiran](#), a Christian woman who was sentenced to death under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in September. At the end of the reporting period, Kiran was awaiting appeal in solitary confinement. Authorities have held Kiran in custody since 2021, after a private citizen accused her of forwarding blasphemous content via WhatsApp in September of the prior year.

Attacks against Religious Minorities

Throughout 2024, religious minorities, including Pakistan's Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslim communities, were common targets of hate speech, discriminatory laws, and arbitrary arrests that contributed to a worsening climate of fear and violence. In November, unidentified gunmen in northwestern Pakistan attacked Shi'a Muslims, killing at least 40 people and wounding 20 more. In May, a gunman separately shot and killed two Ahmadiyya Muslims—Ghulam Sarwar and Rahat Ahmad Bajwa—in the Mandi Bahauddin district in Punjab. The following day, police subsequently arrested a suspect, who was a student at a nearby Islamic seminary. These attacks occurred against a backdrop of increasing terrorist attacks throughout the country.

In July, the UN [expressed](#) grave concern about increased discrimination toward the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and attacks on places of worship. In the leadup to Pakistan's national elections in February, religiously affiliated parties, including the TLP, flooded the media with hate speech and harmful rhetoric targeting Ahmadis. In June alone, human rights organizations documented 36 arrests or detentions of members of the Ahmadiyya community to prevent

them from participating in celebrations and sacrificing animals for Eid ul-Adha in Punjab. Several of these arrests were reportedly in response to complaints from TLP members. Also in June, the deputy commissioner in Chakwal announced orders for the preventive detention of three Ahmadiyya Muslims for 30 days, claiming that their participation in Eid celebrations would "hurt Muslim sentiment." The authorities released the three men from custody two days later—but only after they signed an affidavit pledging to refrain from performing animal sacrifices.

Places of Worship

Attacks against places of worship continued throughout the year, including against Ahmadiyya mosques and religious sites. In January, reporting indicated the desecration of as many as 80 Ahmadiyya graves across two cemeteries in Daska. In June, a mob violently attacked one such mosque in Kolti, in Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir, destroying its minarets. In May, the Council of Islamic Ideology condemned the "culture of mob vigilantism" and reiterated its call from September for the creation of a special court to try these kinds of cases; however, the government had established no such body by the end of the reporting period. Additionally, human rights organizations have claimed that the Pakistani government has continued to refuse to deliver any accountability for the previous year's violent attacks in Jaranwala, where mobs attacked and set fire to dozens of churches with impunity. Many Christians in that area continued to report their experiences of marginalization and threats from the perpetrators whom police had released from custody.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the United States' bilateral relationship with Pakistan focused primarily on security and election integrity. Following Pakistan's national elections, dozens of members of the U.S. Congress expressed [concern](#) about the imprisonment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. In March, then Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs Donald Lu [testified](#) before a House Foreign Affairs Committee on the U.S.-Pakistan relationship in the context of the elections. In June, Congress passed a bipartisan [resolution](#), under the co-sponsorship of then Representative Daniel Kildee (D-MI) and Representative Richard McCormick (R-GA), that called on the Pakistani government to support and strengthen human rights, rule of law, and democratic institutions.

Additionally, U.S. government officials participated in delegations to Pakistan throughout the year. In [April](#) and [September](#), then Acting Under Secretary for Political Affairs John Bass traveled to the country to discuss "a range of regional and bilateral issues."

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation remained poor. Muslims, including Crimean Tatars detained in Russian-occupied Crimea, faced unsubstantiated terrorism charges for possessing religious materials and holding religious gatherings as alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Human rights organization Memorial reported that at least 352 people were in prison, faced prosecution, or were under investigation for alleged HT affiliation. Of these prisoners, 131 had received prison sentences between 10 and 14 years, and 119 had received sentences of 15 years or more. In March, a military court sentenced [Vadim Nasyrov](#) and [Marat Bazarbayev](#) to 18 and 14 years in prison, respectively, for their alleged HT religious activities. Imprisoned Muslims reported experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, pork-filled food, and other ill treatment.

Authorities also prosecuted and imprisoned members of religious groups—including Allya Ayat, Tablighi Jamaat, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi—under spurious “extremism” charges for engaging in peaceful religious activities. In June, a court sentenced Jehovah’s Witnesses [Nikolai Polevodov](#) to eight years and six months, [Vitaliy Zhuk](#) to eight years and four months, and [Stanislav Kim](#) to eight years and two months in prison, surpassing the record length of eight years’ imprisonment for a Jehovah’s Witness. Around 150 Jehovah’s Witnesses reportedly endured detention, forced labor, or imprisonment by the end of the year. In December, a court in St. Petersburg declared the local Church of Scientology “extremist.”

Law enforcement targeted other religious minorities and organizations by designating them as “undesirable.” Authorities raided the homes of Falun Gong practitioners and detained several of them for their religious affiliation and possessing Falun Gong literature. A court sentenced one man to a year of forced labor for posting on social media the content of an “undesirable” Protestant

church. Prosecutors ramped up their enforcement of blasphemy laws, targeting perceived insults against religion and religious texts, including online content related to Christianity and other traditions. In February, a court sentenced [Nikita Zhuravel](#) to three and a half years in prison for allegedly burning a Qur’an.

Authorities targeted and suppressed independent civil society reporting on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In February, a court sentenced [Oleg Orlov](#), co-chair of Memorial, to two and a half years in prison for his criticism of Russia’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine; under Orlov’s leadership, Memorial defended and documented FoRB prisoners in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea. Authorities prosecuted individuals expressing opposition to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on religious grounds, labeled religious leaders “foreign agents” for opposing the war publicly, blocked online religious content, and placed other religious minority members and dissidents on its wanted list. In April, a court fined 87-year-old Orthodox Archbishop Viktor Pivovarov 150,000 rubles (\$1,553) for calling the invasion “satanic.”

Russian forces involved in the ongoing invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea, committed gross violations of religious freedom against Ukrainians by banning religious groups, criminalizing religious materials, and raiding houses of worship. While several Russian-abducted Ukrainian religious leaders returned to Ukraine, Russian forces and de facto authorities reportedly killed or imprisoned others. In February, Russian forces allegedly abducted and tortured to death Stepan Podolchak, a priest with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In August, a court in Russian-occupied Ukraine sentenced Ukrainian Orthodox Church priest [Kostiantyn Maksimov](#) to 14 years’ imprisonment for espionage, following his arrest in May 2023 for refusing to transfer his parish to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (ROC). Ukrainian nongovernmental organizations have reported damage to hundreds of religious 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, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), 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 monitor and document religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and other actions; and
 - Advocate for FoRB prisoners of conscience, including supporting individuals in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s Defending Freedom Project.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Urges Sanctions on Russian Officials Abusing FoRB Prisoners](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Protection of Religious Sites during Armed Conflict](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

According to a 2023 Levada Center [poll](#), 72 percent of Russia's population identify as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, and 18 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 defines only Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. The government also grants special recognition and privileges to the ROC.

Russia [maintains](#) several laws that negatively impact FoRB. The religion law permits fines on individuals engaging in broadly defined "missionary activities" such as preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion to non-members of religious associations or outside of officially designated sites. Russia also criminalizes the activities of several peaceful religious groups by designating them as "terrorist," "extremist," or "undesirable," despite no evidence or even specific allegations that those accused have promoted or participated in violence. In 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed into law amendments that legalize the deportation of foreigners involved in "illegal missionary work" without a court order, require trademarks to undergo assessment for "offending religious feelings," and expand the scope of organizations that qualify as "undesirable" to include foreign government entities.

International Accountability

Special Procedures at the United Nations (UN) frequently raised Russia's human rights abuses, including against FoRB. In January, UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB Nazila Ghanea disclosed a joint letter sent to the Russian government [inquiring](#) about religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Ukraine. The UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine further [concluded](#) in its March report that Russian forces had committed "indiscriminate" attacks damaging Ukraine's Transfiguration Cathedral and other buildings in Odesa's historic center, in violation of [international law](#).

In September, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation Mariana Katzarova [documented](#) human rights abuses throughout Russia, including FoRB violations against Jehovah's Witnesses, alleged HT members, anti-war Russian Orthodox clergy and laypersons, and lawyers defending Crimean Tatars. Her report referenced several FoRB prisoners by name, including [Aleksandr Gabyshev](#), [Mikhail Simonov](#), and [Bakhrom Khamroev](#). In a separate report, Katzarova also [documented](#) Russia's widespread systematic torture and ill treatment of prisoners of conscience at home and abroad, [including](#) the use of punishment isolation cells against alleged HT members such as [Teimur Abdullayev](#). In October, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) its documentation of cases in which Russian-occupation authorities

in Ukraine arbitrarily detained individuals in apparent connection to their legitimate exercise of FoRB.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled against Russia in several cases this year, including some related to FoRB. In June, the ECHR ruled that Russia had [committed](#) multiple human rights violations in its decade-long occupation of Crimea, including unlawful harassment and intimidation of non-Russian Orthodox religious leaders, arbitrary raids of places of worship, confiscation of religious property, and imprisonment of Crimean Tatar Muslims for alleged HT affiliation. ECHR also ruled in two separate cases that Russia's ["undesirable" organizations](#) and ["foreign agents"](#) laws violated the European Convention on Human Rights. Russian authorities have used both laws to target religious groups, anti-war religious leaders, and human rights organizations and independent media that regularly report on religious freedom conditions.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government [continued](#) to [sanction](#) Russian individuals and entities involved in supporting that country's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. In February, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden [announced](#) more than 500 new sanctions, including against Russian prison officials connected to the death of opposition leader Aleksey Navalny. The sanctions also [coincided](#) with the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the 10th anniversary of its invasion of Crimea. In August, the United States and Russia completed a 24-person prisoner swap that secured the release of several Americans and Russian civil society actors, including Oleg Orlov.

The U.S. government worked to expose and combat Russian propaganda and misinformation, including against religious minorities. In January, the U.S. Department of State's Global Engagement Center [released](#) a report documenting Russia's decades-long incorporation of antisemitism into its propaganda and misinformation.

The U.S. Congress raised Russia's religious freedom violations in Ukraine through meetings, congressional delegation visits, and hearings throughout the year. In February, Speaker of the House of Representatives Mike Johnson (R-LA) met with Ukrainian Protestant religious leaders to discuss Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In April, a bicameral congressional delegation [visited](#) Ukraine and toured Odesa's damaged Transfiguration Cathedral. In July, the Helsinki Commission held a [hearing](#) led by Representative Joe Wilson (R-SC) on Russia's persecution of Ukrainian Christians, and in September, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) led by Representative Jim McGovern (D-MA) on Russia's efforts to erase Ukrainian culture and identity, including through the destruction of Ukrainian religious sites. In December, the Russian government declared "undesirable" the Helsinki Commission and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which is now known as the Article 18 Alliance.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some improvements. Challenges to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) included the constitutional prohibition on non-Muslim worship, egregious punishments for religious dissidents, criminalization of blasphemy, and a religiously based male guardianship system.

Although the government's treatment of Shi'a Muslims was less severe than in previous years, that community continued to face [de facto discrimination](#) in housing, employment, the judiciary, and access to senior government positions. In January, authorities detained 12 supporters of Al Safa Football Club for performing a Shi'a religious chant, later posted online, that commemorated the birth of Imam Ali. The detainees faced charges under Article 6 of the Anti-Cybercrime Law, which prohibits the online dissemination of "material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals and privacy." Judges issued and carried out over 200 [death sentences](#) during the year, including against Shi'a Muslims for protesting religious discrimination. In August, authorities executed Abdulmajeed Al Nimr for "destabilizing the social fabric and national unity," "glorifying [executed Shi'a cleric] Nimr al-Nimr," and "inciting Shi'a employees" to join anti-discrimination protests.

Saudi Arabia continued imposing excessively long prison sentences and travel bans for those expressing dissenting religious views. In March, judicial authorities opened a new trial against Malik al-Dowaiish, son of Sunni cleric [Sulaiman al-Dowaiish](#), whom a court previously sentenced to 27 years in prison after he posted a video about his father's mistreatment. Human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#) remained in Dhahban Prison, serving a 15-year sentence since 2015; prison authorities have reportedly denied him medical care. Al-Khair was legal counsel to [Raif Badawi](#), whom a court jailed in 2012 for "insulting Islam" and violating the cybercrime law. Although Badawi was [released](#) in

2022, he remains under a media and travel ban that prevents him from joining his family abroad.

Despite some reforms to the [Saudi guardianship system](#), the government continued penalizing opponents of the system, which restricts women's ability to travel, attend university, marry, or obtain medical care without the permission of a male guardian under a unique interpretation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. In January, after more than a year in detention, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) sentenced social media influencer [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) to 11 years in prison for violating social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws by not wearing "decent" clothing and protesting male guardianship. She reported in April that authorities held her in solitary confinement and broke her leg. In September, the SCC opened new hearings for [Salma al-Shehab](#) and [Nourah al-Qahtani](#), whom courts had previously sentenced to 27 years and 45 years, respectively, for criticizing the guardianship system.

Amid these concerns, the government maintained some initiatives to promote religious inclusivity. Despite the constitutional ban on non-Muslim worship, authorities allowed Christians to gather privately—under strict conditions—and permitted stores to display Christmas and Easter holiday decorations. In May, the state-funded Muslim World League (MWL) organized a global conference to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance, representing a potentially useful step toward creating space for FoRB.

During a March visit to Saudi Arabia, USCIRF observed a higher level of government integration of international FoRB standards than in years past, and conditions for the Shi'a Muslim minority also reflected improvement. In certain urban areas, USCIRF observed less rigid enforcement of religiously based restrictions on women in public life, including a relaxation of strict dress standards, heightened visibility in public spaces, and greater workforce participation.

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);
 - Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
 - Request updates from the Ministry of Justice about reconciling and standardizing religiously grounded sentences and punishments through a draft penal code; and
 - Develop benchmarks, through cooperation between the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Women's Issues and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), for reforming Saudi Arabia's religiously grounded male guardianship laws, in accordance with an October 2024 [memorandum of understanding](#) on women's rights.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Hold hearings, aligned with bilateral U.S.-Saudi strategic dialogues, to raise religious freedom conditions, including prolonged detention of FoRB prisoners, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims, the male guardianship system, and transnational repression; and
 - Conduct bipartisan congressional and staff delegations to Saudi Arabia in 2025 to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB as a contributing factor to the success of Saudi Vision 2030.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia in the Context of Vision 2030](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Leaves Saudi Arabia after Government Official Insisted Chair to Remove Kippah](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Of [36.5 million Saudi nationals](#), 85–90 percent are Sunni Muslim and 10–12 percent are Shi’a Muslim. Nearly half of the population is composed of expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and unaffiliated individuals. Saudi law identifies the Qur’an and Sunna (traditions of the Prophet) as the constitution, while the judicial system enforces an official interpretation of Shari’a according to its version of Hanbali jurisprudence.

Systematic Enforcement of Official Interpretation of Religion

In 2024, the Saudi government continued to codify aspects of its religiously grounded penal code, making these punishments more standardized and transparent. However, the draft code reportedly does not amend provisions in existing laws that authorities have often used to repress religious dissenters. These statutes include the 2007 Anti-Cybercrime Law and the 2017 Counterterrorism Law, both of which equate peaceful religious expression with “terrorism” and “impinging on public order” if it falls outside the government’s strict limitations on religion or belief. Throughout the year, the government systematically wielded both laws to stifle individuals promoting ideas that deviated from the state’s interpretation of Shari’a.

The male guardianship system, which is explicitly [rooted](#) in Islamic legal principles, relegates women to the status of legal minors for life. Through this system, women—including U.S. citizens—face government-imposed restrictions on marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Guardianship laws designate the father as a child’s primary legal guardian on religious grounds without due consideration of the child’s best interest. Authorities detain women for expressing on social media their religious concerns with the male guardianship system. [Loujain al-Hathloul](#), an activist who previously faced prolonged detention and criminal charges for protesting male guardianship, remains unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite the expiration of her travel ban in 2023 and government permission in October for her to challenge the ban in court.

The government also restricts intermarriage between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims according to its official interpretation of Shari’a, requiring government approval and allowing a judge to annul any such marriage. Apostasy and blasphemy are capital crimes for which the government invokes an explicit religious justification.

Intolerant Religious Content in Textbooks

Saudi government-issued textbooks persist in contributing to an atmosphere of religious intolerance toward those not adhering to the government’s mandated interpretation of Islam, despite commitments to [reform](#) that the government made to the United States in 2006. Over the last two decades, it has [removed](#) some intolerant content on religious subjects. However, official textbooks [continue](#) to compare members of non-Muslim religions to maimed animals and contend

that atheism results from “psychological disorders.” Some textbooks also contain content deriding Shi’a and Sufi Muslims as polytheists or idolators, while others justify the imposition of restrictions on women’s dress in public on religious grounds. The truncation of USCIRF’s March 2024 [visit](#) precluded its anticipated meeting with the Ministry of Education to discuss reforms in this area.

Transnational Repression

Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents abroad and imposes punishments, including travel and media bans, on family members in the country. In 2024, Saudi authorities continued to detain [Assad](#) and [Mohammed al-Ghamdi](#), the brothers of UK-based religious scholar Saed al-Ghamdi. In June, the SCC sentenced Assad al-Ghamdi to 20 years in prison on charges including “insulting religion.” Authorities have reportedly subjected him to torture and medical neglect in Dhahban and Al-Hayer prisons. In September, the SCC formally overturned the death sentence against Mohammed al-Ghamdi and instead sentenced him to 30 years in prison.

Saudi authorities continued to detain four Uyghurs—including a minor—in a Jeddah prison, where they remain at risk of forcible repatriation to China. Police arrested Aimidoula Waili and Nuermaimaiti Ruze in 2020 after they had arrived on tourist visas to perform *umrah*, a Muslim religious pilgrimage. Chinese authorities had previously subjected Waili to torture in Xinjiang, China, where the government has perpetrated [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. In 2022, police detained Buheliqemu Abula and her teenage daughter near Mecca.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States continued [bilateral coordination](#) with Saudi Arabia on regional [security](#) issues, including discussions of [defense guarantees](#) and cybersecurity cooperation, amid regional tensions surrounding the ongoing conflict in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [traveled](#) multiple times to [Saudi Arabia](#) in 2024, where he [met](#) with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud and [Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud](#) as well as Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador to the United States Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, to coordinate a response to that conflict. In January, during the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia, then U.S. Ambassador Michèle Taylor [recommended](#) that Saudi authorities reform laws and judicial processes negatively impacting FoRB. In July, 32 members of Congress [wrote](#) to then President Joseph R. Biden and then Secretary Blinken urging them to ask Saudi authorities to immediately release a list of prisoners of conscience in the country, including FoRB prisoners.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained extremely poor. Throughout the year, the government enforced draconian laws and tightened its already repressive Soviet-era control over the religious practices of all groups. In particular, authorities targeted Ismaili Shi'a Muslims and others who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam through harassment, detention, prison sentences, and transnational repression.

The government enforced the law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), which limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, and prohibits unregistered religious activity. For example, in February, Sughd region officials raided a Protestant church that met for worship without state authorization. The state-backed Islamic Council of Ulema, which governs the practice of Hanafi Sunni Islam, prohibited women from attending mosques. Additionally, the law On Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children prohibited children from participating in the activities of religious associations. In June, President Emomali Rahmon approved amendments to the law On the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies (traditions law) to ban children from participating in the Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha custom of collecting sweets and small gifts from neighbors. The same amendments also forbade the sale, import, promotion, and wearing of clothes that are "foreign to national culture." The law already included restrictions on circumcisions, baby naming rituals, weddings, religious pilgrimage ceremonies, and funerals.

The government continued to limit the once active civil society in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), restricting the flow of information about religious freedom and other human rights conditions for the Ismaili Shi'a Muslim minority living there. For example, authorities harassed and leveled criminal charges against the relatives of exiled human rights activists who report on religious freedom, including violations targeting Ismailis and other persecuted groups. Outside of the GBAO, Amnesty International found that authorities meddled in the selection of individuals to fill key positions within the leadership of the Dushanbe Ismaili Center, a community and religious space, and the Ismaili National Council, which governs the activities of Ismaili Shi'a Muslims in Tajikistan. Moreover, while surveilling Ismaili religious meetings, State Committee on National Security (SCNS) officials reportedly did not respect religious and cultural norms, such as removing shoes while in prayer halls.

In April, during Ramadan, authorities in Sughd region arrested [Ikhtiyorhoja Kamolov](#)—an imam at Khoja Muhammad Balodurkun Mosque in Rumon village—on "extremism" charges, accusing him of spreading the banned religious ideology Salafism and allowing minors to attend mosque. Authorities also arrested [Bakhtiyor Akbarov](#), another religious leader, and [Mirzoburhan Salmanzoda](#), a congregant, charging all three men with "extremism." Akbarov and Salmanzoda remained in police custody without trial as of August, although Kamolov's status was unclear.

Tajik authorities, including President Rahmon, discouraged citizens from going on the Hajj pilgrimage and called on them to spend money on public works projects instead. Furthermore, authorities required Hajj applicants to pay fees through a bank run by Rahmon's close relatives.

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);
 - Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
 - Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief standards by the Tajik and other regional governments;
 - Impose targeted sanctions on SCNS officials and others 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
 - Condition military-to-military engagement with Tajikistan based on government reforms to Tajikistan's religion law and related legislation.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Tajikistan's religious freedom conditions by conducting relevant hearings
- and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and
- Reintroduce and pass a revised version of the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act, including robust reporting requirements for the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Justice, to counter Tajikistan's abuse of International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Red Notices targeting individuals abroad for their religion, belief, or peaceful, religiously informed political activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Calls on the U.S. Government to Impose Consequences on Tajikistan Due to Increasing Repression](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Around 90 percent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim, with the majority adhering to Hanafi Sunni Islam. Around four percent are ethnic Pamiris, who adhere to Ismaili Shi'a Islam and reside in the GBAO. The remainder of the population includes members of Christian denominations, such as Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses, as well as Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Traditions Law Amendments

In March, President Rahmon gave a speech on Tajik national and religious values and the risk of religious extremism and terrorism in the country. During his speech, Rahmon warned about the danger of the "Salafi movement" and those who wear "alien" clothes, such as hijabs, connecting both to activities defined as "extremist" under Tajik law. In June, Rahmon [approved](#) amendments to the traditions law to prohibit the "import, sale, promotion and wearing of clothes alien to national culture," which authorities interpreted as including all religious head coverings besides headscarves tied behind the neck in what they deem the "Tajik" way.

Following Rahmon's speech but prior to the official passage of the amendments, state authorities engaged in informational campaigns and made arrests across the country. For example, the Committee for Work with Women and Family took to the streets to educate women about "national" dress and "extremism" prevention. In May, authorities denied women wearing their head coverings in a non-"Tajik" style entry into a local hospital and threatened them with fines. Officials in Sino district, Dushanbe, arrested men with beards and women wearing their headscarves the "foreign" way, interrogating, fingerprinting, and photographing them. In another instance in Dushanbe, officials detained a group of men with beards, coercing them to shave and to pay for the shaving tools they were forced to use. The amendments also impacted businesses that sell religious clothing, as law enforcement regularly monitored shops to ensure they do not continue to offer such merchandise.

In July, the state-backed Islamic Council of Ulema, which often bolsters state policies that limit religious freedom, supported the amendments by issuing a fatwa against tight, transparent, and black garments—the latter of which are often locally invoked as a euphemism for "Islamic extremist" clothing.

State Enforcement of Anti-Extremism Policies Impacting Religious Freedom

The Tajik government continues to level "extremism" accusations against individuals for their peaceful religious activities, particularly those adhering, or suspected of adhering, to banned but peaceful religious groups and ideologies. The government also targeted religiously based political parties it considered "extremist." According

to contacts, the government also engages in transnational repression, abusing INTERPOL by submitting fraudulent requests for arrests of its citizens on alleged "extremism" charges. In March, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Mary Lawlor reported that nongovernmental organizations in Tajikistan generally refrained from working on sensitive issues such as religious freedom, fearing it could lead to criminal charges related to "terrorism and extremism." For the first time, following a 2021 closed court decision, Tajikistan's Supreme Court in 2024 included Jehovah's Witnesses on its public list of banned "extremist" organizations.

In October, President Rahmon announced that the Ministry of Internal Affairs arrested over 5,000 "illiterate mullahs" and 1,500 other individuals for practicing "superstition," "sorcery," and "fortune-telling." Rahmon argued that such practices, despite their popularity in Tajikistan, contributed to the spread of "extremism and terrorism." Earlier in the year, Rahmon also said that the "Prophet of Islam" forbade Muslims from going to fortunetellers and sorcerers. The government amended the criminal code in June to punish sorcerers and fortune tellers with penalties of up to two years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 144,000 somonis (\$13,350).

In June, the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA) published recommendations to prevent "extremism and terrorism" among youth, including specific guidance on how to identify "extremists." The recommendations called attention to where individuals get their religious information, how they dress—including the color and shape of their clothing and beard length—and how they act upon their beliefs, such as through adherence to religious food laws and prayer habits. Earlier in the year, the SCRA published guidance for Sunni Muslims on how to pray, including on prayer volume and hand placement.

Key U.S. Policy

In March, soldiers from the Virginia National Guard [conducted](#) an infantry tactics exchange with Tajik soldiers in Dushanbe as part of the U.S. Department of Defense National Guard Bureau State Partnership Program. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Tajikistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor related human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting. In October, then U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia Anjali Kaur [traveled](#) to Tajikistan to visit project sites and discuss USAID support for local businesses and rural communities.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained dire. The government maintained strict control over all religious activities and particularly targeted Muslims who adhered to a form of Islam that differed from the state’s preferred interpretation. USCIRF continued to follow related cases, such as those of 10 Muslim men whom the government imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities. Laws continued to systematically limit religious activities, such as the 2016 religion law that prohibits unregistered religious activity and heavily restricts religious materials, education, and ceremonies. Additionally, the 2015 extremism law defines “extremism” using vague terms such as “the incitement of enmity,” permitting authorities to arbitrarily prosecute peaceful religious activities.

Authorities continued to harass Christians, in particular Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, preventing them from obtaining registration that would allow them to operate legally. In July, a state-affiliated mosque official from Lebap told mosque attendees that authorities would “lock up” the Protestant pastor of an unregistered church. Ministry of National Security (MNS) officials then visited the pastor’s home and demanded information about his relatives, whom anonymous callers subsequently threatened. In January, police in Sakar [raided](#) a Jehovah’s Witness home, detaining five people and interrogating them for eight hours.

Migration Service and border officials continued to restrict individuals from leaving the country for religious purposes. For example, in January, border guards blocked civil rights activist and lawyer Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev from traveling to Iran for a funeral. MNS officials later told Allaberdyev that officials were monitoring him and that he was banned from leaving the country for five years. Additionally, Migration Service officials at the Ashgabat Airport stopped a Protestant pastor from leaving Turkmenistan, without explanation.

As in years past, officials exploited religious practices to strengthen the cult of personality of former president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, interfering in Turkmen’s religious lives. Gurbanguly is the chairman of the People’s Council and father of the current president, Serdar Berdimuhamedow; in practice he continues to wield substantial power under his self-styled moniker of *Arkadag*, or “protector.” This religious exploitation assumed a variety of forms; for example, in the ethnically diverse cities of Balkanbat and Turkmenbashi, authorities interfered in wedding ceremonies by warning couples to adhere to Turkmen tradition and adopt only Turkmen music for entertainment—including songs from Gurbanguly’s personal repertoire. Ahead of Ramadan, officials in Lebap told government employees to honor the *Arkadag* by fasting. However, officials imposed different religious expectations on youth in another region of the country and guarded the entrances of schools with water, forcing every student to drink before entering to ensure they were not participating in the Ramadan fast.

Officials harassed state employees who outwardly expressed their faith through beards or religious head coverings, threatening them with termination. In one instance, an official told state employees that they should work as a unified people, which included wearing similar clothes. Such harassment also extended beyond state employees. Leading up to the Berdimuhamedows’ vacation to Avaza, local police forced bearded men to shave and women to remove their hijabs, claiming simply that “this is a thing that the president doesn’t like.” Also, in October, Ashgabat police harassed, detained, and interrogated women for wearing hijabs. While detained, security confiscated the women’s personal belongings, told them they were banned from traveling abroad, and lectured them about Turkmenistan’s nature as a secular country—emphasizing that those who would like to cover their heads should do so in the “Turkmen style.”

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);
 - Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
 - Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) standards by the Turkmen and other regional governments; and
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmen government agencies, such as the MNS, 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.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Turkmenistan’s religious freedom conditions by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Implores State Department to Lift Waiver amid Turkmenistan’s Treatment of Muslims and Others during Ramadan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Of Turkmenistan's [estimated](#) population of 5.7 million, 93 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni); six percent is Eastern Orthodox, mostly Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic; and the remaining one 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 is widely considered one of the world's most closed-off countries. The insular state's [poor](#) human rights records—with a severe lack of [press freedom](#) and internet access—makes it difficult and dangerous to report on religious freedom.

Ramadan Restrictions

In March, Tajik terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) opened fire on concertgoers at the Crocus City Hall venue in Moscow, Russia, killing over 130 people and injuring hundreds. In response, the government of Turkmenistan tightened its internal security measures, including further restrictions on peaceful religious activities—especially for Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan.

In Ashgabat mosques, authorities detained and questioned worshipers who “appeared extremist.” Police then interrogated the detainees about their religious habits, calling some of them “Wahhabi” and adding them to undefined “blacklists.” In some cases, officials forced other male worshipers to shave their beards, in alignment with government restrictions on outward markers of religiosity. In Turkmenbashi, Balkanbat, and Cheleken, security services interrogated young worshipers, particularly bearded men and women wearing hijabs, to investigate suspected links to “extremism.” In the Balkan region, security officials prohibited all individuals under the age of 50 from worshiping in mosques and questioned whether fasting was necessary during Ramadan. Additionally, officials shaved men's beards—under threat of sending them to Ovadan-Depe Prison without trial—and forced them to drink alcohol.

Such restrictions remained prevalent across the country. In Turkmenbashi, authorities closed shops selling religious clothing and confiscated their merchandise. In the city of Mary, officials imposed a particular religious interpretation by banning the sale of alcohol during Ramadan and seizing alcoholic merchandise without warning. In Lebap, law enforcement increased its presence in and around mosques, as officials ordered worshipers to leave the mosque immediately following prayers. The imam of the mosque used his pulpit to bolster the influence of and support for the ruling family. Ahead of Eid al-Fitr, Balkan region imams announced that worshipers would require special access cards to enter mosques, which they could only obtain after submitting personal information to mosque authorities. Security officials also increased their use of video surveillance of worshipers in and around mosques.

Status of FoRB Prisoners

In 2024, USCIRF documented 10 cases of Muslim men who remained in prison on murky “extremism”-related charges for their peaceful

religious activities. The actual number of such imprisonments may be higher. The known prisoners include [Bahram Saparov](#), whom authorities arrested and sentenced to 15 years in 2013 for organizing unregistered religious meetings. Prison officials tortured Saparov so severely that his face became unrecognizable. The fates of the 20 other Muslims whom authorities arrested on the same day as Saparov remain unknown. [Annamurad Atdaev](#) is serving 15 years in prison after authorities arrested him in 2016 following his return from Egypt, where he studied Islam. [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetsurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) continued to serve 12-year sentences for meeting to discuss the writings of Said Nursi and praying. Moreover, [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) are serving 15-year sentences for holding religious discussions.

Limited press freedom and repressive human rights conditions in the country make it extremely difficult to obtain information about the status of prisoners or their detention conditions. However, in January 2024, human rights activists confirmed that [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#)—sentenced to 23 years in prison in late 2023 for conducting religious classes—is serving his sentence in the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, known for its inhumane conditions, including torture, medical neglect, and enforced disappearances.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, the U.S. government continued to engage with the Turkmen government on a range of issues but failed to consistently raise FoRB and broader human rights concerns. In April, the United States and Turkmenistan [held](#) the 10th Annual Bilateral Consultations in Ashgabat. Officials discussed issues of common concern such as the environment, economy, security cooperation, and human rights, particularly as it pertained to labor rights. In July, Elizabeth Rood was [sworn](#) in as U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with the foreign ministers of Turkmenistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhancing regional security, and disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor broader human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion. In October, then Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia at the United States Agency for International Development Anjali Kaur [met](#) with Turkmen officials to discuss economic and climate issues. In November, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) met with President Serdar Berdimuhamedov during a visit to Turkmenistan to discuss the U.S.-Turkmen bilateral relationship, particularly trade, security, and climate change.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom in Vietnam remained poor. The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and government increasingly sought to regulate and control religious affairs through state-sponsored religious organizations. Authorities detained, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured members and advocates of unrecognized religious communities that sought to operate independently of state control.

The Vietnamese government continued to wield the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) and its implementing decrees to strictly govern religious affairs. In March, Decree No. 95/2023/ND-CP went into effect, replacing two previous implementing decrees—Decree 162 and the punishment decree—which were already restrictive and suppressive, such as by mandating that religious groups report personnel and location changes to the government. This new decree allows authorities to further demand financial records from religious organizations and suspend religious activities for unspecified, vaguely worded “serious violations.”

As of December, USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) [Victims List](#) included over 80 prisoners whom the Vietnamese government has punished for their religious activities or religious freedom advocacy. In March, the government sentenced Y Krec Bya, a Montagnard Protestant missionary of the independent Central Highlands Evangelical Church of Christ (CHECC), to 13 years’ imprisonment. In April, authorities imposed an additional charge on [Le Tung Van](#), the 92-year-old head of the independent Peng Lei House Buddhist Church, who is serving his sentence for allegedly “abusing democratic freedoms” under house arrest due to his age and ill health. In May, a court in Tra Vinh Province upheld the verdicts and sentences on similar charges of two Khmer Krom religious freedom activists, [Thach Chuong](#) and [To Hoang Chuong](#).

Ethnic Montagnard and Hmong Christians in the Central and Northwest Highlands remained particularly vulnerable to persecution, including detention, arrest, imprisonment, torture, and forced renunciation of faith. Local authorities actively cracked down

on independent Montagnard Protestants’ religious activities. In January, the government sentenced religious freedom activist [Nay Y Blang](#) to over four years’ imprisonment for his activities and affiliation with the unrecognized CHECC. In March, preacher Y Bum Bya was found dead after police summoned him to meet after reportedly threatening and beating him. In September, Dak Lak authorities detained evangelist Y Thinh Nie for repeatedly refusing to join the state-controlled church, and they held a public denunciation in October to pressure more than 20 Montagnard Christians to join the registered church. Unknown assailants reportedly [shot](#) two Montagnard pastors in Dak Lak for leading independent church. The government also pressured the Thai government to extradite Montagnard religious freedom activist Y Quynh Bdap, who could face severe punishment if returned to Vietnam.

Government repression against unrecognized Buddhist and Cao Dai groups also persisted throughout the year. In March, Tam Binh District police demolished part of Dai Tho Pagoda after arresting its Khmer Krom abbot, Thach Chanh Da Ra, and a follower on the charge of “abusing democratic freedoms.” In November, the Vinh Long provincial court slapped more charges on them, before sentencing additional Buddhists in the same case. In June, police briefly detained popular independent Buddhist monk Thich Minh Tue and his followers in Thua Thien Hue Province. In April, An Giang provincial authorities banned independent Hoa Hao Buddhists from commemorating the death of their founder. The independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam continued to face obstacles and harassment over their religious activities. Police officers and followers of the state-controlled Cao Dai 1997 Sect harassed independent Cao Dai followers, preventing their visits to temples, worship practices, and funeral arrangements. In May, police officers interrogated Tran Van Duc after his April meeting with U.S. consular staff on the ongoing harassment of independent Cao Dai adherents.

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);
 - Assess the 2005 U.S.-Vietnam binding agreement to determine whether Vietnam’s backsliding in religious freedom violated the terms of the agreement, and take appropriate actions such as linking the removal of Vietnam’s non-market economy status with substantive improvements in religious freedom;
 - Engage with the Vietnamese government to amend its 2018 Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decrees to conform to international standards, including by making registration simpler and optional; and
 - Facilitate unfettered access for relevant United Nations (UN) agencies and staff to Vietnam, particularly the Central Highlands, to monitor and investigate religious freedom violations before the late 2025 vote on the 2026 UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) membership.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Advocate for religious freedom improvements in Vietnam, with an emphasis on the release of FoRB prisoners; and
 - Reintroduce legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, such as the Vietnam Human Rights Act ([H.R. 3172](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#)
- **Special Report:** [Revisiting the CPC Designation: Improving Accountability and Engaging Productively to Advance Religious Freedom Abroad](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Vietnam is a religiously [diverse](#) country with related demographics [varying](#) greatly across available estimates. As of June, the government officially recognized 43 religious organizations and 16 religions. Religious traditions with a significant presence in the country include Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Vietnam's constitution acknowledges that all religions are equal before the law and that the state must respect and protect FoRB. In practice, however, the government widely restricts religious freedom—especially for members of independent religious groups—through the 2018 LBR, its implementing decrees, and other laws.

Repression of Other Religious Communities

Despite a recent warming of Vatican-Vietnam relations, Vietnamese Catholics continued to face serious challenges to their FoRB—including a longstanding government precedent of expropriating Catholic properties. In May, parishioners of Thanh Hai Catholic Church in Binh Thuan Province protested the government's plan to build a new school on land that the parish reportedly owned. Redemptorist monks in Hanoi also spoke out against the government's project to build a new hospital on the land of the monastery in Thai Ha Parish, which the city authorities expropriated over half a century ago.

The government also continued to persecute groups it deemed as "strange, false, or heretical" religions. For example, in February, the Cao Bang provincial government announced that it had eliminated the activities of the Duong Van Minh religion throughout the province. Similarly, the Dien Bien provincial government also claimed that it had completely eliminated the Ba Co Do religion, an effort the government started in 2017.

International Accountability

In January, Vietnamese authorities tried and sentenced 100 individuals—most of whom are predominately Christian Montagnards—on terrorism charges in response to police station attacks in Dak Lak Province several months earlier. In June, UN Special Rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [wrote](#) to the government of Vietnam to express their concerns over these and other violations of religious freedom, including the criminalization of religious leaders and worship as well as arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, and unexplained deaths in custody, in connection with that 2023 Dak Lak attack and

subsequent mass trial. In August, the UN Special Rapporteurs also [expressed](#) concern over the government's "discriminatory misuse of counter-terrorism law" against Montagnard Christian minorities, which has led to violations including arbitrary arrests and detention, incitement of civilian vigilantes, torture, and forced confessions.

In May, Vietnam went through its fourth cycle of the [Universal Periodic Review](#) (UPR), a mechanism by which the UNHRC reviews a country's human rights record. The government of Vietnam accepted 271 of 320 recommendations but rejected key ones on protecting religious freedom, including on ending forced renunciation of faith and amending the LBR. In September, human rights groups issued a statement to condemn the government's selective acceptance of the UPR recommendations, arguing that it demonstrates the government's determination to continue repressing unregistered religious groups, human rights defenders, and independent civil society. Vietnam is a member of the UNHRC and is seeking reelection to the UNHRC for the 2026–2028 tenure.

Key U.S. Policy

In August, then Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya traveled to Hanoi and met with the Vice Minister of Home Affairs Vu Chien Thang and the Government Committee for Religious Affairs to discuss advancing religious freedom, among other issues. In September, then President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with CPV General Secretary To Lam in New York, during which then President Biden emphasized the "United States' commitment to ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] centrality and respect for human rights."

In [March](#) and [September](#), Representative Michelle Steel (R-CA) released statements criticizing the Biden administration for failing to designate Vietnam as a CPC and urging the U.S. Department of State to follow USCIRF's consistent recommendation for CPC. In June, then Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, joined three other Democratic senators in [writing](#) a joint letter to then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, urging the State Department to better address growing human rights concerns—explicitly including religious freedom—and to fully integrate human rights priorities into the U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relationship.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [placed](#) Vietnam on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor. The government continued its ongoing and systematic prosecution of Christians and Muslim minority communities by invoking Article 144 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes blasphemy, and Ordinance 06-03, which criminalizes proselytization and targets anyone who “incites, constrains or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim.”

Authorities continued to forcibly close to worshipers nearly all Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA) churches, with only one remaining open—in a limited capacity—in Algiers. The government ordered those churches closed through courts or provincial governors, and it continued to deny legal status to EPA churches and prevent them from reregistering.

Although Ordinance 06-03 recognizes Christianity and provides a framework for the exercise of freedom of religion, it also presents the “Conditions and Rules of Practice of non-Muslim Religious Rituals.” These conditions require state permission to establish a non-Muslim place of worship and conduct worship there, and they penalize “shaking the faith” of a Muslim through producing, storing, or distributing religious material. Catholics in Algeria are also limited in how they can publicly practice their faith, and foreign nationals who attempt to proselytize outside of the church or home are subject to prosecution and deportation.

In May, a court of appeals upheld the in absentia 2023 conviction of Pastor Yousef Ourahmane, vice president of the EPA, but suspended his sentence. A court of first instance had charged him for “establishing a place of worship without permission” and “organizing a religious assembly in an unauthorized place,”

sentencing him to two years in prison and a fine. The court of appeals added six more months’ imprisonment and another fine but suspended his sentence; he continued to await a decision from the Supreme Court on his appeal at the end of the reporting period.

The government reportedly continued its ongoing and systematic persecution of members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, which numbered around 230 as of the most recent data available from 2023—down significantly from an estimated 2,000 members in 2018. The government has reportedly refused registration of the community as an association, claiming that Ahmadis “denigrate Islam and threaten national security.” Ahmadis must worship privately for fear of harassment by both the state and other Muslim citizens.

The government also continued to target members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) and surveil them through online monitoring and the deployment of plainclothes police. In the past, the government has called the AROPL a “misguided group” of heretics “out of the Islamic faith” who “should be condemned and punished according to the law.”

While there were reportedly once 140,000 Jews in Algeria, fewer than 200 live there today. The remaining Jewish community has reported few problems with authorities, although antisemitism remains an abiding religious freedom concern in the country. The government has historically tolerated antisemitic hate speech that deliberately conflates Israel, Zionism, and Jews. Such attitudes persist in Algerian public discourse in ways that restrict Jews’ ability to openly practice their religion.

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);
 - Coordinate multilaterally with like-minded governments, including members of the Article 18 Alliance, and United Nations (UN) Special Procedures to raise consistent religious freedom concerns with the Algerian government; and
 - Link foreign assistance to the Algerian government to substantive progress toward addressing violations of religious freedom, such as decriminalizing blasphemy and proselytization, approving registration of the EPA and the Ahmadiyya community as religious organizations, and reopening closed places of worship.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Emphasize to the U.S. Department of State and relevant Algerian counterparts the harmful impact of blasphemy laws and the closure of houses of worship on religious freedom and call for greater visibility of religious freedom concerns in U.S.-Algeria bilateral engagements.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Approximately 99 percent of Algeria's nearly [47 million people](#) are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school of Islamic thought. Algeria's constitution establishes Islam as the official state religion. The remaining one percent of the population consists of Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and an Ibadi Muslim community.

While Algeria's constitution grants the right to freedom of religion or belief, the government limits the free expression and practice of religion by enforcing laws that favor a particular interpretation of Islam and restrict other religious activities. Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize proselytization and blasphemy. Article 11 of Ordinance 06-03 criminalizes proselytization, targeting anyone who "incites, constrains, or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim." The ordinance adds that anyone who "makes, stores, or distributes printed documents or audiovisual footage or by any other medium or means which aim to shake the faith of a Muslim" is subject to penalties, specifically a one- to three-year prison sentence and a fine. Articles 5, 7, and 13 criminalize the "use of an unregistered place of worship," "not worshipping in publicly accessible and identifiable structures," and "modifying a structure for a use not originally intended," respectively.

In April, Parliament proposed penal code revisions, which would introduce penalties for the ambiguously defined crime of "treason" and further restrict an individual's ability to freely speak or share information related to their religious beliefs. Article 144 bis 2 of the Algerian Penal Code criminalizes blasphemy, prescribing prison time and/or a fine for anyone who "insults [the] Prophet . . . or the rest of the prophets, or ridicules the basics of the religion or any of the Islamic rituals."

Restrictions on Religious Minorities

The Algerian government's repression of religious freedom impacts all non-Sunni Muslims in the country, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and others; however, its actions and policies in 2024 particularly targeted the Evangelical Protestant Christian community. Algerian courts upheld several 2023 convictions of EPA pastors during the year, and in January, the government informed a pastor in the region of Kabylia that a court had sentenced him to six months in prison with a fine in absentia for "holding worship without permission." In May, that pastor received a suspended sentence after he filed an appeal. In February, a Tizi Ouzou Province appeals court upheld a court of first instance's

convictions and sentences of five church officials. Each received suspended sentences of varying lengths and penalties, charged with "staging worship without permission" and "worshipping in an unauthorized place." An appeals court also upheld the sentences of three separate EPA congregation members in Tizi Ouzou Province—varying from one month to one year in prison with fines—whom a court of first instance had convicted the prior year for "conducting worship without prior permission." An appeals court also upheld the 2023 sentences of four church leaders from Tizi Ouzou Province charged with "worship in an unauthorized building," "inciting Muslims to change religion," "proselytizing with audio-visual material," "proselytizing by agitating the Muslim faith," and "fundraising without authorization."

Ongoing government toleration of anti-Christian sentiment often forces Christians to meet secretly to worship in Amazigh areas of the country, including Kabylia on the Mediterranean coast. Elders in small towns and villages actively criticized the presence of any churches or visible Christian symbols, discriminating against Christian communities. In September, authorities released Amazigh Christian [Suleiman Bouhaf](#)s, chair of the St. Augustine Coordination of Christians, after he served a three-year sentence on charges of blasphemy. Algerian security agents abducted and refoiled Bouhaf's from Tunisia back to Algeria in 2021, and a court convicted him in 2022. An appeals court upheld that verdict the following year, adding additional charges including "hate speech and discrimination," "use of technology to spread false information," and "conspiracy."

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S.-Algeria bilateral relationship continued to deepen in 2024 through a focus on security, tourism, agriculture, education, and technology-sharing. U.S. security assistance supports counterterrorism efforts to [limit](#) the spread of violent extremism activity. Although the United States has engaged in limited public comment on religious freedom concerns in Algeria, then U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain met with Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf in September. During the meeting, Ambassador Hussain urged the Algerian government to approve the registration of Protestant churches and reopen those that have been closed.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [maintained](#) Algeria on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan remained poor. The government [continued](#) to arrest and imprison certain practicing Shi'a Muslims over their alleged connections to Iran. Most detainees faced dubious drug-related charges, which the government has reportedly used for years to target dissidents, including religious actors. In February, authorities arrested dozens of Shi'a Muslims, including clerics and members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM)—an unregistered Shi'a Muslim group that opposes the government's control of religious practice. In September, a court sentenced MUM board member Agali Yakhyaev to seven years in prison for alleged drug possession, and authorities arrested MUM member [Ahsan Nuruzade](#) in October—less than a month after he completed a seven-year prison sentence motivated by his MUM association. At the end of the year, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Union for the Freedom of Political Prisoners of Azerbaijan had identified 233 “believers” unjustly imprisoned for their religious practices or religiously based opposition to the government.

Detained religious actors accused law enforcement of threatening and wielding physical and sexual violence to elicit false confessions. Many Shi'a Muslims whom authorities arrested or sentenced or for whom appeals were rejected in 2024—including Yakhyaev, Jeyhun Balashov, and Samir Babayev—[claimed](#) law enforcement had planted drugs on, abused, tortured, and/or threatened to rape them during their initial arrests or in pretrial detention. In July, Rustam Gasimli, a member of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), accused police of sexually assaulting him and repeatedly beating him and his co-religionist. This incident happened after authorities arrested them

for a second time within a week for engaging in missionary activities. Shi'a Muslims, including MUM members, also alleged inhumane living conditions and other mistreatment while imprisoned.

Authorities took no apparent steps to investigate credible claims of abuse against freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) prisoners or to hold perpetrators accountable. In July, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) [stated](#) that it continued to receive allegations of “severe acts” of ill treatment and torture by Azerbaijani police officers and that authorities have taken no actions to end such practices. Previous CPT reports [concluded](#) that torture and other forms of physical ill treatment, corruption, and impunity remained “systemic and endemic” among Azerbaijan's law enforcement agencies.

Caucasus Heritage Watch (CHW) provided new satellite documentation of threatened religious sites in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In June, CHW reported the destruction of additional Armenian religious sites—including a 19th century church, two cemeteries, and other artifacts—since Azerbaijan retook control of the region. Also, in June, U.S. NGO Freedom House found Azerbaijan had carried out a “comprehensive, methodically implemented strategy to empty Nagorno-Karabakh of its ethnic Armenian population and historical and cultural presence” during its 2020 and 2023 military operations and concluded Azerbaijan's actions constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity. Some repatriated Armenian prisoners of war reportedly endured mistreatment on a religious basis, including verbal abuse and confiscation and breaking of religious possessions, while in Azerbaijani captivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Azerbaijan 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 Azerbaijani government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime (also known as Bandotdel), 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

- Facilitate an onsite visit by an independent international observer, such as the United Nations (UN), to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories to inspect and document an inventory of cultural and religious heritage.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Introduce and pass legislation to amend the waiver authority ([Pub. L. 107-115](#),

title II) applicable to Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act to require specific improvements to religious freedom in Azerbaijan before the U.S. president can waive restrictions on security assistance to the country; and

- Hold a hearing in the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and/or House Foreign Affairs Committee to highlight religious freedom issues in Azerbaijan, building on the findings of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [hearing](#) on Azerbaijan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Azerbaijan has an [estimated](#) population of 10.6 million. Approximately 96 percent of the population identify as Muslim, composed of around 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolic, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

State Enforcement of Religion Law and Regulations Impacting Religious Freedom

The constitution characterizes Azerbaijan as a secular state and stipulates a separation between the state and religion. Nonetheless, the government continued to enforce its restrictive 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, which subjects virtually all religious practices to intrusive state oversight. The law requires religious groups to register with the government to legally practice their religion, and they must have at least 50 members to qualify. Failure to register puts religious communities at risk of raids, arrests, and criminal prosecutions. Among other limitations, the religion law also mandates the official review and approval of religious materials, restricts who can engage in missionary activity, and requires state approval of religious leaders. Furthermore, the government has not allowed for alternative civilian service although the constitution provides for it. In practice, the government has instead imposed punishments such as exit bans on conscientious objectors—including Jehovah's Witnesses—for refusing military service.

In July, police in Baku detained 11 AROPL members, including Rustam Gasimli, over their public missionary activities and reportedly charged them with violating the regulations for religious organizations. Detainees alleged that investigators threatened them with rape should they continue their activities. Police reportedly have harassed other AROPL members for engaging in similar missionary activities.

In 2024, authorities ramped up their targeting of journalists, political activists, human rights defenders, and other perceived government critics in a massive crackdown. Like religious detainees, civil society actors accused law enforcement of physical and sexual assault, threats of sexual violence, mistreatment in prison, and inhumane prison conditions. In December, authorities arrested human rights defender Rufat Safarov under dubious pretenses days before he was scheduled to travel to the United States to meet with the U.S. Congress and receive an award from the U.S. Department of State for his human rights work. Safarov regularly criticized the Azerbaijani government's unjust imprisonment of nonconforming Shi'a Muslims.

The government used alleged possession of so-called religious "extremist" materials to target political opponents. In April, a court transferred academic and political activist Gubad Ibadoghlu from pretrial detention to house arrest following his July 2023 arrest on dubious allegations that included possession of religious "extremist" materials. Authorities reportedly refused to provide Ibadoghlu with proper medical care, resulting in his health deteriorating. A court later replaced his house arrest with police supervision.

International Attention

European governing and human rights bodies repeatedly raised concerns about Azerbaijan's human rights record, including incidents

related to religious freedom. In January, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) [refused](#) to certify the credentials of the delegation from Azerbaijan in part due to the Azerbaijani government's human rights violations related to prisoners of conscience and its military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. That same month, PACE [adopted](#) a resolution condemning Azerbaijan's reportedly systemic and widespread use of torture and other forms of ill treatment. Moreover, the [Council of Europe](#), the [UN Committee against Torture](#), the [European External Action Service](#), and the [European Parliament](#) denounced Azerbaijan's organized destruction of Armenian religious and cultural heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh and its crackdown on civil society.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Azerbaijani bilateral relations in 2024 largely focused on securing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the U.S. government seeking a mediating [role](#). The United States expressed serious concerns about Azerbaijan's worsening human rights situation. Then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [several times](#) throughout the year and repeatedly brought up general human rights concerns. In his April call with President Aliyev, then Secretary Blinken [welcomed](#) Ibadoghlu's transfer to house arrest and called for his full release, and then U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Mark Libby met with Ibadoghlu in May and October. In October, Ambassador Michael Kozak, a senior official at the State Department, [highlighted](#) Azerbaijan's abuse of Agali Yakhyaev at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Warsaw Human Dimension Conference. In December, then Secretary Blinken [honored](#) Safarov during the State Department's Human Rights Defender Award Ceremony and [called](#) for his immediate release.

Congress elevated human rights concerns in Azerbaijan throughout the year, including religious freedom issues. Members of both [houses of Congress](#) routinely called for the release and an end to the mistreatment of Ibadoghlu. In April, Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) introduced the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act ([H.R. 8141](#)), which, if passed, would have required the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden to determine whether Azerbaijani officials who are mentioned in the bill participated in human rights abuses and qualified for sanctions under relevant U.S. law. In a June letter to then Secretary Blinken, more than 40 members of Congress requested that the State Department raise the issue of destroyed Armenian cultural heritage at every meeting with Azerbaijani officials, citing that country's actions against churches, monasteries, and religious artifacts in Nagorno-Karabakh. Lawmakers used Azerbaijan's hosting of the 29th Session of the Conference of Parties (COP29) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to [highlight](#) its worsening human rights record and [call](#) for the release of all prisoners of conscience. In September, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) led a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission [hearing](#) on human rights in Azerbaijan, including religious sites under threat in Nagorno-Karabakh. In December, then Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [condemned](#) Safarov's arrest and demanded his release.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [placed](#) Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom.

Commissioner dissent on Azerbaijan by Commissioner Vicky Hartzler

Azerbaijan is a secular nation whose Constitution guarantees religious freedom for all. It fosters tolerance between faiths and supports church operations through funding and its state committee of Azerbaijan religious affairs. However, along with this 'support' comes government control suppressing religious freedom. The government controls the publication and distribution of religious materials, requires registration, appoints imams to mosques, and writes the sermons for Muslim services.

The most egregious violations of religious freedom, however, are evidenced by the documented torture of some religious actors including beatings, threats of rape, and detention in horrid conditions. Armenian Christian prisoners are often targeted for brutal treatment including beatings, psychological abuse, lack of access to medical care and proper food, and religious persecution like the attempts to erase cross tattoos through burns. Other religious actors are impacted, as well. One individual who was arrested for distributing pamphlets promoting his Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light faith, was severely beaten, verbally assaulted, and raped with a baton. Police are not held accountable for these actions. This must change.

It is for these reasons that I believe the designation of Country of Particular Concern is more fitting. I am hopeful the government of Azerbaijan will take these concerns to heart, stop the torture, hold police officials accountable, and ensure people of faith can freely live out their faith.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained poor, consistent with past years. The government of Egypt continued to systematically restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for religious minority communities and individuals who express ideas that differ from the state’s interpretation of Islam.

Egyptian authorities continued to enforce the criminal blasphemy statute, Article 98(f), which punishes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” including through prolonged, pretrial detention for individuals who face related accusations or charges. In January, a Nozha court sentenced composer Ahmed Hegazy to six months in prison for “contempt of religion.” Prison officials reportedly subjected Christian convert [Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges](#)—imprisoned in 2021 on blasphemy and terrorism charges—to abuse and torture. State security also continued to hold without trial [Abdulbaqi Saeed Abdo](#), a Yemeni Christian convert whom authorities detained in 2021 for blasphemy after he discussed his conversion online. Authorities have reportedly threatened him with forced deportation back to Yemen, where he would likely face severe repercussions for his beliefs. In July, a military court sentenced Christian conscript Yusuf Sa’d Hanin to three years in prison for allegedly making “statements offensive to Islam” in a private text conversation.

In January and October, a Cabinet-appointed committee approved 480 church and service building permits pursuant to the Church Construction Law, bringing the total number of permits to 3,453 since the law’s 2016 adoption. Currently, the government has yet to act on roughly 2,300 legalization requests for churches and Christian facilities. In contrast, the Ministry of Endowments announced plans in June to invest 18.6 billion pounds (\$366,000) into the renovation, maintenance, and development of more than 12,000 mosques. Although President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s administration previously solicited draft personal status laws

from Christian denominations, the government took no further action in 2024.

While Egyptian security services sometimes moved expeditiously to quell violent incidents against churches, observers criticized authorities’ slow response in other instances, resulting in property damage. In April, reports that an Evangelical congregation had obtained a church construction permit in al-Kom al-Ahmar, Minya Governorate, prompted local mobs to attack nearby Christian communities and set fire to a number of homes. Local authorities failed to prevent the violence despite reported warning signs of worsening sectarian tensions. Anti-Coptic harassment—including the disappearances of young Coptic women—persisted, with reports that authorities were reluctant or unwilling to investigate potential cases of religiously motivated abduction or coercion. In January, police were allegedly hostile and dismissive when the family of Irene Ibrahim, a 21-year-old Coptic woman, reported her disappearance. In August, police purportedly refused to investigate a missing person report from the family of 20-year-old Christina Karim.

Amid these concerns, Egypt’s government maintained some initiatives to recognize and encourage religious inclusivity. Multiple state agencies continued efforts to revive the Holy Family Trail, which includes landmarks sacred to the Coptic community. The government also continued collaborating with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on interreligious programming to promote tolerance between Muslim and Christian women and girls. Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly appointed a Coptic woman to the new Cabinet as minister of local development and two other Christians to head the Beheira and Port Said governorates, increasing that community’s representation in government. The Egyptian government continued its long-term project of removing religiously discriminatory content, although state textbooks continue to reflect some of that concerning material.

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);
- Raise with the Egyptian government during bilateral engagements the need under international law to repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code and phase out its enforcement in the interim;
- Engage with Egypt’s Ministry of Education to obtain updates and assist as needed in the ongoing reform national curriculum to better reflect Egypt’s religiously diverse

history and society while removing or replacing intolerant or inflammatory material; and

- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to engage in scheduled roundtables in Upper Egypt, including local religious leaders, civil society organizations, and government officials, with set agenda items to discuss approvals of houses of worship, religious heritage preservation, and progress toward interreligious tolerance.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold a hearing on religious freedom in Egypt prior to the next designation of

foreign military funding (FMF), requesting testimony and/or attendance from the National Security Council and U.S. Department of State, with topics to include attacks on and forced disappearances of Copts; and

- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Egypt in 2025 to raise key religious freedom issues, including implementation of the 2016 Church Building Law, anti-Christian mob attacks in Upper Egypt, FoRB prisoners, and educational curriculum reform.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Egypt's population is approximately [111.2 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. Over 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, while a minority belong to Evangelical, Catholic, and some smaller denominations. Baha'is may number between 1,000 and 2,000, Jehovah's Witnesses up to 1,500, and the Jewish population has reportedly declined to fewer than 10 people.

Article 2 of Egypt's constitution names Islam as the state religion, with the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 ostensibly provides for freedom of belief, only followers of the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) have a legal basis to publicly practice religion and build places of worship. Since the 1960s, the government has banned Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, maintaining them and other unrecognized religious minorities in a vulnerable position.

Other Legal and Administrative Challenges

Egypt continued to detain and charge individuals under the Cybercrime Law (175/2018), which includes broad provisions the government uses to censor religious expression. In February, an Egyptian court sentenced Kyrollos Nashed, a professor of engineering at Menoufia University, to six months in prison with a fine of 100,000 pounds (\$2,050) for a Facebook post criticizing a member of the Coptic Orthodox clergy; authorities claimed his post violated "family principles and values" pursuant to the Cybercrime Law. In March, the Criminal Chamber of the Court of Cassation rejected an appeal from [Marco Girgis](#), a Christian who in 2022 was sentenced to five years in prison on similar charges. Although the government reportedly lifted its travel ban on Muslim Qur'anist [Reda Abdel Rahman](#) in 2024, authorities continued to surveil him while barring him from obtaining a passport and traveling outside Egypt.

National identity cards present unique challenges to those who do not identify as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, as those documents allow only for those specific affiliations. The exception is Baha'is, whose affiliation is marked on identity cards with a dash; however, they face myriad obstacles despite that modest concession. For example, Baha'is' exclusion from existing personal status law for the three recognized religions results in their inability to legally marry or gather for worship. In August, authorities canceled a gathering that a group of Baha'is planned to hold in a public venue. In September, authorities closed a Cairo facility where members of that community had planned to run a program supporting immigrant children, reportedly due to their planned use of Baha'i educational materials.

Leaders of the dwindling Egyptian Jewish community remained concerned over its broader treatment in the country but welcomed government restoration projects for historic synagogues. However,

the Ministry of Culture continued to deny requests to meet with local Jewish leaders concerning their ability to access and digitize the historical Jacques Mosseri Geniza documents, which have remained in the government's possession since 2016.

Persistent Religious Intolerance in Textbooks and Media

The Ministry of Education launched a long-term effort in 2018 to reform public school curriculum and remove religiously intolerant or inflammatory material on the grounds of religion or belief. This effort resulted in some gradual improvement in textbooks up to the fifth grade but failed to remove other forms of discriminatory content from higher grade textbooks. Current textbooks continued to omit material on the Holocaust and Jewish history in Egypt. Furthermore, the curriculum of the preeminent and state-backed Sunni institution al-Azhar—which maintains a separate primary through secondary school system with government-subsidized textbooks—[teaches](#) a singular religious interpretation, which restricts FoRB for Muslim communities not aligned with that interpretation. The ninth grade "Maliki Jurisprudence" textbook, for example, teaches that vilifying the Prophet and denying the holy scriptures is a crime that should be punished by death. Other textbooks defame Jews as "treacherous by nature" and enemies of Islam while deeming Christians and other non-Muslims "infidels." This curriculum denigrates Baha'is and Ahmadiyya Muslims by framing them as subordinate sects of Islam that promote false beliefs aimed at destroying Shari'a and opposing the Qur'an.

The government also continues to tolerate discourse in state-backed media that invokes antisemitic tropes and Holocaust distortion, including in reference to the ongoing conflict in Gaza and Lebanon. In July, the state-backed Al-Ahram newspaper published an article blaming Jews collectively for "create[ing] terrorism and the terrorists." In October, a newspaper linked to al-Azhar published a Jewish caricature that conflated antisemitic conspiracies with legitimate criticism of Israeli government policy, and it circulated a pamphlet including related conspiratorial tropes.

Key U.S. Policy

Then U.S. President Joseph R. Biden and then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [spoke](#) or [met several times](#) throughout the year with President El-Sisi and other high-ranking Egyptian officials as part of efforts to broker an end to the Israel-Hamas conflict. [Congressional leaders](#) and civil society groups urged the administration to withhold \$320 million attached to the \$1.3 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2023 FMF for Egypt, citing the country's failure to meet benchmarks including the protection of religious minorities. In September, the administration [approved](#) for the first time since 2020 the full amount of FMF, [despite](#) State Department [reporting](#) on systematic discrimination against religious minorities.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, Indonesia's religious freedom conditions remained concerning. Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, the government continued to employ several legal frameworks—including a presidential decree, the Criminal Code, and the Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law—to regulate religion, criminalize blasphemy, and broadly infringe on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In some instances, Indonesia also tolerated FoRB violations by nonstate actors. A new Criminal Code, signed into law in January 2023 and scheduled for implementation in 2026, will set in place additional restrictions on blasphemy, among other issues, deepening the country's systematic repression of religious freedom.

Both the government and intolerant elements of Indonesian society exploited the *Izin Mendirikan Bangunan* (IMB)—the permit required to build religious buildings—and the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship to target minority religious communities. Several Protestant Christian churches faced significant challenges in obtaining the IMB, leading to instances of harassment. In March, a mob in Banten Province disrupted a Christian worship service in a predominantly Muslim area, citing the church's expired permit. In August, authorities from Jombang Regency joined 50 residents in dragging a pastor from his worship site and sealing the shop where his church gathered. In September, a civil servant in Bekasi disrupted and stopped worship at a Christian house church, resulting in the congregation's relocation. Residents in Pegambiran village, West Java, rejected a proposal for the legal establishment of a church in a local warehouse.

Indonesian Catholics continued to face serious challenges, despite the government's welcoming of Pope Francis for a visit in September to promote interreligious harmony and tolerance. St. John the Baptist Parish in Parung has been unable to establish a church building for over two decades, as local Muslims exploited the Interfaith Harmony Forum—the country's main arbiter on matters concerning interfaith relations—to object to the parish's IMB. In May, Muslim residents in Banten Province attacked 12 Catholic students at Pamulang University in South Tangerang city, where the students were holding a neighborhood rosary service. In

November, Parahyangan Catholic University in Bandung, West Java Province, reportedly received a bomb threat from Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, a banned militant group connected to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Ahmadiyya Muslims also continued to face significant hurdles in conducting religious activities. In July, authorities in West Java's Garut Regency forcibly shut down an Ahmadiyya mosque, citing public threats and local Muslims' claims that the group's teachings deviated from Islam. In December, under pressure from hardline Islamist groups, including the banned Islamic Defenders Front, authorities in West Java banned Ahmadiyya Muslims' annual gathering in Kuningan Regency, leaving over 6,000 adherents stranded at Cirebon railway station.

Other religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Shi'a Muslims faced similar discrimination and harsh [treatment](#), including government efforts to shut down or outright ban their religious meetings and other activities.

Indonesia continued to experience concerning levels of antisemitism, which have risen since the October 2023 Hamas terror attack in Israel. Consequently, the small number of practicing Jews concealed their religion out of fear for their safety. For example, a rabbi in North Sulawesi reported that both he and his synagogue have received repeated death threats from hardline Indonesian Muslims. The lead rabbi from the United Indonesian Jewish Community took down their website and asked community members not to post about Jewish activities as precautions, given isolated attacks against Jews and some antisemitic messaging amid pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Jakarta.

Among notable positive developments in 2024, the government [added](#) a seventh category—*kepercayaan* (belief)—as a recognized religion on national identification cards, benefiting smaller religious groups that are not part of the six recognized religions and often suffered discrimination. Additionally, the government no longer [required](#) Christians to use the Arabic term *Isa al-Masih* to refer to Jesus Christ—which it regarded as more palatable for the Muslim majority—and formally allowed them to use an indigenous Indonesian term, *Yesus Kristus*, during major Christian holidays.

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—including Chapter VII of the Criminal Code, blasphemy laws, and the ITE law—to comply with international human rights standards specific to freedom of religion or belief, such as eliminating the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship requirement that religious groups obtain approval from other religious communities to construct worship facilities; and
- Include FoRB-related issues in the Papua region as a part of U.S.-Indonesia bilateral discussions, including by pressing the Indonesian government to grant access to independent international observers to monitor and investigate FoRB conditions in that area.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Legal Impediments to Religious Freedom in Indonesia](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Indonesia is the world’s most populous Muslim-majority [country](#). Of its 267 million citizens, approximately 87 percent are registered as Muslims, around 99 percent of whom are Sunni, less than one percent are Shi’a, and 0.2 percent are Ahmadiyya. Protestant Christians comprise seven percent of the population, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent follow Buddhism, Confucianism, and other traditions.

Through its ostensible commitment to *Pancasila*, Indonesia’s formal ideology promoting religious pluralism, the government strives to present the country as tolerant and respectful of all religious traditions and practices—provided they adhere to monotheism. However, the implementation of *Pancasila* often faces myriad challenges, as evident in persistent interreligious tensions, religious extremist violence, and systematic restrictions that often marginalize religious minorities and enforce specific interpretations of religion in public life. For example, many local municipalities maintain mandatory hijab regulations for women and girls, leading to bullying and withdrawal from school for those who do not wear the hijab. These regulations violate provisions in several human rights treaties to which Indonesia is party, including those guaranteeing FoRB.

Indonesians elected Prabowo Subianto—a retired army general who backed a 2017 rally in support of the blasphemy law—as president in February 2024, raising concerns about the security of democracy and human rights in the country. In particular, many in West Papua fear the prospect of more violence and repression under Subianto’s presidency, given his past human rights record implicating him in atrocities committed in East Timor and Papua.

Ongoing Human Rights Abuses in the Papua Region

Given its unique composition of ethnic and religious minorities and longstanding aspirations for independence, the Papua region’s estimated population of two million—the majority of whom identify as Christians—have long faced discrimination from government agencies, institutions, and laws. Authorities have subjected Papuans to arbitrary arrests, torture, forced displacement, and extrajudicial killings. As of September, increasing armed conflict had led to the internal displacement of nearly 80,000 people who were left with no access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare services, and education, and limited access to employment. Although United Nations (UN) experts have [reported](#) serious abuses against Papuans in the past, such international attention has notably waned in recent years, leading to even less transparency and accountability for government violence and abuses in the area. This lack of attention is particularly troubling in light of Indonesia’s present role as a sitting member of the UN Human Rights Council (2024–2026) and its failure to [conduct](#) full, impartial investigations into abuses such as extrajudicial killings against indigenous Papuans.

Blasphemy Allegations and Convictions

Indonesia’s retention and enforcement of blasphemy laws represent some of its most persistent and systematic FoRB violations. In June, a court in Lampung sentenced comedian Aulia Rakhman to seven months in prison for blasphemy for joking about the name “Muhammad.” In September, police in North Sumatra Province arrested a former councilor of Sibolga for allegedly blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in a Facebook post. In October, police in Sunggal, North Sumatra Province, arrested florist Rudi Simamora for allegedly insulting Islam online; authorities had previously sentenced Simamora to one year in prison for a similar offense, releasing him in early 2024. Police in Medan arrested a social media influencer that same month after local Christians filed a complaint that accused her of making derogatory comments about Jesus’s appearance.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Indonesia maintained close bilateral ties, which they had elevated to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) in 2023—followed by a Plan of Action for implementation from 2024 to 2028—in which the two countries agreed to further expand cooperation on myriad issues including governance, pluralism, human rights, and the rule of law. The two countries [celebrated](#) 75 years of mutual diplomatic relations in 2024. In July, then Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose Fernandez [traveled](#) to Jakarta to highlight U.S. efforts to promote economic growth across Southeast Asia and to further grow the U.S.-Indonesia bilateral economic partnership. That same month, Peter Mandaville, then senior advisor for faith engagement at the U.S. Agency for International Development, visited Indonesia to speak at the International Conference on Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy.

In October, then President Joseph R. Biden designated a presidential [delegation](#) to attend the inauguration of President Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta. In November, the two presidents met in Washington, DC, and jointly announced new programs to further strengthen bilateral ties, including support for interfaith dialogue, promoting democratic governance and human rights, and preserving cultural heritage. In December, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Alpius Hasim Madi, deputy Koramil commander, for his involvement in a gross violation of human rights, namely the extrajudicial killing of Pastor Yeremia Zambani in Papua in 2020, pursuant to Section 7031(c).

In September, then co-chairs of the House Abraham Accords Caucus Representatives Brad Schneider (D-IL), Ann Wagner (R-MO), David Trone (D-MD), and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) introduced a [resolution](#) urging the State Department and civil society organizations to promote peace and tolerance through education and expressing support for the expansion of the Abraham Accords to Indonesia and Saudi Arabia.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom in Iraq remained tenuous, despite some government initiatives to improve conditions for religious minorities. The government’s lack of will or ability to curtail the increasing power of state-subsidized, Iran-linked militias—especially factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—continued to pose a systematic and ongoing threat to religious freedom. Even as U.S.-sanctioned PMF leaders ostensibly set up a human rights department in June, some brigades continued to target religious minorities for harassment, property appropriation, extortion, detention, and torture. In June, Prime Minister Mohammed Shi’a al-Sudani recognized the administrative authority of Chaldean Cardinal Sako, one year after the government had revoked it on the reported advice of the PMF 50th (“Babylon”) Brigade leader, Rayan al-Kildani. Kildani is a U.S.-designated human rights abuser with backing from Shi’a Iraqi constituents and Iran. He continued to attempt appropriation of Christian properties and representation, such as orchestrating the suspension of 15 mayors and district leaders in Nineveh Province in July. The same month, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Benedict Younan Hano sent a letter to Prime Minister Sudani seeking protection from PMF actors. The letter highlighted displaced Christians’ resulting reluctance to return to Mosul and the Nineveh Plains. Sunni Kurds, Assyrian Christians, and others reported the increasing infiltration of sectarian Shi’a actors into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Ongoing territorial disputes between the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) prolonged a power vacuum in parts of northern Iraq. Many Yazidis feared the IFG’s repeated pledges to close

remaining displacement camps. They expressed apprehension over returning to the Sinjar district, which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had devastated a decade earlier. Many of the 200,000 remaining displaced Yazidis felt unsafe returning, despite some IFG and KRG rebuilding, housing, employment, and psychological support programs. Turkey continued its military strikes in the area, purportedly in pursuit of Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) terrorists. The IFG and KRG made some progress toward recruiting up to 1,500 Sinjaris to a local police force, but their failure to fully implement the 2020 Sinjar Agreement allowed for competing militias to intimidate residents and pressure young Yazidi men to join their ranks. In July, the Nineveh Provincial Council selected a Yazidi mayor for Sinjar, ostensibly fulfilling one provision of the Sinjar Agreement. However, some reports suggested the appointment process reflected PMF influence rather than due consultation with Yazidi communities.

Influential members of Baghdad’s leading Shi’a Muslim parties proposed amendments to Personal Status Law No. 188, requiring Muslim families seeking a religious legal framework to choose between Shi’a and Sunni clerical authority in family law matters. The amended law would potentially amplify Shi’a-Sunni sectarianism, privilege husbands’ choice of religious framework, and allow circumvention of the national civil family law in favor of individual clerics’ interpretations of Shari’a. Some interpretations would likely include those that are highly restrictive of women’s property and parental rights while allowing forced marriage for female children. In March, the Supreme Court affirmed IFG policies to monitor and block websites with “anti-religious” content, including perceived insults to scriptures or prophets.

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 additional targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of PMF and other militia units or leaders responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- 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 fully integrating religiously affiliated militias into state forces;
- Provide technical support to supplement or assist the IFG’s efforts to preserve and closely guard internationally collected evidence of genocide, ensuring the security of sensitive data and paving the way for investigations and prosecutions by third countries; and
- Prioritize encouraging the IFG and KRG to comprehensively implement the Sinjar Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community and to conduct a national and regional dialogue on potential 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 any budgeted support to Iraqi officials taking tangible steps toward curtailing threats to the political representation, safety, and continued existence in Iraq of religious and ethnic minority communities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Solemnly Commemorates the 10th Anniversary of ISIS’s Genocide against Iraqi and Syrian Religious Minorities](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years after ISIS’s Genocide](#)
- **Podcast:** [10 Years On: Ongoing Threats to Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS’s Genocide](#)
- **Podcast:** [Responses to Genocide: Two Former U.S. Officials Reflect on ISIS’s Genocide in Iraq and Syria](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Article 2 of Iraq’s constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms “the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice.” However, prohibitions on Baha’is, statutes criminalizing [blasphemy](#), and personal status laws misclassifying converts and their minor children persist.

In November, Iraq conducted its first nationwide census since 1987, with the final results expected in 2025. Previous estimates suggest a 2024 [population](#) of 42–45.4 million that is 95–98 percent Muslim, of which Shi’a Muslims constitute 61–64 percent and Sunnis 29–34 percent. Christians of varying ethnic and denominational backgrounds may constitute less than one percent, and “others” may account for between one percent and four percent. The census did not differentiate between sects (e.g., Sunni or Shi’a) and removed categories for ethnicity, potentially perpetuating miscalculation of populations such as Yazidis and Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians, for whom ethnicity and religion are closely tied. Members of some communities expressed concern over the alleged structuring of the census to allow for political redistribution to further disenfranchise Sunni Muslims in national discourse.

Ongoing Challenges and Positive Steps for Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS

The year 2024 marked the 10th anniversary of ISIS’s launch of [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity targeting Iraqi and Syrian religious minorities. Approximately 2,594 abducted Iraqi Yazidi women and girls remained missing in ISIS internment camps and enclaves in Syria and elsewhere. Complex search and rescue operations benefited from state and nonstate actor contributions, as in the October [liberation](#) of a young Yazidi woman whom ISIS had trafficked into slavery in Gaza. Yazidi advocates called on IFG and KRG institutions to urgently increase their contributions to rescue efforts.

Both the IFG and KRG continued or proposed initiatives benefiting religious minorities, 10 years after ISIS [targeted](#) them, including contributing to the reconstruction of Yazidis’ Lalish Temple. Prime Minister Sudani visited Nineveh to inaugurate several important infrastructure and other projects benefiting its religiously diverse population. The IFG allocated approximately 50 billion Iraqi dinars (\$38 million) to the Sinjar and Nineveh Plains Reconstruction Fund, although some minority advocates regarded the initiative as underfunded. The IFG tasked a High Committee with addressing [hate speech](#) campaigns targeting Yazidis, and in February it announced the creation of a Ministry of Justice [committee](#) to hear religious minorities’ property-related claims.

Christian, Shi’a and Sunni Turkmen, and other religious minority advocates continued to object to the electoral system allowing Shi’a-majority constituencies to propel PMF-affiliated candidates into minorities’ quota seats, counter to legitimate representation. In February, the federal Supreme Court further [limited](#) minorities’ political representation by effectively abolishing the 11 KRI parliament quota seats for Assyrian and Armenian Christians and Shi’a and Sunni Muslim Turkmen. In May, the court restored five quota seats

to Christians and Turkmen, resulting in a net loss of seats and continued exclusion of other communities. The KRI parliament elections in October prompted Assyrians’ additional objections to the quota seat redistribution to KRI governorates with smaller Christian populations. Some members of that community also objected to perceived tokenism benefiting candidates aligned with large, Muslim-majority parties.

In the KRI, some Christians reported KRG officials’ refusal to settle claims for misappropriated properties, tolerance of militias’ checkpoint harassment of Christians, and impediments to Christian farmers transporting supplies between villages. Some Assyrians feared reported KRG plans for a dam that would threaten indigenous sites and monuments and potentially displace Christian residents from the Nahla Valley.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of then President Joseph R. Biden maintained the United States’ [Strategic Framework Agreement](#) with Iraq. In April, then Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with Prime Minister Sudani to reflect on successes in combating ISIS and discuss a “[transition](#) to an enduring bilateral security relationship.” In September, the countries [announced](#) a plan for withdrawal of remaining U.S. troops in Iraq by September 2025 and in December [described](#) ongoing, mutual anti-ISIS efforts. Although ISIS did not reclaim territory, U.S. [military](#) reports pointed to an increase in related attacks in both Iraq and Syria. Throughout the year, the United States held to account those PMF brigades responsible for attacks on U.S. personnel or bases in Iraq and Syria. In January, U.S.-attributed strikes on a PMF logistics center near Baghdad reportedly killed three people, including a senior commander.

In March, then Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran Victoria Taylor visited Cardinal Sako in Erbil to hear concerns over the reported role of PMF actors in the IFG’s selection of administrators for Christian, Yazidi, and Sabeen-Mandaean properties. Some reports suggested that high-level U.S.-Iraq meetings included related discussion of religious minorities’ need for protection.

Throughout the year, the United States commemorated the 10th anniversary of ISIS’s genocide and crimes against humanity targeting Yazidis, Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and others. In May, then Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya visited the [Rabban Hormizd](#) Christian monastery and [Lalish Temple](#), stressing the need for the IFG and KRG to “demonstrate concrete progress in addressing survivors’ concerns.” In July, then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [hosted](#) Yazidi genocide survivors, following his March meeting with Yazidi advocate, genocide survivor, and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad. In November, the United States House of Representatives unanimously passed with bipartisan support [H.R. 554](#), affirming U.S. support for the religious and ethnic minority survivors of genocide in Iraq. The United States also highlighted the more than [\\$500 million](#) it had contributed since 2018 to support Yazidis, Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and other survivors of ISIS and to advance religious and ethnic pluralism.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained poor. The government continued to penalize the peaceful religious activities of all groups, but it particularly targeted Muslims who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam. Systematic restrictions on religious activities remained in place as the government continued to enforce the 2011 law On Religious Activities and Religious Associations (religion law). That law bans unregistered religious activities, requires official examination of all religious materials, and places restrictions on religious education, proselytization, and religious events.

The government continued to control and penalize independent religious activity and expression concerning religion, especially as it pertained to Islam. For example, in May, a worshiper at a Shymkent mosque beat another worshiper, breaking his ribs, because the latter said "amen" during prayers—which is prohibited in state-controlled mosques. When the mosque's imam reported the incident to local police, authorities arrested the victim for allegedly invading his attacker's personal space. In June, Judge Niyazbek of the Shymkent Specialized Interdistrict Court found the victim guilty of violating Article 73(1) of the Administrative Code, which penalizes the intentional infliction of slight damage to health, and sentenced him to 10 days of administrative detention. In November, the Shymkent Interdistrict Criminal Court sentenced a woman who identifies as a "neo-Tengri follower" to two years of "restricted freedom" for posting TikTok videos in which she expressed hatred for Muslims. Her sentence is a form of probation that includes limitations on freedom of movement under Article 174(1) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the incitement of hatred.

Officials also continued to penalize the religious activities of Protestant Christians. In March, police raided Valter Murau's home in the

Zhambyl region, where he leads a Baptist congregation, as worshipers gathered for Sunday services. Police filmed participants during the raid and later charged and fined Mirau and two congregants under Article 489 of the Administrative Code, which penalizes the leadership of and participation in unregistered religious associations. Courts at the district and regional levels rejected all of Mirau's and his congregants' appeal attempts. Police also raided another Baptist congregation in Zhambyl in April, fining three church members under Article 489, along with a second Protestant church during its Sunday services. That same month, the Almaty Religious Affairs Department charged Protestant Christian Sergei Orlov under Article 490 of the Administrative Code for marking International Women's Day by speaking to a group of church members about women in the Bible.

Throughout the year, military officials [rejected](#) the conscientious objection of Jehovah's Witnesses, detaining at least six young Witnesses for days at a time in some cases. In June, authorities in Atyrau detained one Witness for two days, allegedly subjecting him to torture and subsequently forcing him to sign a paper that he had not endured any such abuse.

In January, local press reported that the government was planning amendments to the religion law that would further tighten the space for religious freedom, including by banning religious face coverings in public places and headscarves in schools, increasing membership thresholds for registration, and introducing vague legal terms into official usage such as "destructive religious movement" and "religious radical." The government had not moved forward with the amendments as of the end of the year, but security officials began to actively arrest individuals according to those proposed legal terms, claiming that they were "religious radicals" or members of a "destructive religious movement."

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);
- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief standards among the Kazakh and other regional governments; and

- Engage with Kazakh Ministry of Education officials on the protection of freedom of religion or belief in public educational institutions according to international standards through the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Kazakhstan's religious freedom conditions and advocate for the release of those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs by conducting relevant hearings, including with the assistant

secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, and delegation visits through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and

- Link Kazakhstan's eligibility for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status to the removal of restrictions on freedom of movement related to peaceful religious activities, according to Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

According to a 2021 census, more than 69 percent of Kazakhs [adhere](#) to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Other Muslim groups in Kazakhstan include Shi'a 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, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. A small percentage of individuals identify as atheist or prefer not to share their religious affiliation.

The Kazakh government exercises extensive control over the religious lives and practices of its population, carried over from its pre-independence experience under the Soviet Union. Its efforts to maintain such strict control—generally under the guise of maintaining secularism or combating a vague conception of “extremism”—most commonly target Muslims whose beliefs deviate from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam or who otherwise practice their beliefs independently from the state-controlled Muftiate. Also known as the Muslim board, the Muftiate is a Soviet-era relic agency that regulates the practice of Islam.

Administrative Fines for Religious Activity

Authorities continued to fine individuals for their peaceful religious activities throughout the year. In February, police charged a Kyrgyz man for transporting “prohibited religious literature” while riding a train from Kyrgyzstan, for which the Merki District Court in Zhambyl later fined him 258,000 tenge (\$518). In another instance, Turkistan International Airport officials fined a man 184,600 tenge (\$370) for returning from the United Arab Emirates with 35 religious books in his luggage. In May, Astana police fined the owner of an unregistered mosque 184,600 tenge (\$370) for violating the religion law. In July, the Mamlut District court found a man guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 453 for traveling from Russia with a book written by a former leader of Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic movement that is outlawed as “extremist” in Kazakhstan. The court fined him 258,000 tenge (\$518) and ordered that the book be confiscated and destroyed. Officials later confirmed that the book was burnt. The Astana Akimat Religious Affairs Department lodged a case against film director Nurtas Adambay under Article 490 of the Administrative Code for quoting the Qur'an in a video he posted to his Instagram. Earlier in the year, courts in Atyrau fined two individuals each 129,220 tenge (\$260) under the same article for quoting the Qur'an on their social media pages. In October, Kostonai region officials warned residents to protect themselves from “destructive religious movements,” reminding them that anyone who distributes unauthorized religious materials is liable for administrative penalties.

State Regulation of Religious Symbols in Schools

A Ministry of Education decree prohibits students from wearing religious symbols to class, which schools often interpret as a ban on schoolgirls wearing Islamic headscarves, or hijabs. School administrators across the country suspended and expelled girls for wearing hijabs to class throughout the 2024 school year. As of July—representing the most recent available reporting—parents had filed at least 13 lawsuits for their children's exclusion from class for their religious choice to wear hijabs. In one such case, Bolat Musin sued the Nazarbayev Intellectual School in Karaganda for expelling his daughter, Anel, because she wore a headscarf to class. In June, the Karaganda Administrative Court partially satisfied his claim by recognizing the right to education in the constitution, agreeing that the school had illegally expelled his daughter, and ordering her reenrollment. Other courts throughout Kazakhstan came to the same conclusion in similar cases. However, in July, the Nazarbayev Intellectual School appealed the decision and refused to reenroll Anel. In September, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan found that it violated the right to education for a school to refuse students entry. The court later appeared to backtrack by clarifying that the Ministry of Education can mandate school uniforms and that parents are responsible for complying with such requirements—including the prohibition on religious symbols in schools. Following the Supreme Court ruling, authorities resumed fining parents whose children wore headscarves to class.

Key U.S. Policy

In April, an official delegation from Kazakhstan visited Washington, DC, to engage in the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group with officials from the U.S. Department of State and USCIRF, during which U.S. officials raised concerns regarding religious freedom conditions in that country. In May, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [met](#) with First Deputy Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Akan Rakhmetullin for the sixth annual United States-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue; the parties discussed shared priorities, including religious freedom. In June, then U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev [discussed](#) the bilateral trade relationship, including the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was initially intended to penalize Soviet Bloc countries for discriminatory emigration policies targeting Jews. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor related human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated. The government continued to penalize peaceful religious practices, enforce restrictive, long-existing legislation, and impose additional legislation that violates international standards pertaining to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). These legal and policy developments included amendments to the laws On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations and On Combating Extremist Activity as well as policies to uphold “Kyrgyz traditions” and “traditional Islamic values.”

The government continued to ban organizations that it vaguely labeled as “extremists,” including religious groups with no known history of violence such as Yakin Inkar and Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), the latter of which sometimes propagates antisemitism. Department of Internal Affairs and State Committee for National Security (SCNS) officials raided homes of and arrested members of both organizations. Raids against Yakin Inkar members took place in Osh, Batken, Jalal-Abad, and Chui, many of whom officials arrested and forced to renounce their faith. Authorities also opened criminal investigations against some of them, such as in May when officials in Osh detained seven alleged Yakin Inkar members, seized over 100 religious materials from their homes, and forced at least one detainee to renounce his faith and to promise adherence to “traditional Islam.” That same month, SCNS and Internal Affairs officials in Chui detained 16 Yakin Inkar members, including one man who self-identified as the “caliph.” Authorities placed him in pretrial detention for allegedly creating an “extremist” organization.

HT members faced similar raids. In March, Chui police reported the detention of a man under Article 332 of the Criminal Code—which penalizes the production and distribution of “extremist” materials—for distributing HT materials via Facebook and subsequently refusing to renounce his beliefs. In June, SCNS officials placed in pretrial detention

six HT members from Suzak, Jalal-Abad, after police claimed to have discovered “extremist” materials during residential raids.

Officials continued to raid and suspend or close *madrasas* (schools for Islamic instruction), religious camps, and mosques. In Jalal-Abad, SCNS officials investigated and fined a man 7,500 soms (\$87) under Article 142, Part 1, of the Code of Offenses for teaching minors religious literature without approval from the quasi-independent Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan (SAMK). In July, a Chui interdepartmental committee—including Ministry of Internal Affairs officials and Muslim clergy—collaborated to “minimize the influence of non-traditional movements,” resulting in the discovery of one illegal *madrasa* in Sokuluk that catered to minors and two illegal *madrasas* in Ysyk-Ata. Officials suspended the activities of these *madrasas* and fined the organizers under Article 142, Part 4, of the Code of Offenses, which penalizes performing unauthorized religious work. Officials also carried out a similar raid on at least one other illegal *madrasa* in Talas. In July, the SCNS found and terminated the activities of four religious summer camps in Bishkek, reminding parents that Article 4, Part 5, of the religion law prohibits involving children in religious organizations.

Authorities also subjected non-Muslim groups to raids. In July, SCNS officials joined Combating Extremism and Illegal Migration police in investigating and blocking the activities of the “Word of God” religious movement in Issyk-Kul, arresting and fining three foreign nationals for “carrying out illegal religious propaganda,” under Article 142 of the Criminal Code. In August, authorities raided a Jehovah’s Witness meeting in Kyzyl-Kyia, Batken, seizing religious literature and detaining 18 people—some of whom they subsequently interrogated and photographed. That same month, police in Naryn detained 10 Witnesses for interrogation, demanding information about fellow believers on threat of administrative arrest.

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);
- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international FoRB standards among the Kyrgyz and other regional governments;
- Collaborate, through the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs, with the government of Kyrgyzstan to seek a legal opinion on the religion law and draft extremism law from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights; and
- Suspend U.S. National Guard Bureau military-to-military engagements with Kyrgyzstan until that government increases transparency and clarity regarding its “anti-extremism” operations targeting banned but peaceful religious groups.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Kyrgyzstan’s religious freedom conditions through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Of Kyrgyzstan's approximately six million people, around 90 percent [identify](#) as Muslim, and most adhere to Hanafi Sunni Islam, while one percent adhere to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population largely includes Christians, who make up seven percent of the remaining population. Around 40 percent of them identify as Russian Orthodox; other groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The rest of the population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, International Society for Krishna Consciousness members, and Tengrinists.

Legal and Policy Developments Impacting Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, the government introduced—and in some cases passed—laws, policies, and decrees that impact the religious freedom space or would do so, if passed. For example, the government introduced amendments to two laws, On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations—commonly known as the religion law—and On Combating Extremist Activity, which would increasingly securitize the activities of all religious groups, if passed. Officials largely explained such actions as necessary for upholding Kyrgyz “traditions,” a trope that authorities commonly invoke throughout the region to justify Soviet-era, “secular” policies intended to control the religious sphere.

In August, the State Commission on Religious Affairs (SCRA) released updated draft amendments to the religion law to address “Islamization” and other threats to national security. The amendments mandate that religious people “maintain a neat appearance,” prohibit the door-to-door sharing of beliefs, require those seeking religious education abroad to first obtain official permission, increase registration standards, expand the requirements for theological examination, name the SAMK as the central governing body of Muslims, and more. By the end of the year, the Kyrgyz Parliament approved the draft law following its revision by a working group. Additionally, in September, the Ministry of Internal Affairs developed draft amendments to the law On Combating Extremist Activity, which would strengthen penalties for producing and distributing “extremist” materials through the media or internet and punish the possession of “extremist” materials and public calls for “extremist” activities. Kyrgyz authorities often level accusations of “extremism,” a term vaguely defined under law, to target the peaceful religious practices of Muslims.

In addition, the Bishkek City Internal Affairs Department installed facial recognition cameras around 22 local mosques, allegedly to dissuade theft. During both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the SAMK called

for Muslims to hold prayers only in mosques due to “recent situations in the world,” likely in reference to the March attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia, by suspected Tajik Islamic State terrorists. In July, President Sadyr Japarov signed into law amendments to the Civil Code to ban the use of religious terms in the names of corporate entities. In October, Japarov signed a decree, On Measures to Implement the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Funerals and Burials, which calls for the SAMK to prevent Muslims from holding extravagant burials because such “excessiveness” suggests that Kyrgyzstan “disregard(s) religious customs and traditions.”

The government also targeted those who opposed its religious policies. In February, the Kara-Suu district sentenced [Asadullo Madraimov](#) to three years in prison and [Mamirzhan Tashmatov](#) to two years in prison under Article 330, Part 1, of the Criminal Code—which penalizes the incitement of discord through the internet—for posting a video online that criticized the closure of their local mosque. However, in May, the Osh Regional Court reduced their prison terms by half upon appeal, allowing for Tashmatov's immediate release. The Supreme Court later restored Madraimov's original sentence.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government engaged with the Kyrgyz government in various fora in 2024. In March, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) visited Bishkek to discuss Kyrgyzstan's State Partnership Program with Montana, which is administered by the U.S. National Guard Bureau to foster international civil-military affairs cooperation. In April, then U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs John Mark Pommersheim and Kyrgyzstan Deputy Foreign Minister Aibek Moldogaziev [co-led](#) the 2024 United States-Kyrgyz Republic Annual Bilateral Consultations. During those consultations, participants discussed political and security cooperation, economic partnerships, and support for civil society and rule of law. Human rights discussions focused on the rights of women and gender-based violence but did not appear to include religious freedom. In June, then President Joseph R. Biden nominated Brian Stimmler to be Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Kyrgyzstan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of the C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. As in prior years, the U.S. government partnered with the Kyrgyz government to repatriate Kyrgyz nationals—particularly women and children—from prison camps in northeast Syria.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia remained poor. The dominance of Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence prohibited the practice of other religious interpretations. Theocratic influence and stricter morality policing in public life continued to increase following that favored interpretation of Islam, which state and federal legislation enhanced and reinforced. For example, religious authorities increased morality policing operations during Ramadan to identify and punish Muslims found eating or drinking during fasting hours. Violators faced fines and imprisonment, while the crackdown broadly targeted both Muslims breaking the fast and non-Muslims selling food during those hours. In August, two female divers from Terengganu, one of Malaysia's more religiously restrictive states, sparked a controversy over their donning swimsuits to participate in the 21st Malaysian Games—resulting in the Terengganu Sports Council banning them and other women from representing the state in diving competitions.

While Sections 298 and 298A of the Penal Code directly [criminalize](#) blasphemy, government authorities also use Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 (CMA) to prosecute related offenses. In January, prosecutors charged two filmmakers under blasphemy provisions of Section 298 for the contents of a banned film they had produced. In March, prosecutors charged the owners of a convenience store chain and one of its suppliers for selling socks bearing the name “Allah,” alleging that the writing wounded “the religious feelings of others.” This case sparked outrage among some Muslims and prompted unidentified assailants to attack three of the defendants' stores with Molotov cocktails.

The National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs (MKI) declared the controversial Muslim conglomerate Global Ikhwan

Services and Business Holdings as religiously “deviant”, in part for its ties to the Al-Arqam sect. Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's emphasis on eradicating religious trends that diverge from officially accepted interpretations of Sunni Islam enjoys backing from several Malaysian states—such as Selangor and Johor—whose local governments monitored citizens and referred them to Shari'a courts for following religious groups that authorities deemed “deviant.”

These restrictive conditions continued to present serious challenges to Malaysia's diverse religious minorities. Members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), whom the government deemed as “heretical,” faced ongoing persecution. In October, the Shari'a High Court in Negeri Sembilan sentenced Zolekafeli Bin Abd Ghani to six months in prison for allegedly teaching “false religious doctrines,” while the Department of Islamic Religious Affairs and local police also detained his wife and daughter for their involvement in the group. Moreover, MKI issued a religious decree condemning the AROPL's teachings as “deviant” and incompatible with Sunni Islam.

In October, the government released a classified and long-awaited Special Task Force report on the abductions of activist [Amri Che Mat](#) and [Pastor Raymond Koh](#) in 2016 and 2017, respectively. The report claimed that neither individual had been a victim of an officially sanctioned, forced disappearance, but rather blamed their abductions on rogue police officers—despite earlier findings from the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) that called out government complicity in both incidents. The report's controversial findings prompted Koh's wife, Susanna Liew, to call for an independent investigation into the pastor's disappearance.

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);
- Urge the Malaysian government to ratify core international human rights treaties that impact religious freedom of all Malaysians as well as refugees and asylum seekers, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol;
- Engage with the Malaysian government on religious freedom issues, particularly in its role as the 2025 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Chair, including encouraging its repeal of laws that curtail religious expression, such as the Sedition Act, Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Printing Presses and Publications Act; and
- Work with the Malaysian government to encourage abolishment of blasphemy provisions that are inconsistent with international human rights law, including the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and the right to freedom of expression.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Malaysia's ongoing religious freedom concerns through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation visits and advocacy for FoRB prisoners; and
- Encourage counterparts in the Malaysian Parliament, through the U.S. House Subcommittee on the Indo-Pacific, to amend the SUHAKAM Act of 1999 to bolster SUHAKAM's functions and authority—including its work on religious freedom—to maintain its independence as well as to bring greater transparency and impartiality to the selection and appointment of its commissioners.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- [Hearing: Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences](#)
- [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Although Malaysia is a religiously and ethnically diverse country, the federal constitution explicitly defines majority ethnic Malays as Muslims from birth. Chinese Malaysians, who constitute roughly one-fourth of the population, generally follow Confucianism, Taoism, and Christianity. Malaysians with South Asian roots commonly practice Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism. Over [63 percent](#) of Malaysia's population identify or are classified as Muslim, the vast majority of whom adhere to state-sponsored Sunni Islam according to the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. Buddhists comprise around 19 percent; Christians nine percent; Hindus six percent; Confucianists, Taoists, or followers of traditional Chinese religions one percent; and around two percent identify with no religion.

Following Malaysia's [2022 General Election](#), the growing influence of the Islamist Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has contributed to an increase in hardline approaches in state and society toward the implementation of Shari'a-based laws and education policies as well as toward a variety of social issues. PAS often regards non-Muslims as a threat to the dominant role of Sunni Islam in Malaysian society and exerts pressure on the administration of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to adopt stricter, religiously based policies.

Policing Religion Through Identity Cards

By law, Malaysia's national identity card (MyKad) specifies an individual's religious affiliation in such a way as to assist the enforcement of Shari'a law and to quickly distinguish Muslims from non-Muslims. The law requires visibly singling out those whom the government assumes to identify as Muslims—including all ethnic Malays—by printing "Islam" on their MyKad cards while including other religious affiliations only within the cards' encrypted data. As such, the MyKad system continued to present institutional obstacles to those who sought to change their religious identity as printed on or embedded in their card's data, forcing them into costly and laborious legal proceedings. In January, two Selangor-born sisters won a court declaration that they are Hindus, succeeding in their lawsuit against the National Registration Department (NRD), which had long insisted they were Muslims and required marking them as such on their MyKAD cards. In August, the High Court in Sabah declared that a Christian man was not a Muslim after the plaintiff sought a declaration that he was not a professing Muslim and requested the NRD to remove the word "Islam" from his MyKad card.

Treatment of Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

As of November, Malaysia [hosted](#) more than 190,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including over 110,000 predominantly Muslim Rohingya and nearly 28,000 Chin people—most of whom are Christians—from Burma who are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) without legal status. Rohingya refugees continued to struggle to access education, healthcare, and jobs amid widespread negative sentiment across Malaysian society and a broad lack of rights that left them exposed to extortion, exploitation, arrests, and detention. Human rights [groups](#) criticized the government for [holding](#) 12,000 refugees, asylum seekers, and

migrants in overcrowded and "degrading" immigration detention centers. In February, 115 Rohingya and 16 other refugees from Burma [escaped](#) from the Bidor immigration detention center after a protest, resulting in a road accident that killed one refugee. The government has not allowed the UNHCR to visit immigration centers since August 2019, while authorities increased raids on refugees.

Use of Legal Mechanisms to Restrict FoRB for Muslims

Malaysia's dual legal system allows both civil and Shari'a courts to coexist, although in practice it often serves to control the country's official interpretation of Islam and prevent the enactment of any independent variations. In February, Malaysia's top court declared unconstitutional more than a dozen Shari'a-based laws that authorities in Kelantan State had enacted—a landmark decision that could affect similar laws in other parts of the country. Following the ruling, the government set a deadline of December 31 for individual states to harmonize Shari'a law with the country's constitutional framework, with experts expressing skepticism given the short timeframe and the ambitious undertaking.

In July, the Malaysian Parliament introduced a controversial [Federal Territories Mufti Bill](#), which would expand the powers of muftis—Islamic legal experts with the authority to issue religious rulings, or fatwas—in federal territories. Critics fear that the passage of the bill could lead to the official enforcement of fatwas as law and infringe on the rights of non-Muslims without any recourse. If passed, the bill would also grant unelected officials the power to legislate without transparency or due process while giving additional, exclusive authority to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, further marginalizing religious minorities and Muslims who follow other interpretations of Islam.

Other legal statutes regulating the practice of Islam also continued to place undue restrictions on other facets of religious freedom. For example, Muslims seeking to convert to another religion were required to receive permission from a Shari'a court—along with a declaration of apostasy and accompanying [penalties](#)—which such courts rarely granted.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the United States and Malaysia continued to [collaborate](#) closely on security issues such as counterterrorism and regional stability while regularly engaging in bilateral and multilateral training, exercises, visits, and economic partnership. The two countries also continued to [deepen](#) military [cooperation](#) and to [tackle](#) shared maritime security challenges across the Indo-Pacific through [military exercises](#), military [exchange](#), and high-level naval [visits](#).

In May, then U.S. Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson and then Treasury General Counsel Neil MacBride [traveled](#) to Malaysia to discuss U.S. efforts to disrupt terrorist financing and other topics. In October, the United States and Malaysia [held](#) the Sixth Senior Officials' Dialogue in Putrajaya to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Malaysia-United States Comprehensive Partnership and to reaffirm the two countries' partnership across trade and investment, peace and security, people-to-people ties, and a variety of regional and global issues.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Sri Lanka remained on a concerning trajectory. Government and local authorities continued to harass, detain, and target religious minorities through discriminatory legislation and facilitated the expropriation of land from those communities under the guise of “protecting Buddhism.”

In collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs (BRCA); Buddhist monks; and the Army, the Department of Archeology continued to designate disputed places of worship in the north and east as “Buddhist” cultural sites at the expense of religious minorities. As a result, the government actively denied religious minorities access to houses of worship. In February, with support from that department, the army escorted Buddhist monks to Veddukkunaari temple in Vavuniya, declaring it an ancient Buddhist site. In March, authorities detained eight Tamil Hindus conducting Shivaratri festival activities at the temple, accusing them of harming Buddhist antiquities under the Antiquities Act. While authorities released the worshipers after 10 days, protests erupted across Vavuniya following their initial detention.

Beyond land disputes, religious minorities continued to face challenges in operating and registering places of worship. In August, the Department of Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs (DMRCA) and the Wakfs Board announced the resumption of new mosque registrations, ending a five-year suspension following the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. While a 2022 circular mandates registration only for new places of worship, the minister of BRCA announced in March that all religious institutions must register, regardless of their religion or belief. He added that, under the direction of the commissioner general for Buddhist affairs, authorities would raid all “unregistered” places of worship, claiming that such centers—including churches,

mosques, Hindu temples, and Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Halls—were engaged in religious conversions.

Christians and Muslims reported harassment and hate speech that contributed to a worsening social environment for their communities. In June, the Department of Examinations withheld exam results from 70 Muslim women from Zahira College who wore religious head coverings, claiming without evidence that they could have concealed Bluetooth earpieces to aid them during the exam. In April, Hindu nationalist group Siva Senai organized protests in Jaffna against the slaughter of cattle, where protesters carried placards carrying derogatory claims about Muslims and Christians.

Additionally, the government introduced legislation disproportionately impacting religious minorities. In January, it approved the Online Safety Bill, criminalizing online statements deemed to “outrage religious feelings.” In August, it published an amendment to that bill, offering modest changes but retaining language regarding insults to “religious sentiment.” Simultaneously, the minister of justice published the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), to replace the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which would expand state authority to search, arrest, and detain individuals under a broad definition of terrorism and likely facilitate targeting of religious minorities. Such targeting impacts those engaged in peaceful religious practice or protests, like lawyer Hejaaz Hizbullah, whose trial under the PTA for “inciting communal disharmony” remained ongoing at the end of 2024. In February, the Supreme Court ruled that the ATA would require a national referendum to pass, unless legislators incorporate the recommended amendments—thereby leaving the PTA in effect. In October, the government, under newly elected President Aura Kumara Dissanayake, announced it would not repeal the PTA, claiming the issue is not the law but rather its “misuse.”

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); and
- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into the United States-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue, including the need to repeal or significantly reform the PTA to require a higher threshold of evidence for charges, a definition of “terrorism” that complies with international standards, and safeguards against abuses of religious freedom.
- The U.S. Congress should:
 - Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through the Congressional Caucus on Ethnic and Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka, foreign affairs committee hearings, resolutions, letters, and congressional delegations to Sri Lanka; and
 - Prioritize meetings with the Department of Archeology and the Ministry of BRCA during congressional delegations, and specifically raise concerns over their expropriation of shared or disputed sacred sites.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Sri Lanka’s Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities](#)
- **Hearing:** [Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victim’s List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a multiethnic and multireligious country under the leadership of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, elected in September 2024. The constitution recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity. While recognizing freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, Article 9 of the Constitution guarantees Buddhism the “foremost place” and instructs the government to foster and protect it.

Sri Lanka’s population is an estimated 22 million. Buddhists compose the majority (approximately 70 percent), followed by Hindus (12.6 percent), Muslims (9.7 percent), Roman Catholics (6.1 percent), Protestants and individuals who identify with other Christian denominations (1.3 percent), and followers of “other” religions (0.05 percent). Most Sri Lankans are ethnic Sinhalese and adhere to Buddhism. Tamils are the second largest ethnic group and are predominantly Hindu with a significant Christian minority. The government considers Muslims a distinct ethnic group. Ahmadiyya and Sufi Muslims, Indian Tamils, and other small groups also reside in the country.

Expropriation of Land

Throughout the year, the government continued facilitating the expropriation of land from religious minorities in the north and east under the auspices of protecting Buddhist cultural sites. In February, Sri Lanka’s National Physical Planning Department declared 11 additional Buddhist temples as sacred sites, bringing the total to 142. In March, the minister of BRCA proposed a new bill to safeguard “sacred Buddhist sites.” The same month, the army granted conditional access to seven Hindu temples in Jaffna’s High Security Zone but required worshipers to use army transportation, provide their name and home address, and allow the temple to share their information with the district and divisional secretariat.

Ahead of national elections, Ven. Dr. Omalpe Sobitha Thera, chairman of Sri Lanka’s National Association of Scholars, urged all political parties to maintain Buddhism’s primacy under Article 9 of the Constitution. Echoing this, Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Defense announced the restoration of several Buddhist *viharas*, claiming that thousands were damaged or declined during the civil war.

Places of Worship

April marked the five-year anniversary of the Easter Sunday attacks, which targeted three churches and hotels in Colombo, Negombo, and Batticaloa. Recognizing this anniversary, the inspector general of police instructed authorities to give special attention to religious sites due to heightened risk of terrorist attacks. Sri Lankan news media reported total of 5,580 police officers and 1,260 tri-force personnel deployed at 2,453 of the total 3,203 mosques across the country during Ramadan and to 1,873 churches out of 2,106 for Easter Sunday. This deployment reportedly incorporated body searches, as necessary, before entry into the houses of worship. In October, President Dissanayake visited St. Sebastian’s Catholic Church, which was damaged during the Easter Sunday attacks, and promised a “fair and transparent investigation.”

Attacks and Hate Speech against Religious Minorities

Incidents of discrimination and violence targeting religious minorities continued throughout the year, with little or no punishment from government authorities. Christians and Muslims reportedly faced threats, intimidation, or coercion for their religious beliefs, including from members of Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups like Siv Senai, Rudra Sena, and Ravana Sena. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) reported an increase in anti-Christian and anti-Muslim sentiment proliferating online through social media platforms, particularly in the country’s north and east. In some cases, such discriminatory sentiment was expressed by government officials. For example, the head of Sri Lanka’s Sectoral Oversight Committee on National Security said in May that “brainwashed Muslims” must be forcibly rehabilitated and emphasized that the country can no longer “please” the community by appeasing their demands.

Legislation Impacting Religious Freedom

In January, the government promised to take measures to prevent the purported distortion of religious teachings after a Buddhist preacher and seven of his followers committed suicide. In response to this interpretation of Buddhism, the Ministry of BRCA announced the formation of a committee to investigate “the activities of people who mislead society by distorting religious beliefs.”

In February, the government introduced the NGO Supervision and Registration Bill, which would require stricter regulations of civil society organizations. Its purview includes educational institutions, human rights organizations, and research institutions focusing on religious freedom issues. Such legislation risks exacerbating existing concerns from NGOs and religious leaders regarding levels of surveillance and monitoring. Additionally, in November, the new government announced that it would not make changes to the debated Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA)—which governs marriage, divorce, and other family matters for Muslims—emphasizing that any amendments would require consultation with religious leaders. Some critics argue that the MMDA does not afford Muslim women the same rights and protections as other religious minorities.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2024, the United States continued to strengthen its bilateral relationship with Sri Lanka through foreign investment and high-level delegations. In August, the U.S. Embassy in Colombo [announced](#) the obligation of \$24.5 million to the Sri Lankan government to promote “good governance practices.” In May, then Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Sri Lanka, where he expressed the importance of a robust civil society. In July, the United States [hosted](#) the Fifth Session of the United States-Sri Lanka Partnership Dialogue to “express their shared commitment to economic prosperity, security cooperation, sustainable development, democracy and human rights, and people-to-people exchanges.” However, these engagements did not appear to include any substantive discussion of issues related to freedom of religion or belief.

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Syria remained poor, with both state and nonstate actors contributing to violations. At the close of the reporting period, the nationwide system of political institutions had begun a complex and ongoing [transition](#) under nonstate actors, many of which pledged to respect the rights of religious minorities yet maintained concerning records of religious freedom violations against those very communities. Throughout most of the year, the former government of President Bashar al-Assad engaged in ongoing and systematic restrictions on religious freedom, particularly administrative ones, favoring the Alawite minority and repressing Sunni Muslim, Christian, Druze, and other communities. Its offensives in rebel-held areas killed Sunni civilians and destroyed their mosques. In parts of northern Syria, U.S.-designated [terrorist](#) organization [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and several Turkish-supported Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs) continued to restrict or violate religious freedom as well. Late in the year, HTS led a coalition of Islamist and other rebel groups, including some TSOs, in an offensive against the government, culminating in the December capture of Damascus and toppling the Assad family's 54-year regime.

Despite seeking legitimacy in recent years through its Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), HTS continued to impose its interpretation of Sunni Islam on both Muslim and non-Muslim residents in Idlib. In July, the SSG Directorate of Religious Affairs announced the return to Idlib of 30 internally displaced Christian families, downplaying HTS's past dispossession of Christians and ignoring its ongoing disenfranchisement of religious minorities. Throughout

the year, Idlib residents staged protests against the authoritarian rule of HTS, which continued to jail and [torture](#) dissidents. In late November, some Christian residents of Aleppo and Hama fled HTS's sudden offensives into those areas, fearing a replication of the group's religiously repressive policies in Idlib.

In parts of Aleppo and Ras al-Ein, TSOs—including Syrian National Army (SNA) factions—terrorized Kurds and religious minorities with extortion, detention, and torture. Despite one SNA leader's promise in July to protect Christians, in September a commander of the Jaysh al-Sharqiyya faction reportedly confiscated 500 acres of land from Christian farmers in Ras al-Ein. In December, the SNA took control of some Kurdish-led parts of northern Syria such as Manbij, reportedly abusing and violently ejecting Kurds, Yazidis, and Christians. This offensive, as well as Turkey's ongoing military strikes in the region—purportedly against Kurdish [terrorists](#)—imperiled religious minority communities in northeast Syria, where the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) throughout the year emphasized the religious inclusivity of its government and U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

2024 marked a decade since the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) began its campaign of [genocide](#) and crimes against humanity targeting Iraqi and Syrian religious minorities. Although ISIS did not reclaim territory, SDF and U.S. military [officials](#) reported it had increased attacks during the year. The SDF continued efforts to locate and rescue nearly 2,600 missing Iraqi Yazidi women and girls, many of whom likely remained hidden in al-Hol and other enclaves since ISIS abducted and enslaved them in 2014.

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, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of Syrian entities, including nonstate actors and their leaders, responsible for religious freedom violations; and
- Support religious freedom in Syria by 1) fully implementing General License No. 22 in areas the DAANES governs and encouraging its religious inclusion efforts; 2) offering technical assistance, including identification technologies to assist local partners in locating missing Yazidi women and girls; and 3) maintaining direct humanitarian aid to populations in non-regime areas subject to religious freedom abuses by nonstate or other state actors.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom and issues affecting religious minorities, including

the need for continued U.S. support of repatriations and justice and accountability measures for ISIS members and former regime officials, in Syria-related legislation and in hearings, meetings, letters, and congressional delegation trips abroad; and

- Pass legislation funding the documentation and investigation of crimes against humanity that targeted religious minorities in Syria under the Assad government, to support international efforts to hold accountable violators of freedom of religion or belief.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Solemnly Commemorates the Tenth Anniversary of ISIS's Genocide against Iraqi and Syrian Religious Minorities](#)
- **Podcast:** [10 Years On: Ongoing Threats to Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS's Genocide](#)
- **Podcast:** [Responses to Genocide: Two Former U.S. Officials Reflect on ISIS's Genocide in Iraq and Syria](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Syria's constitution requires the president to be Muslim and identifies Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation. It provides for the protection of religious communities' personal status, which the former government interpreted to mean separate family laws for Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Druze. In 2024, the former government kept in place bans on Jehovah's Witnesses and restrictions on interfaith marriage and the conversion of Muslims to other religions. It also did not allow former Muslims to register as members of the religion to which they converted.

Demographic figures have fluctuated due to almost 14 years of mass displacement within Syria and to other countries, as well as an influx in late 2024 of hundreds of thousands returning Syrian refugees expelled from host countries and new refugees fleeing Israeli military operations in Lebanon. Syria's [population](#) of 23.9 million is 87 percent Muslim, of whom approximately 74 percent are Sunni, with Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a Muslims together constituting 13 percent. Druze are three percent of the population. Proportions of Christians and Yazidis were obscured by these groups' sustained displacement and emigration as well as the government's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam.

Other Threats to Religious Freedom in Regime and Non-Regime Areas

While it held power during most of the year, the Assad regime continued to use one-year military conscription deferments to pressure Christians into outwardly supporting its operations and broader legitimacy. Druze communities and religious leaders in Suweida continued anti-regime protests, departing from their past tacit support of the government. Despite some ostensible concessions, the regime fatally shot a Druze protester in February, and appointed as governor of Suweida a retired general who helped lead the 2011 government crackdowns that sparked Syria's civil war.

In August, the Assad government announced an initiative to monitor digital platforms for "indecent content" that "violates public morals and offends Syrian societal values and national constants." The program built upon Law No. 19 of 2024, which grants overbroad powers to the Ministry of Information, supplementing the state's arbitrary enforcement of the Cybercrime Law of 2022 exposing Sunni Muslims, nonbelievers, and others to prosecution or detention for online content transgressing the state's religiously justified standards.

Five years since a U.S.-partnered international [coalition](#) achieved the territorial defeat of ISIS, some countries continued to [repatriate](#) and prosecute citizens who joined or aided the terrorist group. Approximately 10,000 ISIS fighters and over 44,000 ISIS [family](#) members remained in prisons and internment camps in northeast Syria following recent repatriations. However, SDF wardens struggled to maintain sanitary and secure conditions, and reports described [al-Hol](#) and other camps as breeding grounds for ISIS ideology. Survivors of

ISIS's 2015 raid on Assyrian Christian villages in the al-Khabur Valley—from which at least one kidnapped Assyrian woman remained [missing](#)—expressed fear of the potential for renewed attacks.

Turkey's military strikes on north and east Syria, as well as its permissive stance toward religiously motivated and targeted TSO violence, created a dire humanitarian situation in and near DAANES jurisdictions. By November, multiple communities in northeast Syria, including religious minority villages, had suffered more than a year of severe [water](#) and electricity deprivation due to a long-term Turkish offensive. SNA brigades reportedly also continued to harass, abuse, and confiscate land from Yazidis and Christians, fueling their further emigration and contributing to potentially Turkish-planned demographic shifts to reduce the local presence of Kurds and other ethnic and religious minority groups. In June, members of SNA faction al-Jabha al-Shamiyya destroyed the Yazidi Mannan shrine in a village near Afrin.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States opposed normalization of [relations](#) with the Assad government, with the U.S. Department of State noting in November the regime's [noncompliance](#) with a 2023 International Court of Justice (ICJ) order to prevent state-sponsored torture. In response to the regime's downfall in December, then President Joseph R. Biden stated the United States would [vigorously](#) monitor new leaders' commitment to the rule of law and "the protection of religious and ethnic minorities." In late December, then Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf [met](#) with HTS, emphasizing the need for an inclusive government in Syria that recognizes the rights of diverse ethnic and religious communities.

The United States [commemorated](#) the 10th anniversary of ISIS's launch of genocide and other atrocities against Syrian and Iraqi religious minorities. In May, the State Department announced the [repatriation](#) of 11 U.S. citizens from ISIS camps in northeast Syria and encouraged other governments to take similar steps. U.S. support for regional stability included an ongoing [counterterrorism](#) program and maintenance of the USCIRF-[recommended](#) General License No. 22. However, DAANES representatives reported that some U.S.-based banks had expressed reluctance to offer them accounts, notwithstanding the General License's [authorization](#) of U.S. economic activity in DAANES-controlled areas. The United States maintained and imposed new economic [sanctions](#) and designations for actors linked to the Assad government and visa [restrictions](#) on regime officials involved in human rights abuses.

The outgoing U.S. Congress considered but did not pass legislation to bar the United States from [normalizing](#) relations with President Assad's government and allow for additional sanctions in [expansion](#) of the 2019 [Caesar Civilian Protection Act](#).

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [redesignated](#) HTS as an EPC under IRFA for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Turkey (Türkiye) remained consistent with the previous year. The administration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan maintained relationships with certain historical religious communities and launched restoration of their sacred sites, such as Diyarbakır’s Surp Sarkis Armenian Church. However, several religious groups faced ongoing struggles for legal recognition; construction or administration of houses of worship and other institutions; and legal residency for foreign-born clergy. State actors and institutions including schools continued to emphasize the centrality of Sunni Islam to Turkish national identity, marginalizing non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims while targeting secularists and others for expressing criticism of Islam. USCIRF visited Turkey in September to observe religious freedom conditions.

Authorities continued to monitor online activity for commentary they perceived as offensive to Islam, investigating and prosecuting people under Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code. That law prohibits incitement of hatred toward another group based on religious differences but in effect criminalizes blasphemy against state-approved versions of Islam. In January, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) filed a criminal complaint against Sevan Nişanyan for disparaging on YouTube the Islamic call to prayer. In February, the Beykoz Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office detained Feyza Altun for her social media post denouncing Shari’a. Although the court released her one day later under an international travel ban and police parole, in May it issued a nine-month deferred sentence against her.

In September, the municipality of Istanbul recognized Alevi *cemevis* as houses of worship. However, the Turkish government continued to regard Alevis as Muslim, despite some Alevis’ campaign for recognition as a distinct religion. Protestant Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses also faced ongoing and systematic restrictions, including barriers to zoning, building, and registering places of worship; bans on training Turkish-born Protestant clergy; lack of burial rights for Protestants of Turkish ethnicity; financial penalties for Jehovah’s Witnesses who practice conscientious objection; and national security bans on foreign national Protestant clergy who have legally resided in Turkey. Authorities reportedly denied

refugee claims of some Iranian converts to Christianity, inaccurately denying that deportation to Iran would pose a threat to their safety.

Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic leaders reported a certain degree of freedom of worship, but even these historical communities faced some challenges. In May, the government reopened Istanbul’s Byzantine-era Chora Church and museum as a mosque. Amid some Muslim nationalists’ objections, the government granted permission for Eastern Orthodox clergy to belatedly celebrate a feast day at the Sümela Monastery, reportedly failing to respond to requests to hold ceremonies at another historic site. Some foreign national clergy experienced delays or obstructions in renewing their residency permits. This further constrained the Eastern Orthodox Church, which has been unable to domestically train clergy since 1971, when a constitutional court ruling in effect pressured some private religious colleges to [close](#)—including the [Halki Theological School](#). On a positive note, following the Minister of Education’s May visit to the School, President Erdoğan met in December with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who thanked the president for promising to reopen the school. These visits suggested the government may have moved closer to facilitating the reopening of that institution of great spiritual importance and practical necessity for Eastern Orthodox Christians in Turkey and around the world.

Turkey hosted one of the world’s largest populations of refugees, including members of religious minorities fleeing severe persecution, such as Uyghur Muslims from China and Gonabadi Sufis, spiritualists, Baha’is, and Christian converts from Iran. Some refugees reported facing long waits for third country resettlement, inhibitory parameters for refugee distribution within Turkey, and restrictions on their internal freedom of movement, including travel to attend religious services. These factors increased opportunities for authorities to detain and deport refugees; once deported, they face the same religious persecution they originally fled as well as their government’s punishment. In September, Iranian officials caught and detained in Evin Prison a Gonabadi Sufi Muslim refugee, whom Turkish authorities had deported despite credible threats awaiting him in Iran.

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 meetings with Turkish government officials obstacles to religious minorities’ access to houses of worship and clergy, such as barriers to continued legal residency and restrictions on clerical institutions including the Theological School of Halki, stressing full compliance with European Court of Human Rights rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
 - Work with Turkey and other international partners to better protect individuals seeking protection from religious persecution, including cooperating on resettlement programs for those who have fled to Turkey with a credible fear of religious persecution in their home countries.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Elevate in legislation, hearings, and travel delegations to Turkey serious concerns regarding enforcement of Turkish Penal Code Article 216 as a blasphemy law and limitations on religious minorities’ legal status, houses of worship, and access to clergy.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** Istanbul, Ankara, and Heybeliada in September 2024
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey](#)

Background

Turkey's [population](#) is almost 85 million, at least 99 percent of whom are Muslims, although the government's classification of between 10 million and 25 million Alevi as Muslims skews these statistics. Among Muslims, the vast majority are Sunni while Shi'a Muslims represent a tiny minority. Less than one percent of the population is non-Muslim, such as Greek and Syriac Orthodox Christians, Roman and Chaldean Catholic Christians, Armenian Apostolic and Protestant Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Yazidis, and others. Of Turkey's 452 non-Muslim places of worship, 205 belonged to non-historical groups such as Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Turkey's historical legacy of pronounced secularism, distinct among countries in the Middle East region, has contributed to a relatively large number of secularists with Sunni Muslim or Alevi backgrounds. The constitution reflects this heritage, referring to the state's secular nature and acknowledging freedom of religion and conscience. However, the government administers many aspects of religious life via the Diyanet and the Directorate General of Foundations. The government offered Alevi *cemevi* utilities and other support via the Ministry of Culture and Tourism over the objections of some activists, who claimed Sunni Muslim institutions received higher funding, support, and recognition under the Diyanet.

Religious Freedom Challenges in Education

Fifty-five schools served Jews and Greek, Armenian, and Assyrian Christians. Despite the constitution's characterization of the country as secular, the same article guaranteeing freedom of religion or conscience also requires the state to provide "instruction in religious culture and morals" via "compulsory" school lessons. While the courses included material on world religions, they often reportedly emphasized state interpretations of Sunni Islam—contrary to the government's "supra-sectarian" educational policy, which aims to empirically present religions, avoiding prioritization of any one sect. Secularists, Alevi, Protestant Christians, and other communities raised additional complaints over ostensibly "elective" courses (e.g., music, sports) in which instruction often explicitly invoked Sunni Islam.

In April, the Ministry of National Education announced its new "Education System for the Century of Turkey," the latest of several overhauls to primary and secondary school curricula. Some of the resulting revisions reportedly invoked religious concepts, sparking controversy among a variety of stakeholders. Some Alevi groups expressed concern over misrepresentations of their tradition, while education and women's unions denounced the curriculum for its alleged imposition of religiously justified systems and norms.

In addition to the continued closure of the Eastern Orthodox Halki seminary, the government also limited training and education for Protestant Christian clergy, forcing many Turkish Christian communities to rely on foreign-born clergy and laity. The government continued its multi-year crackdown on the legal residency of at least

100 long-term resident or expatriate Protestant Christians in Turkey and northern Cyprus. Authorities continued to assign restrictive immigration codes (N-82 and G-87) to Christian clergy and their families, designating them as national security risks. In February, the Constitutional Court [ruled](#) that immigration authorities had not violated Protestant Christians' religious freedom by targeting legal resident pastors and other religious leaders for reentry bans, cancelation of residence permits, and deportation.

Nonstate Actors

Nonstate actors, including Turkish perpetrators of hate crimes as well as foreign-born and Turkish members of violent transnational jihadist groups, also posed a persistent threat to religious minority communities. In January, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility for an attack on the Santa Maria Roman Catholic Church in Istanbul, in which suspected members of the group's Khorasan branch (ISIS-K) fatally shot a congregation member during Sunday Mass. In December, a gunman shouted messages of religious intolerance in his New Year's Eve attack on Istanbul's Kurtuluş Protestant Association Church, reportedly prompting authorities' swift arrest and investigation. While Jewish communities in Istanbul and Ankara expressed appreciation for police protection at their services, political leaders' incendiary rhetoric about Israel, including Holocaust distortion, have drawn upon historical antisemitic narratives, contributing to an atmosphere of popular sentiment against Jews.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2024, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden encouraged Turkey to facilitate the reopening of the Halki Theological School. In March, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan jointly presided over the seventh meeting of the U.S.-Türkiye Strategic Mechanism.

Congress took bipartisan action to monitor Turkey's [stances](#) within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and to track the country's [restrictions](#) on the freedom of expression and other rights of journalists, political opponents, and members of the public. In April, the House of Representatives' Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) on human rights in Turkey, featuring [testimony](#) on Turkey's religious freedom violations. Those violations included Turkey's increasing military encroachment, both direct and through local proxies, into parts of north and east Syria and northern Iraq, purportedly in pursuit of Kurdish terrorists but to the detriment of vulnerable religious minority communities in both areas.

With Turkey's cooperation, the U.S. Department of State implemented the first phases of Welcome Corps, a pilot program for privately sponsored refugee resettlement that included individuals who fled to Turkey from religious persecution in their home countries.

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan further deteriorated. The government continued to restrict and penalize the practices of many religious groups, particularly Muslims who seek to practice their faith independently from state control. Additionally, the government continued to enforce its 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations—as amended in 2021—placing bureaucratic restrictions on the registration process for religious communities, banning missionary activity and proselytism, prohibiting unregistered religious education, and mandating government examination and approval for all religious materials. During the year, Uzbekistan’s Parliament, the Oliy Majlis, adopted legislation that would further restrict religious education by penalizing parents or guardians for allowing their children to receive unauthorized religious education.

The Uzbek government continued to enforce longstanding, stringent registration restrictions under the religion law, one of many lingering, Soviet-era “secular” policies intended to strengthen state control over religious practices. In June, Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov ordered the demolition of over 400 unregistered mosques and prayer spaces for conversion to commercial use, although there were no reports that officials carried out such demolitions. This threat, as yet unfulfilled, illustrates some of the complications that emerge from the draconian registration framework. For example, officials reportedly threatened to convert one unregistered mosque in the Yangiyul district of Tashkent into a business due to its disuse since 2007—despite the fact that its disuse was a result of government closure since that time, followed by years of reported state intimidation and denial of the congregation’s repeated attempt to register. In February, the Tashkent Inter-District Administrative Court rejected a complaint from a Jehovah’s Witnesses congregation against an official’s refusal to designate a building as its legal

address, which is necessary for registration. In April, the Tashkent Administrative Court Appeal Board rejected a further appeal by the same community. Officials also continued to refuse the registration attempts of Protestant churches and harass members. In March and April, for example, State Security Service (SSS) officials questioned unregistered church members in Karakalpakstan and Khorezm, claiming to one Protestant Christian that he was attending an “illegal extremist Wahhabi group” and pressuring him to report on the congregation’s activities.

Authorities continued to target Muslims for their peaceful religious activities—often through vaguely defined efforts to counter “extremism”—through fines, arrests, and prison sentences, while the quasi-independent Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU) continued to censor and control imams. USCIRF has [documented](#) the cases of over 50 Uzbeks who remain in prison on vague charges related to their peaceful religious activity. In April, the MBU ordered imams across the country to hand in their passports—likely representing an attempt to restrict their movement following the March attack on the Crocus concert hall in Moscow, Russia by suspected Tajik Islamic State terrorists. A month later, the MBU called on all imams to refrain from using social media and interacting with other people’s content. The Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) also engaged in censorship and published an updated list of banned social media channels and pages that it claimed contained signs of “extremism and terrorism.” Also, to prevent “extremism,” the CRA called on citizens to not interact with online religious posts that have not received a positive theological examination by the state, warning it could lead to serious consequences, including large fines. In June, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev warned against “various forces in the world (that) are trying to destroy the essence of religion and lead young people astray from the true path.”

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);
- Impose targeted sanctions on State Security Service officials that repeatedly arrest individuals for peaceful religious activities 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

- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) standards among the Uzbek and other regional governments.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Uzbekistan’s religious freedom conditions through delegation visits, meetings, and hearings, including through the Congressional Uzbekistan Caucus and the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus; and
- Suspend hosting the Uzbek government’s “Uzbekistan Day” event on Capitol Hill until it releases all individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

Of Uzbekistan's approximately [36 million](#) people, between 88.0 and 96.3 percent identify as Muslim. While most Muslims in the country belong to the Hanafi Sunni community, Shi'a Muslims also exist in small numbers. Other religious groups include Russian Orthodox Christians—who comprise around two percent of the population—as well as atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, International Society of Krishna Consciousness members, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholic Christians, and Protestant Christians.

Administrative Penalties for Religious Activities

Uzbekistan's religion law broadly bans unauthorized religious education. Throughout the year, officials issued fines for peaceful religious activities such as unauthorized religious education, leading unauthorized prayers or religious events, or distributing unauthorized religious materials. While fines largely targeted Muslims, other religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses also faced penalties. For example, courts continued to fine Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their faith with others under Article 240 of the Administrative Code. In February, the Yunusabad District Criminal Court fined Elnora Maksutova 23,800,000 soms (\$1,853) and Marina Penkova 17,000,000 soms (\$1,324) for sharing their religious beliefs.

Officials enforced an expanded interpretation of a September 2023 addition to the Administrative Code of Article 184, Part 4, which bans the concealment of one's identity in public. Claiming security concerns, local authorities have used this provision to arrest and fine individuals for growing a beard—presuming it religious in nature—or wearing religious head covering. According to reporting, authorities continued to conduct beard raids against merchants at the Malika market in Tashkent, during which security officials detained men with beards and forced them to shave under threat of administrative detention. A National Television and Radio Company representative reported that an unofficial ban on bearded singers appearing on TV prevented at least one singer, Shokhzakhon Zhuraev, from participating in a broadcasted musical contest. In August, the Samarqand District Court sentenced two men to 10 days of administrative detention for walking around the Khoja Ahrori Valiy neighborhood with beards and refusing orders to report to the police station. Also in August, the Andijon City Court, in two separate cases, fined two women each 3,400,000 soms (over \$265) for wearing religious face coverings in public.

In August, the upper chamber of the Oliy Majlis adopted legislation to penalize parents and guardians who allow their children to receive "illegal" religious education under the 2008 law On the Guarantees of the Rights of the Child. If President Mirziyoyev signs the legislation into law, those found in violation could face a fine of up to about 8,500,000 soms (\$662) or 15 days of arrest. In August alone, courts throughout the country fined over 100 individuals for providing "illegal" religious instruction under Article 241 of the Administrative Code. For example, a court in Termiz city sentenced a man to 15 days

of administrative detention for giving religious lessons on social media without authorization.

(FoRB) Prisoners

The government continued to arrest, imprison, and prevent the release of individuals targeted for their peaceful, independent religious activities. In June, SSS officials arrested an estimated 100 Muslim men in the Kashkadarya region, including former FoRB prisoner [Khayrullo Tursunov](#). A court also sentenced [Abdumutal Abdurahimov](#) to 12 years in prison for his engagement with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a Muslim organization that does not espouse violence but has perpetuated antisemitism.

Prison officials have placed at least two Muslim FoRB prisoners in punishment cells for seemingly arbitrary reasons. For example, officials placed [Faryozbek Kobilov](#) in a punishment cell for two days in early August, prompting concern that this move could jeopardize his early release. Prison officials also placed [Alimardon Sultonov](#) in a punishment cell which he reportedly fears was to ensure he would serve the rest of his sentence in a harsher prison. In a positive development, officials transferred [Bobirjon Tukhtamurodov](#) from prison to house arrest.

Key U.S. Policy

On September 27, 2024, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhancing regional security, and disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor broader human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting. In June, President Mirziyoyev and then U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Katherine Tai discussed the Jackson-Vanik amendment. In September, the United States and Uzbekistan signed a Customs Mutual Assistance Agreement to strengthen law enforcement and Customs cooperation. In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) former Uzbek officials for engaging in human rights violations.

In March, Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) and Representative Mike Rogers (R-AL) led a congressional delegation to Uzbekistan, including members of the House Armed Services Committee Representatives Adam Smith (D-WA) and Salud Carbajal (D-CA), and former member Veronica Escobar (D-TX). The delegation met President Mirziyoyev and other Uzbek officials to discuss strengthening the U.S.-Uzbek relationship, focusing on trade and regional security concerns. Following the delegation's visit, Representative Smith acknowledged Uzbekistan's human rights abuses but stressed the overriding importance of working with the country on other issues such as terrorism and foreign influence. In July, Senators Steve Daines and Gary Peters (D-MI) launched the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus to "improve trade relations, boost agricultural developments, address human trafficking and migration concerns and increase national security partnerships."

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

An Entity of Particular Concern or EPC, as defined in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998, as amended, is a nonstate group that engages in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and is also “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.”

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. Department of State designate or redesignate seven nonstate actors as EPCs. The conditions supporting these recommendations for Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) are described in the Nigeria chapter. The EPC recommendation for Syria-based Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is described in the Syria chapter. For al-Shabaab, the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and the Houthis, USCIRF bases its corresponding recommendations on the following conditions.

In 2024, al-Shabaab, which gained prominence in the 2000s seeking to establish an Islamic state in accordance with its version of Shari’a, continued its violent campaign against the Somali federal government. The group has killed hundreds of civilians and soldiers in several parts of the country, including Lower Shabelle where the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia is located. In March, suspected al-Shabaab militants reportedly killed six Christian merchants who were known for proselytizing in a Muslim community near the Somalia-Kenya border.

ISSP, a branch of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria active in the [Sahel](#) region of Africa, continued its longstanding campaign against civilians and religious sites across northwest Africa. The group claimed responsibility for an attack on a Catholic church in Burkina Faso in February that killed at least 15 in the village of Essakane. In Niger, it continued to use Islamic taxation as a pretense

to extort religious minorities while regulating their religious practices. In April, the group imposed local Eid celebrations onto all religious groups in northern Abala and claimed it had carried out Shari’a-based punishments near the Mali-Niger border.

JNIM, which formed when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoun merged in 2022, continued expanding its activities across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso [using](#) taxation and ransom of kidnapped captives to extract money from all religious communities. It imposes strict dress codes and gender segregation, and it seeks to replace secular education with religious instruction to fit its restrictive interpretation of Islam. The group also began levying *jizya* (Islamic poll-taxes) on all adult Christians in the Mopti region of Mali.

The Houthi movement, formally known as Ansar Allah, continued to undermine religious freedom in Yemen. Founded in 1992, the Houthi movement significantly expanded its territorial control in 2014 during the country’s civil war, capturing the Yemeni capital of Sana’a and other areas in the country’s north and northwest. In January 2024, Houthi authorities conducted a mass arrest of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including the community’s leader; they released the detainees in April but only after reportedly subjecting them to forced indoctrination and renunciation of faith. In August, Houthi authorities released all remaining Baha’i prisoners they had seized during a May 2023 mass arrest of 17 members of that community. However, the group continued to harass, detain, and torture Yemeni Christians, particularly converts from Islam. Houthi leaders continued to promote antisemitic propaganda and to deliberately conflate Israeli policy and Judaism. Jewish prisoner of conscience [Libi Marhabi](#) remained in Houthi detention despite a court order for his release. The group also imposed a *mahram* (male guardian escort) requirement and enforced gender segregation in public spaces.

2025 USCIRF EPC RECOMMENDATIONS

Al-Shabaab	The Houthis	Islamic State in West Africa Province
Boko Haram	Islamic State – Sahel Province	(also referred to as ISIS – West Africa)
Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham		Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

2023 STATE DEPARTMENT EPC DESIGNATIONS

Al-Shabaab	The Houthis	Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
Boko Haram	Islamic State – Sahel Province	The Taliban
Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham	Islamic State in West Africa Province	

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 abroad.

While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF's recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2024. 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 2024 Annual Report.

Increasing Use of Targeted Sanctions

USCIRF has consistently called on the U.S. government to increase its use of human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals or entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses. Throughout 2024, 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 violations.

Significant sanctions issued during the year for religious freedom and/or related violations included the following examples. While not exhaustive, these examples reflect publicly documented efforts to implement sanctions or visa bans on individuals or entities across CPC and SWL countries.

- In February, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa sanctions on over 100 Nicaraguan municipal officials responsible for human rights violations and in May [imposed](#) additional visa restrictions on 250 members of the Nicaraguan government for supporting human rights and religious freedom violations in the country. This included sanctioning individuals associated with a crackdown on the largest religious university in Nicaragua.
- In April, then President Joseph R. Biden signed into law the [MAHSA Act](#), which would impose sanctions on top leaders and entities responsible for human rights violations, if enforced. Further referencing Mahsa Amini's 2022 death, in September the U.S. Department of the Treasury [announced](#) the sanctioning of 12 Iranian officials for their connection to human rights abuses, including violent repression of prisoners and activists. Additionally, in May, the Department of the Treasury updated the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations (ITSR) by clarifying General Sanctions License D-2, which gives a waiver to technology companies seeking to help Iranians coordinate protests against freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) restrictions and related human rights violations.
- In July, the State Department [announced](#) visa restrictions on unnamed Chinese government officials for their involvement

in repression of marginalized religious and ethnic communities, including in Xinjiang and Tibet.

- Also in July, State Department officials [announced](#) the sanctioning of affiliate groups of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in central, eastern, and southern Africa.
- In August, the State Department [announced](#) visa restrictions on dozens of Syrian government officials, prior to the former regime's collapse in December, for their involvement in human rights abuses.
- Throughout the year, the U.S. government imposed a series of [sanctions](#) on individuals and entities for perpetrating, arming, or otherwise enabling serious human rights abuses and mass violence across Sudan. In January 2025, after the reporting period, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [determined](#) that members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militias had committed genocide in Sudan which, among other actions, included sanctions against RSF leader Mohammad Hamdan Daglo Mousa ("Hemedti") for his role in systematic atrocities and gross violations of human rights.
- In December, the State Department [imposed](#) a travel ban on Alpius Hasim Madi, an Indonesian commander, for his involvement in gross violations of human rights, including the extrajudicial killing of Pastor Yeremia Zanambani in Papua in 2020.

Raising IRF Issues in Multilateral Engagement

USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government:

- Support international investigations, including through the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), into religious freedom violations in China and in Iran.
 - At the UNHRC, then U.S. Ambassador Michèle Taylor [condemned](#) the Iranian government's targeting of religious minorities and, during the Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia, [recommended](#) that Saudi authorities reform laws and judicial processes that negatively impact FoRB.
 - U.S. Ambassador Dorothy Shea [reiterated](#) U.S. support for UN Security Council [Resolution 2721](#), which calls for a UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan.
- Work with like-minded partners to address China's technology-enabled religious freedom and other human rights violations.
 - In December, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security announced new controls on advanced technology to restrict China's ability to repress human rights and bolster its military capabilities.
 - In September, the United States joined several other countries in signing the first-ever international legally binding treaty on artificial intelligence, called the [Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law](#), which requires the development of artificial intelligence consistent with international human rights standards, including FoRB.

- Work in close coordination with international partners to exchange intelligence and to continue prosecuting those engaging in transnational repression against religious minorities.
 - The U.S. Department of Justice [prosecuted](#) and [indicted](#) individuals from China and India for engaging in transnational repression, including [targeting](#) religious minorities on U.S. soil.
- The U.S. government acted as a signatory to several Article 18 Alliance statements, including on [anti-Muslim hatred](#), [FoRB and women's rights](#), and the persecution of [atheist and non-practicing](#) individuals.

Raising IRF Issues in Bilateral Engagement

USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government raise religious freedom issues in bilateral engagements, which occurred throughout the year.

- In November, then Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya discussed Egypt's national human rights [strategy](#)—which underscores areas for improvement on key religious freedom issues—with [members](#) of Egypt's parliament and other government stakeholders.
- Then Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu met with Uzbek and Kazakh officials to discuss a range of shared interests, including religious freedom.

Refugee Resettlement

USCIRF has consistently recommended that the U.S. government maintain a robust refugee resettlement program and prioritize the resettlement of victims of the most severe forms of religious persecution.

- In September, the Biden administration [maintained](#) the annual refugee ceiling at 125,000 for fiscal year 2025.
- In November, the House of Representatives passed the Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts (CARE) Authorization Act ([H.R. 8368](#)) with bipartisan support, requiring the State Department to appoint a Coordinator for Afghan Relocation Efforts responsible for relocating and resettling eligible Afghan allies. While introduced in the Senate, the bill did not pass before the end of the 118th Congress.
- Members of Congress introduced and/or passed legislation related to religious freedom, including passing [reauthorization](#) of the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, which facilitates the resettlement of persecuted religious minorities from certain countries.

Advocacy for FoRB Prisoners

USCIRF recommended that the U.S. government strengthen advocacy on behalf of individuals persecuted on the basis of their religion. U.S. officials engaged in advocacy on behalf of FoRB prisoner cases around the world throughout the year, pursuant to this recommendation.

- International partners, including members of the Article 18 Alliance and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, reported to USCIRF that they had regularly used the Frank R. Wolf FoRB [Victims List](#) as a key resource for their advocacy on behalf of FoRB prisoners.
- In July, 32 members of Congress [signed](#) a joint letter to then President Biden and then Secretary of State Blinken urging them to ask Saudi authorities to immediately release a list of prisoners of conscience in the country, including FoRB prisoners.
- Fifty-eight members of Congress [signed](#) a letter to the Ambassador of Nicaragua to the United States calling for the release of 11 pastors affiliated with Mountain Gateway Ministry, whom the Nicaraguan government had arbitrarily imprisoned. That government subsequently exiled all 11 pastors and several additional FoRB prisoners to Guatemala, including former Catholic university students [Adela Tercero](#) and [Gabriela Morales](#) as well as journalist [Victor Ticay](#).
- Members of Congress advocated extensively for some Azerbaijani prisoners of conscience, including [Gubad Ibadoglu](#) and [Rufat Safarov](#). However, members generally refrained from advocating for Shi'a Muslims imprisoned on the basis of FoRB.
- Members of Congress advocated for FoRB prisoners and other prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#).
- In November, the U.S. government negotiated the resettlement of three Uyghurs from China as part of a prisoner exchange. However, at the end of the reporting period, four Uyghurs in Saudi Arabia remained at significant risk of forced return to China.
- In Nigeria, in August—following significant advocacy from Congress, USCIRF, the State Department, and other U.S. government entities—authorities [released](#) from prison Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, more than four years after his 2020 arrest on blasphemy charges. In late December, a court in Bauchi State [acquitted](#) Christian nurse Rhoda Jatau, more than two years after her arrest on allegations of blasphemy.

Congressional Action Promoting Religious Freedom

USCIRF recommended that Congress highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, and other actions.

- Congress held approximately 10 hearings on international religious freedom issues, including a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on [Antisemitism in Latin America](#).
- The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held hearings on [women's rights](#) in Afghanistan, human rights in [India](#), [Turkey](#), and [Azerbaijan](#), and a hearing on transnational repression that featured discussion of Iran, India, Saudi Arabia, and China.
- The Helsinki Commission held a [hearing](#) on the persecution of Ukrainian Christians in Russian-occupied Ukraine.

- The Senate Foreign Relations Committee organized a [hearing](#) on laws restricting nongovernmental organizations, which often target faith-based organizations. In December, the Committee also held a hearing on the implementation of Global Magnitsky laws, highlighting religious freedom implications.
- In June, the House of Representatives passed a bipartisan resolution, Expressing support for democracy and human rights in Pakistan ([H.R. 901](#)), which called on the Pakistani government to support and strengthen human rights, rule of law, and democratic institutions.
- The Senate and House of Representatives passed the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Act of 2024 ([S. 3764](#)) reauthorizing USCIRF for two years.

OTHER GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

This section highlights some important developments and trends that impacted religious freedom conditions around the world in 2024, 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 contexts.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Restrictions by Nonstate Entities

In 2024, a variety of nonstate entities imposed restrictions on religious freedom, including USCIRF-recommended Entities of Particular Concern as well as entities that did not meet the statutory criteria for that designation. Despite not meeting those specific criteria, however, these groups continued to pose grave challenges to FoRB; the United States designates several of them as terrorist groups, and all of them have regularly targeted specific religious groups with violence, discrimination, and repression.

The Taliban, as the de-facto authority of Afghanistan, continued to severely restrict the religious freedom of all Afghans, by enacting and enforcing draconian religious edicts. Human rights groups and the United Nations (UN) warned of the severely harmful impact of such edicts, as well as the Taliban's use of physical and sexual violence, arbitrary detention, torture, and corporal punishment. The UN Security Council (UNSC) additionally [renewed](#) the mandate of a monitoring team overseeing the implementation of sanctions packages on the Taliban, including freezing assets and prevention of travel, citing the unique threat to women and girls and members of minority groups. It also directed the team to document instances of noncompliance.

Hamas and Hizballah continued to use religious sites, including mosques, to hide weapons in their ongoing armed conflict with Israel. Hizballah continued to promote antisemitic ideas through its official media channels, while senior Hamas officials engaged in antisemitic Holocaust denial and distortion.

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), a regional branch of the jihadist group Islamic State, conducted attacks in multiple countries throughout the year, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. The group has also launched operations in Turkey, Russia, and Iran. It projects additional force in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. In Afghanistan, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for multiple deadly attacks targeting the minority Hazara Shi'a community and their places of worship. While the Taliban made progress in combating ISIS-K, they reportedly struggled to disrupt their urban cells as the group moved away from controlling territory. In Pakistan, ISIS-K continued to conduct recruitment efforts and launch attacks.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not regain territory in Iraq or Syria but [increased](#) attacks on military and civilian targets in those countries and continued to intimidate religious minorities throughout the year. Turkey continued to finance and control several Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs), such as factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which targeted religious minorities in Syria for forced conversion, sacred site desecration, interrogation, extortion, rape, and torture. In December, after partnering with [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) to overthrow the government of President Bashar

al-Assad, some TSOs returned to northeast Syrian territories bordering Turkey to escalate their takeover of parts of the region, forcibly displacing and reportedly assaulting members of religious and ethnic minority groups. At the end of the reporting period, as HTS-led interim authorities began absorbing state institutions in Damascus, religious communities in several other parts of the country remained vulnerable to violence from TSOs, independent militias, ISIS, and other militant organizations. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) warned of a full resurgence of ISIS, as that key U.S. ally in the [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS](#) struggled to ward off Turkish attacks while overseeing detention camps that house over 43,000 ISIS fighters and their family members.

Other ISIS affiliates continued to perpetrate horrific religious violence in various parts of Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed eight people in Beni during an attack on a Pentecostal church in January. In May, ADF assailants reportedly killed 14 Catholics in North Kivu province for refusing to convert to Islam. The same group reportedly also executed 11 Christians in the village of Ndimu in Ituri State and kidnapped several others. Meanwhile, in Mozambique, Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) and other ISIS-linked insurgents continued their longstanding campaign of violence against civilians and religious sites in Cabo Ligado. Government troops responded with security operations, working along with Rwandan forces. In November, ISM reportedly burned four churches and 16 houses in the villages of Juravo and Tacuane.

FoRB Trends in Countries with Conflict or Political Upheaval

Sudan

Following the 2023 outbreak of civil war in Sudan, the country continued to see a range of documented violence, human rights abuses, and FoRB violations against the country's citizens and their communities. A transitional government had presided over Sudan from 2019 to 2021—following a popular uprising that brought an end to the religiously repressive regime of Omar al-Bashir—and made significant [improvements](#) in religious freedom. A military coup in 2021 threatened civilian governance but had largely refrained from [reversing](#) those significant FoRB advances. However, rival military factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), sparked the present conflict in 2023 and since raised widespread threats to FoRB across the country—particularly impacting Sudan's most vulnerable religious populations. The ensuing, widespread violence and chaotic circumstances continued to impede reporting on these serious religious freedom challenges, which have included the abuse of Islamic *hudud* (corporal) punishments, forcible conversions to Islam, attacks against places of worship, widespread restriction of worship, and rampant discrimination against religious minorities. Reports of such atrocities contributed to the U.S. decision to [sanction](#) a series of individuals and entities in 2024 for perpetrating, arming, or otherwise enabling serious human rights abuses and mass violence across Sudan. In January 2025, after the reporting period, then U.S.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [determined](#) that members of the RSF and allied militias had committed genocide in Sudan which, among other actions, included sanctions against RSF leader Mohammad Hamdan Daglo Mousa (“Hemedti”) for his role in systematic atrocities and gross violations of human rights.

Bangladesh

Religious freedom conditions in Bangladesh declined amid a series of attacks against religious minority communities. Following a violent crackdown on protests that resulted in 200 deaths and the removal of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Hindu groups claimed an increase in attacks against their communities and temples. These attacks included vandalism and mob violence. Simultaneously, traditional and social media proliferated false or unsupported claims of violence to discredit the interim caretaker government led by Mohamed Yunus. Hundreds of Hindus were reportedly killed in the violence following Prime Minister Hasina’s departure, though reporting suggests the killings were likely related to political affiliation rather than religion. Ahmadiyya Muslim communities also reported physical attacks and vandalism to their property. In response to these and other incidents, the caretaker government expressed its intention to protect minority communities.

Despite those government pledges, systematic pressure on religious minorities continued to generally worsen. Prior to the July protests, two judges of the Bangladesh High Court expressed support for harsher punishments for blasphemy, including capital punishment. Prime Minister Hasina further issued controversial statements suggesting that Christians in the country were plotting to carve out a “Christian state” from parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. In November, police charged a Hindu priest, Chinmoy Krishna Das, with sedition charges for denigrating Bangladesh’s flag while demonstrating for the protection of Hindus. The arrest sparked clashes between thousands of Das’s supporters and police, resulting in the death of a Muslim lawyer. The same month, an estimated 30,000 Hindus gathered demanding government protection from attacks and harassment.

Throughout the year, predominantly Muslim Rohingya refugees from neighboring Burma also continued to face severe threats, including reported mob violence and desecration of religious materials within their camps in Cox’s Bazar. Increased fighting in Burma forced thousands more Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh. In October, Bangladesh’s caretaker government called on the UN to establish a safe zone in Burma’s Rakhine State to allow internally displaced Rohingya to receive aid in place, calling for expedited resettlement.

Ukraine

In August, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed into law new legal amendments related to the activities of religious organizations, despite widespread concerns about the amendments’ compatibility with international law. The revised legislation allows the government to ban religious organizations in Ukraine affiliated with a foreign religious organization whose management center is located in a country waging war against Ukraine. It also bans the Russian Orthodox Church—which only operates in Russian-occupied Ukraine—and “Russian world” (*Russky mir*) ideology. The amendments would likely significantly impact the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which Ukrainian authorities and society have viewed with suspicion following Russia’s 2022 invasion, due to the UOC’s historical and

ecclesiastical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate. Furthermore, the new amendments risk imposing collective punishment on individual members of religious communities. In December, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) criticized the amendments, stating that they established “disproportionate restrictions on the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief.” USCIRF has urged the Ukrainian government to ensure that enforcement of the amendments comply with international human rights standards.

Libya

Libya’s religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, with each of the two [rival](#) governments restricting religious freedom for both the Sunni Muslim majority and religious minority groups. The interim Tripoli-based government in western Libya and affiliated Special Deterrence Forces (SDF) continued to arrest, interrogate, detain, force confessions from, and criminally try Muslims who expressed theological dissent. It also detained, interrogated, and prosecuted atheists, converts from Islam, and both Libyan and foreign national Christians accused of proselytizing. In November, authorities in Tripoli announced the reactivation of a morality police force and the institution of religious *mahram* (male guardian escort) requirements for women. At the same time, the rival Benghazi-based government in the east continued to invoke religious justifications to police Libyans’ online speech and other expression that did not align with officials’ interpretations of Islam. In December, the eastern Municipal Guard banned New Year’s celebrations, which that government characterized as a non-Muslim tradition. It also interrogated and confiscated stock from Benghazi shop owners selling holiday-themed goods. In territories under both governments, government-affiliated security actors and nonstate militias targeted religious minorities, especially vulnerable migrants, for harassment, torture, and kidnapping for ransom.

Emerging Issues in Other Countries

Mexico

Mexico saw an alarming rise in religious freedom violations by non-state actors during 2024. In April, village leaders in Hidalgo forcibly [displaced](#) over 100 Protestants because of their religious identity, including through electricity cuts and property vandalism. In October, gunmen in Chiapas killed Catholic priest and indigenous rights activist Marcelo Pérez after he officiated Mass. Other nonstate actors, including criminal organizations, engaged in additional acts of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious leaders throughout the year.

Venezuela

Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the government of Venezuela under President Nicolas Maduro continued its institutionalization of an office for religious affairs. Observers feared the office would impose restrictions on religious groups, specifically Christians. Authorities reportedly pressured Evangelical and Christian leaders to voice political support for the Maduro government in exchange for resources and funding to support religious community institutions. The government also reportedly tolerated nonstate actors’ targeting of Christians. In January, unknown assailants murdered a Catholic priest working with indigenous groups.

The government dismissed the killing as a suicide and did not launch a formal investigation. In August, President Maduro promoted the antisemitic trope of Jewish political control by blaming “international Zionism” which “controls all the social networks, the satellites and all the power” for supporting his political opposition.

Nepal

Nepal continued to experience an increase in Hindu nationalist sentiment, marked by several protests advocating for the restoration of a Hindu monarchy. In April, hundreds of protesters in Kathmandu under the direction of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) clashed with police. Additionally, Christians faced increasing levels of harassment and arrest throughout the year. Most notably, in January, Nepal’s Supreme Court sentenced Pastor Keshab Acharya to one year in prison for proselytization. Similarly, in March, police detained four Christians for 24 days for allegedly engaging in forced conversions and carrying Bibles.

Belarus

Religious organizations in Belarus began reregistering with the government following the 2023 passage of a new religion law requiring them to reregister by July 2025 or face liquidation. The law recycled and modified several restrictive articles found in the previous law and introduced new requirements and restrictions for religious communities. In February, UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea and two other Special Rapporteurs [criticized](#) the law for failing to meet the country’s international legal obligations. Other concerning developments in recent years have included the banning of religious and FoRB-related content as “extremist” and the detention of religious clergy for their perceived political activities.

Georgia

In August, Georgia’s law On Transparency on Foreign Influence went into effect despite international condemnation. The new law [requires](#) nongovernmental organizations and media outlets receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign sources—including religious charities and groups working on religious freedom-related issues—to register as organizations “pursuing the interest of a foreign power.” Several UN [Special Rapporteurs](#) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [Volker Türk](#) condemned the law for undermining the freedoms of expression and association. Civil society activists have raised concerns the law could also impact Georgia’s registered religious communities.

Hungary

Hungary’s legal framework continued to arbitrarily restrict religious freedom. Article 9 of the constitution provides that freedom of expression may not be “exercised with the aim of violating the dignity . . . of religious communities.” It further provides that members of religious communities are “entitled to enforce their claims in court against the expression of an opinion which violates their community.” In addition, the Church Law [permitted](#) the government to deny religious groups legal personality for a variety of arbitrary reasons, including too few community members and failure to prove a historical presence in Hungary. Following her visit to Hungary in October, UN Special Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea [acknowledged](#) that the government had

responded to criticism of the Church Law by introducing reforms six years prior, but she noted that they “fell short of addressing the broader concerns about discrimination.” Furthermore, in January, the Pásztó District Court convicted 21 people of the misdemeanor of “quackery,” reportedly for providing medical alternative and drug withdrawal services through a Scientology-affiliated non-profit organization. However, the government showed a willingness to engage with international efforts to combat antisemitism by [welcoming](#) then U.S. Special Envoy on Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt for a visit in May and hosting a two-day meeting in September of the European Commission’s working group on the implementation of the European Union strategy on combating antisemitism.

Increased Targeting of Muslims in European Society

A rise in anti-Muslim hatred generated pervasive fears among Muslims across Europe despite some governmental condemnation and investigation, threatening the ability of members of that community to practice their religion and express their religious identity in safety and security. In Italy, the mayor of Monfalcone prohibited worship in the city’s two Muslim cultural centers in May, forcing worshipers to pray in makeshift spaces or outside. In August, rioters in the United Kingdom shouted anti-Muslim hate speech and attacked a number of mosques following the spread across social media of [misinformation](#) about the murder of three girls in Southport. British leaders condemned these comments, and police arrested over 1,000 people, many of whom have appeared in court facing charges for their participation. In Sweden, assailants attacked a mosque in Norrköping in September, breaking windows and writing neo-Nazi slogans on the walls. Swedish police began an investigation after unidentified attackers threw a severed boar’s head—an animal that Islamic tradition widely considers unclean—at a mosque in Skövde. Similar attacks involving boars’ heads occurred in France in the cities of Contrexeville and Pas-de-Calais in April, prompting a police investigation and condemnation from France’s interior minister.

Muslim women wearing the hijab also faced harassment and assault for their choice of religious garb. On a bus in Bremen, Germany, in August, a woman shouted anti-Muslim statements at an 18-year-old wearing a hijab. At a train station in Langenfeld-Rhineland train station that same month, a man assaulted an 18-year-old Muslim woman and ripped off her hijab. In November, assailants in France attacked a Muslim woman, ripping off her hijab. During the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, the French government prohibited Muslim women on the French Olympic team from wearing the hijab during competition.

Antisemitism Targeting Jews and Jewish Sites

Jews and Jewish sites continued to face an alarming rate of targeting, harassment, and violence around the world, including in Western and Eastern Europe. Despite government condemnation and investigation of these attacks, members of many Jewish communities continued to express growing fears for their safety. Jewish sources reported a spike in antisemitic incidents across the continent throughout the year—ongoing since the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and Israel’s subsequent military operations in Gaza—and a pervasive sense of fear among their communities. In November, assailants in Amsterdam planned a so-called “Jew hunt” via Snapchat, WhatsApp,

and Telegram to follow a soccer match between a Dutch and Israeli team. The following night, police conducted a series of arrests after assailants in the city set a train on fire while shouting “cancer Jews.” Throughout the year in Weimar, Germany, police investigated the vandalism of at least seven Holocaust memorial stones with antisemitic messages including “Jews are criminals.” In early 2024, police investigated on “suspicion of discrimination and a call to hatred” a ski shop at the Pische mountain resort in Davos that posted a sign saying, “we no longer rent skis to our Jewish brothers.” In Lithuania, in April, the Vilnius Regional Prosecutor’s Office announced their conclusion that Member of Parliament Remigijus Žemaitaitis had incited hatred against Jews via antisemitic posts on social media.

Elsewhere, in Australia, unknown assailants firebombed a Melbourne synagogue while worshipers were inside, resulting in one injury and extensive damage to the building. Shortly thereafter, vandals spraypainted antisemitic graffiti in a Sydney suburb that is home to Australia’s largest Jewish community. Dozens of Jewish institutions across Canada received anonymous bomb threats in August, leading to an investigation by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Gunmen fired at a Jewish elementary school in Toronto on three separate occasions throughout the year, prompting a police investigation and the arrest in October of two people connected to the shootings. In addition, police opened an investigation after an unidentified arsonist firebombed a Montreal synagogue in December. In February, rioters in Tunisia set fire to a synagogue courtyard in Sfax, prompting police to arrest a suspect the following month. European governments have condemned and investigated a spate of antisemitic physical assaults, antisemitic hate speech, desecration of property, and vandalism at Holocaust memorial sites across the continent.

In February, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva engaged in Holocaust distortion and inversion, comparing Israel’s military campaign against Hamas to the Nazi extermination of Jews in World War II. Despite this disinformation, the provinces of Goias and Sao Paulo endorsed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s Working Definition of Antisemitism. In May, Colombian President Gustavo Petro severed the country’s diplomatic relations with Israel, after describing Israeli officials as “neo-Nazis” during the previous year. In April, Chilean Jewish community leaders instructed Jewish students to change out of their school uniforms, which feature logos with Jewish symbols, to avoid harassment and intimidation while outside of school grounds. In March, protesters organized an anti-Israel rally outside a Santiago Jewish community center and threw stones at Jewish individuals attending a wedding there. Chilean Jews wearing kippahs in public faced harassment throughout the year, and vandals targeted a number of Jewish community sites with antisemitic graffiti and other damage.

Transnational Repression Affecting FoRB

A growing number of countries have engaged in FoRB repression [beyond their borders](#) in recent years, including in 2024. In August, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer accused Russia of amplifying misinformation on social media to stoke ongoing anti-Muslim riots in the United Kingdom. Several countries, including Russia, China, Belarus, and Turkey, exploited the International Criminal Police Organization’s (INTERPOL) Red Notice system to target dissidents on the basis of their religious identity. Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, have also increased their abuse of INTERPOL mechanisms, leveling fabricated

extremism charges against those who fled the country due to state persecution for their peaceful religious activities.

Several governments also continued to target religious dissidents abroad with violence. India targeted a Sikh activist for assassination in New York, while Canadian police arrested three men in May for their connection to an alleged Indian government assassination of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Surrey, British Columbia in 2023. Countries also pursued family members of dissidents to silence their relatives living in-country. For example, in July, the sister of Saudi dissident [Manahel al-Otaibi](#) reported near-daily harassment, from individuals linked to the Saudi government, over her social media posts in support of her sister who is serving an 11-year prison sentence in Saudi Arabia for advocating for reforms to that country’s male guardianship system. Media outlets alleged in August that Saudi government agents had abducted a Saudi woman in Melbourne who had fled the male guardianship system, forcibly repatriating her to Saudi Arabia.

Artificial Intelligence and New Technologies Threatening FoRB

States continued to harness new and emerging technologies to target disfavored religious communities throughout the year. As USCIRF previously [reported](#), the Chinese government regularly uses artificial intelligence (AI); big data; and facial, voice, and gait recognition to conduct mass surveillance against Christians, Falun Gong practitioners, and ethno-religious groups like Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists. Moreover, China has [exported](#) its “smart city” products and services—which employ such technologies—and its underlying techno-authoritarian governance to over 100 countries, posing threats to human rights and religious freedom beyond China’s borders. In addition, various governments, including India, have [used](#) online platforms, including social media, to spread misinformation and disinformation about religious groups. This messaging amplifies intolerance and leads to harassment, intimidation, and threats against those groups. The Russian government [increased](#) its use of AI technologies to repress dissent, surveil citizens, and strengthen censorship and narrative control online. The Iranian government also began to [employ](#) AI-based technologies to monitor internet traffic and apply its interpretation of Islamic moral standards to digital content. In Egypt, the government, too, has reportedly [used](#) AI in conjunction with its 2018 cybercrime law to further political repression and surveillance of dissidents.

In response to such trends, U.S. policy has begun to incrementally address the current and emerging threats that AI poses to international religious freedom and broader human rights. In December, for example, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden further [tightened](#) export control of advanced semiconductors used in AI, in an effort to restrict China’s development and use of such technologies for repressing human rights and advancing military capabilities.

Positive FoRB Related Developments

Supported by bipartisan advocacy from members of Congress, the U.S. government worked throughout the year to release individuals detained or otherwise persecuted on religious grounds. In December, the Biden administration announced the [resettlement](#) in the

United States of three Chinese Uyghurs that included Ayshem Mamut, mother of former USCIRF Commissioner Nury Turkel. In September, the administration secured the release of American Pastor David Lin, who Chinese authorities had imprisoned for nearly two decades. That same month, the administration negotiated the [release](#) of 135 prisoners in Nicaragua, including 13 members of the Mountain Gateway ministry, members of the Catholic laity, and others.

In Nigeria, in August, the authorities [released](#) from prison Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, more than four years after his 2020 arrest on blasphemy charges. In late December, a court in Bauchi State [acquitted](#) Christian nurse Rhoda Jatau, more than two years after her arrest on allegations of blasphemy for reportedly sharing a message on social media condemning the murder of a Christian student. USCIRF had engaged in extended advocacy for her release.

In July, on the 30th anniversary of the terrorist attack against the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the U.S. government joined more than 30 countries in launching the [Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism](#). The Guidelines identify practical actions that governments, international bodies, and civil society organizations can take to combat antisemitism.

In August, Houthi authorities in Yemen [released](#) all remaining Baha'is who the group had detained after their gunmen raided a private gathering of that community in Sana'a in May 2023. Until the release of each detainee, USCIRF had repeatedly [called](#) on the U.S. government to pressure Houthi authorities and ensure the unconditional and immediate release of all 17 detainees.

APPENDIX 1 COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES



Stephen Schneck, Chair

Reappointed by President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2026. Schneck is a political philosopher and a retired professor from The Catholic University of America. He is a Catholic advocate for social justice and serves on the governing boards of the Catholic Climate Covenant and Catholic Mobilizing Network.



Meir Soloveichik, Vice Chair

Appointed by Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2026. Soloveichik is Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel—the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, the Director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, and a Senior Scholar at the Tikvah Fund.



Ariela Dubler, Commissioner

Appointed by Hon. Chuck Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader for a term expiring in May 2026. Dubler is the Head of School at The Abraham Joshua Heschel School in New York City. She served as the George Welwood Murray Professor of Legal History at Columbia Law School where she taught Constitutional Law, Family Law, and Legal History.



Mohamed Elsanousi, Commissioner

Appointed by President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2026. Elsanousi is the Executive Director of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. He is the founding executive committee member of the Shoulder to Shoulder campaign, member of the NGO Working Group on the UN Security Council, and co-chair of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council to the UN Interagency Taskforce on Religion and Development.



Maureen Ferguson, Commissioner

Appointed by Speaker Mike Johnson (R) for a term expiring in May 2026. Ferguson was a Senior Fellow at The Catholic Association and co-host of the nationally syndicated radio show *Conversations with Consequences*. She is on the Advisory Committee for the de Nicola Center for Ethics and Culture at the University of Notre Dame, the Advisory Board of The Belmont House, and the Board of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast.



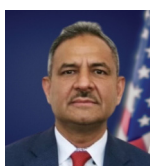
Susie Gelman, Commissioner

Appointed by President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2025. Gelman is an activist and philanthropist. She was previously the Board Chair of the Israel Policy Forum and past President of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington.



Vicky Hartzler, Commissioner

Appointed by Speaker Mike Johnson (R) for a term expiring in May 2026. Hartzler served in the U.S. Congress from 2011 to 2023, representing the Fourth District of Missouri. She served on the Armed Services Committee and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. She sponsored the Combatting the Persecution of Christians in China Act.



Asif Mahmood, Commissioner

Appointed by Hon. Hakeem Jeffries (D), House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2026. Mahmood is a practicing physician, human rights activist, interracial and interfaith community organizer, and philanthropist. He led advocacy for many human rights campaigns focused on South Asia.

APPENDIX 2 FRANK R. WOLF 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 definition for inclusion on the FoRB Victims List. In addition, USCIRF’s professional staff often relies on receiving submissions from external individuals and organizations. As such, the information contained in the database does not reflect country, regional, or global trends—nor is it a representative sample of all those around the world who meet the statutory criteria. Therefore, readers should not interpret figures presented in this section as evidence of a particular group experiencing a different rate of violations than another, or a particular country or entity committing violations at a different rate than others.

USCIRF invites those with credible information on victims of violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, or those who were punished for advocating for FoRB, 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](#).

Religions or Beliefs

The FoRB Victims List is based on violations of rights to freedom of religion or belief as a human right defined by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This right exists for every individual of any religion or belief, and the Victims List includes a global cross section of religions or beliefs, which reflects that international

standard. An individual can be included on the list due to a denial of the right to FoRB or because they were punished for advocating for this right. Currently the Victims List includes individuals representing the following religions or beliefs:

Religions or Beliefs Included in Dataset	
Adivasi	Falun Gong
Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light	Hindu
Baha’i	Humanist
Bon	Jewish
Buddhist - Hoa Hao	Muslim - Ahmadiyya
Buddhist - Theravada	Muslim - Qur’anist
Buddhist - Tibetan	Muslim - Shi’a
Buddhist - Unspecified/Other	Muslim - Sufi
Christian - Catholic	Muslim - Sunni
Christian - Church of Almighty God	Muslim - Unspecified/Other
Christian - Jehovah’s Witness	Santería
Christian - Orthodox	Scientologist
Christian - Protestant	Shaman
Christian - Unspecified/Other	Sikh
Duong Van Minh	Yarsani
ECKist (Eckankar)	Unknown/Unspecified
Erfan-e Halgheh Practitioner	

Nature of Charges

The FoRB Victims List includes Nature of Charges to showcase the various laws and often spurious legal pretenses that governments use to target FoRB prisoners. Some charges cited in the database are based on laws that directly violate international standards of religious freedom, while others are based on ostensibly justifiable laws. In either case, however, governments have frequently used, abused, and exploited such laws to unjustly deny FoRB to these individuals or to limit their FoRB advocacy. USCIRF groups similar charges to identify how foreign governments and entities have justified the incarceration of individuals included on the FoRB Victims List. Although USCIRF excludes from the FoRB Victims List individuals credibly known to have committed or promoted violence, governments have often used vague, false, or unjust accusations of violence or terrorism as a pretext for denying individuals their FoRB rights.

Dozens of victims are not facing any charges, yet they remained imprisoned or subjected to other violations that justify inclusion on the FoRB Victims List—such as enforced disappearance or forced renunciation of faith.

Common charges that directly violate international standards of religious freedom include anti-cult laws, blasphemy laws, and apostasy or conversion laws. More frequently, governments exploit or abuse laws that include restrictions on “banned organizations,” terrorism laws, and hate speech laws, among many others. Other laws are overly broad by design, so that while they may not technically violate the UDHR, their vague framing or omission of important religious freedom exemptions lead to the limitation of rights in practice. Such laws include those that proscribe spreading propaganda, fomenting separatism, and refusing military service. An exploration of the database can further demonstrate the diversity of such laws that governments have used and abused to deny their people religious freedom, as identified and categorized by USCIRF.

Types of Violations

Of the documented violations on the FoRB Victims List, the most common type is imprisonment, with 1,592 cases, followed by detention, with 666 cases. House arrest, enforced disappearance, and forced renunciation of faith were much lower with only 51, 18, and 6 respective documented cases. Other categories only applied to 2 cases.

USCIRF has documented 201 cases in which torture was reported. The top five countries and entities accused of torture with the most documented cases are China (79), Uzbekistan (29), Iran (21), Saudi Arabia (20), and Russia (18). USCIRF has also documented 151 cases in which medical neglect was reported. The countries with the top five most reported cases of medical neglect include Iran (62), Russia (20), China (17), India (14), and Saudi Arabia (9)

Perpetrators

For the 2024 reporting year, the FoRB Victims List included more than 2,335 individuals targeted by 28 different governments and entities. USCIRF has records that indicate more than 1,342 of those victims remain in some form of custody, while more than 696 have been released. The detention status of approximately 283 cases remains unknown and, tragically, 9 individuals are reported to have died in state custody.

USCIRF's Documented List of Detained or Imprisoned FoRB Victims, by Perpetrator*

Perpetrator	Not Released	Released	Deceased	Unknown	Total
China	532	47		231	810
Russia	373	116	1	1	491
Iran	87	250	3	14	354
Vietnam	57	10	2	12	81
Pakistan	54	27	1		82
Uzbekistan	53	37			90
Saudi Arabia	45	6			51
Eritrea	36	24	1		61
India	25	28	1	1	55
Tajikistan	17	4			21
Nicaragua	11	73			84
Azerbaijan	11	7		1	19
Turkmenistan	10	21			31
Kazakhstan	7	9			16
Indonesia	6	1		2	9
Nigeria	5	4			9
Egypt	4	13		1	18
Cuba	4	7			11
Kyrgyzstan	2				2
North Korea	1			11	12
Burma	1	2		2	5
Houthis	1	2			3
Algeria		5			5
Malaysia				4	4
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham				2	2
Iraq		2			2
Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP)				1	1
Sri Lanka		1			1
Total	1342	696	9	283	2330

* This list is not exhaustive, as USCIRF is unable to identify and document all victims that meet the statutory definition for inclusion on the FoRB Victims List. Readers should not interpret these figures as evidence of a particular country or entity committing violations at a different rate than others. The table total does not precisely match the total number of records due to a very small number of other classifications, including Forced Renunciation of Faith.

APPENDIX 3 HIGHLIGHTS OF USCIRF'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES IN 2024

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 Appendix highlights USCIRF's events and other materials from calendar year 2024. USCIRF's 2024 [press releases and statements](#) are available on USCIRF's website at www.uscifr.gov. USCIRF's 2024 posts on X can be found [here](#).

Hearings:

- **January 2024:** [Religious Freedom in Southeast Asia: Techno-Authoritarianism and Transnational Influences](#)
- **May 2024:** [Challenges to Religious Freedom in Sri Lanka](#)
- **July 2024:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua](#)
- **August 2024:** [Navigating Challenges and Opportunities for Religious Freedom in Pakistan](#)
- **September 2024:** [Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and U.S. Policy Options](#)
- **November 2024:** [Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Non-State Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom](#)

Events:

- **March 2024:** [Women in FoRB: Making a Difference](#)
- **May 2024:** [2024 Annual Report: Key Findings and Recommendations](#)

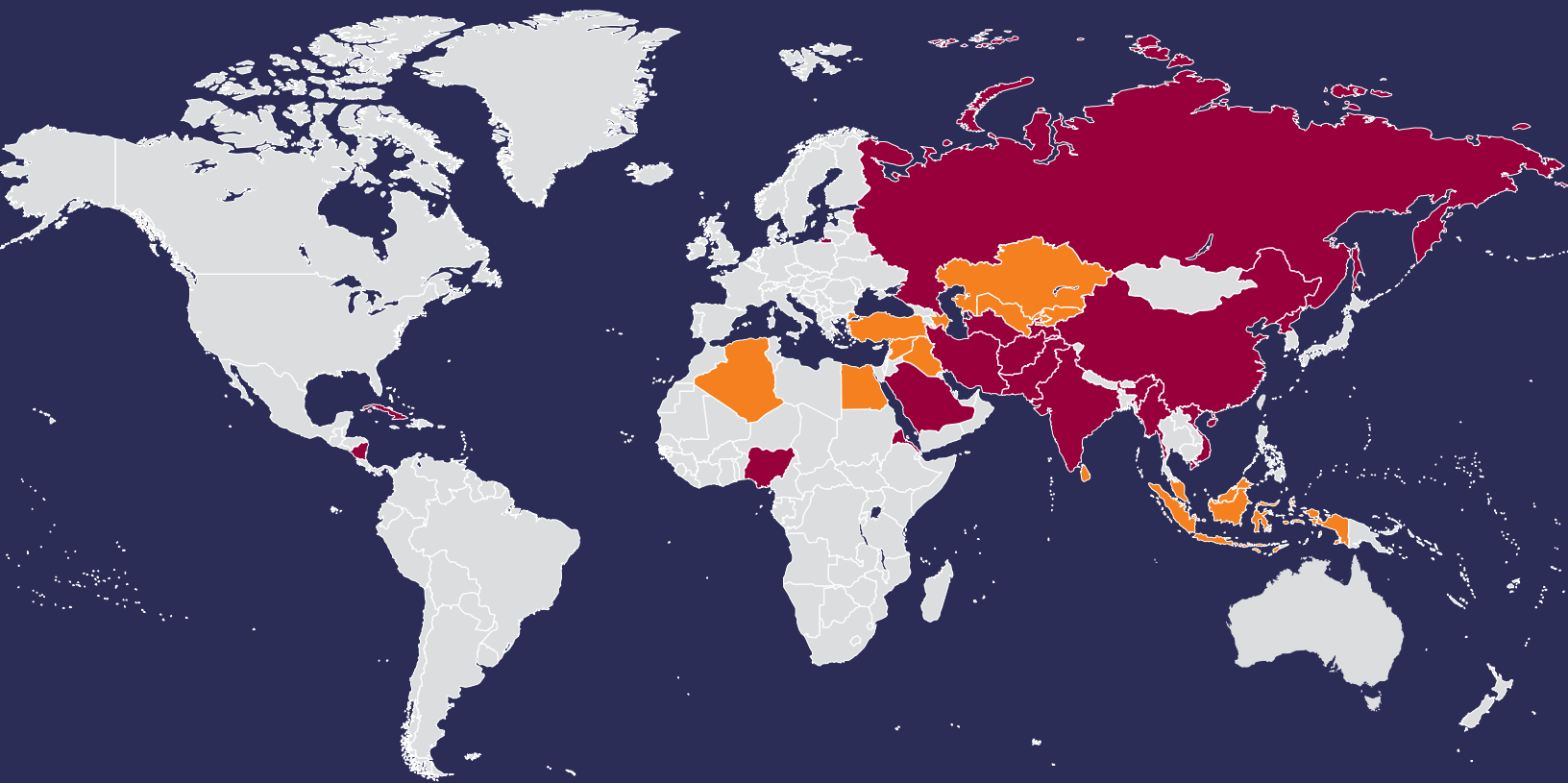
Publications:

- **January 2024:** [Countering China's Techno-Authoritarianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence](#)
- **January 2024:** [Legal Impediments to Religious Freedom in Indonesia](#)
- **January 2024:** [A Retrospective: 25th Anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act](#)
- **May 2024:** [USCIRF's 2024 Annual Report](#)
- **May 2024:** [Protection of Religious Sites during Armed Conflict](#)
- **June 2024:** [Sri Lanka's Shrinking Space for Religious Minorities](#)

- **June 2024:** [Nicaragua's Full-Scale Crackdown on Catholic and Protestant Communities](#)
- **July 2024:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey](#)
- **August 2024:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia in the Context of Vision 2030](#)
- **August 2024:** [Religious Freedom under Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan](#)
- **August 2024:** [Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion of Belief](#)
- **August 2024:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nigeria](#)
- **September 2024:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Cuba](#)
- **September 2024:** [Revisiting the CPC Designation](#)
- **September 2024:** [Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy](#)
- **September 2024:** [State-Controlled Religion and Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#)
- **September 2024:** [Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq: 10 Years after ISIS's Genocide](#)
- **October 2024:** [Increasing Abuses against Religious Minorities in India](#)
- **October 2024:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **October 2024:** [A Disintegrating Nation and Adverse Impact on Religious Freedom \(Burma\)](#)
- **November 2024:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **December 2024:** [Key IRF-Related Positions](#)
- **December 2024:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)

Spotlight Podcast Episodes:

- **January 2024:** [Shortcomings of the State Department's CPC Designations](#)
- **July 2024:** [USCIRF's Spirit of Bipartisanship](#)
- **July 2024:** [The Religious Garb Ban that Undermines the Olympic Spirit](#)
- **August 2024:** [10 Years On: Ongoing Threats to Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS's Genocide](#)
- **August 2024:** [Responses to Genocide: Two Former U.S. Officials Reflect on ISIS's Genocide in Iraq and Syria](#)
- **November 2024:** [The US-UK Special Relationship: FoRB in Focus](#)



2025 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Afghanistan
Burma
China
Cuba
Eritrea
India

Iran
Nicaragua
Nigeria
North Korea
Pakistan
Russia

Saudi Arabia
Tajikistan
Turkmenistan
Vietnam

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

Algeria
Azerbaijan
Egypt
Indonesia

Iraq
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Malaysia

Sri Lanka
Syria
Turkey
Uzbekistan

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Boko Haram
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
The Houthis

Islamic State – Sahel Province
Islamic State in West Africa Province
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin

Al-Shabaab



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