

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ANNUAL REPORT 2021

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

**BURMA
CHINA
ERITREA
INDIA
IRAN
NIGERIA
NORTH KOREA
PAKISTAN**

**RUSSIA
SYRIA
VIETNAM**

**SAUDI ARABIA
TAJIKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN**

**GENOCIDE
REFUGEES**

**INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS
CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY
MASS ATROCITY ASYLUM
SEEKERS**

**APOSTASY
BLASPHEMY**

**FORCED LABOR
RELIGIOUS PRISONERS**

**AFGHANISTAN
ALGERIA
AZERBAIJAN
CUBA
EGYPT
IRAQ
INDONESIA
KAZAKHSTAN**

**MALAYSIA
NICARAGUA
TURKEY
UZBEKISTAN**

SPECIAL WATCH LIST

**UDHR-
ARTICLE 18**

**HOUTHIS
TALIBAN
AL-SHABAAB
BOKO HARAM**

**ISLAMIC STATE
IN THE GREATER
SAHARA (ISGS)
HAY'AT TAHRIR
AL-SHAM (HTS)
JAMAAT NASR
AL-ISLAM WAL
MUSLIMIN
(JNIM)**

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

COVID-19

**POLITICAL
UNREST**

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

**HATE SPEECH
INTOLERANCE
CITIZENSHIP
SURVEILLANCE
REGISTRATION
DISINFORMATION
EXTREMISM
ANTISEMITISM**



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ANNUAL REPORT

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U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

732 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite A714

Washington, DC 20401

(P) 202-523-3240

www.uscirf.gov

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted daily life in every country across the world. By early January 2021, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) reported 83 million cases and 1.8 million deaths globally since the pandemic's start, with the numbers continuing to climb. The year severely challenged individuals, families, religious and other communities, medical and educational systems, arts and cultural institutions, workplaces and economies, and governments worldwide.

Public health measures to control the virus' spread restricted in-person gatherings, including religious gatherings. As the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) [noted](#) in March, in many cases these measures complied with international human rights standards protecting freedom of religion or belief, but in some cases they did not. Such measures must be [necessary](#) to protect the legitimate state interest of preventing disease and proportionate to meeting that aim, must not be discriminatory, and must be lifted once the crisis has passed.

USCIRF's monitoring revealed that in some countries, already marginalized religious minorities [faced](#) official and/or societal stigmatization, harassment, and discrimination for allegedly causing or spreading the virus. Additionally, since crowded prisons present a high risk of infection, USCIRF [urged](#) governments to release all prisoners held because of their religion or belief as part of their COVID-19 response. On a positive note, some governments that have long repressed religious freedom, such as Eritrea, did release religious prisoners. By contrast, Iran, which reportedly furloughed 85,000 prisoners for health reasons, also incarcerated others, especially members of the Baha'i community, and placed prisoners from the Sufi Muslim religious minority in overcrowded wards, increasing their risk of exposure.

About this Report

Created by the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended](#) (IRFA), USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the U.S. Department of State, 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](#), 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 2021 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2020 in 26 countries and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including travel, hearings, meetings, and briefings, and are approved by a majority vote of Commissioners, with each Commissioner, under the statute, having the option to include a statement with his or her own individual views. During the first two months of 2020, Commissioners and/or staff visited Azerbaijan, Laos, Malaysia, and Sudan to assess religious freedom conditions. For the rest of the year and in early 2021, USCIRF did not travel due to the coronavirus pandemic.

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," or 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 violent nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as "entities of particular concern,"

or EPCs, under IRFA. In addition, the report analyzes the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA during the reporting year and provides recommendations to bolster overall U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief abroad. It also includes a section discussing key trends and developments in religious freedom globally during the reporting period, including in

countries that are not recommended for CPC or SWL status. This year, that section covers COVID-19 and religious freedom, attacks on houses of worship, political unrest leading to religious freedom violations, blasphemy laws, global antisemitism, and China's international influence on religious freedom and human rights. Finally, the report's last section highlights key USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government has implemented since USCIRF's previous annual report.

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

Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

IRFA defines CPCs as countries where the government engages in or tolerates "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom. It

[I]n some countries, already marginalized religious minorities faced official and/or societal stigmatization, harassment, and discrimination for allegedly causing or spreading the virus.

defines the State Department’s SWL for countries where the government engages in or tolerates “severe” violations of religious freedom.

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

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

The Annual Report’s emphasis on the countries and entities that, in USCIRF’s view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation is intended to focus the attention of U.S. policymakers 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 that 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.

USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions worldwide, including violations of freedom of religion or belief perpetrated or tolerated by governments and entities not covered in this report. The full range of USCIRF’s work, on a wide variety of countries and topics, can be found at www.uscifr.gov. In addition, information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries can be found in the State Department’s annual [International Religious Freedom reports](#).

USCIRF’S 2021 CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

For 2021, based on religious freedom conditions in 2020, USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- [Redesignate](#) as CPCs the following ten countries: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following four countries: India, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam;
- [Maintain](#) on the SWL the following two countries: Cuba and Nicaragua;
- Include on the SWL the following 10 countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan; and
- [Redesignate](#) as EPCs the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and the Taliban.

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

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

Although al-Shabaab suffered a considerable territory loss in recent years, the terrorist group remained active and in control of rural areas in Somalia. In 2020, al-Shabaab carried out multiple attacks on both Muslims and non-Muslims. In March, al-Shabaab conducted a [series of attacks](#) targeting school teachers in the Kenya-Somalia

border, forcing thousands of teachers to leave their posts. For example, in January, the group [attacked and killed](#) three local teachers in the village of Kamuthe in Garissa county. In September, the group stopped a bus on its way to Nairobi from Lafey town, Northern Kenya, from which it singled out and [abducted](#) three non-Muslims. Within its territory,

the group targeted and [killed](#) individuals who were suspected of converting from Islam to another religion or becoming nontheists.

In 2020, the Houthi movement, formally known as Ansar Allah, continued to hold territory throughout Yemen. The group’s slogan, posted widely throughout Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, includes the phrase “a curse on the Jews,” and the tiny remaining Jewish community faces ongoing and [severe repression](#) from Houthi authorities. In November, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo called for the Houthis to release Jewish prisoner [Libi Marhabi](#) who is suffering health problems and remains detained despite a court ordering his release in 2019. The Houthis [released](#) six Baha’is in July, including religious prisoner of conscience [Hamid bin Haydara](#), but [continue](#) to pursue legal action against them and other members of the Baha’i community. Christians also face persecution at the hands of Houthi authorities, and were [subject](#) in 2020 to violent attacks.

In 2020, ISGS reportedly [executed](#) individuals who refused to pay a religious obligation tax in its areas of control in Niger. It also placed [restrictions on religious practice](#), including the prohibition of music and parties and limitations on women’s abilities to choose their own partners. Finally, ISGS [controls religious preaching](#) in its areas of control, allowing the traditional Tijani Sufi Brotherhood to preach only in some mosques.

In 2020, leaders of JNIM tolerated particularly severe religious freedom violations perpetrated by their Katiba Macina branch, under the leadership of Amadou Kouffa. Katiba Macina fighters publicly killed local imams and traditional leaders in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso who disagreed with Kouffa’s beliefs. The group also

The fact that a country or nonstate group is not covered in this report does not mean that it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year.

imposed a harsh version of Shari'a and strict behavior rules, especially on women, in its areas of control in central Mali.

Changes in SWL Recommendations

In this report, USCIRF is not recommending SWL placement for three countries—Bahrain, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Sudan—that were among its SWL recommendations in the [2020 Annual Report](#) and in prior years. USCIRF has concluded that, although religious freedom concerns remain in all three countries, conditions during calendar year 2020 did not meet the high threshold required to recommend SWL status. As previously discussed, a SWL recommendation is based on USCIRF finding that the government perpetrated or tolerated severe religious freedom violations, meaning violations that meet two of the elements of IRFA's systematic, ongoing, and egregious test. USCIRF will continue to monitor all three countries on an ongoing basis. Should conditions in any of them deteriorate during 2021 to the level of severe violations, USCIRF will not hesitate to renew that country's SWL recommendation.

Bahrain

The change in status for Bahrain reflects ongoing improvements in the government's approach toward the country's marginalized Shi'a Muslim majority in 2020. USCIRF began reporting on Bahrain in its [2012 Annual Report](#) in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and, based on a sharp deterioration in conditions for the Shi'a Muslim community, placed the country on what USCIRF then called its "Tier 2" in the [2017 Annual Report](#).

These conditions have improved over the years, including in 2020. For example, Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain were able to observe the Ashura holiday in 2020 with [mostly reasonable](#) social distancing precautions for COVID-19 put into effect [in coordination](#) with Shi'a Muslim religious authorities. Bahrain remains the only Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country where Ashura is observed as a public holiday. Recent years have seen improvements relative to earlier ones, when Bahraini security forces [deployed tear gas](#) during Ashura processions.

Additionally, in 2020, Bahrain's King Hamad Centre for Global Coexistence [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding with the State Department to combat antisemitism and adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of the term. Bahrain was one of several Muslim-majority countries to normalize relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. Domestically, Bahrain has continued to provide wide latitude for freedom of religion for the Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, and Christian communities. A Catholic cathedral that will serve as a regional headquarters is nearing completion, and Bahrain hosts a Hindu community that worships in a 200-year-old continuously operating temple.

USCIRF will continue to monitor religious freedom conditions in Bahrain and remains concerned that government authorities [summoned](#) and [interrogated](#) at least eight Shi'a Muslim religious figures over the content of their sermons and religious supplications in 2020. While Bahrain faces legitimate security threats from Iran and Iranian-supported terrorist organizations, continuing to integrate rather than marginalize Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain is the best way to mitigate these groups' ability to disrupt Bahraini national security.

USCIRF [commends](#) Bahrain on the furlough of notable prisoner of conscience Nabeel Rajab. However, USCIRF remains concerned about restrictions on religious literature in prison and the treatment of Shi'a Muslim prisoners. USCIRF also notes that Shi'a Muslims continue to face employment discrimination in the private sector and in Bahrain's military, but tracking the extent of progress in these areas is difficult due to a lack of data and restrictions on civil society. Reporting the percentages of Shi'a Muslim Bahrainis in the workforce and expanding space for civil society and the media to raise issues of religious freedom for Shi'a Muslims would enhance Bahrain's efforts toward further progress. USCIRF also appreciates the government of Bahrain's engagement with the Commission over the years.

CAR

USCIRF first recommended CAR's designation as a CPC in its [2015 Annual Report](#), due to elevated sectarian violence and ethnic targeting of Muslims amid the country's civil conflict. In the [2020 Annual Report](#), USCIRF shifted its recommendation on CAR to placement on the SWL, due to the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement on the ground and reduced sectarian violence in 2019. In 2020, CAR continued to make progress on protecting religious freedom. For example, the government worked with international partners to implement key aspects of the peace agreement and hold violators accountable, while local organizations continued to implement successful programs to strengthen interfaith tolerance. As a result, there was a reduction in violence against individuals based on their religious identity. In January 2021, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra highlighted security, reconciliation, and justice as [key priorities](#) for his administration.

However, while certain religious freedom conditions improved in 2020, religious minorities in CAR continue to face ongoing religious freedom violations. The Touadéra government took no action

to ensure that refugees, many of whom are religious minorities displaced by sectarian violence, would be represented in the December national elections. Muslims face discrimination from local government officials, and renewed [post-election violence](#) has the potential to trigger backsliding of religious freedom gains

in this fragile context. The situation in CAR remains dire, and USCIRF's decision to remove it from the SWL reflects only USCIRF's narrow mandate to focus on religious freedom conditions and not the overall political, security or human rights concerns, which are pervasive.

Sudan

Until 2020, USCIRF had recommended that Sudan, under the Islamist regime of former president Omar al-Bashir, be designated as a CPC every year since USCIRF's first set of [CPC recommendations](#) in 2000. After the overthrow of the Bashir regime in April 2019, Sudan's transitional government, which assumed office that August, has taken [concrete steps](#) toward ending systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, and it has closely engaged with USCIRF and other international stakeholders in doing so. The transitional constitution no longer identifies Islam as the primary source of law, and it includes a provision ensuring the freedom of belief and worship. In November 2019, the transitional government repealed the repressive public order law that the former regime had long used to punish those,

Sudan's transitional government . . . has taken concrete steps toward ending systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. . . .

particularly women, who did not conform to its strict interpretation of Sunni Islam. Based on these developments, in the [2020 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended Sudan for SWL placement rather than CPC designation.

Sudan continued to make significant steps toward improved religious freedom conditions in 2020. In February, USCIRF traveled to Khartoum to assess religious freedom conditions in the country, and it was encouraged by the evident progress. In July, the transitional government subsequently adopted the Fundamental Rights and Freedoms Act, which repealed the apostasy law, ended flogging for blasphemy, banned female genital mutilation, permitted non-Muslims to drink alcohol, and abolished the guardianship law that required women to get a permit from a male guardian when traveling abroad with their children. USCIRF's visit also afforded the Commission the opportunity to engage again with the transitional leadership in Khartoum, including Prime Minister Hamdok and his cabinet.

As a result of these substantial and positive changes, USCIRF is not recommending Sudan for SWL status this year. USCIRF encourages Sudan's transitional government to continue to make institutional reforms to further protect religious freedom and to ensure their effective implementation. These reforms should include establishing a religious freedom commission as mandated by the Juba Peace Agreement, addressing the claims of churches whose property the former regime destroyed or confiscated, and repealing the blasphemy law.

Violations of Human Rights on the Basis of Religion

USCIRF's mission is to advance international freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right. Within this conception, USCIRF is also committed to addressing human rights violations perpetrated based on the coercive enforcement of interpretations of religion and has done so since it was created by Congress in 1998. USCIRF fulfills this commitment through its reporting, advocacy, and policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

Some foreign governments enforce laws and policies that permit or condone violations of human rights of minority groups and other vulnerable communities on the basis of religion. Under international human rights law, however, religion is not a legitimate justification for egregiously violating individuals' fundamental rights. As [explained](#) by the [UN Human Rights Committee](#)—the body of independent experts charged with interpreting provisions of the ICCPR—the existence of a state or majority religion cannot result in the impairment of the rights of individuals under the ICCPR. International law requires states to respect FoRB and other human rights for everyone, equally. Thus, states must not coercively enforce religious interpretations on individuals or communities who do not adhere to those interpretations. Individuals and religious communities enjoy the right to hold and follow diverse views on religious precepts free from government interference. Governments are accountable to international human rights standards guaranteeing FoRB and other fundamental human rights to all.

To that end, USCIRF has provided qualitative and quantitative information in its annual reports, publications, and other work highlighting problematic laws and policies of foreign countries that permit or condone violations of human rights of minority groups and other vulnerable communities on the basis of religion. Some of USCIRF's key recent activities on this topic are discussed below.

In December 2020, USCIRF published a study on [Violating Rights: Enforcing the World's Blasphemy Laws](#) and held a hearing on [Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom](#).

Focusing on a five-year period from 2014 to 2018, the report provides extensive data and examples demonstrating the many ways that, in the 84 countries that have blasphemy laws, enforcement of such laws undermines human rights, including freedom of religion or belief and

freedom of expression. The *Violating Rights* study found that 81 percent of the cases of state blasphemy law enforcement occurred in only 10 countries: Pakistan, Iran, Russia, India, Egypt, Indonesia, Yemen, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. In seven of these ten states, the governments identify and enforce Islam as the official state religion, and in the other three, the governments favor certain religions (Christianity for Russia, Hinduism for India, and six recognized faiths for Indonesia).

In November 2020, USCIRF issued a [report](#) on Saudi Arabia's guardianship system, which severely limits women's rights based on the government's interpretation of religion. In 2019, USCIRF published a report on [Shari'ah Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria](#), addressing how the implementation of religion-based law can violate religious freedom and related rights. USCIRF also published reports on [apostasy, blasphemy, and hate speech laws](#) in Africa and on blasphemy cases in [Indonesia](#) and [Pakistan](#) in 2019.

Additionally, USCIRF has published a series of factsheets outlining how laws that seek to enforce religious norms, such as [blasphemy](#) and [conversion](#) laws, violate international human rights standards. Another recent factsheet, [Limitations on the Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), examines permissible and impermissible limitations on religious freedom under international law. A December 2020 [factsheet](#) looked at Brunei's Syariah Penal Code, which enforces a strict interpretation of Shari'a on all resident Muslims, with no ability to opt out or freedom to interpret or practice Islam according to their own conscience. In March 2021, USCIRF released a factsheet on [The Use of Shari'a as Religious Justification for Capital Punishment Against LGBTI Persons](#), discussing how such laws violate the human dignity and rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons and embolden societal hostility, discrimination, and violence against them.

USCIRF also raises awareness on these issues through its public [hearings](#), briefings, and other [events](#), which seek to highlight the Commission's research and recommendations and showcase diverse panelists offering a variety of perspectives. In November 2020, for example, USCIRF hosted an [event](#) with Nasreldin Mufrih, Sudan's Minister of Religious Affairs, where he discussed how the country's transitional government was addressing the previous regime's violations of human rights based on religion. In December, a USCIRF [hearing](#) focused on ways the U.S. government can protect and assist

[S]tates must not coercively enforce religious interpretations on individuals or communities who do not adhere to those interpretations.

refugees and asylum seekers, including those fleeing the coercive enforcement of religion. In 2020, USCIRF established a podcast series, [Spotlight](#), which offers in-depth analysis about developments around the world that have implications for religious freedom and other human rights. Examples discussing the official imposition of religious norms include episodes on [Legal Restrictions to Religious Freedom in Brunei](#), [Global Blasphemy Laws](#), and [Vulnerable Religious Communities in Pakistan](#). Additionally, USCIRF's weekly News Digest compiles articles from diverse publications relevant to issues of religious freedom and related rights around the world, including violations based on the coercive enforcement of religion.

Information on all of USCIRF's activities can be found at <https://www.uscifr.gov/>.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Key Findings

During 2020, the administration of then President Donald J. Trump continued its prioritization of international religious freedom (IRF). In June, then President Trump signed an [executive order](#) on “[Advancing International Religious Freedom](#),” which increased related foreign assistance funding to \$50 million annually, expanded mandatory IRF training to more federal officials, and more explicitly integrated the issue into U.S. bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. USCIRF has long called on the U.S. government to develop an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad, as well as country-specific action plans, and [welcomed](#) that this executive order required the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to do so.

February 2020 marked the official [launch](#) of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) (the Alliance), a network of like-minded countries committed to opposing religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all. As of March 2021, 32 countries have signed on to the Alliance’s [Declaration of Principles](#), which is grounded in international human rights standards. The State Department’s IRF Office [served](#) as the Alliance’s Secretariat. In November, the Alliance issued a [statement](#) outlining its shared vision for advancing the freedom of religion or belief. To complement existing work on the freedom of religion or belief within the United Nations (UN) system, in September the Alliance made a [statement](#) at the Human Rights Council (HRC) inviting members to join its efforts to protect religious freedom. Following two [Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by the State Department in 2018 and 2019, Poland, a founding member of the Alliance, [hosted](#) the third ministerial on the issue in November. The event, held virtually due to the coronavirus pandemic, convened more than 50 nations and

Nigeria was named a CPC for the first time [by the State Department], a step that USCIRF had recommended every year since 2009.

international organizations. [Eight](#) statements of concern were issued. Brazil, another member of the Alliance, will host the next ministerial event in 2021.

In December, the State Department [designated](#) 10 “countries of particular concern” (CPCs), the category under the [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\)](#) for governments that engage in or tolerate particularly severe religious freedom violations. Nigeria was named a CPC for the first time, a step that USCIRF had [recommended](#) every year since 2009. For the [10 designated countries](#), the State Department reimposed existing sanctions on five and issued waivers on taking any action for the other five. USCIRF has [long](#) called on administrations to discontinue the practice of relying on waivers or existing sanctions in response to CPC designations. The State Department also placed four countries on its “Special Watch List” (SWL) for severe religious freedom violations, while it removed Uzbekistan and Sudan

from this list, reflecting progress in these countries. In addition, the State Department designated 10 “entities of particular concern” (EPCs) pursuant to IRFA, which are nonstate actors that engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, including for the first time Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). USCIRF recommended the

designation of HTS in its [2020 Annual Report](#).

Since taking office in January 2021, after the reporting period, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [indicated](#) that its foreign policy priorities will include championing human rights. During his [confirmation process](#), Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken expressed the administration’s commitment to human rights and IRF. In February 2021, the Biden administration [announced](#) that it would reengage with the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) as an observer. As of the end of March 2021, President Biden had not yet nominated an ambassador-at-large for IRF or filled other key IRF-related positions.

STATE DEPARTMENT 2020 DESIGNATIONS

STATE DEPARTMENT 2020 DESIGNATIONS	
CPC Designations	Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia
EPC Designations	Al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS-West Africa, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban

In February 2021, consistent with USCIRF recommendations, the Biden administration announced its intent to increase the annual ceiling for refugees resettled to the United States from abroad for the [current](#) and [upcoming](#) fiscal years. It also indicated that it was considering creating several new priority categories for access to the

resettlement program, including for certain severely persecuted religious groups. The same month, President Biden signed an [executive order](#) that, among other actions, initiated a review of the Expedited Removal process, the implementation of which [USCIRF has monitored](#) under IRFA and has found inadequately [protects asylum seekers](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to [key IRF vacancies](#), including the positions of ambassador-at-large for IRF, special adviser for IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) staff, special coordinator for Tibetan issues, and special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandates;
- Maintain the United States' leadership roles in the Alliance and the [International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), participate in and support future Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom, and continue to implement the executive order on "Advancing International Religious Freedom";
- [Prioritize freedom of religion or belief](#) in the United States' renewed engagement with the UN human rights system, and work with countries, including those in the Alliance, to counter the efforts to undermine that system by states that egregiously violate religious freedom and other human rights;
- Increase the use of human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses, and coordinate with other countries with similar sanctions regimes on such targeted sanctions whenever possible;
- Review U.S. policy toward the five CPC-designated countries for which waivers on taking any action based on those designations are in place—Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—and make appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change;
- In accordance with the definition of who constitutes a refugee in international and U.S. law, prioritize for resettlement through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution, including Iranian religious minorities eligible for processing under the Lautenberg Amendment, members of other severely persecuted religious or belief communities, and survivors of genocide or other atrocity crimes; and
- Address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, including by [enhancing](#) the quality and oversight of the initial processing of noncitizens, [improving](#) detention conditions, and [appointing](#) a high-level official at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to coordinate and oversee reforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Prioritize the prompt confirmation of well-qualified nominees for [key IRF positions](#) that require Senate confirmation to avoid long vacancies in these positions;
- Hold oversight hearings on U.S. IRF policy; highlight IRF issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, and other actions; and examine, during congressional delegation trips abroad, conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs or none;
- As individual members of Congress, advocate for IRF by sponsoring religious prisoners of conscience through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project, collaborating with the [International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), and joining the U.S. House of Representatives or U.S. Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Anti-Semitism and caucuses such as the House IRF Caucus and Ahmadiyya Muslim Caucus;
- [Adopt S. Res 80](#) to create the Senate Human Rights Commission, as a similar initiative to the House's TLHRC, to monitor and address human rights abuses abroad, including violations of the freedom of religion or belief; and
- Evaluate the policy tools available for targeted human rights-related sanctions to ensure maximum impact in curtailing abuses, and reauthorize and strengthen the Global Magnitsky sanctions regime by passing legislation like [the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Reauthorization Act \(S. 93\)](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Key U.S. Government IRF Positions](#)
- **Factsheet:** [United Nations Human Rights Mechanisms](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on The President's Executive Order on International Religious Freedom](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Washington Must Expand the List of Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violators](#) (in *Washington Examiner*)

Legal Framework

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

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

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

Alongside IRFA, other laws provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act ([CISADA, P.L.111-195](#)). More broadly, the 2016 [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) allows the president, who has [delegated](#) these authorities to the secretaries of treasury and state, to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for "extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights" against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. [Executive Order \(E.O.\) 13818](#), issued in December 2017 to implement and build on the Global Magnitsky Act, authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in "serious human rights abuse," providing an even more expansive basis for targeted sanctions.

In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department's annual appropriations law ([P.L. 116-94](#) for FY 2020) requires the secretary of state to make foreign officials and their immediate family members ineligible for U.S. entry if there is credible evidence that such individuals have been involved in "a gross violation of human rights." Unlike the visa ineligibility provision enacted in IRFA, visa bans under this provision can be announced publicly.

Key Developments in 2020 and Early 2021

Key U.S. Government IRF Positions

On January 20, 2021, [Samuel D. Brownback](#) completed his service as ambassador-at-large for IRF, a position he held since 2018. The fifth ambassador-at-large since IRFA's enactment, Ambassador Brownback

actively implemented his mandate, including through public speeches, travel, and meetings with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) IRF Roundtable and other stakeholders.

In February 2020, the Trump administration [appointed](#) Sarah Makin to be the first-ever senior director for IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) staff. IRFA called for a dedicated NSC staff position on this issue, and the Frank Wolf Act reiterated that call. USCIRF for years had urged successive administrations to establish and fill the position and [welcomed](#) the long-needed action. Senior Director Makin completed her service in January 2021, and the position is now vacant.

In October, the Trump administration appointed then Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [Robert A. Destro](#) to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues, which had been vacant since January 2017. USCIRF [welcomed](#) this appointment but noted that "doublehatting" positions could undermine the U.S. government's important efforts to promote religious freedom abroad.

Other positions relevant to IRF that were filled during the Trump administration include the special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, held by [Elan S. Carr](#) from 2019 to 2021 and later [elevated](#) to an ambassador-level position.

International Partnerships

The positive trajectory of the past six years toward an international movement to advance religious freedom continued. The [IRF Roundtable](#) continued its work supporting 26 international religious freedom roundtables in countries including Sudan, Nigeria, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. These roundtables are modeled after meetings NGOs hold regularly among themselves and with government representatives in Washington and aim to increase the global conversation on religious freedom. The Trump administration also leveraged momentum to convene meetings on specific IRF topics, including hosting a conference in October on [combating online antisemitism](#).

An increasing number of countries joined the United States in passing laws that enable targeted sanctions against human rights violators. In July, the United Kingdom (UK) launched its own [Magnitsky-style law](#).

Then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [welcomed](#) the UK's adoption of this law and noted that United States would continue to seek out additional allies and partners to leverage jointly all available tools to hold abusers of human rights accountable. In December, the European Union (EU) [adopted](#) the European Magnitsky Act. In addition to

these recent developments, in 2017 Canada [passed](#) the Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act, which includes visa ineligibilities and asset blocking for human rights violations. Australia and Japan are [reportedly](#) considering creating similar sanctions frameworks.

Individual Violators

During 2020, there were no known visa denials to any foreign officials for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, the provision added by IRFA. However, the U.S. government ramped up its use of

An increasing number of countries joined the United States in passing laws that enable targeted sanctions against human rights violators.

newer accountability tools to deny U.S. visas to or block the U.S.-based assets of foreigners for corruption or human rights abuses.

As of December 2020, the U.S. government had sanctioned [243 foreign individuals](#) and entities under the 2016 [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and the related 2017 [E.O. 13818](#). Of these sanctions, 30 related directly to religious freedom, including 14 out of the 35 (40 percent) total sanctions that were issued during the reporting period. In July, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed Global Magnitsky [sanctions](#) against eight Chinese government entities and senior Chinese officials for their [direct participation](#) in the surveillance, mass detention, and forced labor of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang. In December, the Treasury Department imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions against Chechen leader [Ramzan Kadyrov](#) and five associated individuals, citing Kadyrov's many human rights violations against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and others in Chechnya. Although not explicit in the release announcing the designation, many of the human rights abuses overseen or condoned by Kadyrov are based on his coercive imposition of his religious beliefs on all of Chechen society.

The State Department also used other visa restriction authorities against human rights abusers, including violators of religious freedom. Several public [designations](#) of foreign officials and their immediate family members under Section 7031(c) of the fiscal year [\(FY\) 2020 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act \(P.L. 116-94\)](#) that were announced in FY 2020 involved religious freedom violations. These designations were of: [Kadyrov](#) and his family for the abuses explained above; [Huang Yuanxiong](#) and his spouse for abuses against Falun Gong practitioners; and three [Chinese officials](#) and their immediate families for abuses against Muslims in Xinjiang, issued alongside the Treasury's imposition of Global Magnitsky sanctions in July.

Additional targeted sanctions were imposed on Chinese individuals and entities, including [visa restrictions](#) on certain employees of Chinese technology companies that provide material support to regimes engaging in human rights abuses globally. Under the Iran-specific authority of [E.O. 13876](#), Iranian officials and entities were [sanctioned](#) for serious human rights abuses, including for involvement in the persecution of Jews and Baha'is.

Programs

IRFA envisaged the funding of religious freedom programs, authorizing U.S. foreign assistance to promote and develop "legal protections and cultural respect for religious freedom." For [FY 2020](#), the State Department was required to make funds available for international religious freedom programs. During 2020, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) issued several requests for proposals to advance religious freedom and/or provide protection to religious minorities groups, including to support projects in [Brazil](#), [Burma](#), [China](#), [Cuba](#), [Iraq](#), [Indonesia](#), [Pakistan](#), and [Syria](#), along with thematic and regionally focused programs on issues such as [the preservation of cultural heritage in Africa](#) and [the creation of religious freedom roundtables](#).

During 2020, as part of the Trump administration's continued prioritization of religious freedom, USAID once again emphasized humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. In 2020, USAID [spent](#) \$38 million in development efforts for ethnic and religious minorities in northern Iraq. USAID also supported the U.S. Institute of Peace's (USIP) [Closing the Gap](#) initiative, which analyzed the link between religious freedom, peace, and development.

Refugee Resettlement

Under the USRAP, the president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year; under IRFA, religious persecution should be considered in this determination. Over the course of the Trump administration, the refugee ceilings for [FY 2018](#), [FY 2019](#), and [FY 2020](#) were set at successively declining levels of 45,000, 30,000, and 18,000, respectively, with the administration focusing instead on humanitarian assistance for those displaced abroad and programs to help enable their return home. USCIRF consistently [called](#) for a return of the annual resettlement ceiling to the previously typical level of [95,000](#).

In October, then President Trump [set](#) the annual ceiling for FY 2021, the current fiscal year, at 15,000, the lowest in the program's history. The administration dedicated 5,000 of those slots to refugees fleeing religious persecution, including refugees eligible for U.S. resettlement under the Lautenberg Amendment—a special program for certain persecuted religious minority groups. At the end of 2020, nearly 80 Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, awaiting final approval to travel to the United States for resettlement.

In February 2021, President Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022, which begins on October 1, 2021, and issued an [executive order](#) to take steps to position the administration to be able to do so. The Biden administration also [notified](#) Congress that it intended to raise the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 to 62,500 and develop new priority access categories for several especially vulnerable groups, including Turkic Muslim refugees

who are nationals or last habitual residents of China, Rohingya Muslim refugees who are nationals or last habitual residents of Burma, and Iraqi and Syrian nationals who are members of a religious or ethnic minority. USCIRF held a [hearing](#) on "Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution" in February 2021 that explored opportunities to improve U.S. refugee resettlement, asylum, and humanitarian aid policies.

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

As authorized by IRFA, USCIRF has examined the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows DHS officers to deport quickly—without immigration court hearings—noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documents, unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution or torture. USCIRF's reports on the subject, released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#), documented major problems that successive administrations have not addressed. Specifically, USCIRF found that DHS officials often fail to follow

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required procedures to [identify](#) asylum seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations; that they [detain](#) asylum seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions; and that funding disparities and a lack of high-level oversight [hamper](#) the complicated, multi-agency process. These flaws raise serious concerns that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution or torture in violation of both U.S. and international law—a risk that the expanded use of Expedited Removal over the years has only exacerbated.

In February 2021 President Biden [ordered](#) the secretary of homeland security to review Expedited Removal procedures and make recommendations for “creating a more efficient and orderly process that facilitates timely adjudications and adherence to standards of fairness and due process,” a step that USCIRF [welcomed](#).

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

In 2020, Congress’ IRF promotion efforts included its oversight of the State Department’s implementation of IRFA. In September, a bipartisan group of senators [wrote](#) to then Secretary of State Pompeo to urge consideration of USCIRF’s recommendations when making

CPC and SWL list designations. The joint explanatory statement for the FY 2021 State Department, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act ([Division K of P.L. 116-260](#)) [requires](#)

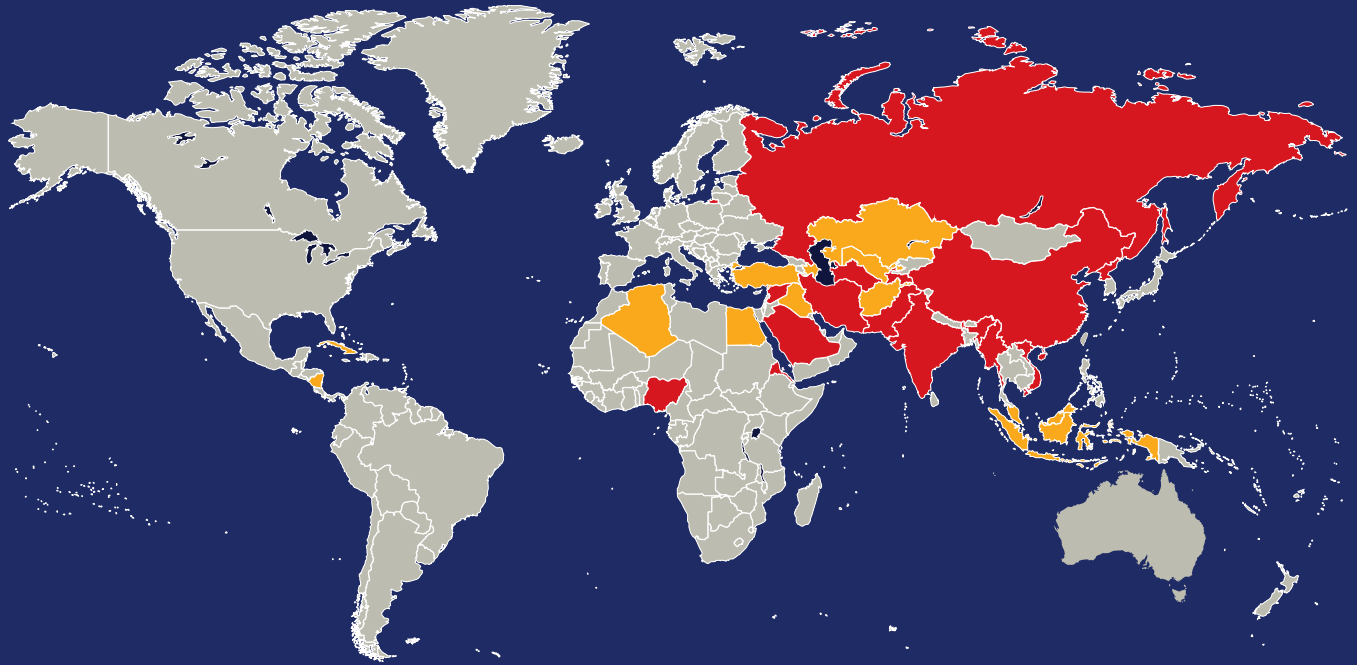
that the secretary of state inform certain House and Senate committees of the reasoning if the State Department does not follow the CPC recommendations in USCIRF’s Annual Report within 30 days of this decision.

Congress also highlighted religious freedom violations through legislation, hearings, and other initiatives. Notable actions by Congress in 2020 to promote IRF included passage of the [Uyghur Human Rights and](#)

[Policy Act](#) and the [Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#), along with the adoption of [a resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws](#). The House passed the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#) and the [Ukraine Religious Freedom Act](#), and both bills were reintroduced into the 117th Congress as Members push for their full passage into law. Congressional hearings on topics related to IRF included hearings convened by the TLHRC on [conflict in Nigeria’s Middle Belt](#), [religious freedom in China](#), and [human rights in Russia](#). Members of Congress also advocated for the release of religious prisoners of conscience through the TLHRC’s [Defending Freedoms Project](#).

Notable actions by Congress in 2020 to promote IRF included passage of the Uyghur Human Rights and Policy Act and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, along with the adoption of a resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws.

2021 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Nigeria	Syria
China	North Korea	Tajikistan
Eritrea	Pakistan	Turkmenistan
India	Russia	Vietnam
Iran	Saudi Arabia	

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Iraq	Nicaragua
Algeria	Egypt	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Azerbaijan	Indonesia	Malaysia	Uzbekistan

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Burma remained poor. The government continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations, particularly against Rohingya Muslims. Denial of basic citizenship rights and systematic discrimination based on ethnic-religious affiliation severely restricted the freedom of religion or belief of minority communities.

November 2020 marked Burma's second general election since the end of full military rule in 2011. Although two previously excluded Muslim candidates from democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) won seats, the government utilized the 1982 Citizenship Law, which it interprets to bar the Rohingya from citizenship, and the [Election Law](#), which requires candidates to prove citizenship, to again block Rohingya Muslims from running or voting. In October, Burma's Union Election Commission [cancelled](#) the elections in over 50 majority-Muslim townships in conflict-ridden regions where religious minorities reside, including Karen, Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine states. In February 2021, the Burmese military, known as the [Tatmadaw](#), [seized power](#) in a military coup and detained Leader Suu Kyi and other NLD officials.

Ongoing clashes in 2020 between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups—including in Rakhine, Chin, Shan, Karen, and Kachin states, where Muslim and Christian religious minorities reside—resulted in civilian casualties, displacement, and property destruction, including of houses of worship. The [ongoing conflict](#) between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA) intensified. In June, Tatmadaw clearance operations against the AA in Rakhine's Muslim-majority [township of Rathedaung](#) forcibly displaced thousands of civilians. The [United Nations \(UN\)](#) reported that at least [500 civilians, mostly Rohingya Muslims and some Christians](#), were killed in 2020 in Rakhine and Chin states, and more than 100 children were killed or maimed during the first half of the year. In

October, the Tatmadaw reportedly used Rohingya [children as human shields](#) to clear passage through landmines and to protect its soldiers from potential enemy fire.

In 2017, the Burmese military [perpetrated](#) mass killings and rapes with what the UN described as genocidal intent against the Rohingya in Rakhine State, forcing over 700,000 to flee to Bangladesh within days. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya and other religious minorities have continued to flee due to violence. Of the 600,000 Rohingya who are still in Burma, approximately 130,000 remain in government-run [internment camps](#) along with several thousand Kaman Muslims. [Severe travel restrictions](#)—enforced by arrests—on those living in these camps prevent internally displaced persons (IDPs) from obtaining employment, healthcare, and education. Although, in 2020, Burmese authorities dropped charges for travel against over [200 Rohingya](#), many remain imprisoned for attempting to flee ongoing violence. Muslims in IDP camps live in squalid conditions with [limited access to aid](#) and information due to government-imposed [internet blockades](#).

Efforts to hold the Burmese government accountable for international crimes, including genocide, continued. In January, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague [announced](#) a provisional ruling in a case led by The Gambia that Burma must “take all measures within its power” to ensure that the military and any irregular armed units “do not commit acts of genocide” against the Rohingya. During the pendency of the case, Burma is required to report regularly on its implementation of the order. In September, The Netherlands and Canada [joined](#) the case to support The Gambia. The International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation [launched](#) in November 2019 into the military's action in Rakhine remains ongoing. The government, including Suu Kyi, continued to deny that the military engaged in genocide against the Rohingya.

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);
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Burmese military and government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or banning their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
 - Definitively and publicly conclude whether the ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Burmese military meet the legal definition of crimes against humanity and/or genocide; and
 - Actively support efforts to hold Burmese officials accountable through the international legal system, including assisting and strengthening the documentation of mass atrocities and pressuring American companies that have facilitated the sharing of hateful content targeting religious minorities to share information with investigative and judicial authorities.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Provide increased funds to support atrocity prevention programs and response efforts to address the dire humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya in Burma and countries hosting Rohingya refugees and pass legislation addressing religious freedom violations in Burma, such as the [Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on An Update on Rohingya Refugees](#)
- **Factsheet:** [The Path Towards Justice: Accountability for International Crimes Against the Rohingya of Burma](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Rohingya Refugees](#)
- **Hearing:** [Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom](#)

Background

Burma has a Buddhist majority (87.9 percent) with Christian (6.2 percent), Muslim (4.3 percent), Animist (0.8 percent), and Hindu (0.5 percent) populations. The 2008 constitution recognizes all these religions, with Buddhism as the de facto state religion. Religious and ethnic minorities not belonging to the majority Bamar ethnicity and Buddhist faith have faced longstanding persecution. Burma's race and religion laws regulate religious conversion, marriage, and births and restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims.

In November 2020, Burma held its second democratic general election, where Suu Kyi's NLD secured another [majority win](#). The NLD government faced criticism for its inaction on the atrocities perpetrated against religious and ethnic minorities, most notably military operations in Rakhine; indeed, Suu Kyi defended the military in the ICJ. In February 2021, the Tatmadaw seized power from and detained Leader Suu Kyi and other NLD officials in a military coup.

Rohingya Refugees

Burma's longstanding and continuous military operations in Rakhine have caused internal displacement and sparked mass migration to Bangladesh and other Southeast Asian countries for many years. At the end of 2020, there were nearly one million registered refugees residing in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, including Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. The Burmese government's ongoing actions and policies have made it [impossible](#) for refugees to safely [return](#) home. In 2020, the Bangladeshi government directed thousands of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar to relocate to the cyclone- and flood-prone island of [Bhasan Char](#).

While the majority of Rohingya refugees fled to Bangladesh, a significant number escaped to [Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand](#). Some Rohingya refugees have managed to settle successfully in these countries, but others have faced discrimination or further religious freedom violations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments in Malaysia and Thailand turned back boats with Rohingya refugees, resulting in many deaths. In April 2020, at least [32 Rohingya Muslims died on a ship](#) that drifted for weeks after it failed to reach Malaysia.

Violence, Discrimination, and Intolerance toward Rohingya Muslims

The government has effectively institutionalized discrimination against Rohingya Muslims through restrictions on participation in elections, marriage, family planning, employment, education, religious choice, property rights, and freedom of movement. The government has proclaimed that the Rohingya are not citizens of their birthplace and homeland of Burma; it fails to acknowledge the Rohingya as one of the 135 legally recognized national races or ethnic groups of Burma and instead refers to them as foreign migrants.

The Tatmadaw has been accused of targeting the Rohingya with killings, mass rape, and other sexual violence; disappearances; forced starvation; arbitrary detentions and arrests; and looting, burning, and property confiscations. Two Tatmadaw soldiers reportedly in

[ICC custody confessed](#) on video to committing atrocities against Rohingya, claiming that superiors ordered units to "exterminate all Kalar"—a derogatory name for the [Rohingya](#).

In June, the Tatmadaw resurfaced on [Facebook](#), nearly two years after the platform removed numerous army accounts and pages for spreading hatred against Rohingya Muslims. The military spokesman said the Tatmadaw intends to combat information deemed anti-nationalist or fake news via Facebook through two newly created Burmese-language military accounts that remain open following the coup. Despite its role in hosting content inciting violence in the past, Facebook has not [shared evidence](#) from its platform with international justice mechanisms.

Some political candidates employed anti-Muslim slogans and speech ahead of national elections in November. Days before the election, hardline Buddhist nationalist monk Ashin Wirathu—who had been charged with sedition and was removed by Facebook in 2018 for posts inciting violence and genocide against Muslims—[handed himself over to authorities after more than a year on the run](#).

Abuses against Christians

The Burmese government also has violently targeted Christian communities. In March, in one example of Burmese military [airstrikes on predominately Christian villages](#), 21 people were killed, including a seven-year-old boy, in Chin state. According to Chin Christian leaders, more than 1,500 villagers fled their homes. [Chin Christian leaders](#) suspect army personnel fired indiscriminately in part because the inhabitants were Christian. In February, the Tatmadaw filed charges against two [Baptist pastors](#) in Kachin for holding an event at their church which allegedly supported ethnic rebel groups.

Key U.S. Policy

During FY 2020, the United States provided more than [\\$437 million](#) to support Rohingya refugees' host communities and internally displaced Rohingya within Burma, including those who fled mass atrocities in Rakhine State.

Several U.S. officials expressed concern over the ongoing conflict in Burma. Then Secretary of State Michael R. [Pompeo](#) addressed the "violent oppression" of Rohingya Muslims by the Burmese military and called for [justice and accountability for the Rohingya](#). In October, then [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale spoke](#) with Leader Suu Kyi to reaffirm U.S. support for democratic reform and an end to conflict, particularly in Rakhine State. On December 2, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Burma as a CPC under IRFA for engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, and it reimposed as the relevant presidential action the existing ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1.

In January 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated during his confirmation hearing that the administration of President Joseph R. Biden would review whether the Burmese government's persecution of the [Rohingya constituted genocide](#). After the February 2021 coup, the Biden administration [reimposed broad sanctions](#) against the Burmese military.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated. The government intensified its “[sinicization of religion](#)” policy, particularly targeting religions perceived to have foreign connections, such as Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism. The authorities also continued their unprecedented use of [advanced surveillance technologies](#) to monitor and track religious minorities, and the [Measures on Managing Religious Groups](#) became effective in February, further constricting the space in which religious groups can operate.

In September, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute [identified](#) 380 detention centers across the Uyghur region (otherwise known as Xinjiang), including new facilities built in 2019 and 2020. This indicates that the Chinese government has continued to detain Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims despite claiming to have released all detainees. Since 2017, authorities reportedly have sent millions of Muslims to these camps for wearing long beards, refusing alcohol, or exhibiting other behaviors deemed signs of “religious extremism.” Former detainees reported torture, rape, [sterilization](#), and other abuses in custody. Experts raised concerns that the Chinese government’s ongoing actions in Xinjiang could amount to [genocide](#) under international law. Reports also highlighted the use of Uyghur [forced labor](#) in internment and prison camps, factories, and industrial parks in the region. Moreover, authorities continued to carry out large-scale closures and [destruction](#) of Uyghur religious sites, including mosques and shrines important to that community’s religious, ethnic, and cultural identity.

The Chinese government continued its pervasive control and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism. In August, at the Seventh Tibet Work Forum, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping [emphasized](#) the importance of sinicizing Tibetan Buddhism to make it compatible with Chinese socialism and mobilizing Tibetans to “fight against separatism.” Subsequently, local authorities organized seminars at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries to

[indoctrinate](#) monks and nuns on these policies. They placed tight restrictions on monasteries and temples—including the [Yachen Gar Buddhist center](#) in Sichuan Province—[barring](#) worshippers from entering these sites. Authorities broadly [banned](#) Tibetans, including students and government workers, from participating in traditional religious gatherings, and they [detained and punished](#) Tibetans for listening to the Dalai Lama’s teachings or possessing his portrait.

Despite the Vatican-China agreement on Bishop appointments, Chinese authorities continued to harass, detain, and torture underground Catholic bishops—such as [Cui Tai](#) and [Huang Jintong](#)—who refuse to join the state-backed Catholic association. They also harassed, detained, arrested, and imprisoned members of Protestant house churches who refuse to join the state-sanctioned “Three-Self Patriotic Movement.” In April, authorities arrested and charged house church pastor [Zhao Huaiguo](#) for “inciting subversion of state power,” and in October, local authorities in Taizhou city, Zhejiang Province, sentenced Christian bookseller [Chen Yu](#) to seven years in prison and fined him roughly \$30,000 USD for “illegal business operations.” The government also continued to demolish both [Catholic](#) and [Protestant](#) church buildings and crosses under its “sinicization of religion” campaign. In addition, there were [reports](#) that authorities across China demolished Mahayana Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religion temples.

According to [reports](#), thousands of Falun Gong practitioners were harassed and arrested during 2020 for practicing their faith, and some likely [died](#) due to abuse and torture while in custody. Credible international [reports](#) also suggested that organ harvesting, including from Falun Gong practitioners, likely continued.

In October, 39 United Nations (UN) member states [condemned](#) the Chinese government’s abusive policies toward ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, including the use of internment camps, violations of religious freedom, forced labor, and forced birth control measures.

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);
- Enforce to the fullest extent existing U.S. laws—such as the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and Tibetan Policy and Support Act—and continue to impose targeted financial and visa sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- Urge like-minded countries to independently investigate and formally determine whether the abuses in Xinjiang meet the definitions of genocide and/or crimes against humanity under international law, and work together to take measures to hold China accountable;
- Publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that U.S. government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government’s crackdown on religious freedom continues; and
- Continue and intensify efforts to counter Chinese government influence operations in the United States—including the Confucius Institutes—that suppress information or advocacy regarding religious freedom violations in China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation to promote religious freedom in China, including the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act ([H.R.6210/S.3471](#)).

Background

Approximately 18 percent of China's [estimated](#) 1.4 billion people are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; 5 percent are Christian; and 2 percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include the Falun Gong, Daoism, and indigenous practices.

Although the CCP has long repressed religious freedom, in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion, resulting in campaigns to “sinicize” Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid the religions of alleged “foreign” influences. These policies require religious groups to support CCP rule and its overall objectives and interests, including by altering their teachings to conform to CCP ideology and adopting architectural and other changes to their sites and symbols. Both registered and unregistered religious groups and individuals who run afoul of the CCP face harassment, detention, arrest, and imprisonment.

The 2018 [Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs](#) effectively ban all “unauthorized” religious teachings and expand the role of local authorities in controlling religious activities. Under Article 300 of the [Chinese Criminal Code](#), simply belonging to certain religious movements, such as the Falun Gong or the Church of Almighty God, is punishable with three to seven years’ imprisonment—or up to life imprisonment for cases the authorities deem more serious.

Religious Freedom under Hong Kong’s National Security Law

In June, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee passed the new National Security Law for Hong Kong amid large-scale protests. The law contains broad and vague provisions that punish “secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces.” In December, Hong Kong authorities charged Jimmy Lai with “collusion with foreign forces,” making him the first high-profile figure to face charges under the law. Lai, a devout Catholic, has advocated for religious freedom in China and expressed concern over the future of religious freedom in Hong Kong. In December, USCIRF Commissioner Johnnie Moore [adopted](#) Lai as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience (RPOC) through USCIRF’s RPOC Project. The law could be invoked by authorities to suppress religious freedom in Hong Kong, especially as many political activists and protest participants, leaders, and groups have religious backgrounds and affiliations.

Uyghur Forced Labor in Supply Chains of U.S. Companies

In 2020, [reports](#) continued to highlight labor abuses in the supply chains of U.S. companies. Forced labor involving Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims took place in reeducation and prison camps, factories, and industrial parks in the Xinjiang region, and is often connected to government-sponsored “[poverty alleviation](#)” and “mutual pairing assistance” programs. In July, four U.S. government agencies issued a joint [Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory](#), warning businesses with potential supply chain exposure to forced labor to consider the reputational, economic,

and legal risks of involvement with entities that engage in human rights abuses in the region and to conduct due diligence accordingly. Some companies responded by [severing](#) ties with suppliers suspected of using Uyghur forced labor, while others claimed to have conducted third-party audits to ensure no forced labor is used in their supply chains.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, senior U.S. government officials continued to [condemn](#) deteriorating religious freedom conditions in China, including then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo in his address at the 2020 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in November. Then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [raised](#) particular concern over the Chinese government’s use of artificial intelligence and facial recognition to oppress Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, many of whom are detained in internment camps for religious reasons. On December 2, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing restrictions on exports to China of crime control or detection instruments or equipment. In January 2021, after the reporting period, the State Department [designated](#) China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.

In May and July, the U.S. Department of Commerce added in total 19 Chinese companies and one government entity to the Entity List due to concerns about forced labor and other human rights violations in Xinjiang. In July, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [sanctions](#) against Chinese government entities and senior Chinese officials, including Chen Quanguo, Communist Party Secretary for Xinjiang; the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau; and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), which has [directly participated](#) in the surveillance, mass detention, and forced labor of Uyghurs.

In May, Congress passed the [Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act](#) by an overwhelming, bipartisan vote, which then President Donald J. Trump [signed](#) into law in June. This law authorizes the U.S. government to impose sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for the persecution of Uyghur and other Muslims. In December, as part of an omnibus pandemic relief and government funding package, the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate passed, and the President signed, the Tibetan Policy and Support Act ([H.R.4331](#)), which promotes the human rights of the Tibetan people, including the right to select and venerate their own religious leaders. USCIRF had recommended the enactment of both the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act and the Tibetan Policy and Support Act.

In September, the House of Representatives passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act ([H.R.6210](#)), which would bar imports of textiles, cotton, and other goods produced using forced labor from Xinjiang. In October, six U.S. senators [introduced](#) a bipartisan resolution to designate human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang as genocide.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Technological Surveillance of Religion in China](#)
- **Factsheet:** [The 2019 Regulation for Religious Groups in China](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Being Muslim Means You’re Never Safe from China](#) (in *The Hill*)
- **Op-Ed:** [China’s war on religion – What US must do to support freedom](#) (in *Fox News*)

Individual Views of Commissioner Gary L. Bauer

Of the countries named each year by USCIRF as egregious violators of religious liberty, one is in a category by itself.

Communist China doesn't only deny its citizens basic human rights, including the right to seek and worship God. It is also asserting itself as a new authoritarian model for developing nations around the world. It is actively engaged in undermining international human rights standards. It utilizes its growing military power to intimidate and threaten its neighbors.

China's Communist Party (CCP) believes the United States is in inevitable decline. They believe the growth of their economic and military might cannot be stopped. They think the 21st century will be the Chinese Communist Century. If they are right, the 21st century will be a time in which human freedom and dignity shrinks while oppression grows.

USCIRF policy recommendations are made annually to U.S. government officials. But in a constitutional republic like ours, public opinion is everything. I appeal to my fellow citizens to act now, individually. To U.S. corporate CEOs, stop putting your desire for greater profits in China ahead of the interests and values of our country. To the presidents of our great universities, stop accepting Chinese Communist money that will inevitably threaten academic freedom. To American consumers, don't buy products made by suffering workers in Communist China's slave labor camps and factories. You are subsidizing their persecution and strengthening an adversary of our country.

The United States has faced and defeated great threats to human liberty before, including Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The Communist Chinese don't think we have the same courage today. They will be proven wrong, but only if each of us stands for American values.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

China is relapsing to its cultural revolution, but with the aid of technology Mao could have only dreamed of—all of which it is using to pursue and enable genocide. Communist China is not a "strategic competitor." The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a hostile actor whose actions imperil the world, and its abuses have been made possible by inexcusable policies endorsed by Congress and the White House over many administrations.

It is time that the United States and its allies embrace a clear-eyed view of the CCP, recognizing that it is singular and distinct in its disregard for human life—not just human rights and religious freedom. It aids and abets similar activities by other countries all around the world. We cannot allow the international order, in pursuit of self-interest, to continue to let China play by its own rules. Those nations around the world that ignore the CCP's malevolence will eventually find themselves subservient to it. It is past time for our world bodies and our liberal democracies to stand up to the CCP.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea improved incrementally, though overall remained poor. Authorities in Eritrea released 240 religious prisoners on bail, allegedly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and eased restrictions on the Baha'i community, the Jewish community, and the Greek Orthodox Church. However, the repressive system governing religious groups remained in place, and members of "unofficial" religious groups continued to face systematic and egregious persecution for practicing their faiths. Since 2002, the Eritrean government has recognized and permitted only four religious entities to operate in the country: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. Although these groups were allowed to practice their faiths publicly, the government consistently intervened in their affairs to limit and direct their activities. The government also continued to invoke [Proclamation No. 73](#) to persecute both religious and secular activists throughout the country on a regular basis, especially those who disagree with the government's stated positions.

The government continued to require all Eritreans above the age of 18 to participate in mandatory military service indefinitely

and restricted religious expression during that service. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to serve in the military due to their faith were stripped of their citizenship and thrown in jail. As of December 2020, 24 Jehovah's Witnesses were [imprisoned](#) in Eritrea, some of whom have been in jail for more than 20 years.

In 2020, approximately 500 to 1,200 individuals were estimated to be in prison in Eritrea due to their faith. Authorities continued to hold the Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Abune Antonios](#) under house arrest. The government illegally removed Patriarch Antonios from his position in May 2007. In addition to Patriarch Antonios, the government also continued to imprison religious leaders—including from the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church—and Sunni and Wahabi Muslims. The leaders of the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church have been in jail since 2004. Despite positive regional political changes, including in neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia, Eritrea continued to resist religious and secular activists' ongoing calls for democratic reform. In 2019, security forces met the demands of both religious and secular activists with lethal force, injuring and even killing tens of them.

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), and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 (a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the

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

- Urge the Eritrean government to release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
- Call on the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and
- Encourage the Eritrean government to extend an official invitation for unrestricted

visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom issues in Eritrea through legislation, hearings and briefings, and a congressional delegation trip to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, to engage with Eritrean officials to encourage them to advance human rights and religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses](#)

Background

Eritrea is a single-party state led by the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ) under the leadership of President Isaias Afwerki [since](#) its independence in 1993. The constitution of Eritrea states that the government must [protect](#) freedom of thought, conscience, and belief, as well as the right of individuals to practice the religion of their choice, but this right is not protected in practice. Eritrea's population is [split in half](#) between Christians (49 percent) and Muslims (49 percent). The Christian population mainly resides in the southern and central regions of the country, whereas the Muslim population lives predominantly in the northern region. The Muslim population is predominantly Sunni, and the Christian community is predominantly Eritrean Orthodox, with various denominations including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals also represented. In addition to these two main religious groups, there is a small community of Baha'is (approximately 200 individuals) and a tiny Jewish community. Finally, about [2 percent of the population](#), who resides in the southwestern region, practice African traditional religions.

In 1995, the government passed [Proclamation](#) No. 73, allowing it to intervene in and exert full control of political, civic, and religious activities. Using this law, the government systematically oppresses secular and religious activists for advocating for human rights or dissenting from the government's positions. Using intimidation, imprisonment, and torture against those who oppose his government, President Afwerki has consolidated power in Eritrea. For example, in 2019 when Eritreans took to the street to demand the advancement of basic human rights, including religious freedom, the government deployed its security forces to disperse the protests, [killing](#) and injuring tens of peaceful protesters.

In July 2018, Eritrea signed the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with its neighbor, Ethiopia, ending years of hostility and conflict between the two countries. The peace accord was anticipated to usher in a new era of respect for civic and political liberties as it ended Eritrea's diplomatic isolation. However, the government continued its systematic oppression of political, human rights and religious activists by severely limiting their activities and imprisoning many of them.

The 2020 internal war in Ethiopia had a direct impact on religious freedom issues in Eritrea. According to [reports](#), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) [accused](#) Eritrea of supporting and aiding the Ethiopian military to carry out air strikes against it. In retaliation, the TPLF launched attacks against Eritrea, forcing tens of thousands of Eritreans to flee to neighboring Sudan and Ethiopia, further exacerbating the humanitarian [crisis](#) in the region. Using this as a [pretense](#), the Eritrean government further limited freedom of expression, including religious freedom. In 2020, refugees continued to flee Eritrea on a regular basis to the neighboring countries of Sudan, Ethiopia, and beyond to escape persecution and inhumane treatment by their government.

Repression of Unregistered Religious Groups

The government of Eritrea deems unregistered religious groups illegal and bans them from openly practicing their faiths. The most prominent unregistered religious groups include: Protestants (Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists), Salafi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Baha'is, Shi'a Muslims, and adherents of African Indigenous

Religions. According to [reports](#), members of these groups are constantly harassed, arrested, and deprived of their civic and human rights. Nontheists are also denied legal rights and equal protection and run the [risk](#) of arrest. Coming out as an atheist or agnostic in Eritrea would [provoke](#) arrest by the government and social pressure and isolation. The government particularly views Jehovah's Witnesses and Salafi Muslims as political forces and therefore severely restricts their activities and punishes them with long prison sentences for practicing their faith.

Positive Developments

In 2020, authorities in Asmara released from prison a total of 244 prisoners of conscience from various religions and denominations. Some of those religious prisoners were released conditionally. Releases included 22 Methodist Christians in July, 101 Muslims in August, 27 Evangelical Christians and 66 Pentecostals in [September](#) and 28 Jehovah's Witnesses in [December](#). Observers [suggested](#) these releases were made to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in overcrowded prisons. While these releases were positive steps, hundreds of individuals remain detained for practicing their faith. In addition to these prisoner releases, the government also eased some restrictions on the Baha'i community, the tiny Jewish community and Greek Orthodox by allowing their members to worship openly in 2020. Specifically, the government permitted the Baha'i community to operate its center in Asmara as well as join the international Baha'i community as an active member. However, the government banned the Baha'i community from soliciting or accepting foreign funding. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox church in Asmara was open to the public as a heritage site as well as a worship place in 2020. The Greek Orthodox congregation worshiped there regularly throughout the year. Finally, the tiny Jewish community was allowed to worship at its synagogue in Asmara.

Key U.S. Policy

Since 2010, Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors due to poor diplomatic relations. In recent years, however, the two countries have been engaging to improve their bilateral relations. In May 2019, a congressional [delegation](#) led by Representative Karen Bass (D-CA) visited Eritrea—the first congressional visit in 14 years. In September 2019, a U.S. Department of State delegation visited Asmara to open a direct dialogue with Eritrean officials. The delegation also met with human rights activists and faith leaders. During both visits, the delegations highlighted the importance of advancing human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief. They also discussed the unlawful imprisonment of religious leaders, human rights activists, and political leaders, as well as the need to allow for alternative civilian services for conscientious objectors. Finally, the [U.S. Embassy](#) in Asmara has engaged young Eritreans to build their leadership skills by participating in the East Africa regional leadership academies and attending trainings in Washington, DC, to advance civic and political rights in Eritrea. The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom since 2004. Most [recently](#), on December 2, the State Department redesignated it and maintained an arms embargo on Eritrea under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in India continued their negative trajectory. The government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), promoted Hindu nationalist policies resulting in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. In early 2020, the passage of the religiously discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)—a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan residing in India—led to nationwide protests against [the CAA](#) and spurred state and nonstate violence, largely targeting Muslims.

In February, the [worst Hindu-Muslim mob violence](#) in more than three decades erupted in Delhi. More than 50 people died and 200 others were injured, mostly Muslims. Mobs sympathetic to Hindu nationalism operated with impunity, using [brutal force](#) to [single out](#) Muslims, attack mosques, and destroy homes and businesses in majority-Muslim neighborhoods. The Delhi Minorities Commission investigated and [found](#) that the violence and allegations of police brutality and complicity were “seemingly planned and directed to teach a lesson to a certain community which dared to protest against a discriminatory law.” Citing COVID-19 concerns, in March police cleared the [Shaheen Bagh protest in Delhi](#)—a peaceful sit-in that had lasted more than 100 days and was led by Muslim and non-Muslim women protesting the CAA.

In conjunction with a proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) requiring all residents to provide documentation of citizenship, the CAA could subject Muslims, in particular, to [“statelessness, deportation or prolonged detention.”](#) The northeastern state of Assam provides a chilling example: in 2019, a statewide NRC was implemented in Assam that ultimately excluded 1.9 million residents (both Muslims and Hindus) from the citizenship register. In some cases, families who had resided in India for generations were excluded; in other cases, a family member was included on the citizenship register while another was not. The consequences of exclusion—as exemplified by a large [detention camp](#) being built in Assam—are potentially devastating and underscore concerns about the impact such laws may have if extended to other states or nationwide. USCIRF highlighted this weaponization of citizenship laws and the potential for atrocities in a [March hearing](#).

Another set of policies raising significant concerns—and too often resulting in violence—are the efforts to prohibit interfaith marriages or relationships using the false narrative of “forced conversion.” In late 2020, Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, [passed](#) an ordinance voiding any marriage conducted for the “sole purpose of unlawful conversion or vice-versa.” Similar legislation was approved in Madhya Pradesh and is being pushed in several states, including Haryana, Assam, and Karnataka. Hindu nationalist groups also launched inflammatory campaigns decrying interfaith relationships or engagements, including calling for [boycotts](#) and [censorship](#) of media depictions of interfaith relationships. These efforts targeting and delegitimizing interfaith relationships have led to attacks and arrests of non-Hindus and to innuendo, suspicion, and violence toward any interfaith interaction.

In September, the Indian Parliament [amended](#) the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) to increase restrictions on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), further [stifling](#) civil society and forcing religious organizations and human rights organizations, including those advocating for religious freedom, to shut down. [Amnesty International India](#) closed operations in October after authorities froze its bank account.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation and hateful rhetoric—including from government officials—often targeted religious minorities, continuing familiar [patterns](#). Disinformation and intolerant content have emboldened intimidation, harassment, and mob violence in recent years, including numerous instances of violence mainly against Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Adivasis, and other religious communities.

Government action—including the [acquittal](#) of all individuals accused of demolishing the Babri Masjid mosque—as well as government inaction to address religious violence contributed to a culture of impunity for those promulgating hate and violence toward religious minorities. At the same time, the government cracked down on those expressing [dissent](#), including detaining and even accusing individuals of sedition for their actual or perceived criticism of the [CAA](#) and other governmental (in)actions. United Nations (UN) officials [expressed concern](#) over the government’s repression of criticism.

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);
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ or entities’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States;
- Advance human rights of all religious communities in India and promote religious freedom and dignity and interfaith dialogue through bilateral and multilateral forums and agreements, such as the ministerial of the Quadrilateral; and
- Condemn ongoing religious freedom violations and support religious organizations and human rights groups being targeted for their advocacy of religious freedom.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Continue to raise religious freedom concerns in the U.S.-India bilateral relationship and highlight concerns through hearings, briefings, letters, and congressional delegations.

Background

India is the world's largest democracy, with a rich tradition of secular pluralism. Its [estimated population](#) exceeds 1.3 billion: 79.8 percent Hindu, 14.2 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Christian, and 1.7 percent Sikh. Smaller religious groups include Buddhists, Jains, Baha'is, Jews, Zoroastrians (Parsis), and nonreligious persons. India's [constitution](#) establishes the nation as secular, and Article 25 grants all individuals freedom of conscience, including the right to practice, profess, and propagate religion. Yet, in recent years, the BJP-led government has challenged the secular principles of the constitution by implementing laws and policies at the national and state levels promoting Hindu nationalism, thereby posing severe [challenges](#) to freedom of religion or belief and related rights. Throughout 2020, the national and state governments' perpetration and toleration of these systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations led to increasing repression of religious freedom and a growing climate of hostility and violence toward religious minorities, human rights advocates, and others speaking out against such violations.

Anti-Conversion Laws

Despite India's constitutional protections for religious freedom, approximately one-third of India's 28 states limit or prohibit [religious conversion](#) to protect the dominant religion from perceived threats from religious minorities. While the new legislation in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh targets interfaith marriage in particular, several other states prohibit conversion based on vague criteria, including force, inducement, allurement, coercion, fraud, or misrepresentation. These anti-conversion laws are too often the basis for false accusations, harassment, and violence against non-Hindus that occur with impunity. In 2020, for example, mobs—fueled by false accusations of forced conversions—attacked Christians, destroyed churches, and disrupted religious worship services. In many cases, authorities did not prevent these abuses and ignored or chose not to investigate pleas to hold perpetrators accountable. This contributed to increased mob attacks and a fear of reprisal against those coming forward. Religious minorities remain concerned about the potential for a national anti-conversion law and additional state-level statutes.

Disinformation and Incitement of Violence Targeting Religious Minorities

Government officials and nonstate actors continued to use social media and other forms of communication to harass and spread hatred and [disinformation](#) against minority communities, including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits. [Experts suggest](#) that in 2020, pervasive disinformation about the CAA protests and the COVID-19 pandemic specifically targeted religious minorities and marginalized communities, disproportionately affecting women. Dalits, who have long faced religious-based discrimination in all aspects of life, experienced heightened harassment and discrimination during the COVID-19

pandemic. Additionally, [false information](#)—aided with images sent via social media—have implicated religious communities in cow slaughter and other alleged offenses, resulting in more than 120 cases of significant violence. The fervor around cow slaughter continues to take root in policy: in December, the state of Karnataka [revised an earlier bill](#) to impose fines and imprisonment for the transport, sale, and purchase of cattle for slaughter.

Religious Freedom in Jammu and Kashmir

In Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir, restrictions on freedom of movement and assembly negatively impacted religious freedom, including the observance of religious holy days and the ability to attend prayers. The shutdown of the internet for nearly 18 months—the [longest-ever](#) shutdown in any democracy—and other restrictions on [communications](#) caused significant disruption and limited religious freedom.

Closing Space for Civil Society through the FCRA and Other Laws

Throughout 2020, members of civil society, including human rights advocates and media reporting on religious freedom violations, faced intimidation and harassment. Government officials used the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and other statutes to detain advocates, media, and academics, including religious minorities.

The national government has taken several steps to limit engagement and support of NGOs, especially religious and human rights organizations. The FCRA regulates the inflow of foreign funds to NGOs. In September, the FCRA was [amended](#) to place further restrictions on NGOs, including reducing the amount of foreign funds that could be used for administrative expenses and requiring that accounts be held in a government-designated bank. In recent years, government officials have [revoked or suspended](#) the FCRA licenses of thousands of NGOs, including numerous Christian and other religious and human rights organizations.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, the United States and India strengthened their relationship, especially in security and defense. In February, then President Donald J. Trump [visited](#) India, highlighting the growing relationship. In October, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [traveled to India](#) for the third U.S.-India 2+2 Ministerial Dialogue, where the two governments signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement.

Several members of Congress have expressed concern about the CAA and other human rights-related issues in India. For example, Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, [urged](#) the administration to “engage the Indian government at the highest levels on these concerns, press for a swift reversal of these policies and practices, and ensure protection of the human rights of all persons in India regardless of their religion.”

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom](#)
- **Hearing:** [Combatting Online Hate Speech and Disinformation Targeting Religious Communities](#)
- **Issue Brief:** [The Religious Freedom Implications of the National Register of Citizens in India](#)
- **Factsheet:** [The Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act in India](#)

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

I love India. I have floated early in the morning down the Ganges in Varanasi, walked every alley in Old Delhi, stood in awe of the architecture in Agra, sipped tea next to the Dalai Lama's temple in Dharamsala, circled the shrine in Ajmer, and looked in awe at the Golden Temple. All along the way, I have met Christian brothers and sisters who serve the poor selflessly, often in difficult circumstances.

Of all the countries in the world, India should not be a "country of particular concern," or CPC. It is the world's largest democracy and it is governed by a pristine constitution. It is diversity *personified* and its religious life has been its greatest historic blessing.

Yet, India does seem to be at a crossroads. Its democracy—still young and freewheeling—is creating through the ballot box difficult challenges for itself. The answer, of course, is for India's institutions to draw upon their rich history to protect their values. India must always resist allowing political and intercommunal conflict to be exacerbated by religious tensions. India's government and people have everything to gain and absolutely nothing to lose from preserving social harmony and protecting the rights of everyone. India can. India must.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Iran deteriorated, with the government escalating its severe repression of religious minorities and continuing to export religious extremism and intolerance abroad. During the year, scores of Christians were [arrested](#), assaulted, and unjustly [sentenced](#) to years in prison. In January, Iran [removed](#) the “other” option from the religion category on national ID cards, forcing members of the Baha’i community to either deny their religion or be denied this crucial document. The government also continued to [arrest](#) Baha’is and impose lengthy prison sentences on them. [Between 50 and 100](#) Baha’is were reported to be in prisons in Iran during 2020, despite the widespread prevalence of COVID-19. In October, officials [confiscated](#) Baha’i land near the city of Sari. In late November, Iran conducted a [mass raid](#) on Baha’i houses, arresting 20 people and searching about 50 houses. Iran also severely [mistreated](#) Sunni [activists](#) and [clerics](#) in 2020. In September, Iran’s Supreme Court [affirmed](#) death sentences for seven Sunni prisoners on charges including “waging war against God” and “corruption on Earth.” The government continued to repress the Gonabadi Sufi community after [hastening the death](#) of its spiritual leader Noor Ali Tabandeh in 2019. During 2020, it continued to detain Sufis who had protested Tabandeh’s house arrest in 2018 and subjected several of them to egregious mistreatment.

Throughout the year, Iran’s government continued to promote antisemitism. In March, several submissions to a COVID-19 cartoon contest sponsored by Iran’s Ministry of Health [asserted](#) that COVID-19 was a Jewish conspiracy. The ministry took no action to reject these submissions. In September, state media [advanced](#) false ideas about Jewish victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks and Iran [launched](#) its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest. In February, a Basij student group in Hamedan made [threats](#) against the [tomb](#) of Esther and Mordechai. In May, unknown [assailants attempted to set](#)

[fire](#) to the religious site. That same month, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [tweeted](#) that the United States is controlled by “wealthy Zionists and their corporate owners,” a common antisemitic dog-whistle.

Iran’s government [closed](#) 147 shops during Ramadan for “not following Shari’a law” and arrested three people for eating during the daily fast. It also [imprisoned](#) and prosecuted several women who peacefully protested mandatory headscarf laws. Imprisoned lawyer Nasrin Soutudeh, who defended many of these women in court, began a hunger strike on August 11, and was [denied](#) adequate medical care. She was [granted](#) a temporary release from prison on November 9 after contracting COVID-19 but [ordered](#) to return on December 2 despite needing ongoing medical evaluation. Iran also continued to [detain](#) USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) at Qarchak Prison and deny her visits with her ill [husband](#). In addition to invoking religion to restrict the religious freedom of women, Iran invokes its interpretation of Shari’a to justify religious freedom violations against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and actively executes LGBTI people for their sexual identity.

USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#) [remained](#) in prison on a six-year sentence for “promoting Zionist Christianity.” Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz and his wife [fled](#) in August [following](#) a rejected appeal against charges of “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.” In March 2020, the government of Canada [granted asylum](#) to spiritualist leader and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Mohammed Ali Taheri](#) following threats to him and his followers by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC continued to threaten the lives of Taheri’s followers outside Iran in 2020. Taheri is the founder of the Erfan e-Halgheh spiritualist movement and was sentenced to death in 2015 before the sentence was overturned later that same year.

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);
- Continue to impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Raise religious freedom and other human rights abuses in any discussions with Iran’s government regarding U.S. re-entry to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA);
- Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions and release religious prisoners of conscience;
- Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) and [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#); and
- Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Iranian Government Officials Sanctioned for Violating Religious Freedom](#)
- **USCIRF Spotlight:** [Religious Freedom in Iran during COVID-19](#)

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic, authoritarian state with restricted political participation. Ninety to 95 percent of the population are Shi'a Muslim, while Sunni Muslims account for 5–10 percent. Approximately 0.3 percent ascribe to other religions, including the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. While the Jaafari (Twelver) school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution extends full respect to the five major Sunni schools. It also recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected minorities. Five of the parliament's 290 seats are reserved for religious minorities—two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. There are two Hindu temples, and Buddhism has historic influences. Iran is home to several other religious groups that face persecution, including Mandeans, [Yarsanis](#), nonbelievers, and followers of spiritual movements. In December 2016, President Hassan Rouhani publicly released a nonbinding Charter on Citizens' Rights, but religious minorities have seen little change based on this document.

Persecution of Religious Minorities

In May, officials at Fashafoye Prison [denied medical care](#) to Sufi prisoners and [moved](#) four Sufis into Ward 5 of the prison, where there were known cases of COVID-19. In September, officials at Evin Prison gave medicines to Sufi activist Benham Majoubi without his consent that caused limb numbness, paralysis, and loss of consciousness. Officials then [sent](#) Majoubi to Aminabad Hospital while [denying him access](#) to crucial medicine. Mahjoubi [died](#) in February 2021.

Iran also escalated its persecution of Christians in 2020, particularly converts from Islam. Officials [lashed](#) Christian convert Mohammed Reza Omid 80 times for drinking communion wine in October following his completion of a two-year sentence for [participation](#) in a house church. In February, the IRGC arrested Christian convert Mary Mohammadi at a peaceful protest in Tehran. She was [held incognito](#) and subjected to [beatings and sexual assault](#) at the Vozara Detention Center. At a court hearing in April, Judge Javad Ahmadi from Branch 1167 of the Criminal Court of Tehran [asked Mohammadi repeated questions](#) about her [faith and conversion from Islam to Christianity](#) that had no bearing on her charge of "disturbing public order." In April she was [sentenced](#) to three months and one day in prison and ten lashes. However, her sentence was [suspended](#) for a year. In January 2020, Branch 105 of the Civil Court in Shiraz [sentenced](#) Christian convert Ismaeil Maghrebinejad to three years in prison for "insulting Islamic sacred beliefs." In February, he was [given](#) an additional two-year sentence for promoting "Evangelical Zionist

Christianity," and in May he received an additional year for "propaganda against the state." In September, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence coerced a judge in Bushire to rule that a Christian couple who converted from Islam must return their adopted daughter to the care of the state because she was Muslim. The ruling came [despite](#) fatwas from two Shi'a grand ayatollahs deeming the adoption consistent with Islamic legal interpretations.

Iran also continued its systematic repression of Baha'is, including a [mass raid](#) on about 50 Baha'i houses in late November. A court official in Shiraz [threatened](#) to "uproot" Baha'is in the city in late spring. In March, 30 Baha'is were [summoned](#) to Branch 10 of the Shiraz Revolutionary Court on grounds related to a 2016 Ministry of Intelligence case against them. In April, Judge Hojjat Nabavi from Branch 2 of the Birjand Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) nine Baha'is to lengthy prison sentences for "membership in the illegal and anti-security deviant Baha'i sect." While one was acquitted, the court [denied](#) an October appeal by the eight other Baha'is.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration continued its "maximum pressure" tactic in 2020 as high-level officials, including then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, repeatedly [highlighted](#) the plight of persecuted religious minorities. In August, [Elliot Abrams replaced](#) U.S. Department of State Iran Envoy Brian H. Hook. In January 2020, the United States [killed](#) IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassim Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq, for "actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region." Later that month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [blocked](#) the domain of the semiofficial Iranian Fars News Agency. Throughout 2020, the Treasury Department sanctioned high-ranking Iranian officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations, [including](#) Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi. At the February 2020 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC, then President Donald J. Trump [called](#) on Iran to free jailed Christian convert Mary Mohammadi. In October, the United States supported a United Nations [resolution](#) condemning human rights restrictions in Iran, including religious freedom violations. On December 2, the State Department [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing travel restrictions on Iranian individuals connected with the commission of serious human rights abuses. While approximately 12 religiously persecuted Iranians were admitted to the United States in 2019 under the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, at the end of 2020 nearly 80 fully vetted Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, awaiting final approval to travel to the United States for resettlement.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Iran is the world's leading proprietor of hostage diplomacy and the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, especially through its proxies like the terrorist Houthis, Hezbollah, and various Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated groups active across Europe, South America, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Iran's activities within and outside of the country target religious minorities and especially Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Baha'is. I'm appalled by reports that certain Biden administration officials would, in effect, reward Iran for its bad behavior by eliminating sanctions prematurely. Negotiations with Iran must only be pursued in consultation with America's allies in the Middle East (including Saudi Arabia and Israel). They must involve the release of arbitrarily detained Americans (and others) and address Iran's gross human rights abuses and proxy activities, and those negotiations are only reasonable if they produce an outcome that would be satisfactory to a bipartisan majority of members of Congress, as if a new deal were a treaty. Otherwise, Iran will only take advantage of American goodwill to lie more, kidnap more, kill more innocents, threaten the elimination of Israel, and further destabilize the world. Finally, I will give my remaining words to Wang Xiyue, the American PhD student from Princeton who was taken hostage by Iran during the Obama administration *after* the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA): "The menace of the Islamic Republic can't be appeased . . . for 42 years Iran has demonstrated that it changes its behavior only in response to strength in the form of American-led international pressure."

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria deteriorated, with both state and nonstate actors committing egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Despite Nigeria's constitution protecting freedom of religion and belief, Nigerian citizens faced violence by militant Islamists and other nonstate armed actors, as well as discrimination, arbitrary detentions, and capital blasphemy sentences by state authorities.

State-sanctioned Shari'a courts handed down [harsh sentences](#) on several individuals convicted of blasphemy, including sentencing [22-year-old musician Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) to death, although a higher court later demanded Sharif-Aminu's case to be retried. Government authorities also arrested prominent humanist activist [Mubarak Bala](#), reportedly in relation to his expression of his humanist beliefs on social media. Bala continues to be detained without charge, and authorities have restricted his access to his legal team.

Militant Islamist groups in Nigeria continued to violate religious freedom in the northeast and expanded to parts of the northwest of the country. Elements from Boko Haram and from the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) abducted and executed several individuals based on their religious beliefs. Boko Haram fighters

[beheaded a local chairman](#) of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in Adamawa State because he refused to renounce his faith, while ISWAP fighters [executed five aid workers](#) as a warning to "all those being used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity." Jihadists also conducted several attacks on religious ceremonies: in May they [attacked villagers](#) preparing to break their Ramadan fast, killing 20 people, and in July they [attacked locals](#) gathering to celebrate Eid al-Adha in Maiduguri.

In the center of the country, other nonstate armed groups also conducted attacks on houses of worship, religious ceremonies, and religious leaders. Christian communities were hit particularly hard in the country's Middle Belt, with nonstate armed actors attacking at least [11 churches](#) and [Christian ceremonies](#). Survivors report that Fulani-affiliated armed groups used [religious rhetoric](#) while conducting myriad attacks on predominantly Christian villages in Kaduna State. Kidnappers also reportedly [deliberately targeted Christians](#) for abduction and execution. The Nigerian government has routinely failed to investigate these attacks and prosecute those responsible, demonstrating a problematic level of apathy on the part of state officials.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate 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), and redesignate Boko Haram and ISWAP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address religious freedom violations, including but not limited to:
 - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on countering hate speech based on religious identity, responding to sectarian violence, reporting on violence against religious communities, and holding accountable security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses;
 - Promote and expand access to justice and strengthen secular courts in areas where ethnoreligious tensions overlap with trends of heightened violence, criminality, and mob justice;
 - Increase funding for security sector reform and rule of law programming and include religious institutional actors in security and justice programs; and
 - Allocate funding for programs that engage civil society, security, and official actors in inclusive efforts to protect places of worship and other holy sites;
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. aid to Nigeria and its impact on religious freedom conditions in the country;
- Develop localized strategies and engage diplomatically with key local government authorities in regions where state-sanctioned or tolerated violations are frequent to bring state practices in line with the constitution and international obligations; and
- Strengthen the public affairs capacity at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja to respond publicly to developments in religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, including commenting on court cases against religious prisoners of conscience, as well as to amplify domestic voices advocating for stronger religious freedom norms.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Nigeria in 2020](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa](#)

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated [219 million people](#). Among these, an estimated 53.5 percent identify as Muslim; 45.9 percent identify as Christian; and 0.6 percent identify with other religious beliefs, including atheism, the Baha'i faith, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and African traditional religions.

The [1999 Constitution](#) protects freedom of religion or belief and prohibits the state from establishing a state religion and from discriminating on the basis of religion. The [Nigerian Criminal Code](#) includes a penalty of up to two years imprisonment for insulting a person's religion. Additionally, 12 Muslim-majority northern states use Islamic Shari'a criminal and family codes alongside civil and customary laws; these Shari'a codes prohibit blasphemy.

Religion in Nigeria plays a [strong role](#) in social and political life. There are also [deeply entrenched religious divisions](#) and mistrust. Often, religious tensions overlap with ethnic identity, exacerbating [ethnoreligious conflicts](#) driven by both the religious and ethnic aspects of victims' and perpetrators' identities.

The Nigerian government is currently conducting [military operations](#) against Boko Haram and ISWAP in the northeast of the country. Despite federal government [claims](#) that it has defeated Boko Haram, these groups remain significant threats to civilians and religious freedom in the Lake Chad Basin region. [Human rights abuses](#) by Nigerian counterterrorism actors have reportedly exacerbated insecurity and put civilian lives at risk.

Attacks on Houses of Worship and Religious Ceremonies

In February, Boko Haram militants attacked Garkida, a town known as the foundation of the Church of the Brethren in the country, [burning at least five churches](#). In a series of attacks in Kaduna State in March, suspected Fulani militants [burned four churches](#). In April, armed assailants believed to be affiliated with Fulani militias attacked a [Christian wedding ceremony](#) in Niger State, killing 12 people and abducting the bride and groom. In July, unidentified gunmen [killed 18 people](#) at a Christian wedding party in Kaduna State and injured 30 others.

In May, reported Islamist extremists attacked a community as people were preparing to break their Ramadan fast, killing [at least 20 people](#). That same month, reported jihadist elements [attacked](#) the city of Maiduguri as locals were preparing celebrations of the Islamic festival Eid al-Adha, killing four people and wounding three others. In October, unidentified criminals [burned down two mosques](#) in Enugu in the south of the country.

Militant Islamist Extremism

Militant Islamist groups in northern Nigeria continue to hold territory and commit severe attacks and human rights abuses in northeast Nigeria and the broader Lake Chad Basin region. Moreover, these groups have [expanded their territory west](#), with ISWAP now conducting activities in Sokoto State and Boko Haram operating in Kaduna State.

ISWAP fighters abducted and [executed Ropvil Daciya Dalep](#), a Christian university student, in January; abducted a [Christian pastor](#) and two women in Borno State in October; and [executed five aid workers](#) as a warning to "all those being used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity." Boko Haram fighters abducted

Reverend Lawan Andimi, local CAN chairman in Adamawa State, and later beheaded him, reportedly because [he would not renounce his faith](#). In December, after threatening attacks against Christians during the Christmas season, Boko Haram fighters conducted three attacks against Christian communities in northern Nigeria, [killing at least 12 people](#) and abducting an Evangelical pastor. Additionally, in January, jihadist group Ansaru [reemerged](#) in Niger State for the first time since 2013, claiming responsibility for an [attack on "apostates"](#) in August.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In 2020, state authorities violated several Nigerian individuals' rights to freedom of religion or belief, including by escalating enforcement of blasphemy laws in comparison to previous years. In August, a Shari'a court in Kano State convicted [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) of blasphemy for insulting the Prophet Muhammad in a private WhatsApp message and sentenced him to death—a higher court later [invalidated the conviction](#) and demanded a retrial. Kano authorities also found 16-year-old [Omar Farouk](#) guilty of blasphemy and detained him throughout the year, although his conviction was overturned in early 2021 and he was released.

Police also [arrested](#) prominent atheist activist [Mubarak Bala](#) in April 2020 after a coalition of lawyers in Kano State filed a petition accusing him of insulting the Prophet Muhammad in Facebook posts. For more than eight months, Kano State police detained Bala without charges, limiting his access to his legal team and refusing to provide proof of his whereabouts and wellbeing to his family. In December, after many months of delay, a federal court ruled Bala's detention unconstitutional and ordered his release—however, as of the end of 2020, Bala remained in Kano State police custody despite this order.

Key U.S. Policy

In December 2019, the U.S. Department of State included Nigeria for the first time on its Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to IRFA. A year later, on December 2, 2020, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Nigeria as a CPC for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations under IRFA, an action USCIRF had recommended every year since 2009. However, at the same time it made the CPC designation, the State Department issued a waiver on any related sanctions as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to Section 407 of IRFA.

U.S. funding to Nigeria continued to prioritize humanitarian assistance and economic development. In November, the United States and Nigeria [cohosted](#) a meeting of the coalition against the Islamic State and affirmed their commitment to defeating Boko Haram and ISWAP. U.S. diplomatic efforts in Nigeria included peaceful conflict resolution programming in regions experiencing high levels of violence as well as monitoring cases of religious prisoners of conscience.

In November, following Nigerian authorities' violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators protesting police abuse, the Congressional Black Caucus sent a [letter](#) to President Muhammadu Buhari condemning state-sanctioned violence against peaceful nonviolent protesters in Nigeria and calling for dialogue. Texas Representatives Al Green and Joaquin Castro introduced a [resolution](#) supporting the protesters to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Individual Views of Commissioner Gary L. Bauer

Nigeria is quickly becoming a “killing field” for that nation’s Christians. The hour is late. Nigeria’s government seems unable or unwilling to stop the growing carnage. In large swaths of the country, Christian parents fear for their children every day when they go to school. Those children are targeted by savage Islamists who kidnap and force them to renounce Christ or face death. Every time a Nigerian Christian family worships at a church, they are painfully aware it may be the last thing they do on this earth. The churches are ripe targets for Boko Haram and other jihadists. Christians have been blown up or “mowed” down in their places of worship.

All too often this violence is attributed to mere “bandits” or explained away as hostility between farmers and herdsmen. While there is some truth in these assertions, they ignore the main truth: radical Islamists are committing violence inspired by what they believe is a religious imperative to “cleanse” Nigeria of its Christians. They must be stopped.

The failure of many in the international human rights community and the Western media to accurately describe what is really happening in Nigeria is inexcusable. More Christians have been killed for their faith in Nigeria in the last year than in the entire Middle East. Unless we find our voice, what is happening in Nigeria will move relentlessly toward a Christian genocide.

We are pleased that in December of 2020, the U.S. Department of State finally included Nigeria as a country engaged in egregious violations of religious freedom. Much more must be done.

Individual Views of Commissioner James W. Carr

Nigeria was considered by many to have a strong commitment to religious freedom. In the past decade or so, however, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria have significantly worsened. While all religious communities and people of no belief face dangerous conditions, the situation for Christians is extremely perilous. We now regularly read of kidnappings, rapes, and murders that are being committed against the Christian community. Sadly, as we look around the world, many now believe that religious freedom violations in Nigeria may be among the worst in the world, if not the worst. As a Commission member, I am concerned about the country’s inability, or reluctance, to protect the Christian community. I for one believe that Nigeria is better than this and that the Nigerian people and their leaders must step up and recommit themselves to the protection of ALL Nigerians to believe and worship freely as they choose. These atrocities being committed against Christian families must stop.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

The persistent facts-be-damned approach to the conflict(s) in Africa’s most populated country has resulted in more loss of life, year in and year out. It is simply incomprehensible to me that proud and beautiful Nigeria remains in its present condition. How long will this continue? The world must do more. The United States must recognize and correct its policy failures. Unfortunately, the perilous situation is now spreading more and more to other countries. Will it take a caliphate in West Africa to awaken the international community? The status quo is unsustainable. This is a tinderbox.

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in North Korea—officially known as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—remained among the worst in the world. North Korea’s ruling ideology, known as *Juche*, deifies North Korean leaders and justifies their rule. It forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. Rooted in *Juche*, the [Ten Principles](#) for Establishing a Korean Workers’ Party Transcendental Guidance System require unconditional loyalty and obedience to the North Korean leader. They also effectively override the rights and freedoms enshrined in international and North Korean law, including the North Korean [constitution](#), which nominally grants freedom of religion. Internal Party legal commentaries, published in 2018, which constitute authoritative guidance for interpreting North Korean constitutional and criminal law within the framework of the Ten Principles and *Juche*, contain explicit antireligion language.

The North Korean government attempts to provide an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world through state-backed religious organizations and sites such as the Korean Christian Federation, Korean Buddhist Federation, Changchung Cathedral, and Kwangbop Temple. In practice, authorities target and persecute various religious groups and adherents, including Protestants, Buddhists, adherents of shamanism or traditional Korean folk religion, Chondoists, and others. The [songbun system](#) classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the “hostile” class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving “discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.”

According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Korean Future Initiative’s (KFI) 2020 [report](#) on religious freedom violations in North Korea, authorities persecuted religious believers on a variety of charges, including religious practice, religious activities in China, possessing religious items such as Bibles, contact with religious persons, attending religious services, and sharing religious beliefs. Religious adherents suffered a range of official violations

and mistreatments, including arbitrary surveillance, interrogation, arrest, detention, and imprisonment; punishment of family members; torture; sexual violence; forced labor; and execution. The report also provides details on North Korean government agencies that have been directly involved in carrying out egregious persecution of religious believers, including the Ministry of State Security (MSS), which operates internment camps, holding centers, political prison camps, and pretrial detention centers; the Ministry of People’s Security (MPS), which operates labor camps, holding centers, pretrial detention centers, long-term reeducation camps, and precinct offices; and the Border Security Command, which plays “a significant role in religious freedom violations alongside the MSS and MPS.”

Consistent with past USCIRF reporting, KFI findings indicate that Protestant Christians are especially vulnerable to persecution, followed by adherents of shamanism. The NGO Open Doors has long [ranked](#) North Korea as the country where Christians face the “most extreme” persecution, most recently in January 2021. Open Doors estimates that of around 400,000 Christians in North Korea, approximately 50,000 to 70,000 are currently imprisoned. Most North Korean Christians are unable to meet for collective worship due to severe repression, and they suffer from harsh abuses such as long-term imprisonment in various prisons or prison-like facilities, severe beatings that result in broken bones and ruptured skin, strangulation, starvation, sexual violence, forced abortion, and execution. The MSS is believed to be principally responsible for persecution against Christians.

The practice of shamanism is pervasive in North Korean society, but its practitioners face severe persecution. As North Korean authorities define shamanism as a “crime of superstition,” practitioners have been subjected to detention, arrest, physical assault, and execution. The MPS is believed to be primarily responsible for abuses against adherents of shamanism. Information on the condition of adherents of other major religious traditions—such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism—in North Korea remains very 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 religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Fill and maintain the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues as a fulltime, independent position at the U.S. Department of State, and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Urge the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country; and
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in U.S. policy toward North Korea, including considering the lifting of certain sanctions in return for concrete progress in religious freedom and related human rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Work with the administration to clarify the conditions under which Congress would approve the partial or complete lifting of certain sanctions under the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 in return for significant progress on denuclearization and commitments to improve religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Can Human Rights Advocacy Resolve the North Korea Nuclear Impasse?](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [There Shall Be No God But Kim Jong Un](#) (in *The National Interest*)

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. North Koreans traditionally followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way). The country had a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War (1950–1953), with Pyongyang known as the “Jerusalem of the East,” but successive crackdowns have shrunk the Christian population to an estimated [2 percent](#) of the total population. Many North Koreans learn about the religion when they flee to South Korea via China. Although technically illegal, shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are widespread.

Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. In recent years, however, the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea has decreased. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a further decrease in 2020. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, about 230 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea during the year—the lowest number in 20 years and significantly less than the 2019 figure of 1,047.

The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and repatriates them if discovered, without regard to their risk of persecution on return. This practice stands in direct violation of China’s obligations under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In addition, since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, many of whom played an instrumental role in helping North Korean refugees escape.

In December 2020, South Korea’s National Assembly passed a controversial [law](#) criminalizing activities that send anti-North Korea materials—including religious ones such as leaflets, Bibles, and cultural items—into North Korea by balloons. Many activists who send these materials across the border are North Korean defectors and Christian missionaries. The law has drawn criticism from [human rights organizations](#) and [U.S. politicians](#), who have expressed concerns over the law’s impact on freedoms of expression and religion.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Given the country’s [closed](#) and isolated nature, information about specific religious and political prisoners of conscience is difficult to obtain. NGOs and rescue groups that work on North Korean human rights and refugee issues often conceal identities of North Korean individuals in order to protect them and their families from government persecution and retaliation. USCIRF continues to [advocate](#) for the release of Deacon Jang Moon Seok—also known by his Chinese name, [Zhang Wen Shi](#)—whom USCIRF adopted as a religious prisoner of conscience (RPOC). Zhang is a Chinese citizen of Korean

descent. Prior to his abduction from China by North Korean agents in November 2014, Zhang provided assistance to—and shared his Christian faith with—North Koreans in China. North Korean authorities sentenced Zhang to 15 years in prison.

United Nations Activity

In June 2020, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “in the strongest terms the long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses” committed by North Korea. The resolution expressed particular concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals and groups on religious and other grounds; “denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to adopt a religion or belief”; and discrimination based on the *songbun* system, which includes consideration of religion. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief. As a member of the UNHRC, South Korea [supported](#) the passage of the resolution but did not cosponsor the draft resolution.

On December 16, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) condemning the “grave human rights situation” and “the lack of accountability for human rights violations” in North Korea. The General Assembly expressed specific concerns over North Korea’s imposition of the death penalty and execution of individuals on account of religion or belief; the pervasive and severe restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief; and the government’s discrimination against people based on the *songbun* system that includes consideration of religion. South Korea did not [cosponsor](#) this resolution.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, relations between the United States and North Korea deteriorated due to a lack of progress on security-related negotiations. The three historic summits that were held between then President Donald J. Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and 2019 did not lead to substantive progress toward full denuclearization. Neither human rights more broadly nor religious freedom specifically were included as an integral part of those bilateral negotiations.

In December, seven of the 15 members of the UN Security Council—the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, the Dominican Republic, and Estonia—[requested](#) a public briefing on human rights abuses in North Korea. After China and Russia [objected](#) to the request, the seven countries brought up the issue at a closed-door meeting on December 11, expressing concerns that North Korea’s “human rights violations pose an imminent threat to international peace and security.” Also in December, the State Department [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to worsen. The government systematically enforced blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and failed to protect religious minorities from abuses by nonstate actors. There was a sharp rise in targeted killings, blasphemy cases, forced conversions, and hate speech targeting religious minorities including Ahmadis, Shi'a Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs.

Pakistan's treatment of religious minorities is best assessed through the prism of its treatment of the Ahmadiyya community, who continued to face severe official and societal persecution for their beliefs and self-identification as Muslims. The year saw a surge in [targeted killings](#) of Ahmadis. Between July and November, five Ahmadis were murdered, including 57-year-old Tahir Naseem, an American citizen [accused](#) of blasphemy who was [shot](#) in a [courtroom](#) in July.

In May, the government formed the National Minorities Commission (NMC) required by a 2014 Supreme Court decision, however Ahmadis were excluded. During debates surrounding their possible inclusion, Noor-ul-Haq Qadri, Pakistan's Minister for Religious and Inter-faith Harmony Affairs, publicly [stated](#), "Whoever shows sympathy or compassion towards [Ahmadis] is neither loyal to Islam nor the state of Pakistan." The government did not address statements made by Qadri or other officials who incited hatred and intolerance towards Ahmadis and other religious minorities.

Pakistan's religiously discriminatory legislation, such as the [blasphemy](#) and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, used in combination with new media rules, contributed to egregious human rights abuses and fostered an overall atmosphere of intolerance for religious minorities

that often leads to violence and discrimination. In August alone, over 40 blasphemy First Incident Reports (FIRs) were registered, mostly [targeting](#) the Shi'a minority during the month of Muharram.

Other religious communities were also targeted with blasphemy charges. In 2020, there reportedly were 30 Christians, including seven on death row, [jailed in Pakistan](#) on charges of blasphemy. They include Asif Pervaiz, a 37-year-old Christian garment factory worker whom a Lahore court [sentenced to death](#) in September.

The issue of [abduction](#), [forced conversion](#) to Islam, rape, and forced marriage [remained](#) an imminent threat for religious minority women and [children](#), particularly from the Hindu and Christian faiths. During 2020, USCIRF documented incidents of forced marriages, more than half involving minors. The government did little to ensure minor girls' safety and return to their families. Authorities often do not take any action, and in abduction cases that are brought to the courts, officials have claimed that victims [willingly converted](#) to Islam. The head of the Parliamentary Committee on Forced Religious Conversions, Senator Anwarul Haq Kakar, claimed that most cases of forced conversion "have some degree of willingness on the part of the girl." Pakistani courts systematically failed to protect and provide justice to victims, who are often [forced to testify](#) that they [converted voluntarily](#) to protect themselves and their families from further harm. In April, Myra Shahbaz, a 14-year-old Christian schoolgirl, was abducted at gunpoint. Despite Myra telling police she was drugged, raped, and forced to sign papers her abductor later used to allege that she was 19 and had voluntarily married and converted, the court ordered that she be returned to her abductor.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
 - Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
 - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
 - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
 - Address extremist rhetoric often preceding attacks on minorities, while protecting freedom of expression;
 - Hold accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversions, and other hate crimes;
 - Reform public educational textbooks, curriculum, and teacher training materials to ensure content is inclusive of and not discriminatory toward religious minorities; and
 - Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan, including [Junaid Hafeez](#), [Ramzan Bibi](#), [Shafqat Emmanuel](#), and [Shagufta Kausar](#).

Background

Pakistan's [population](#) is 96.28 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.22 percent Ahmadi), with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.59 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956 with special status for Islam (for example, only Muslims can serve as president and prime minister). Its constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices and religious education. The constitution also reserves for religious minorities 10 seats in the National Assembly, four seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. However, the second amendment, added in 1974, declares Ahmadis non-Muslims, excluding them from representation.

Blasphemy Law

Sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's [Penal Code](#) criminalize acts and speech insulting religion or defiling the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, places of worship, or religious symbols. These vague provisions are frequently abused to levy false accusations against Ahmadis, Shi'a Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and others who do not adhere to the majority Sunni interpretation of Islam. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. Although some individuals have received death sentences, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. A recent USCIRF [report](#) found that implementation of these blasphemy laws made Pakistan the world's worst offender of blasphemy-related prosecutions and societal violence between 2014 and 2018.

In 2020, some individuals charged with blasphemy were acquitted: Sawin Masih, a Christian, was sentenced to death in 2014 and [acquitted](#) by the Lahore High Court in October 2020. Ramesh Kumar Malhi, a Hindu veterinary surgeon accused in May 2019 of delivering medicine for animals wrapped in paper with Qur'anic text, was [acquitted](#) by a trial court in March 2020. Malhi's practice was burned down after blasphemy allegations emerged; he remains in hiding due to continued death threats.

The Punjab Assembly passed the Protection of Foundation of Islam Bill in July, giving the Inter-Services Public Relations, the media and public relations wing of the Pakistan Armed Forces, powers to censor and monitor any literature considered anti-Islamic.

Growing Intolerance and Hate Speech

Influential Sunni Islamist extremists and groups actively promoted hate speech and incitement to violence against religious minorities via digital platforms and public sermons. Such extremist groups [blamed Shi'a Muslims](#) for bringing coronavirus to Pakistan, calling it the "[Shi'a virus](#)," egged on by government and media claims that the virus came from pilgrims returning from Iran. The government's failure to address hate speech and promote religious harmony contributed to mob violence. In September, after Sunni extremists [led anti-Shi'a protests](#) in

Karachi, a [mob attempted to lynch](#) a Shi'a student at Kohat Technical University while another [targeted an elderly man](#) in Charsadda.

Attacks on Houses of Worship

Pakistan's [Hindu](#) and Sikh communities also faced [discrimination](#) and desecration of their religious sites. In 2020, five Hindu and Sikh temples were vandalized by extremist mobs. In July, the government also [halted](#) construction of Islamabad's Hindu temple due to pressure from hardline Islamic clerics and politicians who argued that allocation of state money defied the country's Islamic identity. The government did not openly push back on radical Islamist narratives that leave little or no room for religious tolerance and freedom of belief.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

In addition to the constitution's second amendment declaring Ahmadis non-Muslim, Articles 298(b) and 298(c) of the Pakistan Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis, who consider themselves Muslim, from self-identifying as such. They are forced to sign a declaration swearing they are non-Muslim to obtain basic civil rights, such as the right to vote. It is a crime punishable by fine, imprisonment, or death for Ahmadis to profess their faith. They are prohibited from citing the Qur'an or Hadith; displaying Qur'anic text; sharing their faith; printing or obtaining material related to their faith; or calling their places of worship "mosques."

Key U.S. Policy

Pakistan played a key role in the [U.S. Taliban Peace Agreement](#) that took place in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020. Then President Donald J. Trump continued to [emphasize](#) Pakistan's importance in the region for U.S. security interests, particularly with the Afghan peace process and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Then Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells [visited](#) Islamabad in January to discuss the growing bilateral relationship in light of Pakistan's cooperation in promoting peace in Afghanistan and regional stability. In 2020, Pakistan was estimated to receive a total of \$299 million in aid from the United States, significantly lower than the \$766 million in 2019.

In April, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [called](#) for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan amid the coronavirus pandemic. In June, he [raised](#) concern regarding anti-Shi'a sentiments. Following the murder of Tahir Naseem in July, the U.S. Department of State [called on Pakistan](#) to reform its blasphemy law and court system. In August, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued a [statement](#) for Pakistan Independence Day, noting that the United States was looking forward to working with Pakistan to expand fundamental freedoms. On December 2, the State Department [redesignated](#) Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Pursuing an IRFA Binding Agreement](#)
- **Hearing:** [Blasphemy Laws and the Violation of International Religious Freedom](#)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges. Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2020, the state brought 188 criminal cases against [Jehovah’s Witnesses](#), who were banned as an extremist group in 2017. Since that time, there have been 1,274 raids and searches of members’ homes, with 477 occurring in 2020. Raids and interrogations included instances of [torture](#) that continue to go uninvestigated and unpunished. During the year, 72 Jehovah’s Witnesses—including at least six from Russian-occupied Crimea—were detained under pretrial detention, house arrest, or incarceration. In 2020, the government also used its anti-extremism law to persecute religious minorities, particularly Muslims.

A 2020 [USCIRF report on blasphemy laws](#) determined Russia to have the world’s third-highest number of criminal blasphemy cases, behind Pakistan and Iran. It also found that Russia led the world in criminal blasphemy enforcement cases related to social media and had the highest incidence of such cases among countries without an official state religion between 2014 and 2018. Such cases [continued](#) in 2020, as did cases of enforcement of the religion [law](#), which also sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede and monitor religious groups’ activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits “missionary activities,” including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites.

In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, arresting or [kidnapping](#) persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy as well as for secular political opposition. Chechen

leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views, including against women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Chechens routinely appear in humiliating televised confessions in which they must publicly apologize for a variety of offenses, including [witchcraft](#), [insulting Islam](#), and criticizing Kadyrov, in a ritual reminiscent of customary political and religious practice in the region. One young critic of the leader was kidnapped and forced to [confess](#) on video before sitting naked on a glass bottle. Chechen Minister of Information and Press [Akhmed Dudaev](#) advocates such policies, recently accusing two LGBTI bloggers arrested in April for insulting religion of aiding Islamist militants. Police across the North Caucasus have broadly targeted and harassed attendees at regional mosques, demanding their personal information and subjecting them to questioning. One mosque in Dagestan has been [targeted](#) so regularly that government [raids](#) are referred to as part of Friday services. Rather than effectively combatting violent extremism, these practices create resentment and lead some individuals to seek information about Islam from disreputable online sources.

In [Russian-occupied Crimea](#), the occupation authorities continued to enforce Russia’s repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law. At least 16 Crimean Muslims were sentenced to prison on made-up charges of extremism and terrorism, primarily based on religious discussions that prosecutors linked to the now-banned group Hizb ut-Tahrir. In the spring, the Russian government began to transfer ownership of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) [Cathedral of St. Vladimir and Olga](#) to the state; it is the most important property of the UOC in Crimea and its congregation has already been evicted.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including Chechen Minister of Information and Press Akhmed Dudaev and Abinsk district court judge Aleksandr

Kholoshin, 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

- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Russia to end religious freedom abuses, release religious prisoners of conscience, and permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass the [Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act](#) (H.R. 496), which calls on the U.S. administration to consider Russia’s religious freedom violations in Crimea and Donbas when determining CPC designations; and
- Hold briefings and hearings highlighting the Russian government’s failure to bring its religion and extremism laws in line with international human rights standards.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union](#)

Background

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a threat to social and political stability and to its own control, yet it simultaneously cultivates relationships with what it deems “traditional” religions. The population is religiously diverse: around 68 percent identify as Russian Orthodox Christian; 7 percent identify as Muslim; and 25 percent comprise an array of communities, including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha’is, and indigenous religions.

The government enforces laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1996 religion law; a 2002 law on combating extremism; and more recent laws on blasphemy, “stirring up religious hatred,” and “missionary activity.” These vague laws give authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity or to ban any religious literature they deem harmful. The [anti-extremism law](#), for example, lacks a clear definition of extremism and includes no prerequisite for the use or advocacy of violence. The law is a powerful way to intimidate religious communities as it allows for the prosecution of virtually any speech; suspects can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and they can face criminal prosecutions.

Muslims

In February, seven members of the Muslim missionary organization [Tablighi Jamaat](#) were arrested, and in September at least seven previously arrested members were sentenced to prison for organizing a “[conspiratorial extremist cell](#).” Readers of the moderate Sunni Muslim theologian [Said Nursi](#) were also prosecuted for extremism, including a 62-year-old woman. Evgeny Kim, a convicted Nursi reader [stripped of his citizenship](#) after serving out his sentence, remained in a detention facility for stateless persons at year’s end. In August, the city of Saratov [blocked](#) efforts to reconstruct a historic mosque after local citizens objected. In the Russian republic of Mordovia, police [raided](#) at least two mosques with no explanation beyond the need for “[prophylactic measures](#)” against extremism prior to New Year’s celebrations. The mufti of one of the mosques had previously been fined for distributing literature linked to Tablighi Jamaat. In December, the city of Rostov gifted a [historic mosque](#) building to a jazz school despite objections from local Muslims. Roughly 300 people are serving harsh prison sentences of 10–20 years for their alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir, including 19 men charged with [terrorism](#) in October despite a lack of evidence that they supported violence and amid allegations of torture during their interrogation.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Religious Minorities

At the end of the year, 45 Jehovah’s Witnesses were in prison and 26 under house arrest; between late October and mid-December, 86 [house searches](#) led to investigations against at least 26 members. Jehovah’s Witness prisoner Dennis Christensen was [granted parole](#)

in June, but a state prosecutor immediately challenged the decision. Even though Christensen has been eligible for early release for a year due to time served in pretrial detention, he was instead [placed](#) in a poorly ventilated cell for allegedly violating prison rules. He has already contracted pneumonia once while in prison, and his pulmonary health remains a serious concern amid the continuing threat of COVID-19.

Protestant Christians are frequently fined for “[illegal missionary activity](#)” and have been [accused](#) on state television of spreading COVID-19. There were numerous incidents of vandalism against religious minorities throughout the year, including the burning of a [synagogue](#) in Arkhangelsk, the placing of an Orthodox Christian icon in a [sacred grove](#) of the indigenous Mari religion, and the burning of a site sacred to the indigenous [Khakas](#) religion. Desecration of indigenous religious sites has increased in recent years, leading to the establishment of a [monitoring group](#) in 2020. Although Russia has many indigenous religions, they are not given the privileged status of “traditional religions” like Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism. In June, a Yakut [shaman](#) who vowed to exorcise Russian President Vladimir Putin was forcibly confined to a psychiatric facility.

Proposed Legislation

In December, the Russian Duma considered new [legislation](#) that would dramatically expand the state’s ability to restrict religious practice, including requiring all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia and prohibiting anyone on the government’s expansive [extremism and terrorism list](#) from participating in or leading religious groups. At the end of 2020, that list included many individuals who had not been convicted of a crime, since “evidence” of involvement was the only apparent prerequisite. Individuals may remain on the list even after serving out sentences, with their finances frozen or restricted. Although the law was not yet enacted, officials in one region began [demanding information](#) about clergy from local religious groups.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russia relations remain at a low point amid tensions over Russian military involvement in Syria, the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory, and allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections. The U.S. government has implemented numerous sanctions over the occupation of Crimea, [most recently](#) in January 2020. In December, the U.S. Department of State again placed Russia on its [Special Watch List](#) for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to IRFA. The same month, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced new sanctions against [Kadyrov](#) and associated individuals and entities, citing his many human rights violations against the LGBTI community and others in Chechnya. In January 2021, the State Department announced sanctions against individuals and entities associated with Andrii Derkach, a Ukrainian citizen with close links to Russian intelligence services, who is accused of running a Russian [disinformation campaign](#) to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor despite some ongoing improvements. Saudi Arabia's official religion is Islam. The construction of non-Muslim houses of worship and public non-Muslim prayer is forbidden. Non-Muslims are not permitted to construct houses of worship and are confined to worshipping in private settings. However, Saudi Arabia in 2020 [made public overtures](#) to the global Jewish community. A review of the current year of Saudi textbooks also found [significant improvements](#), including more religiously tolerant language and the removal of intolerant passages, while also noting that "problematic examples still remained."

According to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, the constitution is the Qur'an and the sunna (traditions of the Prophet). The judicial system is largely governed by a Saudi interpretation of Shari'a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence, which imposes capital punishment for apostasy; openly declaring one's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) identity; and peaceful religious or political dissent. Throughout 2020, Saudi Arabia continued to detain and mistreat individuals who [dissented](#) from the government's interpretation of Islam, [including](#) USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Raif Badawi](#), his lawyer Waleed Abu al-Khair, and atheist poet [Ashraf Fayadh](#). Saudi Arabia also targeted dissidents online, [arresting](#) three people in March for insulting God on social media and [threatening](#) to prosecute [Ayasel Slay](#), who posted a rap video entitled "Daughter of Mecca" on YouTube in February. In July, Saudi Arabian officials arrested Mohammed al-Bokari for posting a Twitter video [calling](#) for LGBTI people to have equal

rights. Prison officials [sexually assaulted](#) al-Bokari and held him in solitary confinement.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Saudi government [imposed a lockdown](#) on the majority-Shi'a province of Qatif. It also failed to respond to incitement on television comparing COVID-19-positive Shi'a Muslims to "ISIS suicide bombers." Despite the government's [promise](#) to review death sentences against minors, several Shi'a prisoners convicted as children received either [no change](#) to their sentence or were sentenced to several [years in prison](#). Four members of the Bohra Shi'a community also remained in prison on multiyear sentences following unsubstantiated charges of money laundering and violating charity collection regulations.

Saudi Arabia maintained key provisions of the religiously grounded [guardianship system](#) in 2020 that violate the religious freedom of Saudi women. It continues to persecute activists who peacefully protest this system. Following [mistreatment](#) in prison, including sexual assault and credible allegations of torture, Loujain al-Hathloul was sentenced alongside Mayaa al-Zahrani to [nearly six years in prison](#), though a portion of the sentences were suspended. Guardianship denies women the rights of legal adulthood and allows abusive male guardians to procure Saudi state resources to force a female ward to return home. This power extends over women who have fled internationally or who are escaping domestic violence. It also denies women, including [U.S. citizens](#), custody and visitation rights with their children regardless of the competence of a male legal guardian.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation; and
- Impose targeted sanctions on Saudi government agencies and officials responsible

for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to amplify congressional concerns over prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia, including

Raif Badawi and his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and work with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for their release; and

- Reintroduce and pass the bipartisan [Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act](#), which requires the U.S. Department of State to report annually on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks and efforts to remove this content.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia in 2020](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Guardianship, Women, and Religious Freedom in Saudi Arabia](#)

Background

Saudi Arabia is home to over [34 million Saudis](#), 85–90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims and 10–15 percent of whom are Shi'a Muslims. The United Nations (UN) estimates that 37 percent of the population are expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Non-Muslim or atheist citizens often hide their identity to avoid harsh social and official consequences. The ruling monarch, King Salman bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has systematically cracked down on both religious and political dissent despite overseeing economic reforms associated with Saudi Vision 2030.

Positive Developments

In January, Muslim World League Chair Mohammed Al Isa [visited](#) the Auschwitz concentration camp, leading one of the most senior delegations of Muslim officials to visit the site. In February, a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations [visited](#) Saudi Arabia to meet with Al Isa, the first visit by an American Jewish organization since 1993. That same month, an interfaith delegation including Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu leaders as well as an Israeli rabbi [met with](#) King Salman. In 2020, Saudi Arabia also [relaxed restrictions](#) on the sale of Christmas trees and [Christmas decorations](#) in the capital, Riyadh.

In April, the government [announced](#) its intent to abolish flogging, a punishment often used against religious prisoners of conscience. In August, the Saudi Human Rights Commission announced the Kingdom would [review](#) the death sentences of Shi'a prisoners who were minors when charged. While Saudi Arabia converted [three such sentences](#) to 10 years in prison by February 2021, eight such prisoners still remained at risk of receiving a death sentence.

Mistreatment of Religious Minorities

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia continued to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and they lack access to senior positions in the government and military. The building of Shi'a mosques continued to be restricted outside majority-Shi'a Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and authorities often prohibited the use of the Shi'a Muslim call to prayer in these areas. In March 2020, the government [locked down](#) the majority-Shi'a Qatif Province, preventing entry and exit. No other province was subject to these restrictions.

Eight Bohra Shi'a in Riyadh were arrested in 2017 and 2018 after collecting funds for the community to participate in the hajj pilgrimage. Two were released in early 2020, but one was rearrested in the summer and the other cannot access his passport. Two of the Bohra Shi'a men in prison suffer health conditions that put them at elevated risk for COVID-19.

Religious Incitement in Textbooks

For more than 15 years, USCIRF has [documented](#) the government's failure to address intolerant content in official textbooks sufficiently. A December 2020 [nongovernmental organization report](#) found that while "extremism persists" in Saudi textbooks, "many problematic examples" of religious intolerance "had been removed" from the most current versions. These [include](#) passages urging the death

penalty for gay men. However, textbooks still teach that "infidels will be punished on Resurrection Day," warn against "polytheists" (a reference to Shi'a Muslims), and include a story describing "Jewish wrongdoers" as "monkeys."

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Dissident Sheikh Salman al-Ouda remained in prison in 2020 despite a January [letter](#) from three UN Special Rapporteurs noting that his detention may violate international laws concerning freedom of religion and belief. Al-Ouda has been [denied](#) family visits and was [not allowed to call his family](#) for a period in early summer 2020. Following a [secret hearing](#) at the Specialized Criminal Court in November, al-Ouda's son reported that he [lost](#) half his hearing and eyesight.

USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Raif Badawi](#) and his lawyer [Waleed Abu al-Khair](#) faced worsening treatment in 2020. Al-Khair was hospitalized in January following a hunger strike to protest mistreatment. He remained on strike [until](#) February 2020. Raif Badawi was sentenced in 2013 on charges of "insulting Islam" and sentenced to 600 lashes and seven years in prison over the content of posts on his blog. In 2020, he was [hospitalized](#) following a hunger strike in protest of being put in solitary confinement and was not permitted to speak with his wife. In May, he was moved out of solitary confinement into a prison cell with [15 other inmates](#). In August, Badawi's wife reported that one of the inmates [tried to assassinate](#) him.

Saudi Arabia also continued to detain and mistreat Loujain al-Hathloul, who [peacefully protested](#) religious guardianship laws. Al-Hathloul's health [deteriorated](#) considerably during a hunger strike protesting prison mistreatment. In November, Saudi Arabia referred her case to the Specialized Criminal Court, which deals with terrorism and national security cases. In December, following a series of hearings, al-Hathloul was [sentenced](#) alongside Mayaa al-Zahrani to a backdated sentence of five years and three months and a five-year travel ban. Al-Hathloul was released in February 2021 but remains under a five-year travel ban.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, the Trump administration continued to coordinate with high-level Saudi officials while Congress pursued a more critical approach. On January 7, then President Donald J. Trump [met with](#) Vice Minister of Defense Khalid bin Salman. On February 12, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo met with Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan. Later that month, then Secretary of State Pompeo travelled to Saudi Arabia for meetings with [King Salman](#) and [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#).

On January 28, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) called for the Trump administration to [impose visa restrictions](#) on officials involved in the detention and abuse of Loujain al-Hathloul. In September, five senators [sponsored](#) a bill calling for the release of Saudi women dissidents, including those persecuted for peacefully advocating for freedom of religion or belief. In November, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) coordinated a [bipartisan letter](#) to the Saudi ambassador calling for their release. On December 2, the State Department [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman, continues to reform, outpacing expectations. This is a categorical fact. The work remains substantially incomplete, but the trajectory is undeniable—the reforms are ongoing and often remarkable.

Objectively—and obviously—Saudi Arabia is still a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, (without, for instance, a single public non-Islamic house of worship or pilgrimage site) but its progress must be measured against its past. I believe the international community should continue its positive reinforcement of the Crown Prince’s reform agenda. In fact, Saudi Arabia deserves much more credit for its reforms than it is receiving, rather than withering, politicized criticism.

This is also why I continue to support the U.S. Department of State’s decision to maintain its waiver for Saudi Arabia. In fact, Saudi Arabia should be rewarded for its progress and not face threats of coercive action from the United States. Punitive measures will not speed the effect of change in the Kingdom; rather, they would complicate and likely slow it. A continued, strong relationship with the United States—contra malign actors—will likely accelerate change. It is clear that real change is possible. The change must continue and it can accelerate.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, as in the prior year, religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country’s ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad brutally enforced its authority over populations under its control, including its efforts to solidify an iron grip on religious affairs. In beleaguered Idlib Province, radical Islamist al-Qaeda affiliate [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS)—which the U.S. Department of State designated as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in December—[continued to vie](#) with other local factions within and outside of its so-called [Syrian Salvation Government](#) for political and military dominance over civilian areas. Meanwhile, Turkish armed forces maintained control over territory inside northern Syria that they had captured in three invasions between 2016 and 2019, endangering religious minorities in areas that included the vicinity of Afrin as well as a swath of land extending roughly 75 miles from west of Tel Abyad to east of Ras al-Ayn.

In regime-controlled areas, the Syrian government continued to brutalize communities and individuals that it perceived as having participated in or supported political or armed opposition movements. In areas over which it retained or regained control, the government continued to solidify its hold on all aspects of political, economic, and religious life. President Assad, for example, persisted in [framing](#) his rule in Islamic terms—alongside his standard Ba’athist-Arab Nationalist approach—and he has progressively shifted religious authority away from the traditional, marginally independent cadre of Sunni Muslim scholars (ulama’) in favor of the regime-controlled

[Ministry of Endowments](#). Despite the government’s [indifference](#) toward houses of worship and other sites of importance to religious minorities throughout a decade of conflict, it continued to [present itself](#) as the sole defender of these communities—implicitly in exchange for their quiescence and support. Indeed, the regime largely left alone members of such minorities in regime-controlled territories if they had no specific record of opposition participation, essentially implementing the self-fulfilling prophecy it has long spun. Even so, it showed no change in its rigid [rhetoric](#) and control over such communities. For example, the Ministry of Justice [reaffirmed](#) in December—although not publicly announced until February 2021—its de facto classification of Yazidism as an Islamic “sect” rather than a separate religion, thereby subjecting Yazidis to Islamic law and denying the community the right to self-identify as a distinct religion.

Meanwhile, as in prior years—and in stark contrast to other parts of Syria and most of the wider region—north and east Syria remained a uniquely promising area in terms of positive religious freedom conditions. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) fostered these conditions through its political foundation in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and military support from the U.S.-allied [Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (SDF). It continued to allow Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and others to practice openly, express, and even change their religious identities—while facing significant peril due to threats from Turkey, Turkish-allied militias, regime forces, and remnants of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a CPC and redesignate HTS as an EPC for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of militias within the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) 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;
- Exert pressure on and engage with Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from all territory that it occupies as a result of cross-border operations into north and east Syria, and in the interim demand that it order armed factions under its control or influence to cease all activities negatively impacting religious and ethnic minorities in that area;
- Recognize the AANES as a legitimate, local government, and accordingly expand U.S. engagement with its institutions, lift sanctions from all areas it governs, and demand its inclusion in all activities pursuant to United Nations (UN) Resolution 2254, including Geneva-based talks to resolve the Syrian conflict “as the basis for a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition”; and
- Contribute to efforts in AANES-governed territory to fund and develop local programs to promote religious tolerance and pluralism; strengthen school curriculum to meet the needs of local families, including addressing the unique concerns of religious and ethnic minorities; and advance religious freedom and related rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Safeguarding Religious Freedom in Northeast Syria](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S. Leaders Must Stand against Turkey’s Atrocities in Northern Syria](#) (in *Newsweek*)

Background

[Estimates](#) place Syria's population at just over 20 million, but the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees recorded 6.6 million Syrians as refugees and another 6.7 million as internally displaced persons (IDPs) [by the end of 2020](#). That population is religiously diverse: Sunni Muslims account for 74 percent; Alawite, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslims comprise 13 percent; Assyrians, Maronites, Armenians, and other Christians comprise 10 percent; Druze account for 3 percent; and a small number of Syrian Jews remain in Damascus and Aleppo. However, it is difficult to confirm these figures amid the country's 10-year conflict, given the [staggering number](#) of displaced persons. A disproportionately high number of religious minority communities have fled during the decade of violence; some estimates [suggest](#) that as many as 677,000 Christians have left the country, diminishing from around 10 percent to 3.6 percent of the population.

While Syria is a Sunni Muslim-majority country, the Alawite religious minority has dominated its political and military classes since Hafez al-Assad, current president Bashar al-Assad's father, seized power in 1970. Over the subsequent four decades, the two Assad regimes retained a stranglehold on power through a complicated framework of Ba'athist ideology, repressive coercion, enticement of economic elites, and the cultivation of a [perception](#) of protection for other religious minorities. However, that fragile framework collapsed following a popular uprising in March 2011, which, after a brutal government response, devolved into armed conflict—first domestic, but encompassing a range of regional and global actors by mid-2015. The conflict has since been marked by the government's utter disregard for civilian casualties, including targeting of hospitals, [churches](#), and even [schools](#) in its effort to crush opposition.

Positive Conditions under the AANES

Not only has the AANES [declared](#) its systematic commitment to religious freedom, but it has also implemented that framework against the backdrop of serious external threats, complicated [tribal dynamics](#) that cross fraught ethnic and religious divides, and other potential barriers. Some practical religious freedom and political challenges persist under the AANES, stemming from the complicated relationship of its founding constituents with Kurdish nationalism and armed movements. These challenges include reports of underage conscription and ongoing—if [diminishing](#)—concerns from the Syriac Christian community regarding school curriculum, as well as persistent and pervasive fear among religious minorities of ISIS, the Assad regime, and Turkish-allied militias. Despite the AANES's sincere efforts to assure that religious and other freedoms extend to members of all ethnic and religious communities under its administration, the fragility of its circumstances throughout 2020 translated to a religiously and ethnically diverse population that was justifiably uncertain whether it would remain as such in the years to come.

Religious Freedom Violations under Turkish Occupation

The Turkish occupation of a wide swath of territory across northern Syria remained a serious threat in 2020—not only to the [vulnerable population](#) of that area, but also to the AANES itself. A significant part of that danger came from Turkey, as its government and military make no distinction between U.S.-designated terrorist group the [Kurdistan Workers' Party \(PKK\)](#) and the AANES—given the latter's origins in Syria's Kurdish-led opposition and waning ties between the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is part of the SDF. Turkey's incessant shelling of civilian areas in AANES/SDF areas across northern Syria, and the potential for expansion of its occupation, represented a [direct threat](#) to religious and ethnic minorities in those towns. However, its support for radical Islamist factions of the TFSA, also known as the Syrian National Army (SNA), was equally insidious and damaging, as they engaged in religious violence, abduction for ransom, and other atrocities. For example, Faylaq al-Sham—a TFSA faction operating in Turkish-occupied Afrin—[laid siege](#) to the town of Basufan and arrested a number of its inhabitants in December, including a Yazidi woman, [Ghazala Mannan Salmo](#), who reportedly faced severe torture in detention. This militia and others also defaced or [destroyed](#) a series of Yazidi [shrines](#) in the same area and across the occupation zone, potentially as many as 18 since 2018. Syriac, Armenian, and other Christian communities, too, faced parallel [threats](#); for example, in August, a TFSA-backed court in Afrin detained [Radwan Muhammad](#), a Kurdish convert to Christianity, and charged him with apostasy for his beliefs.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Syria in 2020 continued to confront the complicated and shifting dynamics that have confounded it since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the country's subsequent devolution into armed conflict. In late 2019, then President Donald J. Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeast Syria, in part precipitating Turkey's renewed invasion of parts of the area and prompting uncertainty regarding the sustainability of the U.S.-SDF partnership. It later became clear, however, that a limited [U.S. military presence](#) would remain in the area indefinitely, as was the case throughout 2020.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) remained a crucial conduit of help for beleaguered civilians in Syria; in September, then Acting Administrator John Barsa [announced](#) a new package of \$720 million in humanitarian assistance for Syria, bringing the total of U.S. aid since the start of the conflict to over \$12 billion. The Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019 also [came into effect](#) in June 2020, resulting in a series of [U.S. sanctions](#) on Syrian regime officials along with regime-affiliated entities and businesses suspected of enabling or committing atrocities on civilian populations.

Individual Views of Commissioners Gary L. Bauer, Anurima Bhargava, James W. Carr, Frederick A. Davie, Nadine Maenza, Gayle Manchin, Tony Perkins, and Nury Turkel

The recommendations to the U.S. government for Syria have strong bipartisan support among USCIRF's Commissioners.

Many independent organizations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and even the United Nations, have produced reports documenting the atrocities that the Turkish military and its Islamist militias are committing against Christians, Yazidis, and other religious and ethnic minorities in the areas Turkey has invaded and occupies in northeast Syria. Those atrocities include killings, kidnappings, rape, extortion, and forced conversion, among other crimes. By contrast, the areas governed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have produced remarkable religious freedom conditions allowing all to practice their faith freely, even Islamic converts to Christianity, otherwise unheard of in the region.

Our recommendations to give political recognition to AANES as a legitimate local government and to lift sanctions on just the area it governs would reward it as a government that supports religious freedom—in a way that is consistent with how USCIRF recommends sanctions for those that commit religious freedom violations. We are hopeful these actions would allow AANES to continue to be a refuge for Yazidis, Christians, and other religious and ethnic minorities.

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, the Tajikistani government's record on religious freedom showed little improvement. The regime of President Emomali Rahmon maintained its authoritarian policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and persecuting minority communities—especially actual and alleged Salafi Muslims, a term authorities apply broadly and indiscriminately. Authorities have banned Salafi Islam since 2009, calling it “extremist”; as a result, the mere performance of Islamic rituals in ways the authorities deem “foreign” or inconsistent with the government’s interpretation of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is subject to criminal prosecution. As detailed in USCIRF’s [recent issue update](#), Tajikistan has legitimate concerns about violent extremism, but its current policies only exacerbate the problem—such as its extremism law that fails to define the category clearly and often leads to arbitrary detention. Extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence, while trials under these charges lack due process and procedural safeguards. In January, the government [amended](#) legislation that expanded anti-extremism efforts and dramatically increased penalties for managing or funding the activities of unregistered religious organizations as well as for religious communities that establish relations with foreign groups. In a surprising move, the government [reduced](#) the penalty for inciting “religious hatred,” replacing prison sentences of up to five years with an administrative fine or 10 days imprisonment. However, prison overcrowding remains a critical issue, and prisons constitute a major vector of Islamist radicalization. Religious prisoners are singled out for harsh treatment by both authorities and fellow prisoners, while general conditions are inhumane and torture is endemic.

State repression of the country’s Muslim majority persisted as in prior years. Since 2017, authorities have closed more than 2,000 mosques, converting many into cafes, garment factories, and other public facilities. Remaining mosques are frequently outfitted with security cameras that allow government surveillance of attendance and the content of sermons. In January, the government ordered the conversion of a popular mosque in Khujand, the nation’s second-largest city, into a [movie theater](#) due to the region’s relative lack of cinemas. In February, the head of the Department of Women’s and Family Issues [publicly](#) linked hijabs with terrorism and vowed that the government would do everything in its power to “preserve the national culture” and “defend the people” from the threat posed by female religious clothing. The authorities continued to torment former members of the banned opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) under the guise of a struggle against religious extremism and terrorism, harassing and even imprisoning their [family members](#). In June, one alleged IRPT member was sentenced to 20 years in prison after his [illegal extradition](#) from Austria.

Many religious minorities hide their affiliations for fear of government scrutiny and social backlash, expressing concern over government [plans](#) to document individual religious affiliation in the October 2020 census. Social tolerance for religious minority communities continued to decline. For example, in January a Shi’a Muslim was imprisoned and allegedly [tortured](#) for sharing his faith, an act authorities characterized as spreading “extremist ideas.” Jehovah’s Witnesses have been illegal in Tajikistan since 2008; there are currently two members [imprisoned](#) for their faith, including a 70-year-old man who is serving a five-and-a-half-year sentence.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Condition U.S. assistance to the Tajikistani government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions or advance human rights, on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law and the improvement of conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism, as part of all U.S. security assistance to Tajikistan;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Tajikistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Press the Tajikistani government at the highest levels to identify and immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajikistani prisons.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Promoting Religious Freedom and Countering Violent Extremism in Tajikistan](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)

Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and ruled since 1992 by President Rahmon, who has concentrated power in his family's hands. President Rahmon was elected to another seven-year term in October 2020, allegedly winning almost 91 percent of the vote in elections widely [perceived](#) as fraudulent. The government is weak and highly corrupt, and it faces financial catastrophe in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. Tajikistan typically derives around 40 percent of its gross domestic product from labor remittances, primarily from Russia, but this dramatically declined as many laborers were forced to return home amid the pandemic. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly located in the mountainous east, account for roughly 4 percent. The remaining 10 percent includes Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Tajikistan's legal environment for freedom of religion or belief sharply declined after the adoption of several highly restrictive laws in 2009. In particular, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference in the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials. In 2011 and 2012, administrative and Penal Code amendments set new penalties, including large fines and prison terms, for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in "unapproved" religious meetings. A 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals. Since 2014, the state has paid imams' salaries and required them to wear state-manufactured religious garments, and the content of sermons is commonly dictated by the government.

Misuse of Extremism Laws

The Tajikistani government continued to use concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against participants in certain religious or political activities in 2020. As in past years, Tajikistan used this pretext to crack down on individuals in the religious, media, and civil society sectors. For example, it leads Central Asia in imprisoning journalists for alleged extremism, terrorist links, and inciting religious hatred. In March, the government officially banned the Prague-based news outlet [Akhbor](#), a website founded by a former employee of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to provide objective coverage largely unavailable inside Tajikistan, claiming that it was a "platform" for "extremists and terrorists." [Akhbor](#) was forced to [cease operations in November](#), citing official opposition and the threat it posed to journalists, experts, and participants. In April, a Tajikistani court [sentenced](#) the journalist Daler Sharipov to one year in prison for "inciting religious hatred," likely for his [coverage](#) of religious freedom conditions in the

country, including government anti-hijab campaigns. Government entities make all determinations about extremism through a closed and opaque process that favors the prosecution, and there is no provision for independent analysis.

Government Persecution of Muslims

In 2020, the government conducted [mass arrests](#) and interrogations of Islamic leaders, including prominent Sufi Muslim clerics and many who received religious education abroad. This trend likely represented an attempt by the government to suppress dissent and ensure compliance ahead of the parliamentary and presidential elections by intimidating religious leaders who do not follow officially sanctioned Hanafi practice. Furthermore, since January the government has detained at least 154 people it accuses of membership in the banned Muslim Brotherhood; in June, a [Muslim cleric](#) and three of his brothers received suspended prison terms for alleged membership in the group, while 10 other defendants—including the cleric's son, son-in-law, and nephews—were sentenced to prison terms of between five and seven years. In August, a court [sentenced](#) 20 alleged members—including academics, businessmen, and at least one government official—to prison terms that ranged from five to seven years. In November, authorities [arrested](#) Eshoni Sirojiddin, a prominent cleric previously imprisoned for teaching Salafi Islam.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Tajikistan has emphasized security and regional connectivity. In January, then U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells visited Tajikistan and [announced](#) that the United States was "deepening [its] security cooperation in the areas of border security, counterterrorism, law enforcement, and joint military exercises and training." She [referred](#) several times to the more than \$200 million in aid that the U.S. government had provided Tajikistan to secure its border with Afghanistan and expressed concern about restrictions on fundamental freedoms. General Frank McKenzie, commander of [U.S. Central Command](#), made his first visit to Tajikistan in October, where he met with President Rahmon and senior military and security officials to discuss continued cooperation on security and stability in Tajikistan and the Central Asian region, including Afghanistan.

In October, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [launched](#) its first full mission in Tajikistan; its presence in the country had previously been a branch of the regional mission in Kazakhstan. USAID [initiatives](#) in Tajikistan work to foster food security, support civil society and nongovernmental organizations, improve education quality and access, combat human trafficking, and help reintegrate migrant workers into their home communities. The U.S. Department of State has designated Tajikistan as a CPC repeatedly since 2016, [most recently](#) on December 2, but it has also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States."

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Restrictive state policies have “[virtually extinguished](#)” the free practice of religion in the country, where the government appoints Muslim clerics, surveils and dictates religious practice, and punishes nonconformity through imprisonment, torture, and administrative harassment.

Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational “black hole” with an [abysmal record](#) on freedom of the [press](#). Despite the state’s iron grip on the media, in September President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov [lashed out](#) at journalists and threatened to demote responsible officials for not adequately reporting “on the country’s successes.” This landscape makes it difficult to chronicle the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. Nevertheless, the available information presents a bleak picture.

The government continued to treat all independent religious activity with suspicion, maintaining a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmenistan law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups’ activities, and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups, which are effectively banned. There were reports during the year of the authorities [raiding](#) several Protestant meetings and subsequently fingerprinting participants, forcing them to write confessions that they had

attended an illegal religious gathering, and threatening them with the loss of their children and their employment. The government accelerated its ongoing [persecution](#) of Jehovah’s Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service, sentencing at least five more members to prison in 2020, which brings the current known total to 11. These include two Jehovah’s Witnesses, Vepa Matyakubov and Kamiljan Ergashov, who in January and February, respectively, received [sentences](#) of two years imprisonment for their conscientious objection. In August, two brothers, Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov, received two-year prison sentences for the same charge—their [second time](#) to face conviction for this offense, having already served out their first criminal sentences. In September, [yet another](#) Jehovah’s Witness, Myrat Orazgeldyev, was imprisoned for “avoiding mandatory military service.” Most conscientious objectors are held at the [Seydi Labor Camp](#), where overcrowding, harsh climatic and health conditions, physical abuse, and a high mortality rate are the norm.

Persons accused of criminal religious offenses are often tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Convicts are often disappeared in the state’s prison system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. The authorities likely hold many religious prisoners at the notorious [Ovadan-Depe Prison](#), located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and starvation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under [IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#) to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide a civilian alternative to military service and to release and pardon all those convicted for conscientious objection.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Issue Update: [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- Issue Update: [Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan’s Gulag](#)
- Op-Ed: [Lift the National Security Waiver on Turkmenistan](#) (in *Eurasianet*)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Berdymukhamedov since 2007, enforcing a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage. The 2016 Constitution removed the presidential age limit and Berdymukhamedov was “reelected” in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote. Sources report that the government is extremely concerned about the possibility of [mass unrest](#) amid a crippling economic decline, and it is rapidly implementing an “anti-terrorist plan” that includes the installation of facial recognition cameras and “smart city” technology in public places, including small businesses. The government typically [charges its critics](#) with terrorism, targeting their families and friends if it cannot extradite them from abroad.

A majority 89 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, while Orthodox Christians represent the second-largest group, comprising around 9 percent. Although the 2016 Religion Law asserts that Turkmenistan is a secular state with religious freedom, it requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice under intrusive criteria, mandates that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans private religious education and worship, and prohibits the public wearing of religious garb except by clerics. The State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) oversees all religious activity, including registrations, the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, and the import and publication of religious literature. The registration process requires religious organizations to provide detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Recognized communities must reregister every three years, and religious activity is forbidden in prisons and the military.

Government Control of Religion

In addition to this strict framework of registration, Muslims continued to face particular scrutiny in 2020. The government maintained its practice of appointing senior Islamic leaders and dictating the content of sermons and prayers. Sermons include [tributes to the President](#), reminding the congregation that all that is good in their lives derives from Berdymukhamedov’s “wise policies.” Although the government denied the existence of coronavirus in Turkmenistan, all mosques have been closed as a “[prophylactic](#)” measure since July—a restriction that did not apply to the President’s dedication of a mosque in November or to its large accompanying feast.

The personality cult of President Berdymukhamedov functions as a virtual state religion. In 2020, the President published his alleged 53rd book, *The Spiritual Life of the Turkmens*, which prescribes correct national belief and culture and is [celebrated](#) in state media as a work “of particular value in the spiritual and moral education of youth.” Berdymukhamedov noticeably adopted a more pious appearance in public, including at the [dedication](#) of massive prestige mosques in February and November, when he delivered speeches about the

necessity of protecting national values and culture. State media increasingly refers to him as [Hajji](#), in reference to his completion of the Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca, and emphasized at his 63rd birthday celebration that he is now the same age that the Prophet Muhammad was when he died. However, the state frowns on open religious piety among regular citizens and the civil service; in February, state employees in the Lebap region were [forbidden](#) outright from attending Friday prayers or praying at work, and the state employees were warned that they would lose their jobs if they entered a mosque.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Although not technically banned, Jehovah’s Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally. The government has arrested and imprisoned many Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service, for which there is no civilian alternative available; Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a “sacred duty” incumbent on everyone. Since 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against conscientious objection, Turkmenistan has imprisoned at least 25 Jehovah’s Witnesses under Article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. Although 14 of those prisoners have since been released after serving their one-year sentences, 11 others remain [imprisoned](#). In September, President Berdymukhamedov [pardoned](#) more than 800 prisoners but did not include a single Jehovah’s Witness among them. In October, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights sent an [open letter](#) to the Turkmenistani Human Rights Ombudsman requesting an end to the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses for conscientious objection.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States engages with the Turkmenistan government in border and regional security programs, along with educational and cultural exchanges. Turkmenistan enjoys most-favored-nation trading status and receives direct U.S. assistance to strengthen the security of its border with Afghanistan. Although the U.S. government is cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, it has prioritized security concerns related to the ongoing war in Afghanistan. In October, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale participated in a virtual [trilateral meeting](#) with counterparts from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, where they discussed strengthening cooperation on regional security, economic growth, and development. The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014, and [redesignated](#) it on December 2, 2020, but has repeatedly used a waiver against any related sanctions “as required in the ‘important national interest of the United States.’” This waiver effectively neutralizes the consequences of Turkmenistan’s CPC designation, removes any incentive for the government to reform its brutal policies, and lends credence to the regime’s claims that security concerns warrant its harsh repression of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as in 2019. The government actively enforced the Law on Belief and Religion, which, as written and implemented, contravened international human rights standards and systematically violated religious freedom, particularly of independent religious groups but also of government-recognized groups.

Authorities continued to actively persecute independent religious minority communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, the Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, Catholics, and Falun Gong practitioners. Ethnic minority communities faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their faith, including physical assault, banishment, detention, imprisonment, and forced [renunciation](#) of faith. An estimated 10,000 Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands [remained effectively stateless](#) because local authorities have refused to issue household registration documents and identity cards—in many instances in retaliation for refusal to renounce their faith. During the year, central and local authorities made efforts to resettle Hmong Christians in Subdivision 179 of Dam Rong District in Lam Dong Province, but as of December implementation of this process remained incomplete.

The government also continued to harass and interfere in the religious activities of independent Hoa Hao Buddhists. In [March](#) and [July](#), local officials disrupted and prevented members of this community from conducting religious rituals and observing important religious holidays. In February, following the [death](#) of Patriarch Thich Quang Do—former leader of the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV)—authorities [interfered](#) in Do’s funeral arrangements. In addition, USCIRF received a report that local officials in the Huong Tra Township of Thua

Thien-Hue Province disrupted UBCV’s disaster relief work this year, claiming that it was an “illegal church.” Authorities have in recent years also [harassed](#) independent Cao Dai believers and [attempted](#) to take over their temples or forcibly “reunite” them with state-recognized ones.

Local authorities continued to expropriate or destroy Catholic Church properties. In August, government-led thugs [harassed](#) and attacked members of a Benedictine monastery at Thuy Bang Commune in Thua Thien-Hue Province, forcing the monastery to relinquish its land. In Ho Chi Minh City, an ownership dispute involving a local parish school led one Catholic priest to [sue](#) the local government. During the year, authorities also detained and [punished](#) Falun Gong practitioners for practicing and distributing materials about their spiritual practice—including a school principal who was [punished](#) for practicing Falun Gong with others at his home—on the grounds that it is not a recognized religion.

Reports of [torture](#) and mistreatment of religious leaders and religious freedom advocates persisted in 2020. [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)—a Hoa Hao Buddhist advocate sentenced to 11 years in April 2018—remained imprisoned at the end of the year and is reportedly in poor health. In November, Truyen started a hunger strike [protesting](#) prison conditions, including the lack of medical care. Prison authorities in Nam Ha Province continued to refuse to provide a Bible to Catholic environmental activist [Le Dinh Luong](#).

Authorities also targeted recognized groups for harassment. For example, USCIRF received reports that during the year authorities had cited Article 34 of the Law on Belief and Religion to interfere in the election of religious officers—known as “functionaries”—of recognized religious groups, leading at least one such group to suspend its election process.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a new binding agreement with the government, as authorized by Section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth commitments to further improve religious freedom;
- Encourage the Vietnamese government to amend the Law on Belief and Religion to conform to international standards to which Vietnam is party, including by making registration optional and not using it as a burdensome tool to control religious groups and activities;
- Encourage the effort by central, provincial, and local authorities to resettle Hmong Christians in Subdivision 179, urge similar efforts for other functionally stateless ethnic minority communities in the Northern and Central Highlands, and consider providing funding to facilitate improving religious freedom conditions among those communities; and
- Direct the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam to track houses of worship or religious sites of unique spiritual, cultural, or historical importance and work with Vietnamese authorities to ensure those sites receive special protection from development projects or expropriation.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Send delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to Vietnam, and specifically request to visit areas impacted by religious freedom restrictions and individual prisoners of conscience—such as Nguyen Bac Truyen—and urge authorities to release them.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Op-Ed:** [The Rising Cost of Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#) (in *The Hill*)
- **Op-Ed:** [Hopes and Fears for Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#) (in *The Hill*)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Prisoners of Conscience in Vietnam](#)

Background

Vietnam's constitution permits citizens to "follow any religion or follow none" and mandates respect and protection for religious freedom. However, it also authorizes authorities to override human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of "national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being." The country's Law on Belief and Religion, which went into effect in January 2018, requires religious communities to formally register their organizations, activities, and places of worship. It allows only religious organizations that have operated for at least five years to apply for registration, and it grants registered organizations status as legal entities.

Roughly 20 percent of Vietnam's [estimated](#) 97 million citizens identify with a religion. Approximately 8 percent of the population follow Buddhism, while 7 percent identify as Catholics. Other religious traditions with a significant presence include Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Evangelical Protestantism, and Islam. By the end of 2020, the government had officially recognized a total of 16 religions and 43 religious organizations; however, many groups refused to register for fear of persecution or concern for their independence, which has led to both state-sponsored and independent organizations competing to represent the religion in some cases.

Positive Developments

The government has reportedly made efforts to streamline administrative processes and procedures related to religion by implementing an interagency, one-stop online platform. The platform is also used by the government's Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA), which monitors and evaluates the implementation of the Law on Belief and Religion, in addition to coordinating with central and local authorities to address complaints from religious organizations and individuals. In February, the Ministry of Public Security issued a circular on the regulation of detention facilities, which included a provision allowing prisoner access to religious publications.

In early 2020, the government of Dam Rong District in Lam Dong Province announced a plan to [resettle](#) stateless Hmong Christian residents in Subdivision 179 and to issue them household registration documents. For decades, local authorities have discriminated against Hmong and Montagnard Christian communities in the Northern and Central Highlands because of their faith and refused to issue them household registration and identification cards, which are necessary to access public services such as education and healthcare. If successfully implemented, Subdivision 179 could serve as a model for central and local government officials to improve conditions for other ethnic and religious minority communities.

In September, the government [released](#) Pastor A Dao, leader of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ and one of [USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience \(RPOC\)](#). State authorities had arrested A Dao in 2016 after he attended the Southeast Asia Freedom of Religion or Belief Conference, where he had shared the challenges his church faced from the government.

State-Sponsored Intolerance against Religious Groups

Human rights groups raised concerns that the government of Vietnam targets religious groups and individuals through online hate speech and defamation. In 2020, the state-backed "Red Flag Association" joined with government entities in spreading online propaganda that promoted discrimination and intolerance against religious groups and individuals such as Catholic priests, Montagnard Christians, and independent Cao Dai adherents. The Red Flag Association has been active since 2017 and was involved in violent incidents attacking the Catholic community. Although reportedly dissolved in 2018, the association has increasingly moved its operations to online platforms. In one instance, the Red Flag Association attacked three members of the Catholic community with derogatory language on its website, calling them "terrorists" and "brain dead."

Cybersecurity and State Secret Laws and Regulations

Several new laws had potentially negative implications for religious freedom. Broad and vague provisions in the Cybersecurity Law (effective January 1, 2019) and Protection of State Secrets Law (effective July 1, 2020) could be used in conjunction with their implementing decrees and decisions to punish and persecute religious groups and individuals. For example, according to the State Secrets Law, certain documents concerning religion and belief—such as meeting minutes between religious groups and the government—could be classified as state secrets, while "unauthorized" possession or dissemination of such information could be grounds for criminal prosecution or administrative punishment.

Key U.S. Policy

While the United States and Vietnam have close economic and defense relationships, religious freedom and broader human rights remain key U.S. concerns. In October 2020, during the 24th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, U.S. officials [raised concerns](#) with their Vietnamese counterparts about religious freedom conditions, the status of ethnic minority groups, and other related human rights issues. In [April](#) and during the third [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) in November, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback called on countries, including Vietnam, to release prisoners of conscience.

In August, U.S. Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and John Cornyn (R-TX) sent a [joint letter](#) to then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo urging the U.S. Department of State to designate Vietnam as a CPC for its religious freedom violations and to consider imposing Global Magnitsky Act sanctions against perpetrators of grave human rights abuses in that country. While USCIRF has recommended Vietnam's designation as a CPC every year since 2002—finding that despite some areas of progress, "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious freedom within the meaning of IRFA persist—the State Department designated it as a CPC only in 2004 and 2005.

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to trend negatively amid the country's ongoing political instability. Lack of security remains the primary challenge to protecting the freedom of religion or belief in the country. In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an [agreement](#) stipulating the withdrawal of foreign presence. In September, the Afghan government and the Taliban commenced peace negotiations. However, these landmark strides toward peace failed to improve security conditions. An increase in [attacks](#) by extremist groups—most notably the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and the Taliban—not only threatened Afghanistan's overall stability but also decimated religious minorities, particularly the [Sikh community](#), which faces near extinction in Afghanistan. The Afghan government's limited control over the country's territory and lack of capacity within the areas it did control continued to hamper its ability to protect its citizens.

The United Nations (UN) documented [8,820 civilian casualties](#) (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured) in 2020, with some of the most brutal attacks targeting religious minorities. Antigovernment, nonstate actors, including [ISIS-K](#) and the [Taliban](#), were blamed and some claimed responsibility for the deadliest attacks. The UN reported the Taliban were responsible for [45 percent](#) of civilian casualties. While the Taliban rejected these findings and [denied responsibility](#) for or involvement in attacks targeting civilians, particularly religious minority communities, the [Afghan government alleges](#) that the [Taliban use Islamic militant groups](#) as proxies and continue to target progovernment Muslim leaders, institutions, and leaders of other faiths throughout the country. Although their use of antiminority rhetoric has diminished, [reports](#) indicate that the Taliban continue

to [exclude religious minorities](#) and punish residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law. During the current peace negotiations, the Taliban also refused to acknowledge or allow the integration of Shi'a jurisprudence in the current [Afghan legal system](#), causing concern among Shi'a Muslims. During their time in power, the Taliban discriminated against and violently persecuted the Shi'a Hazara community, which they labeled as heretical.

Although ISIS-K lost significant territorial control in 2020, it continued to target minority faiths and Muslims who it believes deviate from Islam. Terrorist and criminal attacks against Sikh and Shi'a communities continued, targeting their leadership, neighborhoods, festivals, and houses of worship. In [March](#), a [gurdwara](#) (Sikh house of worship) in Kabul was attacked, killing 25 Sikhs—including women and children—and causing many of the few Sikhs remaining in Afghanistan to flee. In March, [ISIS-K](#) once again attacked a memorial service held for a Shi'a Hazara leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was killed by the Taliban in 1995—killing 32 people and wounding over 50. In [November](#), two roadside bombings perpetrated by ISIS-K killed 14 and injured 45 others in the Shi'a province of Bamiyan.

In May, terrorists attacked a [maternity hospital](#) in Dasht-e-Barchi, a majority-Hazara neighborhood of Kabul. The attack killed more than 20, including two newborns, causing Doctors Without Borders/[Médecins Sans Frontières](#) to end its longstanding activities and withdraw from the hospital. In another incident in October, a suicide bomber detonated in the street outside the Kawsar-e-Danish Centre, an [educational institute](#) in a Shi'a Hazara neighborhood, killing dozens of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Afghanistan on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) and continue to designate the Taliban as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Incorporate protections for freedom of religion or belief into U.S.-supported peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban, emphasizing to Afghan political leadership the close

relationship between religious freedom and overall security;

- Integrate religious freedom concerns, including the protection of houses of worship, into assistance and training programs focused on countering terrorism, resolving sectarian conflict, and bolstering law and order funded by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the U.S. Department of Defense; and
- Facilitate cooperation between faith leaders and scholars of all religions in Afghanistan

to foster societal religious tolerance and encourage the Afghan Ministries of Education, Information and Culture, and Hajj and Religious Affairs to ensure that textbooks and curricula do not propagate intolerant teachings that denigrate religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Appropriate funding specifically for the protection of freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan and continue oversight activities of these expenditures and related programs in conjunction with the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Strongly Condemns Terrorist Attack against Sikh House of Worship in Kabul](#)

Background

Afghanistan is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns (42 percent), Tajiks (27 percent), Hazaras (9 percent), Uzbeks (9 percent), Turkmen (3 percent), and Baloch (2 percent). Historically, the nation also was religiously diverse, but the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban consolidated control of the government in 1996. The Hindu and Sikh population, for example, dropped from [220,000](#) in the early 1990s to a little over 200 today. The country's current [population](#) is approximately 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a, including Ismailis), with the few remaining non-Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and others, including one known [Jew](#)) comprising the remaining 0.3 percent.

Afghanistan's 2004 [constitution](#)—which recognizes Islam as the official religion—requires all parliamentary laws to respect Islamic principles and educational curricula to be based on the Islamic faith. Moreover, the constitution requires the courts to rely on Hanafi Shari'a jurisprudence in the absence of governing constitutional or legal provisions, which has the effect of criminalizing blasphemy (subject to the death penalty), apostasy, and proselytizing by non-Muslims. In 2009, the [Shi'a Personal Status Law](#) allowed Shi'a Muslims to be judged by their own laws, the Ja'fari school of jurisprudence.

Since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, religious minority communities slowly regained footing in society. Shi'a Muslims' socio-political standing improved, with members of the community holding key positions in government, media, and private industry. Additionally, Hindus and Sikhs have been represented in parliament since 2016 with a reserved seat, and some have been employed in government service. Despite this representation, Hindus and Sikhs face systematic discrimination and increasing violence.

Exodus of Sikh and Hindu Community

Driven by societal discrimination influenced by extremists, Sikhs and Hindus are subject to harassment, including physical assaults, abduction, land grabbing, looting, and pressure to convert. In addition to the incidents above, in June, insurgents reportedly kidnapped Sikh community leader [Nidan Singh Sachdeva](#) at Thala Sri Guru Nanak Sahib gurdwara in Paktia Province. Sachdeva was released due to government pressure and was among the first group of Afghan Sikh and Hindu community members who were granted legal entry to India in 2020.

The [Hindu and Sikh](#) population dropped from about 250,000 in the early 1990s to less than 1,000 in 2019. After the 2020 Kabul *gurdwara* attack and kidnapping of Sachdeva, the number dropped to around 200, a near extinction of the once robust community. Members of the Sikh and Hindu community have felt [pressured to leave Afghanistan](#) due to the lack of safety and [security](#) in the face of ongoing targeted attacks on their leadership and houses of worship by militant groups.

Rising Fear for Other Religious Minorities

Although the Afghan constitution stipulates followers of religions other than Islam may exercise their faith within the limits of the law, conversion from Islam to another religion is considered [apostasy](#). This crime is punishable by death, imprisonment, confiscation of property, or deportation according to the Afghan government's prevailing interpretation of Sunni Islam's Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which according to the constitution applies if there is no relevant provision in the law. Small populations of the Christian, Baha'i, and Ahmadiyya religious communities exist in secret due to fear of reprisal. In 2020, fear among religious minorities markedly increased due to a variety of factors, including the downsizing of the U.S. troop presence, continued violence, and the government's [lack of control](#) over the entirety of the country's territory.

In 2007, the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts of the Supreme Court declared the Baha'i faith to be blasphemous. The Baha'i community has lived in secret since this ruling. According to sources, there are about 450 adherents of the Ahmadiyya faith residing in Kabul. Although the Afghan constitution does not legally define the Ahmadiyya faith as non-Muslim, most Afghan Muslims view the faith as heretical.

Cases of Muslims [converting to Christianity](#) remain few, but Christian faith-based [organizations](#) maintain they are closeted due to fear of reprisal by Islamist extremists, familial-societal ostracization, ethnic antagonism, and official repercussions for those charged with apostasy. Society and the state often label instances of conversion as an attempt to flee Afghanistan through political asylum via Western Christian sympathy.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, after 20 years of U.S. government involvement in Afghanistan, the administration of then President Donald J. Trump signed a peace agreement with the Taliban that stipulated complete withdrawal of the U.S. presence by May 2021. The agreement also called on the Taliban to cut ties with terrorist groups, reduce violence, and engage in negotiations with the Afghan government. As of [January 2021](#), there are [2,500 U.S. troops](#) in Afghanistan, along with 6,346 U.S. contractors. The [Taliban](#) have called on the administration of President Joseph R. Biden to honor the previous administration's commitment, but [delays](#) in the peace talks, increased violence, reports of continued Taliban ties with militant organizations, and ISIS-K presence has left the [new administration](#) reconsidering complete withdrawal.

In 2020, the U.S. government continued to provide an estimated [\\$1.1 billion](#) in aid to Afghanistan despite the reduction in pledged assistance to the Afghan government at the November 2020 Geneva Conference and U.S. statements that future [assistance will be conditioned](#) on progress in the peace talks and protection of human rights.

On December 2, the State Department [designated](#) the Taliban as an EPC for engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations. The designation of ISIS-K as an EPC was not renewed, as the State Department [determined](#) it lost control of the territory it previously controlled.

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor, with the government continuing its systematic repression of Christians as well as minority Muslim communities. The government resumed its campaign against the Ahmadiyya community, sentencing dozens of Ahmadis to multiyear prison sentences and often interrogating them about their religious beliefs during trials. In October, the government handed down several two-year prison sentences for Ahmadiyya Muslims in Constantine, while in December a court in Tizi Ouzou sentenced 25 Ahmadis to extended prison time. On December 14, a court in Khenchela sentenced a prominent Ahmadiyya leader to six months in prison and a fine of 20,000 Algerian dinars (DA) (\$150 USD), [nearly half](#) the country's average monthly wage. The prosecutor has appealed the verdict to pursue a blasphemy conviction and harsher sentence.

Non-Muslim communities also faced discrimination. The [governor of Oran](#) forced two Protestant churches to close in January,

and in August a court in Tizi Ouzou upheld the state governor's October 2019 decision to close three Protestant churches. The government also [collected information](#) on the religious affiliations of teachers and reportedly handed the data over to the Department of Intelligence and Security. Moreover, having issued restrictions on places of worship in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government granted mosques and Catholic churches permission to reopen in August, but [Evangelical churches remained closed](#) through the end of the year.

In addition, a [constitutional referendum](#) passed in November indicated further erosion in religious freedom conditions in Algeria. Religious minority communities report that the government failed to consult them while drafting the referendum. The new constitution has removed language protecting "freedom of conscience" for all Algerians, raising concerns that the government may use this alteration to oppress religious minorities further.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Algeria on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Encourage U.S. Embassy officials to meet with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and other relevant government officials, and insist the government deliver clear and timely

responses to registration requests by non-Muslim organizations as required by Ordinance 06-03;

- Encourage U.S. Embassy officials to attend and observe court proceedings on church closures and against Ahmadiyya Muslims to emphasize the U.S. government's concerns about such cases; and
- Monitor the impact of changes in the new constitution regarding freedom of

conscience and advocate that the government continue to protect the rights of its citizens to freedoms protected under international human rights law.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to encourage Algeria to reverse decisions that have led to religious freedom violations and reform procedures related to religious minorities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Raises Alarm about Speech Laws that Restrict Religious Freedom in More than Half of African Countries](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom in Algeria](#)

Background

Algeria is geographically the largest country in Africa and home to [more than 43 million people](#). Algeria's state religion is Islam, and an estimated 99 percent of the population identify as Sunni Muslim, with the remaining 1 percent of the population comprising of Jews, Christians, and Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims. The Christian community of Algeria includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians.

Algeria limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor Islam specifically and restrict religious activities. Article 144 Section 2 of the [Criminal Code](#) penalizes blasphemy with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to 100,000 DA (\$753). A [2020 USCIRF report](#) on the enforcement of blasphemy laws between 2014 and 2018 found that Algerian authorities have declared converts guilty of blasphemy. The report also highlighted incidents of state violence against individuals accused of blasphemy—for example, [Slimane Bouhafs](#) "suffered attacks within the prison system as a result of standing up for his Christian faith."

Algeria has a long history of repression and persecution of religious minorities. Baha'i activities have been banned by law in Algeria since 1969. The government has made little progress on its 2014 commitment to reopen synagogues that had been converted to mosques or churches. In 2006, Algeria adopted [Ordinance 06-03](#) requiring non-Muslim organizations to register with the National Commission governing worship by non-Muslim groups, housed under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. This commission rarely meets and often fails to respond to registration requests by non-Muslim groups in the time required by the ordinance.

Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims

In 2016, Algerian authorities [refused to register](#) the Ahmadiyya Muslim community as an association, and since then the government has prosecuted more than 280 Ahmadis on grounds of their faith. Government officials have made public statements denouncing Ahmadis in abusive terms and declaring them "non-Muslim."

In 2020, the government of Algeria continued its campaign against the Ahmadiyya community. In October 2020, a court in Constantine handed down two-year prison sentences to Ahmadis found guilty of worshipping without authorization. On November 29, seven Ahmadiyya Muslims in Khenchela appeared in court, where the prosecutor requested five-year prison sentences and heavy fines.

On Monday, December 14, the Khenchela court handed down a six-month prison sentence and 20,000 DA fine for the leader of a group of Ahmadis and a fine alongside suspended sentences for others on charges that included offending the Prophet Mohammad and degrading the principles of Islam. The prosecutor has appealed the decision to pursue longer prison sentences for the accused. On December 22, in Tizi Ouzou, the court sentenced four Ahmadiyya Muslims to multiyear prison terms and enforced fines against them. The judge in these cases refused to divulge the accuser and questioned the defendants about their Muslim faith. Several Ahmadis who were charged publicly recanted their faith in court.

Oppression of Christians and Other Non-Muslims

Since 2017, authorities have forced 13 Protestant churches to close, citing lack of registration, despite the fact that these parishes filed

for registration and never received a response from the government. The government continued to close churches and restrict Christians' rights to worship in 2020. The governor of Oran forced the closure of two Protestant churches in January. In 2020, many courts also ruled on several [forced closures of Protestant churches](#) that took place in 2019. A court in Tizi Ouzou Province upheld the closure of three Protestant churches in August, including two of the country's largest congregations. In November, a court in Bejaia overturned the governor's order to close five churches there, claiming that the authority to do so lies with the minister of the interior, not the state governor.

Churches also faced stricter COVID-19 restrictions than mosques. Having ordered all houses of worship to close in response to the pandemic, the Algerian government issued an order in August [authorizing](#) mosques with more than 1,000 worshippers to reopen. The order made no mention of churches. In [October](#), authorities in Tizi Ouzou governorate in the Kabylie area, where most Algerian Christians live, allowed 183 mosques to reopen, including several that had fewer than 1,000 worshippers. It also permitted Catholic churches to open, but did not afford the same opportunity to Protestant churches.

Finally, in July the Tebboune Administration [collected information](#) on the religious affiliations of teachers in Tizi Ouzou Province, cataloguing the identities of Christian and atheist teachers and reportedly forwarding the list to the national Department of Intelligence and Security.

Constitutional Referendum

On November 1, Algeria held a [constitutional referendum](#) to respond to demands made by popular civil protesters to reform Algeria's laws to better protect human rights and freedom of expression for its citizens. The new constitution does not necessarily enjoy strong support from the Algerian people, considering the vote was marred by [low voter turnout](#). While the new constitution includes language protecting places of worship from any political or ideological influence, it also excludes language that had been included in the previous constitution protecting citizens' rights to "freedom of conscience," which raises serious concerns about the future prospects for religious freedom in Algeria.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States maintains close relations with Algeria focused on security and counterterrorism, economic ties, and cultural and educational programs. Algeria is an important U.S. partner for regional stability in North Africa and the Sahel.

In 2020, U.S. government representatives in Algeria continued to prioritize religious freedom concerns. U.S. officials engaged Algerian authorities several times to pressure the government to reverse its decisions discriminating against Protestant and Ahmadiyya individuals, as well as to revise and adequately implement its registration process for non-Muslim organizations.

The [2020 decision](#) by then President Donald J. Trump to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara also had implications for the relationship between the United States and Algeria more broadly. The government of Algeria has long supported independence movements in Western Sahara and rejected claims of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan remained largely static, with the notable exception of recent violations committed amid renewed conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories. The Azerbaijani government continued to regulate religious activity through its 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law), requiring all religious communities to register in order to operate, mandating state approval for religious literature and related materials, and placing limitations on certain other religious activities. In 2020, the Azerbaijani government reportedly registered 14 religious communities, including two Christian communities. It did not, however, provide registration to all unregistered communities—such as some Jehovah’s Witnesses and Lutherans—despite initial impressions that they would finally receive registration within the year. This issue remained a source of significant concern for unregistered religious communities, which the government attempted to alleviate in some cases by suggesting they “affiliate” with registered counterparts, or in one case by providing a letter to a small, unregistered Baptist community permitting their worship within the confines of a weekly two-hour time slot in a pastor’s yard. However, neither suggestion appeared to have any legal basis and therefore offered no guaranteed legal protections.

The government continued to disallow conscientious objection to mandatory military service; while no reported prosecutions took place during the year, the Azerbaijani National Assembly failed to create an alternative civilian service, for which the country’s constitution provides and one Member of Parliament [suggested](#). As in 2019, there were no known incidents of law enforcement raids on religious communities, although some interlocutors reported nevertheless limiting some of their activities for fear of possible repercussions.

The government continued to imprison individuals related to their religious activism. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that maintain lists of political prisoners in the country estimate that between 43 and 51 current prisoners are religious

activists. In 2020, authorities released at least three religious prisoners, including Shi’a Muslim imam Sardar Babayev, who had served his full sentence, and two others released in consideration of the COVID-19 threat. Members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM) [announced](#) that the government subjected them to increased pressure during the year through summonses, detentions, and arrests on questionable or politically motivated grounds. In one instance, authorities reportedly [detained](#) and then [arrested](#) alleged MUM member Elvin Muradov for poems and songs he had written about imprisoned MUM leader Taleh Bagirzade. Throughout the year, Rahim Akhundov [pursued](#) a lawsuit alleging that he was discriminated against and forcibly dismissed from his position as a staffer at the National Assembly due to his identity as a Christian and role as pastor of a house church. In January, a judge ruled his case inadmissible in a decision that the Baku Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court [upheld](#) in June and September, respectively.

The reemergence of active fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories in late September [prompted serious concerns](#) about the preservation and protection of Armenian places of worship and other religious sites in those areas. In October, Azerbaijani forces reportedly targeted and shelled the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in the city of Shusha two times, resulting in extensive damage to that building and possibly [constituting](#) a war crime. Azerbaijan claimed that during the fighting, Armenian forces damaged various religious and cultural sites as a result of shelling as well. Following the November 10 ceasefire and the cession of some territories to Azerbaijan, media outlets [documented](#) the apparently recent vandalization and destruction of Armenian cemeteries and gravestones. That same month, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev [pledged](#) to protect Christian churches and specified that “Christians of Azerbaijan” would be given access to those places of worship.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Azerbaijan on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Azerbaijan to revise the 2009 religion law to comply with international human rights standards and to bring it into conformity with recommendations made in 2012 by the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE);

- Assist the Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with international partners, to develop an alternative civilian service and permit conscientious objection pursuant to its commitment to the Council of Europe, obligations under international human rights law, and the Azerbaijani constitution; and
- Allocate funding to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and

U.S. Embassy in Baku to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious or cultural sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territories.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings to investigate Azerbaijan’s religious freedom and broader human rights abuses, including its treatment of the MUM; raise related concerns directly with the Azerbaijani Embassy and other government officials; and advocate for the release of all prisoners of conscience.

Background

Approximately 96 percent of Azerbaijan's [estimated](#) population of 10.2 million people are Muslim; the Azerbaijani government [estimates](#) that around 65 percent identify as Shi'a Muslim, while the other 35 percent identify as Sunni Muslim. The remaining 4 percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

Azerbaijan is a secular state that [stipulates](#) the separation of state and religion in its constitution. Although the constitution protects the freedom of conscience and provides for the right to "profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion, and to express and disseminate...beliefs concerning...religion," the government has in practice limited such rights through the 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs, the administrative code, and the criminal code.

Government Control of Religious Practice and Literature

The Azerbaijani government wields extensive control over religious practice throughout the country, including that of majority Shi'a Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and non-Muslim minorities. The government actively [differentiates](#) between what it views as "traditional" and "non-traditional" religions, favoring those communities it places in the former category and interfering in the affairs of the latter—such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and others. In particular, the government [perceives](#) independent Muslims as potential threats to its authority or national security, and it regularly enacts policies "to counter and limit the influence of [those] unwanted religious groups." To this end, the government oversees and strictly regulates Islamic practices through both the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) and the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB).

Although many non-Muslim religious communities have reported improved overall conditions for religious freedom in recent years, their practices remain subject to state approval. Religious minority communities frequently experience difficulty obtaining registration, as each community must first have at least 50 adult founding members in order to qualify, and at times officials have subjectively [applied](#) other discretionary guidelines to impede their registration. In addition to mandatory registration, other provisions of the law—such as those that limit a religious community's activities to its legal, registered address; prohibit foreign citizens from engaging in "religious propaganda" or missionary activity; and require that the SCWRA approve all religious literature and related materials—also serve to inhibit the ability of these communities to practice their religion or belief freely.

Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

In September 2020, armed conflict broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan in connection with the [long-running dispute](#) over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories. Although the conflict is predominantly territorial and ethnic in nature, some people involved in or directly affected by the conflict have [characterized](#) it as partially driven or exacerbated by religious differences. On two separate occasions in October, Azerbaijani forces reportedly shelled with precision-guided missiles the Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shusha, resulting in significant damage to some parts of the structure, including the roof. Human Rights Watch [determined](#) the attacks were likely deliberate and would therefore constitute a war crime that should be investigated and prosecuted.

Over the course of the fighting and in the immediate aftermath of the November ceasefire, numerous local and international observers [raised](#) concerns about safeguarding religious and other cultural sites, specifically underscoring the need to protect the various Armenian churches, monasteries, and cemeteries lost or subsequently ceded to Azerbaijani control. By the end of the reporting period, there was evidence that some of these sites—such as the cemetery of an Armenian church in Hadrut—had already been [vandalized](#). At the end of the year, the Azerbaijani government announced that at least two Azerbaijani soldiers, Arzu Hüseynov and Umid Ağayev, [faced charges](#) for destroying Armenian gravestones in a village in the district of Xocavənd.

Key U.S. Policy

In their bilateral relationship, the United States and Azerbaijan continued to [prioritize](#) European energy security, trade and investment, and joint efforts to combat terrorism and transnational threats. The United States also remained engaged in seeking a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a cochair—alongside France and Russia—in the OSCE [Minsk Group](#). Following the outbreak of conflict in late September, the United States [condemned](#) the use of force and urged the sides to bring an end to hostilities. In October, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo met separately with the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers to urge both sides to cease fighting and resume negotiations. Although the United States [brokered](#) a ceasefire that commenced within days of that meeting, it was reportedly [violated](#) just minutes after coming into effect.

The State Department raised a number of religious freedom issues in Azerbaijan throughout the year. In June, then Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback [expressed concern](#) about the reported dismissal from Parliament of Rahim Akhundov due to his religious identity, [pressed](#) Azerbaijan to release all religious prisoners, and [called](#) for the country to protect religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Stalled Progress in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **Interview:** [Need to Release Prisoners of Conscience Is "More Urgent than Ever"](#) (in *Turan*)
- **Commissioner Delegation Visit:** Baku and Quba in February 2020

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Azerbaijan should not be on USCIRF's list. Despite its legitimate security concerns, Azerbaijan is one of the only countries in the world where Sunni and Shi'a clerics pray together, where all Christian sects enjoy a reputation for cooperation, and where a thriving Jewish community has long reported freedom and security in an almost entirely Islamic country. Azerbaijan is a Shi'a-majority neighbor of Iran whose still-warm peace with the state of Israel was established almost 30 years ago! The country has also made important strides toward increasing religious freedom despite a post-Soviet legal framework, certainly more so than its neighbors.

I am afraid the Commission's view on Azerbaijan may be interpreted by some as inserting itself into the politics of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The conflict between the two countries—which is *political* and *geographic*, not religious—is often oversimplified as it cannot actually be understood in isolation from the interests of other countries like Iran, Turkey, and Russia.

Finding a path to enduring peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia is a better use for religion. Religion should be the meeting place rather than a rhetorical weapon or a causality of war. This can begin with an assessment of any holy sites—Christian or Muslim—that were damaged during the recent war or the years of conflict that preceded it, and a joint effort should be undertaken to restore what has been damaged or desecrated, whether unintentionally or otherwise.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained challenging. The Cuban government used a system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control and suppress religious groups and others for their advocacy or support of religious freedom.

The Cuban government, through the [Office of Religious Affairs \(ORA\)](#) continued its repressive enforcement of religious restrictions. The Law of Associations requires religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), where the ORA is housed, for registration. Despite existing criteria, registration decisions are often arbitrary and discriminatory. Unregistered religious groups are particularly vulnerable, as membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of registered religious organizations, requiring permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services.

During 2020, the Cuban government harassed and intimidated certain religious communities and their leaders. Common tactics included threats, short-term detentions and interrogations, surveillance, and travel restrictions. The Apostolic Movement, an unregistered network of Protestant churches, [reported](#) an increase in arrests, threats, and fines of pastors and parishioners. Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente of the Apostolic Movement, his family, and his congregation were [frequent targets](#) of the regime's [harassment](#). In May, several United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs, including the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, [issued](#) a communication to Cuba regarding the ongoing harassment of Pastor Toledano and the Apostolic Movement, noting their concern that the group's lack of legal registration prevents it from operating freely. An unregistered church in Victoria de las Tunas [reported](#) ongoing harassment, including stoning of worshippers, denial of permits to worship, and threats of criminal charges against the pastor. According to the pastor, security services encouraged the stoning and warned that the attacks would stop only if he

ceased calling for religious freedom during his sermons. Several Santería religious leaders and practitioners, particularly members of the unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, were also frequent [targets](#) of government harassment. State security [reportedly](#) detained, threatened, and surveilled Free Yoruba leaders, including detaining two high-ranking Free Yorubas in March and declaring that "there is only one god, Fidel Castro." In May, state security [reportedly](#) broke up a religious meeting of an unregistered Islamic group studying the Qur'an, summoned participants to the police station the next day, and threatened them with criminal charges.

The government used its penal code against individuals whose religious beliefs conflict with the political teachings and practices in schools and education. The children of Olainis Tejeda Beltrán and Lescaille Prebal, members of the Jewish Sephardic Bnei Anusim community, endured violent bullying for wearing kippahs at school. Instead of protecting the children, authorities responded by [threatening](#) the parents with criminal penalties and loss of guardianship if the children continued to wear the religious symbols. The parents agreed in January that their children would attend school without kippahs. However, they continued to denounce their children's treatment in independent online media, which resulted in authorities threatening charges under [Decree Law 370](#). This law regulates the use of the internet and is applied to [criminalize critical expression](#). Other religious leaders were [threatened](#) with charges under this law for "subversive posts on social media." Pastor Ramón Rigal and his wife Adya Expósito Leyva were [released](#) from prison in [July](#) and [March](#) respectively. After homeschooling their children based on a concern regarding Cuban schools' promotion of socialism and atheism, the couple was [convicted](#) in April 2019 for "illicit association"—as their church is unregistered—and other charges, including acts against the normal development of their children. While USCIRF welcomed their release, concerns about conflicts between religious beliefs and practice and schooling persist.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Cuba on the U.S. Department of State's 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 Cuban government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—including Caridad Diego, head of the ORA—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;
- Publicly denounce violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Cuba and convey that any changes in other areas of U.S. policy toward and engagement with Cuba do not diminish the Cuban government's need to improve religious freedom conditions on the island;
- Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for an unrestricted visits by USCIRF and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to engage with, exchange aid and materials with, and interact with coreligionists in the United States and globally.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Santería Tradition in Cuba](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Release of Pastor Ramón Rigal](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Release of Adya Expósito](#)

Background

While there are no independent sources on Cuba's religious demographics, a [reported](#) 60–70 percent of Cuba's estimated population of 11.1 million self-identify as Catholic. Approximately 25–30 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Moravians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An [estimated](#) 70% of Cubans engage in one or more practices associated with Santería, a syncretic religion borne out of the Yoruba tradition mixed with elements of Catholicism, or another Afro-Cuban religion.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. A new [constitution](#) adopted in April 2019 [protects](#) the freedom of religion or belief and prohibits religious discrimination. A [timetable](#) was set to review and amend corresponding legislation to codify the constitutional changes, including the Law of Associations. However, this process has been [delayed](#), [resulting](#) in some constitutional rights existing only on paper.

Restrictions on Religious Property

The right to establish and maintain places of worship is severely limited in Cuba. It is illegal to hold religious activities in buildings not dedicated for religious use. The ORA rarely grants permission for new religious buildings and seldomly [approves](#) any renovation or construction of designated religious buildings. In a positive development, in October the Catholic Church [opened](#) the last of three new churches built since the 1959 socialist revolution.

Threats to demolish unregistered religious buildings [reportedly](#) increased, and even registered religious buildings were targeted. Cuban authorities, with permission from the ORA, [demolished](#) an Assemblies of God church in Santiago de Cuba in October. This church was one of the few Protestant churches with legal status, as it had been registered since 1959. Pastor Toledano, who lives in the neighborhood, was violently [detained](#) while broadcasting the demolition on social media. Authorities later [detained](#) the church's pastor and superintendent.

Many, if not most, Cubans' place of worship is private residences. The Cuban government imposes complicated and repressive requirements on private residences used as places of worship, limiting the ability of Cubans to worship in community.

Conscientious Objectors

There are no legal provisions exempting [conscientious objectors](#) from mandatory military service. In December, [Oscar Kendri Fial Echavarría](#), who believes carrying and using weapons goes against his Christian beliefs, was detained and later prosecuted for disobedience because he did not enlist. In October, activist Osmel Rubio Santos was [detained](#) for several hours after refusing military service.

Targeting of Independent Journalists Who Report on Religious Freedom

The Cuban government frequently targeted independent journalists for reporting on religious freedom conditions. After serving

over a year in a labor camp for disobedience and resistance for covering the trials of Pastors Rigal and Expósito, independent journalist [Roberto Jesus Quiñones Haces](#) was [released](#) in September. Cuban authorities also harassed other independent journalists who report on religious freedom, including [Yoe Suárez](#), by threatening criminal charges and fines, often under [Decree Law 370](#), and imposing travel [restrictions](#).

Denial of Religious Freedom for Activists and Protesters

Cuban authorities also violated the religious freedom of human rights activists and protesters, often by blocking their access to religious services. The Ladies in White, the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, [suspended](#) their weekly attendance at Mass and protest marches due to coronavirus. However, the group was [denied](#) access to religious services and arbitrarily detained when marches occurred at the beginning of the year and after restrictions were relaxed. In December, Lady in White Martha Sánchez González was [released](#) early on parole from prison, where she was serving a four-year sentence that began in 2018 for disobedience.

In November, a [crackdown](#) on the San Isidro Movement (MSI), a civil society group opposed to restrictions on artistic expression, sparked [rare protests](#) calling for greater [freedom of expression](#). Cuban authorities harassed, [surveilled](#), and stopped some protesters from leaving their homes, including preventing individuals from attending [religious services](#). Catholic officials were [reportedly](#) blocked from visiting protesters. One [priest](#) who attempted to visit and attend to the protesters' religious needs was fined for "enemy propaganda" and told he required a permit from the ORA to access protesters.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration's policy toward Cuba was guided by the November 2017 [National Security Presidential Memorandum](#) entitled *Strengthening the Policy of the United States toward Cuba*, which focused on the need for human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Cuba. In 2020, the Trump administration imposed a [range of sanctions](#) that [aimed](#) to deny the Cuban regime funds used to support Venezuela while strengthening Cuba's civil society and private sector. Since 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Havana has operated with a permanently reduced staff and limited embassy operations.

High-level government officials raised concern regarding Cuba's poor human rights record, including then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, who [welcomed](#) the release of Roberto Quiñones and [condemned](#) the crackdown on MSI. Then U.S. Agency for International Development Acting Administrator John Barsa [noted](#) the importance of religious freedom in Cuba during a webinar in September. Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Havana Timothy Zuniga-Brown condemned religious freedom abuses in Cuba, including the [demolition](#) of the church in October. On December 2, the State Department again [placed](#) Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

In my estimation, Cuba should not be recommended by USCIRF for the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List. It should be recommended for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Cuba's ongoing, systematic, and egregious actions are not isolated to the country alone, but rather are characterized by transparent efforts to aid and abet the agendas of other hostile actors from around the world in the Western Hemisphere.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained largely static. Radical Islamist violence and anti-Christian mob attacks remained serious threats but occurred less frequently than in prior years. Despite some improvements, systematic and ongoing religious inequalities remained affixed in the Egyptian state and society, as various forms of religious bigotry and discrimination continued to plague the country’s Coptic Christians and other religious minorities.

In terms of positive trends, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and other officials continued to call for religious inclusivity, albeit less prominently than in the prior two years, including again [attending](#) Coptic Orthodox Christmas Mass in January. The Cabinet committee for approving registration of churches and church-related buildings [approved](#) 388 such preexisting properties in 2020—a significant decline from 785 in 2019 and 627 in 2018. It has now approved 1,800 of the 5,515 applications received (32.6 percent) since the passage of Law 80/2016, commonly known as the Church Building Law. Several high-profile court cases resulted in the conviction of perpetrators of religiously motivated violence, including the June conviction and sentencing to 15 years in prison of seven individuals for the 2013 burning of a church in Giza. A Court of Appeals ruling in May [affirmed](#) the right of Christians to follow their own tradition of inheritance distribution, including gender equality. With the permission and often direct support of the Egyptian government, local and international initiatives furthered efforts to revitalize some non-Muslim religious heritage sites, including the completion of a project to [restore](#) the Basatin Cemetery in Cairo, one of the world’s oldest Jewish burial sites.

Nevertheless, Egyptian authorities continued to perpetrate or tolerate various forms of systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. Blasphemy cases continued to disproportionately impact non-Muslims as well as Muslims whose beliefs the state perceived as outside officially accepted interpretations of

Sunni Islam. Religious discrimination remained pervasive, including a disparity in policies regarding places of worship, a lack of opportunities for non-Muslims to work in key areas of government service, state security harassment of former Muslims, and recurring incidents of anti-Christian mob violence, particularly in rural areas. For example, reports in 2020 pointed to the [exclusion](#) of non-Muslims from the roster of Egypt’s national soccer team, while the Coptic community continued to raise [longstanding concerns](#) regarding the potential targeting of Christian women by radical Islamists for abduction and forcible conversion. In December, attackers in Alexandria [stabbed](#) one Christian to death and injured two others in what was likely a sectarian incident. Anti-Coptic violence in the Minya towns of Dabous and Barsha in October and November, respectively, illustrated Egypt’s ongoing impunity for sectarian violence, as each incident concluded with a so-called “customary reconciliation council” that absolved the attackers of responsibility.

The Egyptian government continued to fall short in balancing domestic security, protection of citizens’ fundamental rights, and [economic development](#), despite a nearly 3 percent [decline](#) in poverty in 2020. Security forces continued to struggle with combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in North Sinai as its self-proclaimed “Sinai Province” [carried out](#) operations against government forces and civilians, including the November [kidnapping](#) of a Coptic man in Bir al-Abd. Although 2020 saw few incidents of radical Islamist violence elsewhere in the country, the government continued to use counterterrorism as a [pretense](#) to repress journalists, human rights and religious freedom advocates, and other members of civil society—even prosecuting some resulting cases through a terrorism court. Such actions directly contradict the government’s assurances that it is working to improve conditions for civil society, including its [passage](#) of a revised version of the Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Law in 2019.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Egyptian government to 1) take concrete steps toward phasing out the long-standing use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of sectarian mob violence, 2) repeal decrees banning Baha’is and Jehovah’s Witnesses, 3) remove religion from official identity documents, 4) pass laws consistent with article 53 of Egypt’s constitution; and 5) repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and in the interim limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail;
- Encourage Egypt to expedite approval of church registrations under Law 80 of 2016;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance to programs supporting efforts to promote greater religious inclusivity throughout the country as well as to reform public school curriculum and teacher training; and
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and require the State Department to provide explicit justification for the release of any previously withheld Foreign Military Financing (FMF), including public disclosure of justification for its certification of Egypt’s progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Egypt’s Detention of Mohamed Basheer, Ramy Kamel](#)

Background

Egypt's constitution identifies Islam as the state religion and the principles of Shari'a as the primary source of legislation. While Article 64 states that "freedom of belief is absolute," only Muslims, Christians, and Jews can practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Of the country's estimated 104 million people, [around 90 percent](#) are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi'a Muslims, comprise less than 1 percent. An estimated 10 percent are Christians, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; other Christians belong to various denominations that include Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and others. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 20 Jews.

Legal and Security Repression

Egypt's evolving [crackdown](#) on civil society demonstrated the overlapping interests of religious freedom and broader human rights. In November, security forces [detained](#) Mohamed Basheer, Karim Ennarah, and Gasser Abdelrazek, three members of the NGO the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR). While authorities released them three days later, after an international [outcry](#), prosecutors submitted their case to a terrorism court, which [ordered the seizure](#) of their personal assets. These arrests were likely in retaliation for EIPR's discussion of issues facing Egyptian civil society with a [visiting delegation](#) of diplomats from the European Union and Canada in October, echoing Coptic activist [Ramy Kamel's](#) November 2019 arrest and indefinite detention one day before he was expected to travel to Switzerland to testify at the United Nations Forum on Minority Issues. Both EIPR and Kamel have devoted significant emphasis in their advocacy to the challenges facing [Coptic Christians](#) and [other religious minorities](#) in Egypt. Their detentions, along with that of EIPR researcher [Patrick Zaki](#) earlier in the year, demonstrate a systematic and ongoing effort by the government to suppress any challenge to its narrative of progress and its efforts to bolster its international image—even against those whose work addresses the same challenges the government itself [ostensibly recognizes](#).

At the same time, a [recent USCIRF report](#) has shown that implementation of Egypt's blasphemy law—Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code—made it one of the world's worst offenders of both blasphemy-related prosecutions and societal violence between 2014 and 2018. Such [arrests and prosecutions](#) continued in 2020; they involved both Muslims and non-Muslims, but they most often targeted religious minorities, including Christians, nonbelievers, Qur'anists, and Shi'a Muslims. For example, in June an Alexandria court [sentenced](#) Anas Hassan to three years in prison for managing a Facebook page that

promoted atheism, while Reda Abdel Rahman, a teacher at al-Azhar Institute in Sharqiya governorate, was [detained](#) in August for promoting Qur'anism.

Rural Sectarianism

Anti-Christian mob attacks remain endemic in parts of rural Egypt. Although 2020 saw a modest decline in incidents in comparison to prior years, the decrease may have resulted from the [months-long closures](#) of houses of worship throughout Egypt to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Nevertheless, legal impunity for the perpetrators of such violence persisted in 2020 as the systematic norm. These sorts of attacks most commonly occur in response to a rumor of a perceived slight against the Muslim majority—such as an interreligious affair, a social media post perceived as insulting Islam, or an attempt to register an informal church legally—and they are almost always met with the convening of a "customary reconciliation council" that ultimately absolves the perpetrators of legal responsibility and punishes the victims. For example, in September the Minya Criminal Court [convicted](#) 23 defendants in absentia for burning several Coptic homes in 2016 following rumors of an interreligious affair—a rare prosecution, likely due to the notoriety of the attack, which also involved the sexual assault of an elderly Coptic woman—but the terms of a last-minute reconciliation agreement led to the [acquittal](#) of three of the attackers.

Key U.S. Policy

[Bilateral relations](#) between the United States and Egypt remained steady in 2020—a partnership that has weathered countless challenges since the Camp David Accords of 1979. U.S. financial assistance, mostly in the form of FMF, remained largely consistent at \$1.38 billion in FY 2020, and the same amount is expected for FY 2021. The administration of President Donald J. Trump broadly supported President El-Sisi's efforts to counter radical Islamist violence and to improve religious freedom conditions in Egypt. In October, then U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Acting Administrator John Barsa, then Deputy Assistant to the President Sarah Makin, and then Chief Advisor for International Religious Freedom Samah Norquist [led a delegation](#) to the country that included a rare visit by high-ranking U.S. officials to Upper Egypt, where they joined U.S. Ambassador Jonathan Cohen in meeting with local programs to promote religious freedom in sectarianism-plagued Minya. However, Egypt's detention of EIPR staff members in November [drew sharp, bipartisan rebuke](#) from members of Congress and the State Department—only weeks after 55 members of Congress [issued a letter](#) calling on President El-Sisi to release imprisoned members of Egyptian civil society, naming Ramy Kamel and more than 20 others.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Despite all the complications of managing the Arab world's largest country, often in the crosshairs of terrorists, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves credit for assuming personal responsibility for the republic's interfaith harmony. He has often led by example, has always taken the issue seriously, and has worked personally to protect and foster peaceful coexistence among Egypt's varied religious communities. I commend el-Sisi for it. I have also appreciated his willingness to indulge in direct and brutally honest conversations with various interlocutors along the way, unlike many world leaders. Of course, Egypt must continue along its path until every Egyptian citizen in every part of the country feels they can practice their faith without fear.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Indonesia stagnated. The administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) continued to pursue a policy of promoting its favored interpretation of Islam through state efforts that included attempting to revamp the state ideology of Pancasila, establishing a voluntary certification program for religious officials, and installing “moderate” voices inside the quasi-governmental Indonesia Ulema Council (MUI). However, these measures aimed to combat rising extremist or hardline Islamist trends and to promote tolerance exclusively among officially recognized religions; they did not promote greater religious freedom or expand recognition of other religious minorities.

Religious extremists continued to represent a serious threat against religious minorities and others. In June, a militant extremist [attacked](#) the deputy police chief in Central Java with a knife. In Sulawesi, the radical Islamist group, East Indonesia Mujahideen (MIT), carried out a series of sectarian attacks, [killing](#) four Christians and burning a home that local Christians used for a house of worship.

The enforcement of blasphemy laws, which Indonesia inherited from the Dutch colonial period but expanded under Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS/1965 and the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE), continued to impact all religious communities. In May, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated an increase in blasphemy allegations, primarily through application of the ITE law—even as the coronavirus pandemic raged. For example, in March authorities in Probolinggo Regency, East Java, arrested a local man for sharing lewd religious images online; in July, the State Court of East Java sentenced him to four years’ imprisonment and fined him five million Indonesian rupiah (\$350 USD). Beginning in April, a number of people across the country faced arrest and blasphemy charges for sharing a song about a wife of the Prophet Muhammad with altered lyrics that

some religious conservatives found offensive. These detainees included a popular YouTube celebrity who was arrested in April in Medan, North Sumatra, and sentenced in October to seven months’ imprisonment, as well as three young adults in Gorontalo Province who were arrested in May after posting a video of them dancing and singing to the song in question. While these cases involved the dissemination of potentially offensive material, none included incitement to violence.

In July, hardline Islamist organizations and their supporters actively [demonstrated](#) against interfaith activities in West Java and contributed to [obstructing](#) government efforts to reform the official ideology of Pancasila due to concerns about both communism and secularization. In West Sumatra, the governor successfully [petitioned](#) for the removal of a Christian Bible app in the minority Minangkabau language from the Google Play store due to concerns about Christian proselytization to the Muslim-majority community. In May, acting Governor of Aceh Nova Iriansya was likewise successful in removing the Aceh Holy Bible app from the Google Play store.

Last year, USCIRF reported on the September 2019 attempt by the Indonesian legislature to replace the existing Criminal Code, which dates back to the Dutch colonial era. This new code would have [expanded](#) the criminalization of blasphemy to include insulting a religious leader during a religious service, persuading someone to become an atheist, and defiling or unlawfully destroying houses of worship or religious artifacts. Civil society groups led massive protests in response to these and other proposed restrictions, leading the government to delay the bill indefinitely. Throughout 2020, this draft code was neither amended nor removed from consideration in the legislature. NGO reports indicate that the government has failed to soften the provisions in the code that would violate international human rights standards, including religious freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Indonesia on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Indonesian government to revise the draft Criminal Code bill to remove criminal sanctions for blasphemy; to repeal or amend the existing blasphemy laws, including Indonesia’s ITE law; and to release all individuals currently detained or imprisoned on blasphemy charges;
- Urge the Indonesian government to repeal or revise existing legislation and regulations on houses of worship, including the 2006 Joint Regulation;
- Incorporate training on international human rights standards related to religious freedom—including concerns related to enforcement of blasphemy laws—into U.S.-funded programs, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Harmoni and MAJu projects, and work with the Ministry of Education to incorporate programming on tolerance and inclusivity into compulsory education courses on religion; and
- Urge the Indonesian government to take the regional lead on human rights and religious freedom in its capacity in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, including by publicly advocating on behalf of Uyghurs and other persecuted Muslims throughout the region.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Indonesia’s Pancasila](#)

Background

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Muslims [comprise](#) 87.2 percent of Indonesia's 267 million citizens, while Protestant Christians comprise 7 percent, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent identify as another minority religion such as Buddhism or Confucianism. In 2020, the World Bank [upgraded](#) Indonesia's economic ranking from lower- to upper-middle income country.

In light of this diversity, Indonesia has a long tradition of religious pluralism. Article 29 of its constitution "guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." The government has long promoted an ideology known as Pancasila, which comprises five principles: monotheism (broadly defined as any religion with a supreme deity, holy figure, scripture, and established rituals), civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice. Efforts in summer 2020 to pass legislation to reform Pancasila failed. These failed reforms included strengthening the government's responsibility to promote the ideology in school and its ability to regulate Pancasila through the Agency for Pancasila Ideology Education. The government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, based on a 1952 Ministry of Religious Affairs definition of religion that limits it to monotheistic traditions. Furthermore, the government views Sunnism as the only officially accepted variant of Islam. Violations of religious freedom tend to impact Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims disproportionately as well as Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, nonbelievers, atheists, and certain indigenous religious communities.

The government also requires all citizens to list their religious affiliation on their identification cards—a practice that has historically forced nonbelievers and members of unrecognized religious minorities to misrepresent their faith or leave the field blank. This omission can impact access to licenses and permits, education, and government jobs.

Shari'a Law in Aceh

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia with the legal authority to enact Shari'a law. Religious police there enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a that includes and administers corporal punishment. In December 2019, Aceh [introduced](#) its first all-female flogging squad, which it expanded in early 2020. This development was the end result of years of pushing by authorities to assemble such squads to punish women convicted in the Shari'a courts. Behavior is heavily regulated within this framework; for example, couples are in danger of flogging if they sit too close, women are prevented from straddling motorbikes and forced to wear hijabs, and unmarried sexual activity is severely punished. During the pandemic, officials [modified](#) but continued to enforce such corporal punishment.

Houses of Worship

The 2006 Joint Regulation on houses of worship remains an ongoing and systemic barrier to the religious freedom of minority communities, requiring at least 90 congregation members and approval from 60 local households of other religions. In March, a group of petitioners [referred](#) to as the "People's Lawsuit Presidium" requested that the Supreme Court review the regulation, but the request made no subsequent progress. In March and April, two mosques belonging to the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation (JAI) were sealed from use. In Karimun, the local Catholic community faced hardline Muslim resistance to efforts to renovate St. Joseph Catholic Church. The community had received a permit in October 2019, but protests spurred the local authorities to delay its approval. Construction finally began in April 2020, but only after President Jokowi [intervened](#) and the lawsuit that had prevented it was [thrown](#) out in court.

Minority Faith Communities

Members of minority Muslim sects—such as the Milah Abraham faith community (also known as Gafatar), Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadiyya Muslims—remained especially vulnerable in 2020. MUI has long issued fatwas (religious edicts) declaring these groups "deviant" and heretical to Islam; in 2005, MUI issued a fatwa declaring Ahmadiyya Muslims as apostates, and in 2008 the government banned them from proselytizing, a step that former Indonesia President Abdurrahman Wahid [publicly condemned](#). In January 2020, Ade Munawaroh Yasin, the regent of Bogor, West Java, issued a letter with the support of local Islamists stating that Ahmadiyya Islam was illegal in Bogor. Shi'a Muslims who had been displaced from Madura Island in 2012 by anti-Shi'a violence [remained](#) unable to return home. In November, some members of that community publicly converted to Sunni Islam to return to their homes. In a positive sign, newly appointed Minister of Religious Affairs Yaquut Cholil Qoumas [stated](#) in December his intention to uphold the rights of both Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. and Indonesian governments have cooperated closely on counterterrorism and maritime security issues, including with regard to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia in 1949, following its independence from the Netherlands. In October, Indonesia [hosted](#) then U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo to discuss continued cooperation. The United States also continues to support Indonesian efforts to build regional multilateral cooperation through organizations such as ASEAN.

Throughout 2020, the USAID-funded Harmoni program continued to support the Ministry of Social Affairs and local organizations. Harmoni funding was applied to strengthen Inter-Religious Harmony Forums; to counter extremist narratives through community, university, and school-based campaigns; and to rehabilitate women and children returning from conflict zones in the Middle East and Philippines.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

I commend the efforts by President Jokowi to promote peaceful coexistence in Indonesian society and to preserve Indonesia's historic (and threatened) wasatiyyah Islam. Our report refers to the Jokowi administration "favoring their preferred view of Islam." There are many issues in Indonesia worthy of concern, but this is not one of them. I am glad that Jokowi is combating extremism by favoring a tolerant, Indonesian Islam and not allowing extremists to hijack the religious culture of the world's most populated Muslim country. Religious freedom and human rights must never be used as a shield for extremists, whether it's via Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated Shi'a extremists who threaten Bahrain or Lebanon or al-Qaeda-affiliated Sunni extremists who target Egypt or Indonesia. Religion certainly plays an outsized role in Indonesian society, but as long as it does, then the government should absolutely continue to empower and favor moderates. Thankfully, Indonesia has plenty of them as it has long been home to many of the world's most admirable and credible Islamic scholars and leaders.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained poor despite the ostensibly significant Sinjar Security Agreement signed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) in October to provide protection for religious minorities. Almost four years after the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), religious and ethnic minorities in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar continued to face [immense challenges](#) to returning safely to their towns and homes from internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps. Renewed fear of persecution is growing among these communities amid lingering potential for a [re-emergence](#) of ISIS or ISIS like groups. Iranian-backed militia groups under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), continued their constant harassment of religious and ethnic minorities, especially in northern Iraq, making the improvement of religious freedom conditions [more difficult](#). In 2020, the PMF operated with impunity in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar, committing heinous violations against these long-suffering communities.

Although humanitarian assistance from the United States and other international donors contributed to improving the infrastructure that ISIS had ravaged across northern Iraq, a substantial proportion of displaced religious and ethnic minorities did not feel safe returning to or living in their homes in 2020. [Over one million](#) Sunni Arab Muslims remained forcibly displaced, both internally and externally. Accused or suspected of aiding ISIS, many of them

continued to fear retaliation if they return to their homes in former ISIS-controlled territories. The Yazidi minority remained especially vulnerable, still largely [scattered](#) throughout the Middle East and beyond with limited opportunity to return safely to their heartland of Sinjar. Living in IDP and refugee camps further exposed Yazidis to threats from ISIS affiliates and other hostile militia groups; for example, throughout the year, ISIS [hunted](#) Yazidi boys and girls to traffic or force them into other illegal activities. Additionally, of the [6,000](#) Yazidi girls and women whom ISIS abducted in 2014, only [a few hundred or so](#) were able to reunite with their families during the year; Iraq’s inability to address this atrocity continued to perpetuate collective trauma throughout the Yazidi community. Also, many Iraqi Christians in northern Iraq remained [displaced](#) in 2020; those who were able to return to their homelands found their property, including places of worship, destroyed or expropriated.

Turkish airstrikes and other military operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in northern Iraq, particularly in the area of Sinjar, have worsened the situation as they disproportionately impacted already devastated religious and ethnic minority communities. The Turkish military has reportedly taken minimal precautions to avoid civilian casualties in the area; for example, in June and July, the Turkish advance into Sinjar as part of “Operation Claw-Eagle” and “Operation Claw-Tiger” [claimed the lives](#) of five civilians and wounded dozens more.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Encourage the Iraqi government, as part of high-priority bilateral relations, to implement its own stated policy to rein in the PMF, particularly those factions that continue to engage in sectarian violence; present specific obstacles to the return and rehabilitation of Yazidis, Christians, Sunni Arab Muslims and other religious and ethnic components in northern Iraq; and/or intervene against the protest movement on behalf of Iranian interests;
- Use diplomatic and other available channels to encourage the IFG and the KRG to resolve the disputed areas per article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution while including all religious and ethnic minorities in the process and comprehensively implement the Sinjar Security Agreement with full inclusion of the Yazidi community in particular;
- Impose targeted sanctions on additional PMF leaders who direct militia engagement in 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
- Continue to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to rebuild communities devastated by ISIS and to advocate for their own interests, including opening a broad discussion on governance to hold fair and free local and regional elections to select their own representatives.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Protecting Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Turkish Military Operations in Northern Iraq](#)

Background

[The Iraqi population](#) is predominantly Muslim: 64–69 percent are Shi'a Muslim and 29–34 percent are Sunni Muslim. The Shi'a Muslim population resides predominantly in the south and eastern regions of the country, whereas the Sunnis live in the west, center, and north of the country. There are also about 200,000 Christians from various denominations, including Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants, mainly located in the Nineveh Plains in the north. However, that population has drastically declined since 2003, when Iraqi Christians were estimated to number 1.5 million. Iraq is also home to almost 700,000 Yazidis, who remained largely internally displaced, as well as about 150,000 Kaka'is, also known as the Yarsan or Ahl al-Haq; these two communities are mainly spread across the north. Finally, a tiny Jewish community continues to reside in Baghdad and Erbil.

The Struggle of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq

Six years after fleeing the ISIS genocide, the Yazidi community continued to face [severe challenges](#) to reclaiming its homeland along with its religious and ethnic identity. The whereabouts of thousands of kidnapped Yazidi women, girls, and boys remain unknown. Despite joint efforts between the KRG and the IFG to locate abductees and reunite them with their families, few were able to return to their homes in 2020. Around [2,800](#) abducted Yazidis were still missing, many of them reportedly still [trafficked](#) into sex, labor, or terrorism. Furthermore, many ISIS fighters responsible for those atrocities remain at large despite Yazidi [demands](#) for accountability. The 2020 United Nations (UN) Security Council [renewal](#) of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by ISIS, which continued to document atrocities and uncover mass graves throughout the year, offered some hope.

Despite international development efforts by the U.S. government to improve living conditions for religious and ethnic minorities in northern Iraq, significant [obstacles](#) remained in 2020. The [presence](#) of armed groups and checkpoints in and around Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains, particularly from Iranian-backed PMF factions, have prevented religious and ethnic minorities from returning to their communities of origin. [At checkpoints](#), PMF fighters demanded that IDPs and refugees, especially religious minorities, pay excessive amounts of money to cross or risk being sent back to the camps. As a result of these and other repressive practices, [less than 50 percent](#) of the population of displaced Christians have been able to return to their homes since ISIS was defeated in 2017. Tens of thousands from that community remained in IDP and refugee camps under difficult and inhumane conditions. Christians who managed to return to their communities also faced [new challenges](#), including a lack of basic services, dire economic conditions, and stolen properties.

Security Challenges in Northern Iraq

The continued [presence](#) of competing armed factions, backed by different regional players with varying interests in northern Iraq, represented a challenge to improved security in 2020. [The Sinjar Security Agreement](#), signed in October, was aimed at reducing

tensions between the KRG and the IFG that contributed to the security problems in northern Iraq. However, it was widely [criticized](#) for failing to address concerns of the Yazidis—Sinjar's most vulnerable and traumatized community. For example, the agreement allowed the KRG to appoint a mayor in Sinjar without involving and consulting Yazidi locals. Religious minorities continued to fear that the KRG and IFG's failure to agree on security measures for disputed areas opened the opportunity for ISIS to reemerge in areas with significant minority populations. For example, in April 2020, the Iraqi government [raided](#) a home in Hawija, Kirkuk, where dozens of ISIS members were hiding. Additionally, Turkish [airstrikes](#) in northern Iraq represented another security challenge as ongoing military operations further destabilized already vulnerable Yazidi areas in Sinjar.

Other Religious Freedom Issues in Iraq

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in the KRG territory remained relatively consistent with the prior year, although the regional government created the new [Ministry of Minority Affairs](#) to advance the rights of both religious and ethnic minorities. Moreover, the KRG continued to host hundreds of thousands of IDPs who fled in prior years from ISIS territory—mainly from Yazidi, Christian, Turkmen, and Shabak communities. A lack of security for these communities in and along disputed areas persisted throughout the year.

Religious freedom conditions in Iraq, apart from northern Iraq, remained poor. Although Sunni-Shi'a Muslim reconciliation efforts continued, there was reportedly little progress. The IFG refused to remove blasphemy and apostasy laws and continued to deny formal recognition of religious minority and nontheist groups, including Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, humanists, Kaka'is and others. Finally, the "de-Ba'athification" [process](#), which was adopted to remove Baath party officials from the government post-2003 and has since remained a fixture in Iraqi law, continued to provide a basis for discrimination against Sunni Muslims.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2020, the U.S. government maintained support for ethnic and religious minority groups to recover and rebuild their communities through financial and programmatic support as well as civic and political engagement. Since the defeat of ISIS in 2017, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [has spent over \\$438 million](#) to help with reconstruction efforts in Iraq, including \$38 million in 2020 alone. In addition, the U.S. government provided the Iraqi government with [\\$60 million](#) to help combat the spread of COVID-19.

The U.S. government also enacted punitive measures against individuals responsible for human rights violations; for example, in January 2021, immediately after the reporting period, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on PMF Chairman and Iraq's former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh for engaging in egregious human rights abuses. U.S. government officials in Baghdad, Erbil, and Washington, DC, continued to [raise](#) religious freedom issues through bilateral engagement with their Iraqi counterparts.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan continued to improve. The government remained committed to reforming its approach to religion in conversation with U.S. counterparts; President Kassym Tokayev, who assumed the presidency in 2019, has explicitly sought to improve Kazakhstan’s record on international religious freedom. In February, government officials joined the second U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group, held at the U.S. Department of State in Washington, DC, with the participation of civilian experts and U.S. officials, including from USCIRF. The Kazakhstani government representatives presented their road map for religious legislation and oversight reform over the next two years and responded to suggestions and concerns from the U.S. side. At a third working group held virtually in November, the Kazakhstani government provided an updated version of the road map and a tentative timeline for its realization.

Problematic legislation remained in force in Kazakhstan during 2020, but significant reforms are likely in the upcoming year. Those reforms may include simplification of the registration process and a reduction in the number of founding members needed to register, removal of official approval for religious events, elimination of expert review of religious documents, and implementation of an appeals process in cases in which registration has been denied. Such reforms, if enacted, would significantly reduce Kazakhstan’s systematic limitations on religious freedom. Other positive indicators in 2020 included the government hosting a religious freedom roundtable in the capital of Nur-Sultan early in the year, prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The government also announced its intention to convene such meetings regularly across Kazakhstan in a joint effort between the Ministry of Social Development and Information

and Love Your Neighbor Community (LYNC), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that works on international religious freedom. Meanwhile, the number of administrative prosecutions for religious offenses [continued to decline](#), reaching 131 in 2020—down from 160 in 2019, 171 in 2018, and 284 in 2017.

Despite these noteworthy signs of improvement, ongoing religious freedom violations and allegations of abuse continued to plague Kazakhstan. Legislation that restricts religious freedom was the primary source of such systematic and ongoing violations. Before it enacted the 2011 religion law, Kazakhstan was one of the least repressive post-Soviet Central Asian states with regard to freedom of religion or belief. That law, however, set stringent registration requirements with high membership thresholds, and it banned or restricted unregistered religious activities, including those related to offering education, distributing literature, and training clergy. Other vague criminal and administrative statutes enable the state to punish most unauthorized religious or political activities, and religious groups have since been subject to ongoing and intrusive state surveillance. The total number of registered religious groups plummeted after 2011 as a result of that law—especially “nontraditional” groups, which declined from 48 to 16. Government experts can deny registration in a closed process, which applicant groups have no ability to appeal. For example, Scientologists have been denied status as a religion since 2012, and Ahmadiyya Muslims cannot receive official registration unless they remove “Muslim” from their community’s title. Without a clear legal framework in place to protect religious freedom for all, such abuses are likely to persist and the overall situation could deteriorate once again.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Continue engaging with the Kazakhstani government through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group to press the government of Kazakhstan to:
 - Repeal or amend its religious registration laws, in part by setting the required number of founding members at no more than 10 individuals;
 - End mandatory expert review of founding documents and religious literature or significantly reform the process to make it more transparent;
 - Cease the detention and sentencing of individuals for their peaceful religious expression and practice;
 - Hold local officials accountable for religious freedom abuses; and
- Open the Congress of the Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions in 2021 to representatives of all faiths, in cooperation with the recently founded Religious Freedom Roundtables; and
- Provide religious freedom training to law enforcement and local officials through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Kazakhstan as part of broader initiatives to combat corruption and promote good governance.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Russia and Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Anti-Cult Movement and Religious Regulation in Russia and the Former Soviet Union](#)

Background

Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia and home to the region's second-largest population, with [around 19 million citizens](#). The population is around 70 percent Sunni Muslim, 26 percent Christian (including Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses), 3 percent other (including Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas), and less than 1 percent Shi'a Muslims, mostly ethnic Azeris. A total of 3,826 officially registered religious associations represent 18 religious groups in Kazakhstan and 3,597 registered places of worship. Approximately two-thirds of the population are ethnic Kazakhs—a Turkic people group—while the rest are ethnic Slavs and other Turkic peoples, including Uzbeks and Uyghurs. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country with a large ethnic Russian population, mostly in the north.

The government is avowedly secular and seeks to control religion, which it views as a potentially destabilizing force. It maintains influence over, and preference for, what it considers the “traditional” Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence; it is generally wary of other Islamic practices emanating from the wider Muslim world. It classifies as traditional and nonthreatening other religions with a long-established presence and good relations with the government—like Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism—while viewing with suspicion newer arrivals to the region, such as evangelical Christianity and Scientology. The government is particularly concerned about the spread of religious extremism, which it defines broadly and uses to target political opponents, as well as the potential for perceived social disruption from proselytism and missionary activity. Although concerns about extremist violence are legitimate, the government's vague conception of religious extremism is applicable to any nonviolent activity it sees as potentially disruptive—even private religious practice and instruction.

Ongoing Challenges

Although the number of administrative charges has dropped, in 2020 religious minorities still [reported](#) facing intimidation tactics from government authorities, including hostile interrogations, threats of punishment, surveillance, and periodic detention. The government [seized](#) the property of several Protestant churches, groups advocating for religious freedom and broader human rights faced official [smear campaigns](#) and [fines](#), and peaceful religious minorities continued to face prosecution as [extremists](#). For example, beginning in May, the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law (KMBPCh) and other NGOs faced a concerted government [smear campaign](#), in which they were accused of trying to destabilize the country at the behest of foreign interests. Yevgeny Zhovtis, the director of KMBPCh, is a frequent and vocal critic of official religious policy; he [argued](#) in October that all restrictions on the individual right to freedom of religion and belief clearly violate the Constitution of Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Scientologists reported that members in Nur-Sultan were required to attend “preventative consultations,” where they were threatened and ordered to sign a statement denouncing and disavowing Scientology.

Corruption, particularly at the local level, remained one of the more persistent problems impeding religious freedom; for example, some religious groups reported attempts at blackmail or bribery by local officials. The solicitation of [bribes](#) by local police was reportedly a contributing factor behind deadly clashes in February when angry Kazakh mobs targeted the ethnic [Dungan](#) community, a Muslim Chinese minority. Official religious policy may have [contributed](#) to these clashes by linking Kazakh national identity with Hanafi Islam and equating “foreign” Islam with extremism; in doing so, the government has arguably helped to foster an environment hostile to religious and ethnic minorities like the Dungan.

Ethnic Kazakh Refugees from Xinjiang

The Chinese Communist Party has imprisoned large numbers of ethnic Kazakhs alongside Uyghur Muslims in China's massive concentration camps in the Xinjiang region. Partly in response to this crisis, President Tokayev signed amendments to Kazakhstan's migration law in May, changing the term used to describe ethnic [Kazakh migrants](#) from *oralman* (returnee) to *kandas* (native/blood related) as part of a broader effort to ease legal residency and citizenship for Kazakh refugees from Xinjiang. In October, four ethnic Kazakhs who had fled Xinjiang and entered Kazakhstan illegally were granted temporary [refugee status](#), marking this shift in policy. Even so, relations between Beijing and Nur-Sultan remained close; in August, the Chinese ambassador praised military cooperation between the two countries and vowed to strengthen mutual efforts to [combat extremism](#). This statement fueled concerns about China's influence in Kazakhstani security policy and the potential spread of expansive counterextremism tactics modeled on those China has used in Xinjiang.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Kazakhstan enjoyed a close partnership in 2020, including two sessions of the U.S.-Kazakhstan Working Group on Religious Freedom. In February, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo traveled to Kazakhstan and [met](#) with President Tokayev to discuss improving relations between the two countries. The then secretary also reiterated his admiration for Kazakhstan's leadership in reintegrating citizens from Syria and Iraq, and he expressed concern over the situation in neighboring Xinjiang. The U.S. government delivered \$6.2 million of [assistance](#), including essential laboratory equipment and supplies, to support Kazakhstani efforts to fight COVID-19. Meanwhile, USAID continued to support programs in Kazakhstan to promote civil society, good governance, and human rights, including efforts to foster relationships between the Kazakhstani government and [civil society](#) organizations and support partnerships for reform. In November, then [Assistant Secretary of State](#) for Educational and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce met with Kazakh and Uyghur refugees from Xinjiang during her visit to Kazakhstan, where she also discussed [bilateral engagement](#) on education and culture with government officials.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions for religious minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority in Malaysia remained largely the same as in 2019.

The Malaysian government requires members of the Sunni Muslim majority to adhere to a strict, state-approved interpretation of Islam and regulates the internal affairs of Muslims, leaving them little freedom to practice according to their conscience. The pairing of Malay ethnicity with Islam continues to infringe on the religious freedom rights of ethnic Malays. In addition, Shari'a courts have historically declared several minority Muslim groups as non-Muslim, which persistently creates a grey area for those Malays who adhere to what the government considers "deviant" forms of Islam. For example, an ongoing [court case](#) to determine whether Ahmadiyya Muslims can legally identify as Muslims remained unresolved after being remitted to the High Court in August.

In February, the two-year-old pluralist Pakatan Harapan coalition collapsed and was replaced by the Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition. The PN coalition brought together the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), a political party that has sought to incorporate corporal *hudud* penalties into the state-level Shari'a system. In a November coalition meeting, Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin stated that the PN coalition would fight secularism and liberalism and insisted that his government would hold fast against challenges to Shari'a. The transition of power has [spurred](#) an increase in judicial harassment from the police of human rights activists.

Malaysia's systematic emphasis on Sunni Muslim identity continued to place particular pressures on non-Muslim communities. On December 1, the state of Kedah in northwestern insular Malaysia demolished a Hindu temple on land ostensibly unauthorized for the building. This demolition follows a trend in recent years in which authorities have ordered the destruction of hundreds of Hindu

temples, which officials disingenuously explain as a matter of land usage to avoid framing the destruction as religiously motivated. Non-Muslim communities remain forbidden from using Arabic words that authorities claim are exclusive to Islam, such as the word "Allah". Such restriction affects the ability of Christians and others to import, print, and distribute religious materials such as Bibles. However, Malaysia's top court has set a date in 2021 to hear the case—first raised in 2008—of an indigenous Christian community's right to use such language.

Non-Muslim communities are also prohibited from proselytizing to Muslims. All religious conversions, including between non-Muslim faiths, face serious restrictions. Some converts have [won the right](#) to adopt their new religious identity openly, but only after taking the issue to the High Court. The Malaysian federal government deemed atheism unconstitutional, and those who are ethnically Malay and identify as nonreligious are at risk of criminal prosecution for apostasy. Blasphemy is criminalized at the federal level in Malaysia's secular Penal Code, and at least five states [criminalize](#) apostasy with fines, imprisonment, and/or detention in a "rehabilitation" center.

The special task force set up in June 2019 to investigate the disappearances of five individuals, including Pastor Raymond Koh and Shi'a Muslim convert Amri Che Mat, continued to delay the release of its findings throughout 2020. In November, Commissioner James Carr adopted [Pastor Koh](#) through USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project.

During the coronavirus pandemic, public and official attitudes hardened toward migrants, including Rohingya refugees. In May and June, officials temporarily banned refugees and migrants from mosques as they reopened religious buildings following the Movement Control Order issued to stop the spread of the virus. In addition, non-Muslim houses of worship, including Hindu temples and Christian churches, were not prioritized for reopening and [faced](#) different reopening times than mosques.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Malaysia on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Fund and implement training on community-based policing between the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security and their Malaysian counterparts to promote better shared practices on interacting with faith communities and protecting houses of worship and other religious sites;
- Urge the Malaysian government to repeal the federal and state-level laws criminalizing blasphemy and apostasy, to remove the constitutional link between the ethnic Malay identity and Islam, and to release the findings of the special task force investigating forced disappearances such as the case of Pastor Koh; and
- Work with Malaysia and regional partners to ensure the safety of migrants and refugees, including those fleeing ethnic and religious conflict, by facilitating access for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to refugee and migrant camps as well as by contributing to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Trust Fund for Humanitarian Relief Efforts.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Malaysia's Unwelcoming Shore for Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution](#) (in *The Diplomat*)

Background

Malaysia is a highly pluralistic society. Around 61.3 percent of the population identify as Muslim, the vast majority adhering to state-sponsored Sunni Islam. Buddhists comprise 19.8 percent; 9.2 percent are Christian; 6.3 percent are Hindu; 1.3 percent practice Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions; and about 0.8 percent identify with no religion. Although Malaysia was founded as a secular state, Article 3 of the 1957 constitution places Islam—interpreted as Sunni Islam—as the federation’s official religion, while Article 160 links Malay ethnic identity with Islam. This constitutional construct has long been used to advance social policies—many of which amount to legally mandated religious discrimination—that give ethnic Malays preferential treatment, including in education and employment, to offset historical economic disparities.

Government Regulation of Religious Practice and Identity

The federal Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) provides funding for mosques and preapproved talking points for imams. In January, guidelines from JAKIM prompted the Ministry of Education to declare the Pongal harvest festival as a Hindu religious event, raising concerns among the Malaysian Tamil community of crackdowns on celebrating the festival in public schools similar to those preventing the celebration of the Chinese New Year. JAKIM takes a proactive role in regulating religion, including monitoring perceived insults against Islam and the Prophet Muhammad as part of the country’s enforcement of blasphemy laws. It also [regulates](#) and monitors independent Islamic preachers to ensure they follow officially accepted interpretations of Islam. All Muslim students in public schools at the Form 5 level must take a course that includes federally-approved material claiming Sunni Islam as the “superior” and only acceptable form of Islam, while labeling Shi’a Islam as “deviant.” In 1996, the Fatwa Committee for Religious Affairs issued a fatwa prohibiting the proselytism, promulgation, and profession of Shi’a Islam; at least 11 of the 13 states have adopted the fatwa.

At the same time, individual states have a high degree of autonomy in regulating Islamic practice. In August, the PAS-dominated state government of Kelantan began to investigate the indigenous *Main Puteri* dance to make it “Shari’a compliant,” continuing a [trend](#) in more conservative states of banning “un-Islamic” indigenous practices such as traditional dances and dramas. JAKIM, along with states and federal territories through their individual Shari’a codes, often target the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community; for example, JAKIM runs a conversion therapy camp (*Mukhayyam*) portrayed as a job program that targets LGBTI Muslims to guide them to the “correct path.” In August, minority rights activist Nicole Fong tweeted against JAKIM efforts to “heal” the Muslim LGBTI community, prompting Director-General Datuk Paimuzi Yahya to report her for defamation. In July, Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri, minister in charge of religious affairs to the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Department

(JAWI), [ordered](#) his department to force members of the transgender community of the federal territories, including Kuala Lumpur, into religious education programs.

Religious identification on national identification cards, known as MyKad, continued to present difficulties for minority faith communities. Only Muslims’ cards visibly state their faith in print, while the cards of individuals belonging to other communities include their religious affiliation in electronic form—an easily identifiable difference that some local sources report [leads](#) to discrimination in government services. Some Malaysians who identify with or convert to non-Muslim religions have been falsely labeled as Muslim or prevented from changing their religious identity on their MyKad, which brings them under the jurisdiction of the Shari’a courts. In a positive development, the Federal Court [determined](#) that Rosiliza Ibrahim, who was born of a Muslim father and Buddhist mother, could identify as a non-Muslim, following a five-year legal battle to change her registration.

The Dual Court System

Malaysia maintains a system of two independent but equal courts: secular and religious. Muslims are subjected to general laws enacted by parliament as well as religious laws enacted by either the federal government or the legislature of the state in which they reside. This dual system enables varying levels of protection under the law based on one’s religious status. The Shari’a court system appears to place an unequal burden on women, as [evidenced](#) by the fact that Muslim women who choose not to wear a headscarf often face societal discrimination with no legal recourse. For example, in 2020, Maryam Lee—who published a book in 2019 about her choice to stop wearing the headscarf—[continued](#) to receive death threats and faced [investigation](#) by religious authorities for her decision. The legal age of children to marry [varies](#) in each state between those who are Muslim and those who are not, with lower age restrictions and fewer protections for children who are Muslim. Marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims remains illegal unless the non-Muslim partner converts.

Key U.S. Policy

Malaysia and the United States maintain strong bilateral ties. The United States is Malaysia’s [third-largest trading partner](#), and the two countries share numerous educational and cultural exchange programs. Those programs include the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP), which since 2008 has brought Muslim educational leaders to the United States in part to observe conditions for freedom of religion and belief. The two countries also continue to partner in counterterrorism efforts through information sharing, capacity-building programs for law enforcement and judicial authorities, and assistance to improve immigration security and border controls.

In March, the State Department [awarded](#) Susanna Liew, wife of Pastor Koh, the International Women of Courage Award for her advocacy on behalf of her husband and others who have been disappeared by government forces.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained the same as in 2019. The government of Nicaragua maintained its campaign against the Catholic Church, continuing a pattern of harassment that began during April 2018 protests against reforms to the public pension system. Members of the Catholic Church acted upon their religious convictions by providing sanctuary to and voicing support for [the protesters](#). Following the Church's support of the protesters, President Daniel Ortega used his government and his supporters to persecute members of the clergy, worshippers, and Catholic organizations. Many of the abuses in 2020—violent attacks on churches, intimidation of worshippers, threats and hate speech, and harassment of Catholic institutions—emulate those committed by the Ortega regime since the civil uprising.

The Ortega government harassed Catholic officials and institutions in ways that disrupted the normal functions of the Church. In September, the Diocese of Estelí [announced](#) that one of its priests had his visa cancelled. According to the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua, several other foreign-born priests who have worked in Nicaragua for decades face deportation. Additionally, the government repeatedly hampered the operations of the Church's primary charitable organization, Caritas. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, Caritas had its tax exemption status denied in April. Without the tax exemption, the organization is [unable](#) to withdraw foreign donations from customs. Additionally, the Regulation of Foreign Agents Law, passed in October, stipulates that [citizens](#) working for foreign governments, companies, foundations, or organizations are required to register as foreign agents with the Interior Ministry and must report monthly income and spending as well as the intended use of foreign funds. Among other concerns regarding the law's impact on religious organizations, observers worry it could be used to [hamper arbitrarily](#) the operations of Caritas and other foreign humanitarian organizations that receive donations from abroad.

As in preceding years, in 2020 senior members of the Ortega regime made inflammatory statements against the Catholic Church that contributed to the perilous environment in which the Church operated. For example, after President Ortega refused to initiate measures to safeguard the country against the COVID-19 pandemic and Catholic leaders expressed concern for the safety of Nicaraguans, Vice President Rosario Murillo, President Ortega's wife, [called](#) Catholic leaders "demons" who espouse hatred. Gustavo Porras Cortés, the president of the National Assembly and member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), falsely claimed on December 20 that priests beat and torture Sandinistas.

Additionally, there were numerous violent attacks on Catholic churches around the country throughout the reporting period. These attacks usually involved known or suspected Ortega supporters forcibly entering churches and committing acts of vandalism and desecration. Often, perpetrators wore Sandinista emblems or colors. The most brazen instance of violence occurred in July, when an unknown assailant set off an incendiary device in a chapel attached to the Cathedral of Managua in what Catholic officials [called](#) a premeditated assault. The arson attack resulted in extensive damage to the interior of the building, including the charring of a 400-year-old wooden crucifix in the center of the room. It was not an isolated incident; USCIRF received reports indicating that nearly a dozen smaller attacks on churches occurred in the weeks [leading](#) up to and following the arson in Managua. Vice President Murillo peddled falsehoods against the Church in the wake of the attack when she baselessly [claimed](#) that a candle [igniting](#) a curtain was responsible for the blaze, despite neither candles nor curtains existing in the structure. The lack of credible government investigations into such attacks or prosecutions for perpetrators contributes to an environment of impunity for abuses against the Catholic Church.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Nicaragua on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- In addition to existing sanctions based on human rights violations, impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Encourage multilateral organizations such as the Organization of American States to investigate religious freedom violations that occur in Nicaragua and hold to account the perpetrators or instigators of criminal acts; and
- Support and collaborate with multilateral and/or nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners to monitor religious freedom violations and hate speech against religious actors, particularly ahead of the presidential election on November 7, 2021.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold public hearings highlighting religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Factsheet: [Controlling Civil Society's Purse Strings](#)

Background

President Ortega is the head of state and head of government of the Republic of Nicaragua. He and his party, the FSLN, exercise authoritarian control over all three branches of government and the electoral process. Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 50 percent of the population, followed by Evangelical Christians at 33.2 percent, followers of unspecified religions at 13.2 percent, “other” religions (including Jews and Muslims) at 2.9 percent, and 0.7 percent adhering to no religion.

Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started in April 2018 when peaceful protests erupted after President Ortega announced reforms to the public pension system. Law enforcement responded to the protests with excessive force and repression. The Catholic Church stepped in to provide aid to protesters and mediate a National Dialogue. Since the Church refused to turn away demonstrators in need of aid and individual clergymen voiced opposition to the government, the Ortega Administration abandoned the talks and began lashing out at the Church. Over two years later, the Ortega regime’s ire against the Catholic Church has not abated. A presidential election is set for November 7, 2021, and Catholic Church officials in the country [fear](#) more violence leading up to election day.

Impunity for Violent Attacks on Churches

Attacks on Catholic churches were common occurrences throughout the country in 2020. In addition to the incendiary attack on the Cathedral of Managua, supporters of the regime threatened, vandalized, besieged, and desecrated churches across Nicaragua. Unlike in previous years, the attacks appear to have been perpetrated by citizens who support President Ortega, as opposed to law enforcement or paramilitary groups. No one—citizens, law enforcement, or paramilitary members—has been held to account for crimes committed against Catholic churches, officials, or worshippers since April 2018.

Harassment of Worshippers

Ortega supporters repeatedly entered churches prior to or during Mass to harass worshippers. On February 25, a group of agitators [entered](#) the San Felipe Apostol church in Matagalpa ten minutes before Mass to harass and film the parishioners. As parishioners and clergy scuffled with the group, a man approached the sacristan and punched him in the eye and a woman sprayed him with pepper spray. The church’s priest, Monsignor Roger Garcia, said that Sandinista “mobs” sought to take photographs of parishioners at that church in the past. On March 3, a group of Sandinistas clad in clothing the colors of the party [disrupted](#) the funeral service held at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Managua

in honor of well-known priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal. The group chanted anti-Catholic slogans, stole personal belongings of attendees, and made it difficult for Cardenal’s family to move the coffin to the hearse waiting outside. Law enforcement stood nearby the cathedral but did nothing to disperse the regime supporters. On July 19, services at two different churches in León and Matagalpa were [suspended](#) due to loud noise caused by Ortega supporters.

Vandalism of Church Property

Incidents of vandalism included smashing religious icons and stealing in [Tipitapa](#); splashing paint on religious icons and throwing away communion wafers in [Mateare](#); “breaking images, [offending] the tabernacle, trampling [communion wafers], breaking benches, and causing damage to furniture, doors and pipes” in [Nindirí](#); stealing paintings in [Managua](#); and defecating in various locations around a church in [Nindirí](#). These are only a small sample of the incidents that occurred at Catholic churches in Nicaragua in 2020.

Key U.S. Policy

In January, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo traveled to Central America to meet with Nicaraguan opposition leaders. During this meeting, then Secretary Pompeo [urged](#) President Ortega to end “repression, and to restore the fundamental civil liberties and support free and fair elections.” He also stated that the United States has provided Costa Rica with at least \$13 million to assist vulnerable populations, including Nicaraguans who fled their country to Costa Rica following the outbreak of civil unrest in April 2018. On December 2, 2020, the State Department again [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, on [March 9](#) and [June 16](#), respectively, passed resolutions supporting the Nicaraguan peoples’ pursuit of democracy and human rights and the use of tools under U.S. law to pressure the Ortega government. USCIRF had urged Congress to pass these measures. The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials and companies, though none referred to religious freedom violations. On March 5, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [imposed](#) sanctions on the Nicaraguan National Police as well as police commissioners Juan Valle Valle, Luis Alberto Perez Olivas, and Juan Pastor Urbina for engaging in serious human rights abuses against protesters. Further, on July 17 OFAC [imposed](#) sanctions on Juan Carlos Ortega Murillo, son of President Ortega; Jose Jorge Mojica Mejia; and “two companies they use in an effort to distribute regime propaganda and launder money.”

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Turkey continued to follow a troubling trajectory. In July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a decree [converting](#) back into a mosque the famous Hagia Sophia, a former church that had been serving as a museum, in a move that many denounced as divisive and hostile to Turkey’s religious minorities. While the government [took similar steps](#) to reopen as a mosque another former church, the Chora Museum, it reportedly [paused](#) those efforts. The government furthermore made little to no effort to address many longstanding religious freedom issues and it ignored the continued targeting and vandalism of religious minority properties throughout the country. Despite repeated [requests](#) by religious minority communities for permission to hold board member elections for non-Muslim foundations, the government did not permit those elections during the year. Similarly, the government disregarded [calls](#) for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and continued to [deny](#) legal personality to all religious communities. Members of the ruling party and its coalition partner [rejected](#) efforts to recognize Alevi gathering houses (*cemevleri*) as places of worship, and the government declined to resolve other religious freedom concerns for Alevis and other communities, such as their objection to compulsory religious courses and other educational policies. Although officials made a point to [meet](#) with some religious minority community leaders, the government appeared to take no subsequent action following that meeting to address those communities’ concerns. In December, Turkey’s parliament passed a law that human rights groups [warned](#) would increase governmental control over civil society, including religious groups, by [subjecting](#) them to intensified oversight and new limitations on online fundraising.

Many religious minorities continued to feel [threatened](#) in connection with incidents perpetrated by nonstate actors or due to direct pressure from the state. [Alevi](#), [Armenian](#), and [Protestant](#) communities and organizations reported receiving death threats, whereas Jews [described](#) an increase in antisemitism largely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Assyrians remained deeply [disturbed](#) by the detention and trial of Syriac Orthodox priest Sefer Bileçen (aka Father Aho) for allegedly providing food and water to Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) members, and by the apparent kidnapping of an elderly Chaldean couple—one of whom was later found dead. The Turkish government continued to [expel](#) or bar the entry into the country of foreign Protestants for posing a purported “national security threat.” Throughout the year, authorities brought politically motivated charges of blasphemy against individuals and groups, while others in official positions utilized rhetoric [characterized](#) as hate speech that denigrated nonreligious individuals and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community.

Religious sites—including places of worship and cemeteries—were subject to vandalism, damage, and, in some cases, destruction, which the government regularly fails to prevent or punish. In January, unknown individuals [broke into](#) the Pir Sultan *cemevi* in Istanbul and [graffitied](#) the interior with threatening messages. In May, an individual [attempted to set fire](#) to an Armenian church for “bringing the coronavirus,” and that same month, another person [scaled](#) the gate of another Armenian church and tore down its cross. In other instances, unknown actors [destroyed](#) a Yazidi cemetery in Mardin Province and [damaged](#) a Catholic cemetery in Trabzon. Local officials in Bursa [demolished](#) a Greek Orthodox church after many years of neglect.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and for full compliance with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief;
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Ankara and Consulates in Istanbul and Adana to track religious communities’ efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historic importance, and work with the Turkish government to ensure the protection of such sites; and
- Require a thorough review regarding the inclusion of objects that constitute the religious and cultural heritage of religious and ethnic minority communities—previously or currently residing within the territory of the Republic of Turkey—in any designated list of materials subject to import restrictions under a bilateral cultural property agreement between the United States and Turkey, and support cultural and educational exchanges that highlight the histories and contributions of those communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate consideration of Turkey’s treatment of religious minorities and broader human rights issues into its continued evaluation of the U.S.-Turkey bilateral relationship, for example by passing S. Res. 755 requesting information on the government of Turkey’s human rights practices pursuant to section 502B(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on Religious Freedom in Turkey](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Decries Decision to Change Status of the Hagia Sophia](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [U.S. Leaders Must Stand against Turkey’s Atrocities in Northern Syria](#) (in *Newsweek*)
- **Annual Report Chapter on Syria:** For information on religious freedom violations by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces in the areas they occupy in Syria.

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) that Turkey's population is approximately 82.5 million, of which 99.8 percent is Muslim; an [estimated](#) 77.5 percent majority adheres to Sunni Islam. Between 10 million and 25 million people identify as Alevi, a community that the government largely refuses to differentiate from majority Sunni Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Yazidis, and other religious communities.

The [constitution](#) defines the country as a secular state and guarantees the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. However, the government also exercises extensive control over both majority Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities through either the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which oversees the practice of Islam, or the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), which regulates other religious communities.

The Turkish government has become increasingly repressive since a [July 2016 coup attempt](#), detaining numerous journalists and perceived political opponents, including a [reported](#) 292,000 individuals affiliated with—or accused of affiliation with—the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. Turkey also remained actively engaged in or supported numerous military operations beyond its borders throughout 2020. At the end of the year, members of Turkey's significant Uyghur diaspora community remained [concerned](#) about possible deportation to China, as the Chinese Communist Party [pursued](#) the adoption of a bilateral extradition treaty with Turkey.

Government Antisemitism and Rhetoric against Minorities

Throughout the year, government rhetoric at various levels increasingly [targeted](#) religious minorities and nonreligious individuals and promoted a "conquest mentality" that not only ostracized those communities but also risked encouraging hate crimes against them. For example, in November, *Diyanet* President Ali Erbaş [stated](#) during an opening ceremony for a mosque that "all manner of evil can be expected from those who don't believe in the afterlife," prompting Turkey's Atheism Association to open a criminal complaint for "targeting nonbelievers." In a January speech [considered](#) one of the most antisemitic incidents of the year, President Erdoğan [lashed out](#) at Muslim majority countries that normalized relations with Israel and celebrated it with "those with kippahs on their heads."

In July, after [recent hints](#) and [multiple threats](#) to do so, President Erdoğan signed a decree [converting](#) the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque after a court revoked the historic site's status as a museum. During the first Friday prayers held at the former Greek Orthodox cathedral, *Diyanet* President Erbaş held aloft a sword as a "symbol of

conquest" that many [decried](#) for the marginalizing message it sent to Turkey's religious minorities.

Politically Motivated Blasphemy Charges

Authorities continued to threaten or pursue blasphemy charges under Article 216(3) of the Penal Code, which penalizes "openly insulting the religious values held by a segment of society." In April, authorities [took into custody](#) former editor Hakan Aygün for social media posts in which he used religious wordplay to criticize President Erdoğan's COVID-19 fundraising campaign; his trial was ongoing at the end of the reporting period. That same month, the Ankara Prosecutor's Office [launched a retaliatory investigation](#) into the Ankara Bar Association for characterizing anti-LGBTI statements by *Diyanet* President Erbaş as hate speech. Following an incident in May in which hackers [played](#) the song "Bella Ciao" from the minarets of mosques in Izmir, local authorities detained a handful of people for "insulting religious values" by sharing and "[praising](#)" videos of the episode on social media. Among those [detained](#) was former opposition party politician Banu Özdemir, who had tweeted about the incident. During the year, authorities also [investigated](#) and [prosecuted](#) journalist Enver Aysever for posting online a caricature that mocked religious figures.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey are allies as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and [cooperate](#) on international security concerns. Despite this cooperation, however, several issues continued to plague the bilateral relationship, including U.S. concerns regarding Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system. Such concerns prompted Members of Congress to [adopt](#) legislation requiring the imposition of sanctions against Turkey under the [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act](#) (CAATSA), and in December, the United States [sanctioned](#) Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries.

The U.S. government regularly raised religious freedom matters in Turkey and frequently engaged with representatives of Turkey's religious minorities. In July, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [urged](#) Turkey to maintain the Hagia Sophia as a museum. Following the government's decision to convert the site into a mosque, then Vice President Michael R. Pence [reiterated](#) a call for it to remain accessible to all. In October, head of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Ambassador Phillip T. Reeker [traveled](#) to Turkey and [met](#) with Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I. In November, then Secretary Pompeo also [visited](#) Turkey to discuss religious freedom; he [met](#) Patriarch Bartholomew, [toured](#) the Rüstem Paşa Mosque, and [discussed](#) regional interfaith peace efforts with Archbishop Paul Fitzpatrick Russell, Apostolic Nuncio to Turkey. After the reporting period, in January 2021, the United States and Turkey [signed](#) a bilateral cultural property agreement to curb the looting and trafficking of cultural property.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positively. Over the course of the year, the government registered at least eight non-Muslim religious organizations, [ended](#) a de facto ban on children attending mosques, [interceded](#) to prevent the eviction and demolition of a synagogue located in Tashkent, and released some religious prisoners. Government officials continued to engage closely with the United States and other international partners on religious freedom concerns, particularly the ongoing efforts to reform the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 religion law). On multiple occasions, the *Oliy Majlis*, Uzbekistan’s parliament, invited international observers—including USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief—to participate in open parliamentary discussions of the draft law. In August, the government formally requested an opinion on the draft from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. In October, the two organizations [issued](#) a joint opinion that criticized the draft because it “maintains major restrictions and suffers from deficiencies that are incompatible with international human rights standards.” Although the government stated at the end of the year that it was still considering some recommendations provided by the ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and others, it was unwilling to accept the more substantive revisions required to bring the draft law into full compliance with international standards. On the contrary, the government stated that it will preserve in the law many problematic provisions, including those prohibiting unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and missionary activity. According to the draft, the law also will continue to set difficult and potentially discretionary registration requirements, place limitations on the location of religious

rites and ceremonies, and subject all religious literature and related materials to official review and approval.

Reports throughout the year indicated that authorities in Uzbekistan continued to harass, detain, and imprison Muslims who practiced Islam independently of strict state controls or possessed unauthorized or allegedly “extremist” sermons and other religious texts in print or electronic form. In March, human rights activist Musajon Bobojonov was [arrested](#) and sentenced to five days in prison for conducting a *nikah*, an Islamic marriage ceremony, without state permission. In April, authorities visited Dr. Alimardon Sultonov following an inquiry he made about the prevalence of COVID-19 cases in the area, [seized](#) his computer for containing illegal religious texts, and [sentenced](#) him to 14 months restricted freedom. In December, authorities pulled Shi’a Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov from a taxi, brought him in for questioning, and forcibly gained access to his phone where they discovered religious materials. It was unclear by the end of the year whether he would face charges. Although President Shavkat Mirziyoyev issued multiple pardons releasing and reducing the sentences of many religious prisoners throughout the year—including releasing prisoners [Aramais Avakian](#) and [Ruhiddin Fahriddinov](#), who were included in [USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#)—a few thousand religious prisoners are estimated to remain in prison. Moreover, in 2020 the government [arrested](#) an undetermined number of individuals under broad and ill-defined charges of “extremism” that many observers viewed with skepticism given Uzbekistan’s “history of alleging extremism accusations to target political opposition” and religious individuals. In March, the United Nations Human Rights Committee [expressed](#) concern about the persistence of torture in prisons and other detention facilities and the use of arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture against independent Muslims.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the State Department’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards and encourage the government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Press at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Allocate funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and U.S. Embassy in Tashkent to provide litigation support to individuals and religious communities prosecuted in connection with their peaceful religious activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Podcast:** [How Far Has Tashkent Gone in Greater Respect for Religious Rights?](#) (in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*)
- **Issue Update:** [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Legal Reform Efforts in Uzbekistan, Urges Conformity with International Standards](#)
- **Country Update:** [Assessing Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan](#)

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) that roughly 88 percent of Uzbekistan's population identifies as Muslim, while Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates that between 93 and 94 percent of the population is Muslim. The majority of Muslims in Uzbekistan are Sunni, while approximately 1 percent are Shi'a. Around 3.5 percent of the population is Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 3 percent comprises atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Protestants.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has sought to enact a number of legal and policy reforms to improve conditions for religious freedom and actively address some concerns raised primarily at the international level. Despite these efforts, however, and although the constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, the government largely preserved its interest in maintaining extensive state control over the practice of religion. Various officials remained actively involved in the effort to revise the 1998 religion law, but they did not pass an amended version of that law during 2020 and appeared likely to reject many of the recommendations that the ODIHR and the Venice Commission put forward. In addition, the Administrative Code and Criminal Code also continued to limit and allow for the punishment of religious activity that the government had not expressly sanctioned.

Legal Restrictions and Reforms

The government of Uzbekistan first pledged to revise the country's 1998 religion law in May 2018 with the parliament's adoption of a "roadmap" to improve religious freedom conditions. Initial versions of a revised draft law made some important improvements by lowering the number of persons required to register a local religious organization from 100 to 50, reducing the time to process registration applications, and [eliminating](#) a formal prohibition against wearing religious clothing in public, among others. However, despite the government's continued engagement with international partners and other interlocutors who advised additional revisions to make that law compliant with international standards, officials remained adamant that under the amended law they would not allow any unregistered religious activity, missionary activity, or private teaching of religion. Other aspects of the draft law also raised concerns, such as new and potentially discretionary requirements that religious communities seeking registration obtain a "letter of consent" from the government's Committee on Religious Affairs and a "letter of guarantee" from local authorities—as the text of the draft law specified no criteria for either the provision or denial of such letters.

Government Control of Islam and Imprisonment of Muslims

Officials in Uzbekistan remained most preoccupied with maintaining control over the practice of Islam in the country. Although the government made some progress regarding the ability of non-Muslim religious minorities to practice their beliefs—including by registering

[some](#) Christian communities and upholding a ban on police raids—it devoted comparatively less effort to easing restrictions on Muslim religious practice. On the contrary, one imam at a mosque in Tashkent [said](#) that "all mosques in Uzbekistan are under constant video surveillance" to monitor the ways attendees pray and worship, and that a person who "ignores the government's policy in the religious sphere can find themselves behind bars." The nongovernmental organization Forum 18 [reported](#) that in multiple instances authorities searched Muslims' homes for unauthorized or banned religious texts, often seizing even those texts that are officially permitted. In the beginning of the year, Uzbekistan significantly [expanded](#) its list of banned religious literature and websites to include, among other things, a number of poems and materials critical of the government's stance on Islam. Muslims frequently faced charges of "extremism" or terrorism, and they were prosecuted under various provisions of the Criminal Code—such as Articles 244.1 and 244.2—for possessing such literature in either print or electronic form or for [meeting](#) to discuss Islam. By the end of 2020, an undisclosed number of religious prisoners remained imprisoned, including [Khayrullo Tursunov](#), who is included in [USCIRF's ForB Victims List](#). However, one source indicated that the government has released as many as 1,600 religious prisoners since 2016.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan pursued an expanded bilateral relationship in 2020. In February, the State Department [released](#) a new Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025 that underscored continued U.S. commitment to the region, including through the promotion of rule of law reform and respect for human rights. In September, then USAID Acting Administrator John Barsa [announced](#) the opening of a new bilateral USAID Mission in Uzbekistan. At the conclusion of the State Department's Annual Bilateral Consultations with Uzbekistan in November, the two sides [announced](#) that they would upgrade those discussions in 2021 to the status of a Strategic Partnership Dialogue.

The United States also continued to prioritize religious freedom through sustained high-level engagement with the government of Uzbekistan. In February, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [traveled](#) to Uzbekistan where he [met](#) with religious leaders to discuss reforms, and that same month he [urged](#) Uzbekistan to continue its "good work in granting greater degrees of religious freedom to [its] own people." Over the course of the year, the United States [worked closely](#) with the government of Uzbekistan to reform its 1998 religion law and to [advocate](#) for the release of religious prisoners. On December 2, the State Department [removed](#) Uzbekistan from its Special Watch List "based on significant, concrete progress," two years after delisting it from the department's list of Countries of Particular Concern. Despite the State Department's decision to take Uzbekistan off the Special Watch List, USCIRF concludes that the violations during 2020 remained sufficiently severe to meet IRFA's standard for inclusion on that list.

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Why is Uzbekistan still in this report? Very few countries have ever engaged as proactively as Uzbekistan has with the international community. Its progress is significant and worthy of commendation. Uzbekistan is an example to other countries.

As I read it, among the reasons for Uzbekistan remaining on USCIRF's list: (1) the country has not met the international community's expectations when it comes to the passage of the law mentioned in this report; (2) there remains among some authority figures in Uzbekistan a visceral bias against its citizens changing religions; and (3) there is an ongoing need to review any relevant cases of those individuals actually imprisoned on the basis of religion alone.

I understand the procedural complexities with the first and third concerns, but I find the second issue very easy to solve. Uzbekistan's authorities, including its religious leaders, need to make it clear they actually believe in the celebrated Islamic teaching that "there is no compulsion in religion" and acknowledge—as all Abrahamic faiths do—that the freedom of choice is a divine gift (see Section 2 of the "Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration"). It may be that Uzbekistan's authorities are somehow confusing coercive proselytization with the freedom of religion and belief. Surely this at least can be overcome, and it should be overcome.

OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENTS

COVID-19 and Religious Freedom

Governments responded with [sweeping action](#) to the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. While many of these restrictions were justifiable under public health exceptions [defined](#) in international law, some restrictions harmed religious minorities or otherwise violated freedom of religion or belief. In Sri Lanka, authorities insisted on the [cremation](#) of those who died from COVID-19, [including](#) Muslims for whom the practice is religiously prohibited. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) [cites](#) a lack of evidence that cremation of COVID-19 victims is necessary for public health reasons. USCIRF [expressed](#) concern about this requirement, and [welcomed](#) its lifting in early 2021. Vietnam [arrested](#) members of the Ha Mon religious group on charges of “sabotaging implementation of solidarity practices.” In [Pakistan](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), government authorities indicated Shi’a religious communities were responsible for the spread of coronavirus and subjected some neighborhoods and localities to stricter lockdown measures. On a positive note, however, in several countries, as part of efforts to reduce prison populations for health reasons, nonviolent offenders, including prisoners of conscience, were furloughed or sent to house arrest.

The pandemic also fostered a wave of misinformation targeting religious minorities. Despite being obligated to do so under international law, many governments failed to respond adequately to this misinformation. In India, for example, Muslims were [accused](#) of spreading COVID-19, leading to a reported increase in attacks on members of the community. In April, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, [issued a statement](#) warning that the pandemic has precipitated a “flare-up in existing religious intolerance in many countries.” For example, USCIRF received reports of numerous anti-Hindu incidents in Bangladesh that occurred with impunity, particularly during COVID-19 lockdowns.

As reported at a [USCIRF panel](#) in September, a rise in antisemitism also coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19, particularly in Europe. In Germany, protests against public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 [involved](#) the invocation of [Holocaust imagery](#) and antisemitic conspiracy theories about mandatory vaccination. Social media users in France [used](#) antisemitic [tropes](#) to criticize Jewish former health minister Agnes Buzyn, and a Polish Holocaust revisionist [claimed](#) that COVID-19 was being used to introduce “Jewish” values into “Western Christian culture.”

Attacks on Houses of Worship

The desecration or destruction of houses of worship continued around the world in 2020. As part of its ongoing campaign against the Uyghur

Muslim minority, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [destroyed](#) and closed mosques and shrines and removed religious symbols as well. It also [destroyed](#) a thousand-year-old Buddhist temple in Shangxi Province as well as [Taoist](#) temples across the country. The CCP continued its ongoing [demolition](#) of churches and [removal of crosses](#) from church buildings, affecting both government-sanctioned and underground Catholic and Protestant churches.

Several other countries experienced attacks on churches in 2020. Weeks after a terrorist beheaded a teacher in France for showing images in class of the Prophet Muhammad, a man [killed](#) three people in a church in Nice. In Azerbaijan, security forces party to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh allegedly conducted [two strikes](#) on a church. During protests related to a constitutional referendum in [Chile](#), one church was firebombed and another set alight.

In Pakistan, armed men [attacked](#) a church in Punjab, and a mob [attacked](#) Christians at a Christmas celebration at a church in Lahore.

Also, a mob destroyed a [Hindu temple](#) in northwestern Pakistan and [attacked](#) the construction site of the first Hindu temple in Islamabad. Sikh [gurdwaras](#) also came under attack in 2020. In Pakistan, protesters [surrounded](#) a [gurdwara](#) in Nankana Sahib and threatened to overrun the site.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked a [gurdwara in Kabul](#), killing 25 Sikh worshippers.

The government of Vietnam continued the [expropriation](#) and destruction of property belonging to the Catholic Church, and the government worked with state-backed Cao Dai groups to forcibly [take over](#) temples belonging to the independent Cao Dai.

In November, Eritrean troops fighting in Ethiopia’s northern region of Tigray allegedly [killed hundreds](#) of people in the holy city of Aksum, a city of major significance for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. Close by, fighters also shelled and looted the [al-Nejashi Mosque](#), one of the oldest mosques in the world believed to have been built during the time of the Prophet Muhammad by the first Muslims to migrate to Africa.

In Burkina Faso, an unknown assailant threw a flammable bottle into a mosque in the capital city in November, reportedly wounding six people. Witnesses to the event reported that a note left on the ground nearby the attack read: “[Close the mosque or we’ll launch grenades at you.](#)” In February, unidentified gunmen [attacked a church](#) during Mass in the village of Pansi in the Yagha region, killing 24 people, including a pastor.

In recognition of increasing attacks on houses of worship, in January 2021, after the reporting period, the UN General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) condemning attacks on religious sites.

The pandemic also fostered a wave of misinformation targeting religious minorities.

Political Unrest Leading to Religious Freedom Violations

In 2020, several post-Soviet countries experienced political unrest that prompted the emergence of religious freedom violations. In August, the reelection of President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, widely viewed as fraudulent, was quickly followed by sustained protests across the country that drew hundreds of thousands despite brutal government crackdowns. The [Catholic Church](#) organized some of those protests, spoke out against regime violence, and protected protesters within its facilities. In August, state media responded to this participation by stopping the broadcast of Catholic Mass on Sundays. Belarusian officials blocked Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz from reentering the country after a short trip to Poland, eventually [annulling](#) his passport. Despite his readmission on Christmas Eve, the archbishop promptly [resigned](#) in January 2021. In September, the authorities deported a long-serving Catholic priest without explanation and have since [harassed](#), fined, and detained other priests. Other religious communities faced similar consequences: for example, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church dismissed [Metropolitan Pavel](#), the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) in August, after he visited protesters in the hospital and spoke out against regime violence.

In October, Kyrgyzstan experienced a political revolution, with resulting unrest leading to religious freedom restrictions. The former Kyrgyz president was quickly replaced by Sadyr Japarov, a jailed politician who was freed during the uprising. Japarov's base is highly nationalistic, and his ascension heralds an [authoritarian shift](#) in what has historically been the most democratic former Soviet republic in Central Asia. Among his first decrees were several that ordered educators and the media to promote "traditional" moral, family, and spiritual values. He also reportedly plans to introduce Islamic [education](#) in Kyrgyz schools while characterizing minority religions like Christianity and Buddhism as foreign.

Political unrest in Yemen continued to undermine the religious freedom of Jews, Baha'is, and Christians severely, especially in areas controlled by the Houthis. Since 2014, the Houthis have sought greater political influence and control in Yemen, all while espousing the slogan "Allah is great/Death to America/Death to Israel/ Curses on the Jews/ Victory to Islam." In 2020, Jewish prisoner of conscience Libi Salem Musa Marhabi [remained](#) in prison even though a court had ordered his release. Despite the [release](#) of several Baha'is from Houthi prisons, the community [remained](#) a target of regular persecution throughout the year. Christians reportedly faced an [uptick](#) in violent attacks as well.

Blasphemy Laws

There were many [changes](#) to blasphemy laws around the world in 2020. Some of these changes were positive. Early in the year, Ireland [abolished](#) its blasphemy laws. [Scotland](#) also announced in April it would repeal its blasphemy law, though debate endured on whether the hate crimes bill replacing the law would allow for criticism of religion. In July, [Sudan](#) decriminalized apostasy and eliminated flogging as a punishment for blasphemy, although the blasphemy law remained in force.

Other countries actively enforced blasphemy laws in 2020. In Sri Lanka, after a Buddhist monk filed a complaint citing the country's blasphemy laws, police [summoned](#) a nontheist activist and told him not to speak about Buddhism. Sri Lankan authorities [charged](#) a writer under these laws for posting a short story on Facebook deemed critical of Buddhism. In Morocco, officials [charged](#) an actor under blasphemy laws for posting a video on social media deemed critical of Islam. A court in Morocco [sentenced](#) a member of the Yousoufia city council to six months in prison over a Facebook post about Islam. In Egypt, a court [sentenced](#) a man to prison for managing a Facebook page that promoted atheism, and security forces [detained](#) a teacher for promoting Qur'anism. Poland used [blasphemy](#) laws to charge lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) protesters in August 2020. In Brazil, a judge ruled that a Netflix movie depicting Jesus as gay be removed on the [grounds](#) that it hurt "the honor of millions of Catholics," though Brazil's supreme court later [overturned](#) the order.

Global Antisemitism

In 2020, far-right (including neo-Nazis), far-left, and Islamist extremists increasingly threatened Jewish communities in Europe. The Nordic Resistance Movement [harassed](#) Jews in 20 cities across four Scandinavian countries during the week leading up to Yom Kippur, utilizing antisemitic posters and confronting Jewish worshippers outside of synagogues. In Germany, the government began to examine closely the [extent](#) to which individuals associated with the far right are represented in the country's [security forces](#). In one instance, 29 officers were [suspended](#) for sharing images of Hitler and violent neo-Nazi propaganda in multiple group chats. [Nationalist](#) groups and other far-right extremists held marches in [Spain](#) and [Ukraine](#) featuring antisemitic imagery and chants.

[Germany](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) again witnessed record levels of antisemitic incidents throughout the year. The chief of German domestic intelligence [acknowledged](#) that nearly all popular Islamist organizations that are active in Germany include antisemitism as a part of their ideology. In October, the British Equality and Human Rights Commission found that the British Labour Party had [failed](#) to respond sufficiently to far-left antisemitism within the party, [including](#) Holocaust denial and Rothschild conspiracy theories posted by party members on social media in previous years. Throughout Europe, Jews faced threats to ban or limit ritual slaughter, physical attacks, discrimination, and rampant vandalism. In France, in a July television interview, the leader of the far-left La France Insoumise party [accused](#) Jews of being responsible for the death of Jesus.

In October, USCIRF [reported](#) on the importance of ritual slaughter to Jewish individuals who follow their faith's dietary laws. Yet in a far-reaching decision, the Court of Justice of the European Union (EU) [ruled](#) in December that "member countries may ban the practice of ritual slaughter in order to promote animal welfare." Additionally, the Polish government came [close](#) to ending its \$1.8 billion kosher/halal meat export [industry](#), which would severely hamper the ability of Jews and Muslims in neighboring countries to access religiously permissible meat.

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Jews faced physical attacks and threats of violence at places of worship and in public throughout the year. In Germany, a man with a shovel badly [injured](#) a Jewish student leaving a synagogue in Hamburg on Sukkot. Likewise, a man wielding an ax [entered](#) a synagogue compound in Ukraine, though security guards stopped him before he entered the building. Assaultants attacked Jewish families in [Argentina](#) and [France](#) as well as a [Brazilian](#) man wearing a kippah.

Jews were also victims of xenophobic discrimination. Antisemitism [featured](#) heavily in Poland's presidential campaign. There were [multiple instances](#) reported of Jews being [refused](#) service due to their faith, Jewish professionals [enduring](#) antisemitic [stereotypes](#) in their places of work, and even a police [request](#) for a list of all Jews living in a Ukrainian city. Jewish cemeteries were frequent targets for acts of vandalism, including spray-painted Nazi rhetoric and imagery, smashed headstones, and [stolen property](#). A spate of such attacks occurred in Greece in the [fall](#) and [winter](#), and cemeteries in at least eight other countries around the world suffered similar circumstances.

Textbooks in countries whose governments profess Islam as an official religion continued to contain antisemitic content. Iran's textbooks portrayed Jews as "conspirational" and referenced "Jewish gold hoarders and capitalists." Saudi Arabia's textbooks, while significantly improved from previous years, still [discussed](#) Jewish "treachery" and referred to Christians and Jews alike as "infidels."

There were promising signs in 2020 as well. France, a country normally associated with ever-increasing numbers of yearly antisemitic incidents, [recorded](#) a 50 percent drop in such cases though France also had some of the most enduring lockdown policies in Europe to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. At [least three countries](#) announced the creation of positions similar to the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, as well as the [UN](#) and the [Council of Europe](#). Albania, Argentina, Italy, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay and organizations like the Global Imams Council adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's "[Working Definition of Antisemitism](#)." Crucially, numerous countries and multi-lateral organizations announced [Holocaust](#) and [antisemitism](#) awareness education programs, millions of dollars in [security funding](#), and [comprehensive strategies](#) for combating antisemitism. USCIRF held two events on antisemitism in 2020: a [hearing](#) entitled "Global Efforts to Combat Antisemitism" and a [virtual event](#) focused on antisemitism in Europe amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's International Influence on Religious Freedom and Human Rights

While the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policies and actions have resulted in severe persecution of religious groups within China's borders, its growing overseas influence and activities also negatively affected religious freedom and other human rights far beyond. According to [Freedom House](#), China's transnational repression campaign is by far the "most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive"; Human Rights Watch similarly declared that China "[remained](#) the biggest threat to global human rights" in 2020.

The CCP government exercises its broad economic and geopolitical influence to pressure foreign countries near and far to accept its demands without concern for human rights. Tactics include harassment, intimidation, and detainment of human rights activists, ethnic and religious minorities, and other critics and dissidents. For instance, in 2020, reports [revealed](#) that Turkey—a country with linguistic and cultural ties to the Uyghurs and home to thousands of Uyghur refugees—has increasingly yielded to China's pressure, reportedly silenced Uyghur critics in Turkey, and even [repatriated](#) Uyghur refugees to China where they face atrocities that the U.S. government has deemed genocide and crimes against humanity. Furthermore, there are growing concerns that Turkey might enter into an [extradition agreement](#) with China that could result in more forcible repatriations of Uyghur refugees. Many Uyghur refugees in countries such as [Indonesia](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), and [Thailand](#) remained in similarly precarious situations in 2020. In addition, in February 2020, then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo revealed that China had [pressured](#) several countries to not join the newly established International Religious Freedom Alliance.

The CCP government also exerted pressure on international companies, including U.S. companies, to disregard human rights abuses in, and international scrutiny over, their business operations in China. Following growing concerns over U.S. companies' complicity both in facilitating China's digital authoritarianism targeting ethnic and religious minorities in China and Uyghur forced labor in their Chinese supply chains, the U.S. government enacted and enforced domestic laws and regulations to curb human rights abuses involving U.S. companies. In retaliation, the Chinese government [issued](#) countermeasures in January 2021, effectively forcing U.S. companies to choose between complying with U.S. laws and Chinese laws.

The CCP has intensified its covert influence and infiltration activities overseas through the United Front Work Department (UFWD), with top CCP leaders issuing directives. Termed a "[magic weapon](#)" of the CCP, the UFWD has undergone significant reorganization under CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping with a renewed focus on overseas Chinese populations, ethnic minority affairs, and religious groups. For example, U.S. authorities [arrested](#) a Tibetan New York Police Department officer in September 2020 for spying on the local Tibetan diaspora community. The officer's family members reportedly work for the CCP, the government, and the military, while one of his handlers was identified as a Chinese consulate official with direct ties to the UFWD. Similar [incidents](#) of surveillance and intimidation targeting Tibetans in the diaspora also took place in Sweden, Switzerland, and Canada.

In August 2020, the State Department [designated](#) the Confucius Institute U.S. Center (CIUS)—the de facto headquarters for all Confucius Institutes operating in the United States, which have close ties to the UFWD—as a foreign mission, following widespread concerns over censorship and threats to academic freedom that have implications for religious freedom. For example, the Confucius Institutes' influence operations in the [United States](#) and in [other countries](#) have in the past resulted in universities rescinding speaking invitations to the Dalai Lama. In 2020, [many](#) U.S. universities [severed](#) their ties with the Confucius Institutes.

The CCP government also exerted pressure on international companies, including U.S. companies, to disregard human rights abuses in, and international scrutiny over, their business operations in China.

Alarming, China also has been [exporting](#) both its internet governance model and advanced surveillance technology and equipment to countries—such as Belarus, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe—where repressive governments actively persecute and oppress human rights activists and political opponents. Honed and refined at home—specifically in the repression of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet—China’s digital authoritarianism has become attractive to repressive regimes worldwide that may seek to replicate a “China model” in their own countries that could result in religious freedom violations. Chinese technology companies that have intimate ties to the CCP, such as Huawei and ZTE, play an important role in implementing and deploying such technology abroad.

China’s coercive policies at home have negative transnational implications for religious freedom. In some cases, such policies amount to the active aiding and abetting of religious freedom violations in other countries. Uyghur, Kazakh, and other Turkic Muslims in foreign countries [reported in 2020](#) that Chinese authorities harassed them through messaging apps and phone calls, and by targeting their relatives back home, to silence and suppress their speech and activities overseas. Chinese authorities also [rescinded](#) their passports to lure them back to China where they faced persecution, such as internment. In addition, Chinese authorities continued to carry out a policy of forced [repatriation](#) of North Korean refugees in China who faced severe persecution upon their return to North Korea, in many cases due to their exposure and connection to Christianity and to South Korean Christian missionaries who play a crucial role in assisting them to escape North Korea.

Lastly, the Chinese government and its allies continued to [weaken](#) and subvert the international human rights system and norms within the United Nations (UN) by [arguing](#) that economic progress

should precede respect for individual rights, including the right to religious freedom. Additionally, following its election as a UN Human Rights Council member in October 2020, China attempted to [frame](#) international human rights law as merely a matter of “state-to-state” relations by emphasizing so-called “[mutually beneficial cooperation](#)” and “constructive dialogue,” thereby downplaying states’ responsibility to protect human rights. By doing so, China not only attempted to minimize international scrutiny over its human rights abuses, but also to further its increasing efforts to promote a distorted concept of human rights to other countries in the international fora. Those efforts could have far-reaching implications around the world, particularly in countries and regions where authoritarian regimes suppress human rights and religious freedom.

For example, in October 2020, Germany led 39 countries at the UN to [condemn](#) jointly China’s abusive policies toward ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet. In response, China rallied 45 countries to [support](#) its abusive policies, including some with records of severe human rights abuses, such as North Korea, Russia, Iran, and Eritrea, along with Organization of Islamic Cooperation members such as Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. China reportedly pressured some Western diplomats not to support the statement made by those 39 countries. Moreover, it has [exercised](#) its veto power as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to protect Burma from international scrutiny over its brutal treatment of Rohingya Muslims.

China is unapologetic as it increasingly disregards international rules, norms, and criticism of its actions and violations of human rights. Indeed, if left unchallenged and unchecked, China will continue to erode and undermine the universal human rights system with an emboldened sense of impunity.

China not only attempted to minimize international scrutiny over its human rights abuses, but also to further its increasing efforts to promote a distorted concept of human rights. . . .

KEY USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS IMPLEMENTED IN 2020 AND EARLY 2021

The [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended](#) (IRFA) 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 to making recommendations, USCIRF’s mandate was recently amended to include tracking the U.S. government’s implementation of USCIRF’s recommendations. While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights the key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2020 and early 2021, including several longstanding recommendations. The list is not exhaustive, but instead is meant to showcase particularly impactful U.S. government actions that implemented USCIRF’s recommendations. Unless otherwise noted, the recommendations highlighted here were included in [USCIRF’s 2020 Annual Report](#).

Designating the Worst Violators

- In December 2020, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) 10 countries as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) under IRFA, all of which USCIRF recommended for such designation. The State Department designated Nigeria as a CPC for the first time, an action USCIRF had recommended every year since 2009.
- In December, the State Department also placed four countries on its Special Watch List (SWL) under IRFA, two of which—Cuba and Nicaragua—were recommended by USCIRF for such placement. While USCIRF recommended that Russia be designated as a CPC, its placement on the State Department’s SWL is a recognition of the severity of the religious freedom violations occurring there.
- The State Department also designated in December five entities as “entities of particular concern” (EPCs) pursuant to USCIRF’s recommendations, including for the first time Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an entity that USCIRF had recommended be designated as an EPC since 2019.

Increasing the Use of Targeted Sanctions

- USCIRF has repeatedly called on the U.S. government to increase the use of human rights related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses. Notably, a higher percent of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Global Magnitsky) sanctions issued in 2020 were in response to religious freedom abuses than in previous years. Global Magnitsky [sanctions](#) were issued against Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and former Political and Legal Affairs Commission chief Zhu Hailun, both of whom were explicitly named in USCIRF’s 2020 Annual Report. USCIRF also called for the use of targeted sanctions against perpetrators of religious freedom violations in Russia and [Iran](#); this report’s IRFA Implementation section details the implementation of these sanctions.
- USCIRF continues to advocate for the increased use of targeted sanctions as a tool to deter religious freedom violations. In January 2021, after the reporting period, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chairman and Iraq’s former national security advisor Falih al-Fayyadh for engaging in egregious human rights abuses.
- USCIRF [recommended](#) that the U.S. government urge U.S. allies to condemn publicly China’s treatment of religious minorities in conjunction with a multilateral effort to coordinate targeted sanctions against Chinese leaders. Pursuant to this recommendation, in March 2021, the U.S. government [imposed](#) Global Magnitsky sanctions on two Chinese officials for their involvement in atrocities committed against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang. These sanctions were issued in conjunction with the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union, which concurrently sanctioned abusers to ensure global accountability for these violations.

2020 State Department Designations Pursuant to USCIRF Recommendations	
CPC	Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan
SWL	Cuba, Nicaragua
EPC	al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, the Taliban, HTS

Increasing Prioritization of Religious Freedom

- The [executive order](#) on [Advancing International Religious Freedom](#), signed by then President Donald J. Trump in June, implemented several of USCIRF's [longstanding recommendations](#) related to the prioritization of religious freedom abroad in U.S. foreign policy. This included increasing related foreign assistance and developing an overall strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad and country-specific action plans.

Filling IRF-Related Appointments

- USCIRF for years had urged successive administrations to establish and fill a National Security Council (NSC) staff position dedicated to international religious freedom (IRF), as urged by IRFA and reiterated by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016. In February 2020, the Trump administration [appointed](#) Sarah Makin-Acciani to be the first-ever senior director for IRF on the NSC staff.
- USCIRF [repeated](#) its call to fill the vacancy for a special coordinator for Tibetan issues during 2020. In October, the Trump administration appointed then Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor [Robert A. Destro](#) to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues, which had been vacant since January 2017.

Increasing the Refugee Ceiling

- In recent years, USCIRF has consistently [called](#) for a return of the annual refugee resettlement ceiling to the previously established level of 95,000. In February 2021, President Joseph R. Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022, which begins on October 1, 2021. The Biden administration also [notified](#) Congress that it intended to raise the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 to 62,500 from 15,000.

Raising IRF Issues in Bilateral and Multilateral Engagement

- In certain contexts, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. administration raise religious freedom issues consistently in its bilateral engagement. In line with these recommendations, U.S. government officials raised concerns with their counterparts in many countries, including Eritrea, Iraq, Sudan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. Sustained U.S. attention likely contributed to or encouraged tangible actions and/or improvements to religious freedom conditions in some of these countries. This includes the government of Eritrea's eased restrictions on the Baha'i and Jewish communities and the Greek Orthodox Church, the government of Sudan's invitation to the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief to visit the country and assess religious freedom conditions, and the government of Uzbekistan's ongoing work to revise the 1998 religion law to comply with international human rights standards.
- USCIRF provided suggestions to the U.S. government for opportunities to guide foreign countries toward improving religious freedom conditions. This included, for example, USCIRF's recommendations that the administration continue to provide guidance and training for Bahrain's security services to prepare for Ashura

observances in ways that protect observers' religious freedom rights and minimize the potential for the outbreak of violence. As detailed in the Introduction to this report, Shi'a Muslims in Bahrain were generally able to observe the Ashura holiday in 2020.

- USCIRF has [recommended](#) that the U.S. government encourage foreign governments to create positions like the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism and also urge the UN to create a position to engage with Jewish communities and monitor antisemitism globally. Pursuant to these recommendations and resulting U.S. government action, [Canada](#), the [Netherlands](#), and [Romania](#) created such positions in 2020. Further, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [appointed](#) Spanish diplomat Miguel Ángel Moratinos as the UN Focal Point in charge of monitoring antisemitism and enhancing a system-wide response to global antisemitism.
- USCIRF [recommended](#) that the U.S. government support the UN Alliance of Civilization in the implementation of the [UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Holy Sites](#). In January 2021, the United States [supported](#) a UN General Assembly [resolution](#) condemning attacks on religious sites. Among its provisions, this resolution called on UN member states and other stakeholders to support the continued implementation of this plan.

Advocating for Religious Prisoners of Conscience

- USCIRF has recommended that U.S. government officials and members of Congress press foreign governments for the release of religious prisoners of conscience (RPOCs). Pursuant to this recommendation, U.S. officials actively engaged on RPOC cases around the globe. This included drawing attention to RPOCs and prison conditions in engagement with their foreign counterparts, including in Eritrea and Uzbekistan, two countries where RPOCs were released during 2020. High-level engagement by Trump administration officials on this issue included then Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [welcoming](#) the release of Roberto Quiñones, an independent journalist in Cuba imprisoned for reporting on religious freedom issues, and then Ambassador-at-Large for IRF Samuel D. Brownback [drawing](#) attention to the plight of RPOCs during the coronavirus pandemic. Members of Congress also actively advocated for the release of RPOCs, including by adopting RPOCs through the [Defending Freedoms](#) project, pushing for the [release](#) of Iranian RPOCs, and holding a [hearing](#) to pressure Saudi Arabia to release prisoners of conscience, including [Raif Badawi](#) and his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair.

Increasing Aid to Support Religious Freedom and Religious Minorities

- Several of USCIRF's recommendations regarding the U.S. government increasing aid to support religious freedom and religious minorities were implemented in 2020. Examples where such support occurred include the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) providing [\\$38 million](#) dollars in aid to support religious and ethnic minorities with reconstruction efforts in northern Iraq and [\\$356.2 million](#) to help stabilize Sudan's economy.

Designating Uyghur Genocide

- In June, USCIRF warned that the Chinese government's repressive population control measures against Uyghurs and other Turkic

Muslims were evidence of genocide and [urged](#) the State Department to investigate whether these policies meet the legal definition for genocide under international law. In January 2021, after the reporting period, the State Department [designated](#) China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity.

Adopting Laws and Passing Resolutions Related to Religious Freedom

- USCIRF advocated for the adoption of several laws to promote international religious freedom, including [the Uyghur Human Rights and Policy Act](#) and [the Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#). USCIRF also [supported](#) the adoption of a [resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws](#) and a [resolution condemning human rights violations in Nicaragua](#).

USCIRF applauds the U.S. government for taking strong action, including the developments highlighted above, to advance the freedom of religion or belief internationally during 2020 and early 2021. Pursuant to USCIRF's new mandate, USCIRF will continue to track the implementation by the U.S. government of USCIRF recommendations and their effectiveness, to the extent practicable. To support continued advancement of religious freedom globally, USCIRF encourages the Biden administration and Congress to continue to implement USCIRF's recommendations, including those detailed throughout this report.

APPENDIX 1 COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES



Gayle Manchin,
Chair

REAPPOINTED BY

Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2022. Educator, former First Lady of West Virginia, and past President of the State Board of Education.



Tony Perkins,
Vice Chair

REAPPOINTED BY

Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2022. President of the Family Research Council (FRC), a religious public policy organization.



Anurima Bhargava,
Vice Chair

REAPPOINTED BY

Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for a term expiring in May 2022. Dignity and Justice Advocate, President of Anthem of Us, fmr. Justice Department Official.



Gary L. Bauer,
Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY

Former President Donald J. Trump (R), for a term expiring in May 2021. President of American Values, a public policy think tank, and Washington Director Emeritus of Christians United for Israel Action Fund.



James W. Carr,
Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY

Hon. Kevin McCarthy (R), House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2022. President and Chairman of Highland Home Holdings investment fund, and formerly served on the National Security Education Board.



Frederick A. Davie,
Commissioner

APPOINTED BY

Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2022. Executive Vice President of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and Chief Administrative Officer at the Union Theological Seminary.



Nadine Maenza,
Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY

Former President Donald J. Trump (R), for a term expiring in May 2022. President of Patriot Voices and serves on the Board of Directors for the Institute for Global Engagement, Sinjar Academy, and Freedom Research Foundation.



Johnnie Moore,
Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY

Former President Donald J. Trump (R), for a term expiring in May 2022. Founder and CEO of The KAIROS Company, and President of The Congress of Christian Leaders. "Medal of Valor" recipient from the Simon Wiesenthal Center.



Nury Turkel,
Commissioner

APPOINTED BY

Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for a term expiring in May 2022. Lawyer, Uyghur rights advocate, Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute, and member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

APPENDIX 2 RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT AND VICTIMS LIST

RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT

Through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience (RPOC) Project, USCIRF seeks to raise awareness of illustrative cases of individuals imprisoned for their religion or belief, reduce their numbers, and highlight the country conditions that led to their imprisonment.

Current RPOCs



Patriarch Abune Antonios

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore



Raif Badawi

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Nadine Maenza



Mubarak Bala

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Frederick A. Davie



Ramzan Bibi

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner James W. Carr



Dennis Christensen

USCIRF Advocate
Chair Gayle Manchin



Gulmira Imin

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Anurima Bhargava



Golrokh Ebrahim Iraee

USCIRF Advocate
Chair Gayle Manchin



Shamil Khakimov

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Nury Turkel



Raymond Koh

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner James W. Carr



Jimmy Lai

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore



Youcef Nadarkhani

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Nadine Maenza

Current RPOCs (continued)



The Panchen Lama

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Nadine Maenza



Leah Sharibu

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Tony Perkins



Yahaya Sharif-Aminu

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Frederick A. Davie



Zhang Wen Shi

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner James W. Carr



Hu Shigen

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Gary Bauer



Nguyen Bac Truyen

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Anurima Bhargava

RPOCs Released in 2020



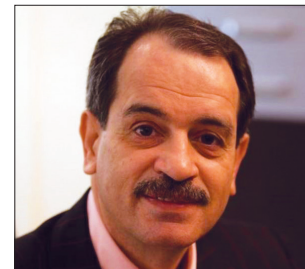
Pastor A Dao
Released: September 2020

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner James W. Carr



Hamid bin Haydara
Released: July 2020

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore



Mohammad Ali Taheri
Released: May 2020

USCIRF Advocate
Chair Gayle Manchin

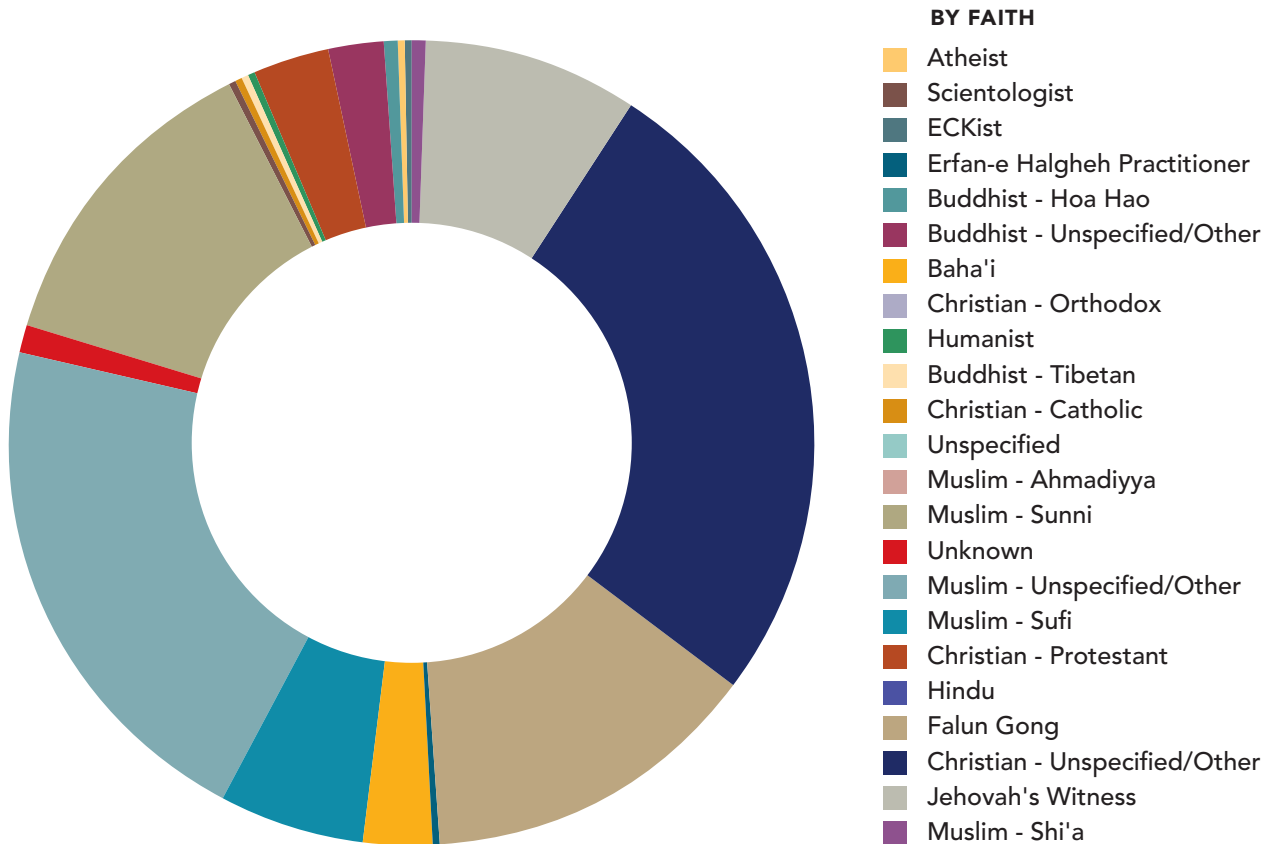
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF VICTIMS LIST

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’s [Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#) is a database that catalogues select victims targeted due to their religion or belief from countries that USCIRF recommends for CPC and Special Watch list designations, as well as EPCs. To date, the FoRB Victims List includes over 1,000 individuals detained by 18 countries and entities of particular concern. These victims represent a diverse number of faith communities, as shown in the chart below.

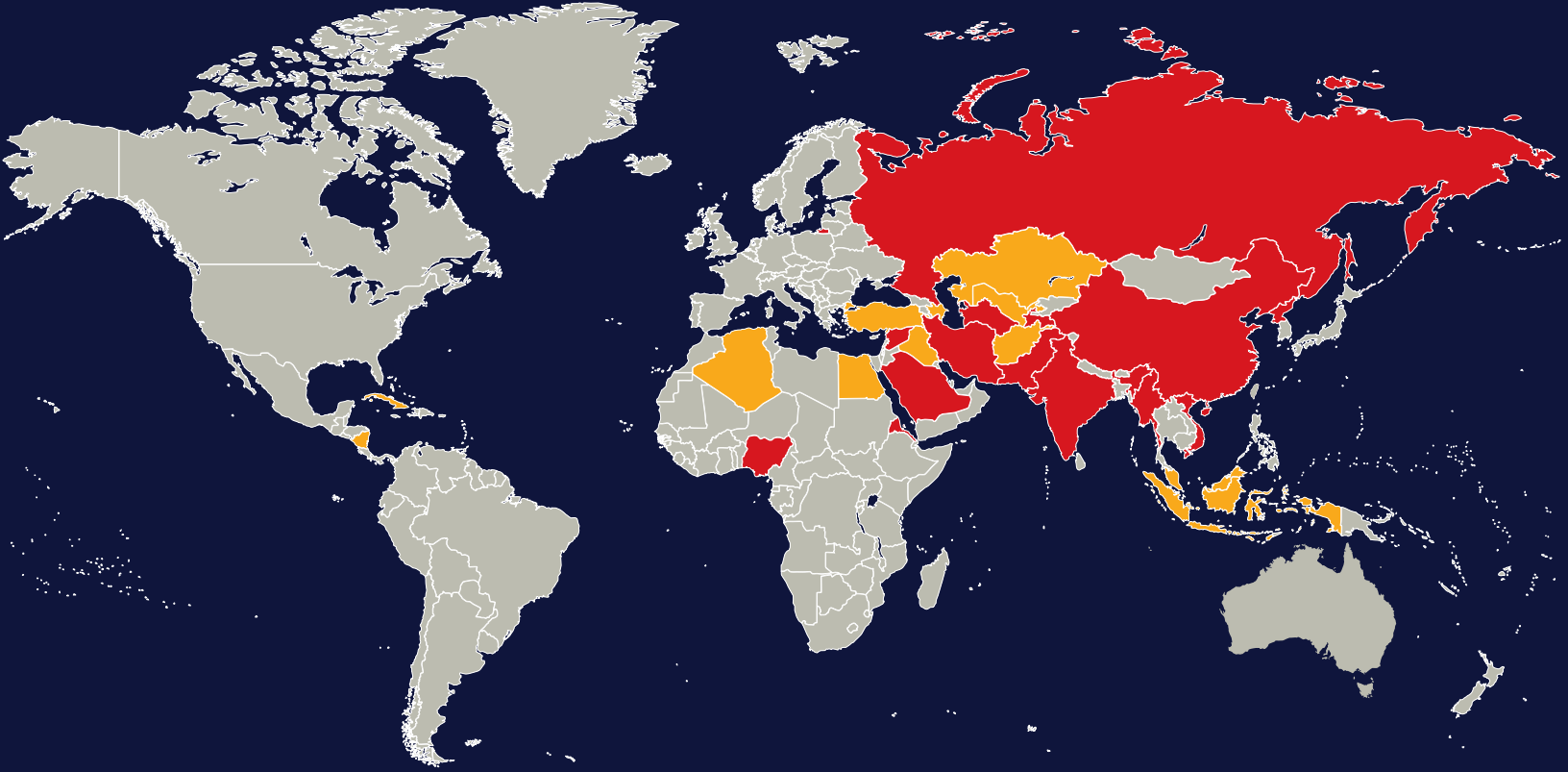
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF (FORB) VICTIMS LIST



Please refer to the USCIRF website for more information on the [FoRB Victims List](#).

Due to limited resources, USCIRF has been unable to identify and document all victims that meet the statutory requirements to be included on the FoRB Victims List. As such, the data contained in the database does not reflect country, regional, or global trends.

To support this project, USCIRF invites those with credible information on victims to submit information using the intake form [here](#). Please refer to the [About Section](#) of the FoRB Victims List for more information on the scope of the database.



2021 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Iran	Russia	Turkmenistan
China	Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Vietnam
Eritrea	North Korea	Syria	
India	Pakistan	Tajikistan	

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Iraq	Nicaragua
Algeria	Egypt	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Azerbaijan	Indonesia	Malaysia	Uzbekistan



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

732 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Telephone: (202) 523-3240
www.uscirf.gov