



2022 ANNUAL REPORT

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

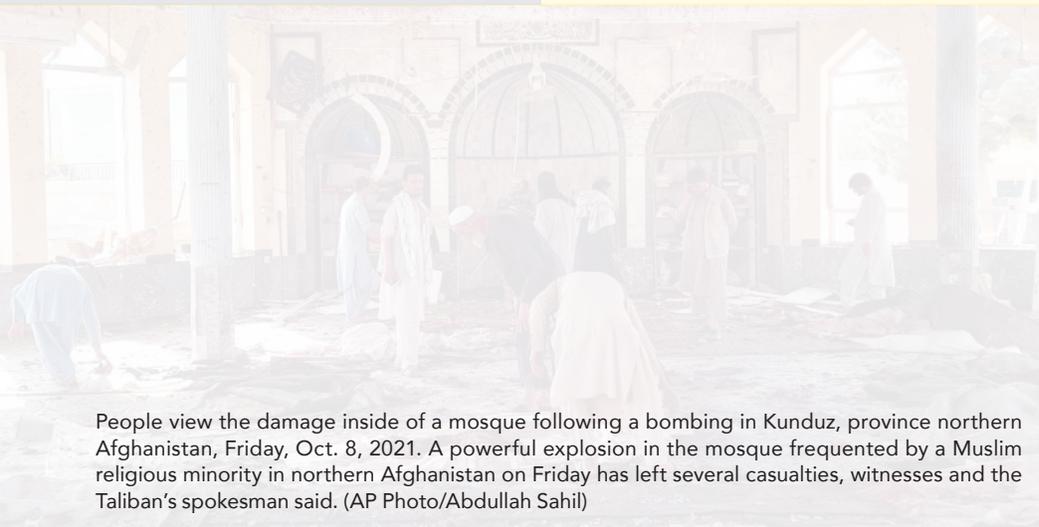




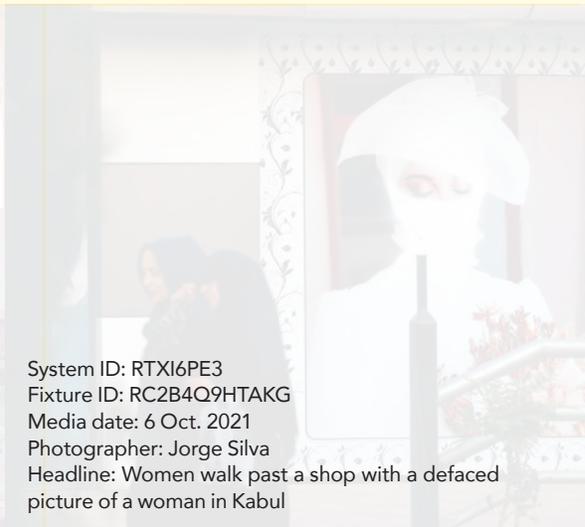
Afghan nationals residing in India hold placards as they participate in a protest demanding better rights for women in Afghanistan, during a demonstration in New Delhi, India on October 30, 2021. (Photo by Mayank Makhija/NurPhoto via AP)



System ID: RTS16JM5
Fixture ID: RC19526F6FC0
Media date: 11 Jun. 2017
Photographer: Parwiz Parwiz
Headline: A girl looks on among Afghan women lining up to receive relief assistance, during the holy month of Ramadan in Jalalabad



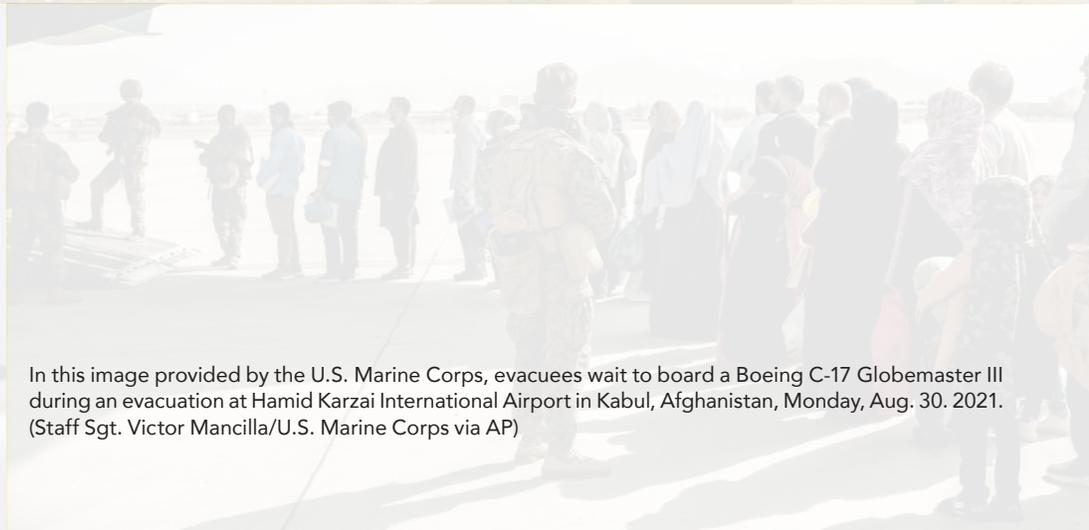
People view the damage inside of a mosque following a bombing in Kunduz, province northern Afghanistan, Friday, Oct. 8, 2021. A powerful explosion in the mosque frequented by a Muslim religious minority in northern Afghanistan on Friday has left several casualties, witnesses and the Taliban's spokesman said. (AP Photo/Abdullah Sahil)



System ID: RTX16PE3
Fixture ID: RC2B4Q9HTAKG
Media date: 6 Oct. 2021
Photographer: Jorge Silva
Headline: Women walk past a shop with a defaced picture of a woman in Kabul



Afghan Sikh man mourns over a coffin during a funeral procession and cremation ceremony for those who were killed on Wednesday by a lone Islamic State gunman, rampaged through a Sikh house of worship, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Thursday, March 26, 2020. An explosive device disrupted Thursday's funeral service for 25 members of Afghanistan's Sikh minority community, killed in an attack by the Islamic State group on their house of worship in the heart of the capital. (AP Photo/Tamana Sarwary)



In this image provided by the U.S. Marine Corps, evacuees wait to board a Boeing C-17 Globemaster III during an evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday, Aug. 30, 2021. (Staff Sgt. Victor Mancilla/U.S. Marine Corps via AP)

ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has monitored and reported on religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan for more than two decades, but 2021 was particularly difficult. Following U.S. withdrawal from the country, the Taliban took control on August 15, 2021. The Taliban's victory was calamitous for many reasons, including the detrimental effect it had on religious freedom. USCIRF has long raised concern that the Taliban's brutal application of its extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam violates the freedom of religion or belief of all Afghans who do not adhere to that interpretation, including Muslims and adherents of other faiths or beliefs.

With the Taliban's return to power, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan, and the overall human rights situation, significantly deteriorated in 2021. Religious minorities faced harassment, detention, and even death due to their faith or beliefs. The one known Jew and most Hindus and Sikhs fled the country. Christian converts, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyya Muslims practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal and threats from the Taliban. Years of progress toward more equitable access to education and representation of women and girls disappeared. Throughout 2021, USCIRF consistently called attention to the escalating persecution of religious minorities in the country, including in two [virtual events](#), two [podcast episodes](#), and a [factsheet](#).

Given the sharp decline in religious freedom conditions witnessed in the country in 2021, USCIRF recommends in this Annual Report that the U.S. Department of State designate Afghanistan under the Taliban's de facto government as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) under the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 \(IRFA\)](#). The last such [recommendation](#) by USCIRF was in 2001, right before the ousting of the previous Taliban regime that controlled most of the country starting in 1996.

Even before its return to power, the Taliban presented a grave threat to religious freedom, including in 2020 and the first half of 2021. The group committed violent attacks, excluded religious minorities, and punished residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islam. The government of Afghanistan, under then President Ashraf Ghani, faced difficulties maintaining territorial control and security, impacting the safety of religious minority communities. Given these conditions, USCIRF in its [2021 Annual Report](#) recommended that the Taliban be designated as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) under IRFA and that Afghanistan be placed on the State Department's Special Watch List (SWL), a lesser category than CPC. The State Department has designated the Taliban as an EPC every year since its first set of EPC designations in 2018, most [recently](#) in

November 2021. The State Department caveated that this designation was based on information analyzed as of August 15, 2021, before the Taliban's takeover as the de facto governing authority.

The crisis in Afghanistan should serve as a collective call to action to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable religious communities around the globe. Beyond Afghanistan, this report sounds the alarm regarding the deterioration of religious freedom conditions in a range of other countries and provides policy recommendations to the U.S. government to respond to violations occurring in these places. This year, these countries include the Central African Republic (CAR), which USCIRF removed from last year's annual report following improvements in religious freedom conditions, after previously reporting on the country since 2015. During 2021, Central African authorities and their partners committed egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom in CAR—including targeted abductions, torture, and killings of Muslims—which led USCIRF to reinstate its recommendation to place CAR on the SWL.

USCIRF is also concerned about the potential for backsliding in countries that did not meet the CPC or SWL standard this year, particularly Sudan, where the October 2021 military takeover [threatens](#) recent advancements in religious freedom protections made by the civilian-led transitional government. USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Sudan closely. In all contexts where the freedom of religion or belief is violated or under threat, we urge the U.S. government to actively promote this fundamental right and protect persecuted religious communities.

About This Report

Created by 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 2022 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress in 27 countries during calendar year 2021 and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key

The crisis in Afghanistan should serve as a collective call to action to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable religious communities around the globe.

findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including hearings, meetings, and briefings, and are approved by a majority vote of Commissioners. Under the statute, each Commissioner has the option to include a statement with his or her own individual views. Although USCIRF was not able to travel in 2021 to observe religious freedom conditions abroad due to the coronavirus pandemic, USCIRF was able to meet virtually with various stakeholders to further substantiate reports received throughout the year.

The report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as CPCs under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its SWL. The report also includes USCIRF's recommendations of nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as 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 topics including the COVID-19 pandemic and religious freedom, blasphemy and hate speech law enforcement, transnational repression of religious freedom, religious intolerance in Europe, deterioration of religious freedom conditions in South Asia, and political upheaval raising religious freedom concerns. 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 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 highlights the countries and entities that, in USCIRF's view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation; it is intended to focus U.S. policymakers' attention on the worst violators of religious freedom globally. The fact that a country or nonstate group is not

covered in this report does not mean it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year. It only means that based on the information available to USCIRF, the conditions during that year did not, in USCIRF's view, meet the high threshold—the perpetration or toleration of particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom—required to recommend the country or nonstate group for CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. In the case of a nonstate

group, it also could mean that the group did not meet other statutory requirements, such as exercising significant political power and territorial control.

USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions abroad, 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.uscirt.gov.

USCIRF's 2022 CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

For 2022, based on religious freedom conditions in 2021, USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- **Redesignate** as CPCs the following 10 countries: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following five countries: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam;
- **Maintain** on the SWL the following three countries: Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua;
- Include on the SWL the following nine countries: Azerbaijan, CAR, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan;
- **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), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) (also referred to as ISIS-West Africa), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

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

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

Although al-Shabaab's territorial control continued to shrink, the group actively operated in the southern and southcentral regions of Somalia in 2021. The terrorist group carried out a series of deadly attacks in Somalia and in neighboring Kenya against both Muslims and non-Muslims. Reportedly, the group carried out amputations, floggings, and executions of Muslims who disagreed with its interpretation of Sunni Islam. In Lamu County, Kenya, a priest [reported](#) that the group attacked Christians and destroyed a church.

In 2021, the Houthi movement, formally known as Ansar Allah, expanded its territorial holdings throughout Yemen. In March 2021, Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi [accused](#) the United States of "seeking to establish Baha'i, Ahmadiyya and atheist [communities] in Yemen in order to undermine Islam." The group [forced](#) Yemenis living in Houthi-controlled areas to take indoctrination "trainings," even when these trainings were contrary to their religious beliefs. Prison officials also forced detainees to take Islamic religious trainings as a condition for their release, even when the detainees were not Muslim. 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 faced ongoing and severe repression from Houthi authorities. Houthi authorities continued to detain Jewish prisoner of conscience Libi Marhabi despite a [court order](#) for his release. Houthi authorities also continued to prosecute Baha'is released from prison in 2020 and [blocked](#) Baha'i bank accounts in March 2021. Christians, especially [converts](#), were also persecuted by Houthi authorities. In 2021, Houthi authorities [detained](#) two Christian convert [priests](#) and [arrested](#) a Christian man on charges of apostasy and promoting Christianity.

In 2021, militant Islamist groups ISGS and JNIM continued to control territory in parts of Mali and Niger. While reporting during the calendar year is sparse, these groups likely [continued trends](#) of executing individuals with differing religious beliefs, restricting religious practice and preaching, and imposing harsh punishments based on a singular interpretation of Islamic 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 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 [United Nations \(UN\) 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 (see Appendix 4) 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.

Throughout 2021, USCIRF published products and held public events that provide examples of states' abuses of human rights on the basis of religion. USCIRF's [Country Update: Iran](#), released in August

2021, detailed how the Iranian government uses religion as a basis for violating the rights of its citizens, including by executing members of its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. USCIRF's September 2021 [Country Update: Saudi Arabia](#) described Saudi authorities' enforcement of the government's interpretation of Sunni Islam and the country's guardianship system, which severely

limits women's rights. These themes were further explored in USCIRF's December 2021 hearing on "[State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran](#)."

Additionally, USCIRF released a factsheet on [Religious Minorities in Afghanistan](#) in October 2021, outlining the Taliban's imposition of its strict interpretation of Sunni Islam that violates the freedom of religion or belief of Afghanistan's religious minorities and others who do not share the same religious beliefs. USCIRF further highlighted the impact of the coercive application of these beliefs on religious minorities and other vulnerable Afghans during the "[USCIRF Conversation: Update on At-Risk Religious Communities in Afghanistan](#)" event held in October 2021. Also in October, USCIRF released a factsheet on [Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya](#) describing how the Chechen dictatorship maintains hegemony through the imposition of a purported "traditional" version of Islam, including by conducting violent purges of the LGBTI community and witch hunts that often target elderly women. In November 2021, USCIRF published [Country Update: Malaysia](#) addressing how the implementation of

USCIRF is 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.

religion-based law in Malaysia’s dual court system can violate religious freedom and related rights. In this report, USCIRF details the use of these religious laws to target members of vulnerable groups, such as Malaysia’s Muslim LGBTI community.

USCIRF also conducted research on the coercive enforcement of interpretations of religion by nonstate actors, particularly EPCs. In November 2021, USCIRF published a report on [EPCs and Religious Freedom](#), which outlines the human rights responsibilities of EPCs and other armed nonstate actors. USCIRF also released reports on [Violent Islamist Groups in the Central Sahel](#) and [Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria](#), which address the imposition of a strict interpretation of Shari’a by EPCs and other violent Islamist groups in these areas and its impact on human rights.

USCIRF continued to highlight the ways in which the enforcement of blasphemy or apostasy laws, which are based on religious interpretations, undermines human rights—including freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression—and often targets vulnerable religious and other communities. Commission reports on this topic published in 2021 include [Country Update: Egypt](#), [Factsheet on Religious Freedom Violations in Kano State, Nigeria](#), and [Factsheet on Ahmadiyya Muslims](#). At the end of 2021, USCIRF’s FoRB Victims List showcased 73 victims targeted under blasphemy or apostasy laws. USCIRF’s 2021 work on other problematic laws based on religious interpretations included the March 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 LGBTI persons and embolden societal hostility, discrimination, and violence against them.

In addition to the work described above, 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 May 2021, for example, USCIRF hosted an [event](#) with Nasreldin Mufrih, Sudan’s then Minister of Religious Affairs, where he provided an update on how the country’s transitional government was addressing the previous regime’s violations of human rights based on religion. These efforts were further discussed in [USCIRF’s Policy Update on Sudan](#), released in November 2021. In February, a USCIRF [event](#) focused on ways the U.S. government can protect and assist refugees and asylum seekers, including those fleeing the coercive enforcement of religion. During 2021, USCIRF’s podcast series, [Spotlight](#), offered in-depth analysis about developments that have implications for religious freedom and other human rights. Examples of episodes that discuss the official imposition of religious norms include [Pakistan’s Laws that Enable Islamist Extremism](#), [Hazara Community Threatened in Afghanistan](#), [Enforcing Blasphemy Laws Have Dire Consequences](#), [Religious Restrictions in Iran](#), and [Governments Using Shari’a to Impose Death Sentences on LGBTI Persons](#).

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

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Key Findings

Since taking office in January 2021, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden has maintained and continued many of the international religious freedom (IRF)-related initiatives from the previous administration of Donald J. Trump. The administration [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.

The U.S. government continued to serve as the Secretariat of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) (IRFBA). During 2021, the Alliance made multi-country statements regarding religious freedom in Burma and Afghanistan, on behalf of missing Yazidi women and children, and in support of persecuted Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Biden administration continued to implement the [executive order](#) on [Advancing International Religious Freedom](#), signed by then President Trump in June 2020, by bolstering religious freedom within the [priorities and programming](#) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). This included activities to address the needs of vulnerable religious minority communities in [various parts of the world](#) as well as organizational initiatives such as the IRF Sector Council to foster agency-wide coordination and cooperation.

In March 2021, the Biden administration [announced](#) its candidacy to rejoin the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council. At the session that month, the United States cosponsored a resolution in the council on freedom of religion or belief. In October, the United States was [elected](#) to serve on the council for the next term, beginning in 2022.

In February 2021, consistent with USCIRF recommendations, President Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to

125,000 for fiscal year (FY) 2022, which began on October 1, 2021. In May 2021, President Biden [announced](#) he was raising the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 from 15,000 to 62,500 and that he intended to “push hard to complete the rigorous screening process for those refugees already in the pipeline for admission.”

Also in February, 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.

Among other IRF-related appointments, the Biden administration [nominated](#) Rashad Hussain in July 2021 to serve as the ambassador at large for IRF, and the Senate [confirmed](#) him in December 2021.

In November 2021, 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 Russia as a CPC for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2017. The Biden administration chose not to redesignate

Nigeria as a CPC again after it was added to the list for the first time in 2020. For the 10 designated countries, the State Department reimposed existing sanctions on six and issued waivers on taking any action for the other four. 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, adding Algeria for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended since 2020. In addition, the State Department designated nine “entities of particular concern” (EPCs) pursuant to IRFA, which are nonstate actors that engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The State Department designated Russia as a CPC for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2017.

STATE DEPARTMENT 2021 DESIGNATIONS

CPC Designations	Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Algeria, Comoros, Cuba, and Nicaragua
EPC Designations	Al-Shabaab, 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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Promptly appoint a well-qualified individual as a special adviser for IRF on the National Security Council (NSC) staff and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to fulfill their mandate;
- 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 events 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, including at the UN Human Rights Council, and work with countries 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 four CPC-designated countries for which waivers on taking any action based on those designations are in place—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—and make appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change;
- Increase funding for existing [data analytics programs](#) that assess atrocities, state fragility, and civilian security to extend and expand the collection and analysis of country-specific data on [religious repression](#) to inform U.S. foreign policy and strategy;
- 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

- 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 Antisemitism 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.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [International Religious Freedom Act](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Recommendations for State Department CPC and SWL Designations](#)
- **Factsheet:** [EPCs and Religious Freedom](#)
- **Hearing:** [Ending Genocide: Accountability for Perpetrators](#)
- **Hearing:** [Targeted Sanctions: Implications for International Religious Freedom](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation on the Global Compact on Refugees](#)

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 (USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency, the ambassador at large and the State Department's [IRF Office](#), 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, 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. 116-260](#) for FY 2021) 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.

In 2021, the State Department chose not to redesignate Nigeria as a CPC, despite religious freedom conditions in the country not changing significantly from the previous year.

Key Developments in 2021 and Early 2022

Key U.S. Government IRF Positions

On January 24, 2022, [Rashad Hussain](#) was sworn in as the sixth ambassador at large since IRFA's enactment. Ambassador Hussain immediately began implementing his mandate through public speeches, travel, and meetings, including with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) IRF Roundtable and other stakeholders.

In July, the Biden administration [nominated](#) Deborah Lipstadt as the special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, granting the rank of ambassador to the position for the first time, and the Senate confirmed her in March 2022.

In December, the administration [appointed](#) Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues. USCIRF welcomed this appointment but noted that "double hatting" positions could undermine the U.S. government's important efforts to promote religious freedom abroad.

Lack of Designation for Nigeria

The State Department designated Nigeria as a CPC in 2020 for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2009. In 2021, the State Department chose not to redesignate Nigeria as a CPC, despite religious freedom conditions in the country not changing significantly from the previous year. Furthermore, the State Department completely bypassed downgrading the country to the SWL, indicating that Nigeria is a country with no severe religious freedom violations as defined by IRFA. USCIRF [issued](#) a public statement criticizing the State Department's decision. Information on the particularly severe religious freedom violations that took place in Nigeria in 2021 can be found in the chapter on Nigeria in this report.

Individual Violators

During 2021, 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 continued its use of 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 2021, the U.S. government had sanctioned 419 foreign individuals and entities under the 2016 [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and the related 2017 executive order,

[E.O. 13818](#). Of these sanctions, 38 related directly to religious freedom. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chairman and former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh for engaging in egregious human rights abuses. In March, 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

targeted sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union against the same abusers. In July, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) religious freedom violators in Syria, including the Turkish-backed militia Ahrar al-Sharqiya as well as individuals Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes—commonly known as Abu Hatem Shaqra—and Farrukh Fayzimatov. In July, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) individuals in Cuba for suppressing peaceful protests, including the beating of a Catholic priest. In September, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) four Iranian intelligence operatives for attempting to kidnap an Iranian American activist living in Brooklyn who advocated for Iranian women’s freedom to choose whether or not to wear Islamic headscarves.

Countries continued to join the United States in passing laws that enable targeted sanctions against human rights violators. Australia [adopted](#) Global Magnitsky-style [sanctions](#) in December 2021. Legislation in Japan is still [pending](#), and there have been [calls](#) for similar actions in New Zealand.

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 2021](#), the State Department was required to make funds available for international religious freedom programs. During 2021, 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 minority groups—including to support projects in [Bangladesh](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kazakhstan](#), and [Sudan](#)—along with thematic and regionally focused programs on issues such as [combating antisemitism online](#).

During 2021, the Biden administration continued to provide humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. In May 2021, USAID [announced](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance to meet the urgent needs of Rohingya refugees and other minority groups affected by ongoing violence in Burma that has specifically targeted them because of their religion and ethnicity. Similarly, the U.S. government continued to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to rebuild communities devastated by ISIS. In June, the State Department [announced](#) an additional \$436 million in humanitarian assistance for the people of Syria. In July, the State Department [announced](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance for the people of Iraq as well as for Iraqi refugees in the region and the communities hosting them.

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 each fiscal year were set at successively declining levels, 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 2020, then President Trump [set](#) the annual ceiling for FY 2021 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.

In February 2021, President Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022, which then began on October 1, 2021, and issued an [executive order](#) to take steps to position the administration to be able to do so. In May 2021, the administration [announced](#) it was raising the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 from 15,000 to 62,500 and that it intended to 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. At the end of FY 2021, the United States had [admitted](#) only 11,411 refugees during that fiscal year.

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 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

In February 2021, President Biden announced his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022, which then began on October 1, 2021, and issued an executive order to take steps to position the administration to be able to do so.

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](#).

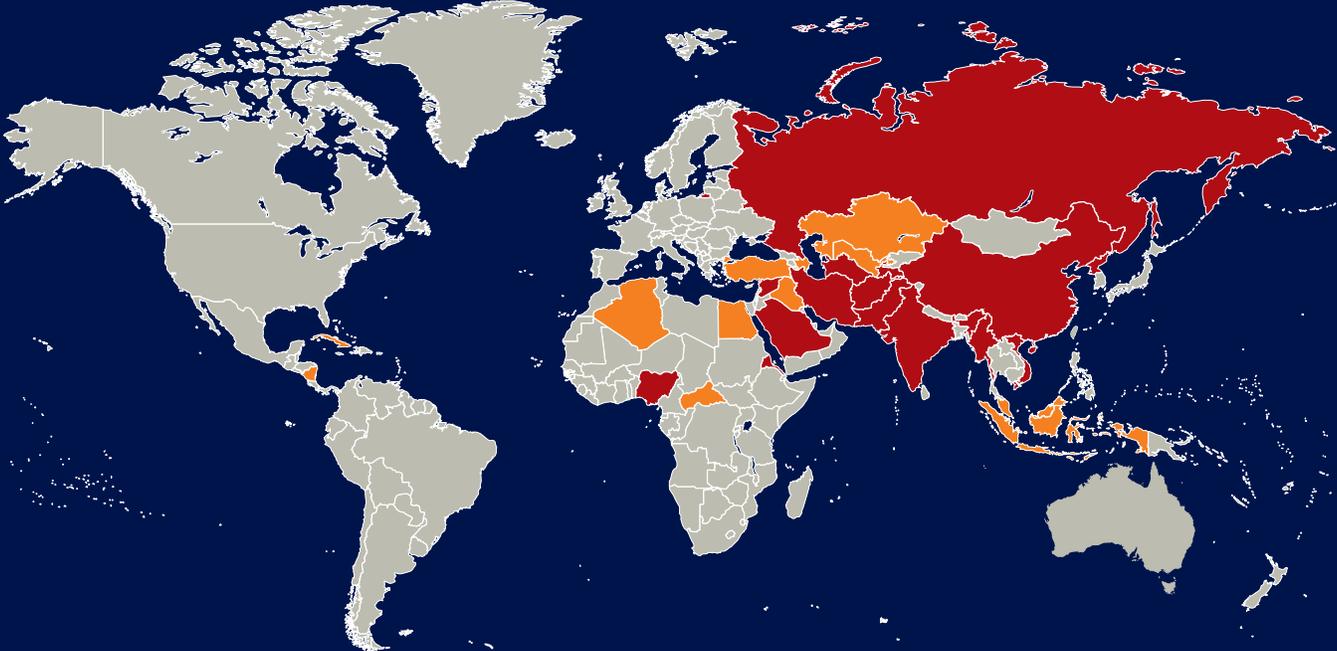
Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

In 2021, Congress’ IRF promotion efforts included its oversight of the Biden administration’s implementation of IRFA. In May, a bipartisan group of senators and representatives [wrote](#) to President Biden urging him to quickly nominate a well-qualified individual as ambassador at

large for international religious freedom and to prioritize religious freedom in the administration’s foreign policy.

Congress also highlighted religious freedom violations through legislation, hearings, and other initiatives. Notable actions by Congress in 2021 to promote IRF included passage of the [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#) in December. Congressional hearings on topics related to IRF included a TLHRC [hearing](#) on the state of religious freedom around the globe and also a [hearing](#) cohosted with USCIRF on ending genocide and holding perpetrators accountable. Members of Congress also advocated for the release of religious prisoners of conscience through the TLHRC’s [Defending Freedoms Project](#).

2022 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

- | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Algeria | Cuba | Iraq | Nicaragua |
| Azerbaijan | Egypt | Kazakhstan | Turkey |
| Central African Republic | Indonesia | Malaysia | Uzbekistan |

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan worsened as the Taliban took control of the country on August 15. Despite initial statements from the Taliban that they had reformed some elements of their ideology, Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban's harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and adherents of other faiths or beliefs are at risk of grave danger. Reports indicate that the Taliban continue to persecute religious minorities and punish residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law. USCIRF has received credible reports that religious minorities, including nonbelievers and Muslims with differing beliefs from the Taliban, were harassed and their houses of worship desecrated. By year's end, the one known Jew and most Hindus and Sikhs had fled the country. Christian converts, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyya Muslims practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal and threats from the Taliban and separately from the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K).

In [September 2021](#), despite promises to form an "inclusive" government, the Taliban announced an all-male and religiously and ethnically homogenous government cabinet. The Taliban also [reinstated](#) the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which uses a notoriously [violent](#) hardline Islamist policing system. Since September 2021, the ministry has banned practices it deems un-Islamic, including wearing Western-style haircuts and listening to music. The ministry also imposed a [new dress code](#) as well as [work](#), education, and [travel restrictions](#) on women.

Prior to the Taliban taking over, the government of Afghanistan under then President Ashraf Ghani faced difficulties maintaining

territorial control and security, impacting the safety of religious minority communities, particularly Shi'a Muslims (including ethnic Hazaras), Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha'is, and Christian converts, all of whom are at greater risk of persecution from the Taliban and ISIS-K.

The [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#) (UNAMA) [documented](#) at least [20](#) attacks targeting Shi'a Hazaras in the first half of 2021. After the Ghani administration lost control in August, there was a resurgence of Taliban and ISIS-K attacks targeting the Shi'a community. During their time in power from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban discriminated against and violently [persecuted](#) the Shi'a Hazara community, which they labeled as heretical. In early [July](#), after the Taliban took control of Ghazni Province in their advance toward Kabul, Taliban fighters massacred nine Shi'a Hazara men there. In [September 2021](#), Taliban fighters are reported to have forcibly evicted at least [2,800 Shi'a Hazaras](#) from their homes in Daikundi and Uruzgan provinces and seized their properties. Shortly afterward, in [October 2021](#), there were confirmed reports that the Taliban killed 13 Shi'a Hazaras in Daikundi Province.

ISIS-K—which maintains a presence primarily in [Kunar and Nangarhar provinces](#)—also targeted religious minority communities. In October 2021, [ISIS-K took responsibility](#) for two separate attacks on Shi'a mosques in Kunduz and [Kandahar](#), killing scores of Shi'a worshippers during Friday prayers. According to reports, ISIS-K made marginal gains in territory during 2021, although not to the extent of what it controlled when designated as an "entity of particular concern" by the U.S. Department of State prior to 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Afghanistan under the *de facto* rule of the Taliban as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systemic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Expand the existing [Priority 2 \(P-2\) designation](#) granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members, explicitly including Afghan religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution;
- Incorporate protections for freedom of religion or belief into dialogue between the U.S. government and the Taliban, continue to publicly condemn ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Taliban and ISIS-K, and emphasize to Taliban leadership the close relationship between religious freedom and overall security; and
- Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban 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—and coordinate with allies to impose similar sanctions.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Create by law a P-2 designation for members of religious groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Calls on the State Department to Prioritize Refugee Resettlement of Afghan Religious Minorities](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Minorities in Afghanistan](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Update on At-Risk Religious Communities in Afghanistan](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: The Exodus of Religious Minority Communities in Afghanistan](#)

Background

Afghanistan is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns (42 percent), Tajiks (27 percent), Hazaras (nine percent), Uzbeks (nine percent), Turkmen (three percent), and Baloch (two percent). Historically, the nation was religiously diverse, but the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban consolidated control of the government in 1996. 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 and Ahmadis), with the few remaining non-Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and others) comprising the remaining 0.3 percent. By the end of 2021, there appears to be no remaining Jews in Afghanistan. Gathering statistics on religious communities that practice in secret is difficult but estimates for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Afghanistan range from 450 to 2,500. There are an estimated [12,000](#) Christian converts throughout the country.

The Taliban takeover and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in [August](#) led to mass panic, with a violent crackdown on [civil society, targeted killings, beatings and detentions](#), severe restrictions on [women's rights](#), diminished local [media](#) presence, mass exodus, and violent targeted attacks claimed by ISIS-K on [Kabul Airport](#) and houses of worship.

Exodus and Persecution of Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews

Afghanistan's overall instability has led to the near [extinction](#) of religious minorities, particularly the Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh communities. While the last known remaining Jew left Afghanistan in September 2021 out of fear of persecution by the Taliban, the Hindu and Sikh community population [dwindled](#) to 140 at the end of 2021, a near extinction of the once robust community. Soon after the takeover, armed Taliban representatives went to the Sikh gurdwara in Karte Parwan in Kabul to [urge Sikh and Hindu](#) community members to "not feel fear or anxiety" in an attempt to assure them of their safety in Afghanistan. In October 2021, however, videos of alleged Taliban members vandalizing and ransacking the Sikh [gurdwara in Karte Parwan emerged](#). Sikhs and Hindus have felt [pressured to leave Afghanistan](#) and take refuge in India due to the lack of safety and [security](#) following the Taliban takeover and ongoing targeted attacks on their houses of worship.

Practicing Faith in Fear

Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha'is, and nonbelievers are unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly because they face dire consequences, including death, if discovered by the Taliban or ISIS-K. Ahmadiyya Muslims are not recognized by either the Sunni or Shi'a Muslim faiths and have experienced a [long history](#) of [persecution](#) in Afghanistan. Today, Ahmadis practice their faith in secret due to continued societal persecution and discrimination. According to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community [leader](#), some Ahmadis were [detained](#) in 2021.

Afghans who converted to Christianity from Islam over the past 20 years are considered "apostates," a crime punishable by death according to the [Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam](#). Converts, who already faced ostracization and the threat of honor killings by family and village members, are at [heightened risk](#) following the Taliban takeover. USCIRF received reports that the Taliban have gone door to door looking for Christian converts. Christians have received threatening [phone calls](#), and one leader of a house church network received a threatening [letter](#) in August from Taliban militants. Some Christians have [turned off their phones](#) and moved to undisclosed locations.

In Afghanistan, followers of the [Baha'i faith](#) have faced persecution, exacerbated by a [2007](#) ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court that declared the Baha'i faith blasphemous and its followers infidels. Since then, the Baha'i community has lived in secret.

Key U.S. Policy

Following the Taliban takeover, over [120,000](#) Afghans, including religious minorities, were evacuated to the [United States and ally countries](#). Additionally, masses fearing persecution at the hands of the Taliban fled to neighboring countries, including [Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran](#), where they continue to face uncertainty. In response to the crisis, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security created a government-wide program, [Operation Allies Welcome](#), to coordinate efforts to support vulnerable Afghan populations. In August 2021, the State Department announced a [P-2](#) designation for certain Afghan nationals and eligible family members.

The Taliban takeover prompted the [U.S. government](#) and other international actors to [halt aid](#) programs, suspend financial assistance, freeze billions in Afghan central bank assets, and impose stringent sanctions on the Taliban. Despite these restrictions, in [October 2021](#) the United States announced more than \$144 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. This additional funding brought total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and for Afghan refugees in the region to nearly \$474 million in 2021.

While the United States has not recognized the Taliban regime as the government of Afghanistan, in [November 2021](#) a U.S. delegation met with Taliban representatives. The U.S. officials emphasized the importance of the Taliban fulfilling its public commitments, including protecting the rights of all Afghans, particularly women, girls, and religious minorities. In [December](#), the State Department designated a Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan.

On November 15, the State Department [designated](#) the Taliban as an "[entity of particular concern](#)," or EPC, under IRFA for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department caveated that the Taliban's designation is based on information analyzed as of August 15, 2021, before its takeover as the *de facto* governing authority. ISIS-K was not designated as an EPC, as the State Department [determined](#) in 2020 that it lost control of the territory it previously controlled.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Burma declined significantly. On February 1, the Burmese military, known as the Tatmadaw, seized the institutions of the state, arrested members of the civilian government, including leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and placed Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in effective control of the country. The coup ended a decade of quasi-democracy and triggered an escalation of violence. Conditions for ethnoreligious minorities, such as the predominantly Muslim Rohingya and Christian Chin, deteriorated alongside the breakdown of order and violations of civil and political rights. The Tatmadaw [targeted](#) houses of worship, faith leaders, and religious communities in its crackdown on opposition. The Tatmadaw arrested religious leaders, including those from the Buddhist majority, for opposing the military junta.

Faith communities, including ethnoreligious Christian minorities, now face persecution that some have likened to what the Rohingya have faced since 2017. Previous civilian governments and the Tatmadaw institutionalized discrimination against Rohingya Muslims and denied Rohingya basic rights and dignity. In 2017, the Tatmadaw under General Hlaing [perpetrated](#) mass killings and rapes against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, [forcing](#) over 745,000 to flee to Bangladesh within days. Each year since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya continued to flee due to [ongoing](#) violence. There is a [pending](#) case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for violations of the Genocide Convention.

The Tatmadaw increased its persecution of Christian communities during 2021. In February, the Tatmadaw [raided](#) the Hakha Baptist Church in the capital of Chin State, arresting the pastor. The same month, the Tatmadaw [raided](#) a Kachin Baptist Church in Shan State.

In March in Kalay township in Sagaing Region, the military shot and [killed](#) 25-year-old pastor Chung Lian Ceu and three other civilians. In May, the military [attacked](#) a Catholic Church in Kayah State. In June, airstrikes damaged another Catholic church in Kayah State. In September, the Tatmadaw [gunned](#) down Baptist pastor Cung Biak Hum in Chin State as he went to help put out a fire caused by military shelling. Soldiers have [torched](#) homes and churches.

The Tatmadaw has closely associated itself with Buddhist nationalism to promote its legitimacy. In September, it released from jail Wirathu, a nationalist monk notorious for advocating violence and hate against Muslims. General Hlaing has [publicly](#) demonstrated his support for those monks that align with the military junta, its violent crackdown, and its targeting of ethnoreligious communities such as the Rohingya. Conversely, many monks have been [jailed](#) for protesting the military junta and some have been [disrobed](#).

In opposition to the military junta, members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and others have formed the National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG has attempted to unite the non-Tatmadaw-controlled areas of Burma and coordinate various armed ethnic groups to stand against the military junta. The NUG has [pledged](#) to undo decades of abuse and disenfranchisement of the Rohingya. Members of the NUG also have [issued](#) personal statements of apologies to the community. While the NUG has not yet committed to fully embracing an agenda of religious freedom and equality, it has [declared](#) its acceptance of the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) jurisdiction. As a possible way to protect minority ethnic and religious communities, the NUG has [suggested](#) transitioning post-coup Burma into a federal system.

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);
- Actively support international efforts to hold the Tatmadaw, Burmese agencies, and officials accountable through the international legal system for atrocities against religious communities, including by intervening in the case of *The Gambia v. Myanmar* at the ICJ and using coordinated sanctions against Tatmadaw leaders for particularly severe violations of religious freedom; and
- Increase engagement with multilateral and regional partners—in particular the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—as well as domestic actors in Burma, including the NUG, to stem ongoing religious freedom violations and promote accountability.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support initiatives that prioritize the pursuit of religious freedom in Burma, such as language in the Burma Act of 2021 (H.R. 5497) and the National Defense Authorization Act (S. 1605), that require the imposition of targeted sanctions, and encourage accountability mechanisms in relation to the atrocities committed against the Rohingya.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Ending Genocide—U.S. Government Genocide Determinations and Next Steps](#)
- **Hearing:** [Ending Genocide—Accountability for Perpetrators](#)
- **Podcast:** [Fourth Anniversary of the Rohingya Genocide](#)
- **Country Update:** [Burma—Religious Freedom since February 1, 2021 Coup](#)

Background

Burma's population consists of Buddhists (87.9 percent), Christians (6.2 percent), Muslims (4.3 percent), Animists (0.8 percent), and Hindus (0.5 percent). The 2008 constitution treats Buddhism as the *de facto* state religion but also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism. Despite the recognition, religious and ethnic minorities not belonging to the Buddhist faith have faced longstanding persecution. In 2015, Burma [passed](#) race and religion laws supported by Buddhist nationalists such as the Ma Ba Tha. These laws regulate religious conversion, marriage, and births and restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims.

Since the coup on February 1, 2021, the economy and political order of the country have collapsed. On August 1, 2021, General Hlaing, in defiance of international calls for a return to democracy, [declared](#) himself prime minister until 2023. The Tatmadaw [arrested](#) and sentenced leaders of the civilian government and opposition forces, including [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) and Win Myint. Clashes between the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups, as well as the military's crackdown on peaceful protests for democracy, resulted in at least 1,300 deaths and hundreds of arrests. By November 2021, the violence perpetrated by the Tatmadaw [caused](#) 223,000 Burmese to be internally displaced and placed three million in dire need of humanitarian aid. As violence [escalated](#) in December, thousands fled into neighboring countries.

Rohingya and Other Refugees

Tatmadaw violence since the coup has [pushed](#) at least 200,000 people from different communities to be internally displaced or seek refuge in neighboring countries. An estimated 30,000 predominantly Christian Chin [fled](#) into neighboring India in December 2021, adding to the 1.1 million refugees who have fled from Burma in the past five years. Also in December, both Indonesia and Malaysia [refused](#) a boat of over 100 Rohingya refugees stranded at sea, but Indonesia ultimately changed course and took them in.

At the end of 2021, around one million [registered](#) refugees who fled violence in Rakhine State resided in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. In September, amid [escalating](#) violence in the camps, prominent Rohingya leader Mohib Ullah was [assassinated](#) in Cox's Bazar. The Bangladeshi government has been relocating some of these refugees to an island, Bhasan Char. Among the first of those to be relocated have been Rohingya Christians. Some observers worry they could be [exposed](#) to significant environmental risks, especially given worsening climate change. In December, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur for Myanmar Tom Andrews [noted](#) with concern the Bangladeshi government's decision to close down educational opportunities for Rohingya children. He also expressed concern for the 130,000 Rohingya internally displaced within Burma held in internment camps.

The coup has rendered impossible the safe and voluntary return home of Rohingya refugees displaced in the region. Nevertheless, host countries to Rohingya refugees, as well as ASEAN, have not departed from [rhetoric](#) centered on ultimately repatriating refugees back to Burma.

International Justice and the Influence of Social Media

In November 2019, The Gambia, on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, [initiated](#) a case at the ICJ against Burma alleging violations of the Genocide Convention in its 2017 crackdown on the Rohingya. The ICC is also [investigating](#) the military's actions in Rakhine, although the court's jurisdiction is limited. The legal proceedings in these cases continued during 2021, even after the coup. In November, Argentina's justice system [announced](#) it would investigate allegations of war crimes committed by the Tatmadaw through the principle of universal jurisdiction.

There has been increased discussion of the role of social media in escalating violence against religious minorities in Burma, particularly the Rohingya. In August, Facebook [acknowledged](#) that hundreds of military personnel had used its platform to create troll accounts to disseminate incendiary comments and posts, including calling Islam a threat to Buddhism. In December, Rohingya refugees in the United States [filed](#) a \$150 billion class action suit against Facebook's parent company, Meta, for allowing content that promoted violence against the Rohingya. Also in December, Meta [banned](#) Tatmadaw-owned firms from its platforms.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2021, particularly in response to the February 1 military coup, the U.S. government has provided funding for [Rohingya](#) refugees in Bangladesh and others impacted by violence in Burma. The United States sanctioned several Burmese government officials, including high-ranking officials of the Tatmadaw. While these [sanctions](#) cited numerous human rights abuses, they have not cited religious freedom violations [or targeted](#) the oil and gas industry, which many [argue](#) could cripple the financial backbone of the military junta. U.S. officials met with representatives of ASEAN and regional countries to discuss peacefully resolving the military coup and transitioning the country back to democracy; they also worked multilaterally through the UN. After the reporting period on March 22, 2022, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [announced](#) the United States had determined that the atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw against the Rohingya constitute genocide and crimes against humanity.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Burma as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1. The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC every year since 1999.

On December 27, President Biden signed into law the [National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#) for fiscal year 2022. The NDAA included provisions relating to Burma, including calling for the U.S. government to support and legitimize the NUG and deny legitimacy and resources to the Tatmadaw. The law urges the return to democracy and accountability for atrocities and human rights violations committed by the Tatmadaw.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated. The government continued to vigorously implement its “[sinicization of religion](#)” policy and demand that religious groups and adherents support the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rule and ideology. In December, top CCP and government officials [held](#) the National Conference on Religious Work in Beijing, after which authorities and state-controlled religious organizations at all levels organized meetings to study and implement the CCP’s religious policies. Throughout 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)—a government agency under direct control of the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD)—and other agencies [issued](#) new legal measures, imposing further restrictions on clergy, religious schools, and [religious content on the internet](#). Although China recognizes Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism, adherents of groups with perceived foreign influence—such as underground Catholics, house church Protestants, Uyghurs and other Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists—and those from other religious movements, such as Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God, are especially vulnerable to persecution.

During the year, Xinjiang authorities continued to [detain](#) Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims arbitrarily in concentration camps, prisons, and forced labor camps for a variety of religiously related reasons. Former detainees and witnesses [reported](#) physical and psychological torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, forced labor, and forced sterilization and abortion while in custody. Moreover, authorities separated as many as [880,000](#) Muslim children from their parents and [destroyed](#) or desecrated important religious and cultural sites throughout Xinjiang. In 2021, the [U.S. government](#) and the [parliaments](#) of Canada and several European countries, [research organizations](#), and the United Kingdom (UK)-based [Uyghur Tribunal](#) determined the atrocities in Xinjiang to be genocide and/or crimes against humanity. Furthermore, evidence [suggests](#) that Chinese authorities began to [implement](#) similar repressive policies against Hui Muslims—a group the government previously tolerated—throughout China.

The Chinese government continued its pervasive control and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism. In May, it issued a [white paper](#) on Tibet that included an emphasis on sinicizing religion there. In July, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Tibet and [stressed](#) the importance of “fully implementing” the Party’s religious policies. Local authorities organized seminars to [indoctrinate](#) monks and nuns at Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, [restricted](#) Tibetans’ access to temples with heavy security presence, [destroyed](#) sites and symbols of religious significance, and [detained and punished](#) Tibetans for listening to the Dalai Lama’s teachings or possessing his portrait.

Despite the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, authorities continued to harass and detain underground Catholic priests who refuse to join the state-controlled Catholic association, such as Bishop [Joseph Zhang Weizhu](#) of Xixiang, Hebei Province. They also intensified persecution of Protestants by harassing, detaining, arresting, and physically abusing leaders of Protestant house churches who refuse to join the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement, such as Elder [Zhang Chunlei](#) of Ren’ai Reformed Church and Pastor [Yang Hua](#) of Living Stone Church in Guiyang City, Guizhou Province. Pastor [Wang Yi](#) of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu City, Sichuan Province, remained imprisoned, serving a nine-year sentence amid reports of his deteriorating health. Moreover, authorities throughout China routinely [raided](#) churches, detained Christians, and [confiscated](#) religious materials. The government also continued to demolish church buildings and crosses—including the [Sacred Heart Catholic Church](#) in Xinjiang—under its “sinicization of religion” campaign.

The government continued its persecution of other religious movements, often using the “anti-cult” provisions under [Article 300](#) of China’s Criminal Law. Falun Gong source Minghui reported that in 2021, authorities [harassed and arrested](#) thousands of Falun Gong practitioners and [sentenced](#) 892 to prison terms. At least 101 practitioners [died](#) as a result of government persecution. The government escalated its persecution of the Church of Almighty God, reportedly [arresting](#) thousands of its members throughout China and [torturing](#) many for practicing their faith. Some reportedly [died](#) in custody.

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);
 - Expand financial and visa sanctions to target Chinese officials and entities responsible for carrying out severe religious freedom violations, especially within the CCP’s UFWD, SARA, the public security and state security apparatus, and localities where particularly egregious violations occur;
 - Work with like-minded countries in international fora, including the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, to collectively hold the Chinese government accountable for severe religious freedom violations, including by creating a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate and identify perpetrators of genocide and other atrocity crimes in Xinjiang and document other severe human rights abuses throughout China; and
 - Enforce China-related human rights legislation to ensure that U.S. companies do not contribute to religious freedom violations in China.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Work with the administration to ensure that China-related human rights legislation, such as the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act and Tibet Policy and Support Act, are fully enforced.

Background

China is officially an [atheist state](#). Of China's [estimated](#) 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; five percent are Christian; and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religion practices.

The CCP, whose members are banned from believing in or practicing any faith, has long repressed religious freedom, and in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion, implementing campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of alleged "foreign" influences. These policies require religious groups to support CCP rule and its political objectives, including by altering their religious teachings to conform to CCP ideology and policy. Both registered and unregistered religious groups and individuals who run afoul of the CCP face harassment, detention, arrest, imprisonment, and other abuses.

National Religious Work Conference

At the National Conference on Religious Work, top CCP officials [reiterated](#) many of the same policy priorities from the [2016 conference](#), which was followed by severe religious freedom violations in subsequent years. General Secretary Xi [emphasized](#) "fully implementing" the Party's theory and policies on religious affairs, including the "sinicization of religion" policy. He called for strengthening control and management of religion, requiring officials to adhere to Marxist views of religion, and demanding state-controlled religious groups to support the CCP's rule and its religious policies.

In addition to the top leadership, other central, provincial, and military officials—including officials from Xinjiang and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps—attended the conference virtually. Afterward, government authorities and state-controlled religious organizations at all levels organized separate meetings to study General Secretary Xi's speech and to implement the policies. Minister of Public Security Zhao Kezhi [convened](#) one such meeting and emphasized that his agency must "effectively prevent and resolve major risks within the religious sphere [and] safeguard national security and unity, ethnic unity, and social stability." Specifically, Minister Zhao called for a crackdown on "religious extremist thoughts and forces," "illegal missionary activities," "cults," religious activities associated with the Dalai Lama, and "illegal religious activities on the internet."

Accountability for International Crimes against Uyghurs

In December 2021, the UK-based and civil society-led [Uyghur Tribunal](#) judged that China has committed—beyond a reasonable doubt—genocide and crimes against humanity under international law. The tribunal considered and reviewed extensive evidence presented by

victims, witnesses, and experts, and it linked the repressive policies and abuses in Xinjiang to the highest echelon of Party and government leadership, including General Secretary Xi and former Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo. The tribunal invited the Chinese government to take part in its proceedings but did not receive a response. The Uyghur Tribunal was formed in large part due to the lack of meaningful UN actions and inaccessibility to international courts. The International Criminal Court (ICC) [stated](#) in December 2020 that it would not investigate abuses against Uyghurs in Xinjiang as China is not a party to the ICC.

Key U.S. Policy

In January 2021, the administration of then President Donald J. Trump [designated](#) China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity. In March, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [affirmed](#) this determination. That same month, the United States, Canada, the UK, and the European Union [imposed](#) coordinated, targeted sanctions on two Chinese officials—Wang Junzheng and Chen Mingguo—for their involvement in serious human rights abuse in Xinjiang. In May, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) visa sanctions against Chinese official Yu Hui for his involvement in the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners. In December, the U.S. government [sanctioned](#) Shohrat Zakir and Erken Tuniyaz, former and current chairman of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, respectively, for their involvement in serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang, as well as Chinese company SenseTime for developing facial recognition programs that targeted Uyghurs. That same month, the Biden administration [implemented](#) a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics given the Chinese government's ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses. Also in December, the Biden administration [appointed](#) Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues. On November 15, the State Department [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 July, the U.S. government [issued](#) an updated Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory, which [warned](#) businesses with supply chain and investment ties to Xinjiang of heightened legal risks due to serious human rights abuses in the region. In December, Congress [passed](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act—legislation USCIRF had recommended Congress support—and President Biden [signed](#) it into law. The law creates a "rebuttable presumption" that all goods and products from Xinjiang are made with forced labor and bans their import, unless U.S. Customs and Border Protection certifies by "clear and convincing evidence" that forced labor was not involved.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [China's 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [I Grew Up Witnessing Forced Labor. U.S. Companies Must Step Up.](#) (New York Times)
- **Podcast:** [China Sanctions U.S. Religious Freedom Officials](#)
- **Hearing:** [Ending Genocide—Accountability for Perpetrators](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Gulmira Imin](#), [Jimmy Lai](#), [The Panchen Lama](#), [Hu Shigen](#), [Adil Tuniyaz](#)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea improved slightly, but overall, they remain poor. The government released approximately 130 religious prisoners from various prisons. Allegedly, some of these releases were made due to fears of COVID-19 spreading in prisons. Eritrean authorities continue to recognize only four religious groups as official: Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea.

The government deems unregistered religious groups to be illegal and punishes them for practicing their faiths publicly. The government regularly invokes [Proclamation No. 73](#) to prosecute members of unregistered religious groups and intervene in the internal affairs of registered groups. This law was passed in 1995, shortly after Eritrea's independence, to justify the persecution of political, civic, and religious dissidents. The law enables the government to intervene in and regulate political and religious activities as well as pursue those who disagree with the government's position. President Isaias Afwerki and his government use this and other restrictive laws to torture, imprison, and even kill individuals who oppose the government. Based on Proclamation No. 73, authorities [brought](#) nine Catholic Church-run primary schools under the administration of the government and threatened to do the same to 19 other schools, including Muslim-run ones.

All Eritreans above the age of 18 are required by law to participate in military service. Military conscription can extend indefinitely, and the government often restricts religious expression during that service. The government only exempts the physically disabled and pregnant women from mandatory military service. Individuals who refuse to participate are stripped of their citizenship and punished with long jail time. When Jehovah's Witnesses refused to take part in the Eritrean War of Independence (1961-1991), the government imprisoned many of them and denied them citizenship. As of December 2021, there were [20 Jehovah's Witnesses in jail](#), some of whom have been imprisoned for more than 20 years.

At least a thousand individuals are believed to be imprisoned due to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. These prisoners include Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church and USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience Abune Antonios. Patriarch Antonios was illegally removed from his position in May 2007 and placed under house arrest. He passed away after 16 years of house arrest in February 2022. The government also continues to jail other religious leaders, including ones from the Full Gospel Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Salafi Muslim community. Some of these religious leaders have been in imprisonment since 2004.

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);
- Maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations as the presidential action imposed as a consequence of CPC designation, to encourage religious freedom improvements;
- 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;
- Call on the Eritrean government to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses, and release the remaining detainees held on account of their religious activities; 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 Eritrea to engage with Eritrean officials to encourage them to advance human rights and religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea](#)
- **Issue Update:** [The Condition of Nonbelievers in Africa](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Patriarch Abune Antonios](#)

Background

The Democracy and Justice party (PFDJ), under the leadership of President Afwerki, has been leading Eritrea [since](#) its independence in 1993. Although the constitution [protects](#) citizens' rights to freedom of thought, belief, and conscience as well as individuals' rights to practice the religion of their choice, the government regularly violates these rights in practice. As of July 2021, the U.S. government [estimates](#) the total population of Eritrea at a little over six million. The population is divided in half between Muslims (49 percent) and Christians (49 percent). The majority of the Muslim population lives in the northern region and Christians reside in the southern and central regions of the country. Eritrean Muslims are predominately Sunni, and the Christian community is mainly Orthodox. The other Christian communities consist of various denominations, including Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. The remaining two percent of the population are followers of different religions. These mainly [include](#) adherents of African traditional religions, Baha'is (approximately 200 individuals), and a tiny Jewish community. Those who practice African indigenous religions reside in the southwestern part of the country.

Eritrean authorities [signed](#) the Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship with neighboring Ethiopia in July 2018. The accord ended over two decades of war between the two countries. Following the peace treaty, President Afwerki delivered a much anticipated [speech](#) on Independence Day, saying "the beginning of a new era" had come to Eritrea. Historically, Eritrea justified its [oppression](#) of political and civil rights by citing the ongoing war with Ethiopia. Many observers anticipated that the President's commitment would translate into advancements on human rights, including religious freedom. However, three years after the agreement, over a thousand political [prisoners](#), including many imprisoned for exercising their freedom of religion or belief, remained behind bars.

The 2020 Ethiopian civil war has had a direct impact on religious freedom issues in Eritrea. Eritrean troops were spotted [participating](#) in the civil war alongside the Ethiopian national army, fighting against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF accused Eritrea of committing gross human rights violations as the Ethiopian army engaged in an armed struggle in the Tigray region, including the [destruction](#) of the two oldest places of worship: the al-Nejashi Mosque in Negash and the Church of St. Mary in Mekelle. Eritrean troops also [detained hundreds of Eritrean refugees](#)—who had crossed the border into Ethiopia to flee torture, forced military services, and imprisonment—and forcibly returned them to Eritrea. Some of these refugees were living in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps since the war of independence. To retaliate against Eritrea, the TPLF has launched airstrikes into Eritrea, forcing thousands of Eritreans to flee to neighboring Sudan, Ethiopia, and beyond.

Government Oppression of Unregistered Religious Groups

The Eritrean government [requires](#) all religious groups to register with the Office of Religious Affairs. The government considers

unregistered groups illegal and therefore bans them from practicing their faith in public. The most prominent of these groups [include](#) Shi'a Muslims, Salafi Muslims, Protestants (Pentecostals and Seventh-day Adventists), Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Baha'is, and adherents of African indigenous religions. The government consistently deprives the practitioners of these religions of their civil and human rights by harassing and arresting them. The government particularly perceives Jehovah's Witnesses and Salafi Muslims as political forces and severely restricts their activities and punishes them with long prison sentences for practicing their faith. Similarly, Eritreans professing atheism or casting doubt on any religion or deity run [the risk](#) of arrest and social ostracization. Nontheists are often forced to [associate](#) online on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups because in-person association carries the risk of arrest.

Positive Developments

Eritrean authorities continued to take some steps that enhanced religious freedom. Similar to its actions in 2020, in 2021 authorities in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, set free approximately 130 prisoners of conscience from various religions and denominations. Most of those released were women, and some were released conditionally. In February 2021, the Eritrean government released on bail [70 prisoners](#) of conscience from different prisons. The government followed with the release of [21 prisoners](#) in March and 36 prisoners in April 2021, many of them Christians. In August 2021, the Eritrean embassy in Washington, D.C. engaged with USCIRF on issues of freedom of religion or belief for the first time. USCIRF acknowledged the Eritrean authorities' release of more than 350 prisoners and encouraged them to release the remaining religious prisoners as well as remove legal barriers to promote religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

Due to disagreements on critical issues, the United States and Eritrea have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. In recent years, however, diplomatic engagement has increased. In May 2021, newly appointed U.S. Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, and Deputy Ambassador Payton Knopf [traveled to](#) Eritrea during a regional visit focused on the crisis in Ethiopia and pressed the Eritrean government to withdraw its troops from the Tigray region where they reportedly had been committing grave human rights violations, including religious freedom abuses. Finally, the U.S. Embassy in Asmara continues to [highlight the importance](#) of advancing human rights issues by releasing all human rights and religious activists who are still imprisoned as well as allowing the registration of political and religious organizations.

Since 2004, the U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom. Most [recently](#), on November 15, the State Department redesignated Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA and maintained an arms embargo on the country under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in India significantly worsened. During the year, the Indian government escalated its promotion and enforcement of policies—including those promoting a Hindu-nationalist agenda—that negatively affect Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and other religious minorities. The government continued to systemize its ideological vision of a Hindu state at both the national and state levels through the use of both existing and new laws and structural changes hostile to the country’s religious minorities.

In 2021, the Indian government repressed critical voices—especially religious minorities and those reporting on and advocating for them—through harassment, investigation, detention, and prosecution under laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the Sedition Law. The UAPA and Sedition Law have been invoked to create an [increasing climate](#) of intimidation and fear in an effort to silence anyone [speaking out](#) against the government. [Father Stan Swamy](#), an 84-year-old Jesuit priest and longtime human rights defender of Adivasis, Dalits, and other marginalized communities, was arrested on dubious UAPA charges in October 2020 and never tried. He died in custody in July 2021 despite repeated concerns raised about his health. The government [arrested](#), filed complaints against, and [launched](#) criminal investigations into journalists and human rights advocates documenting religious persecution and violence, including [Khuram Parvez](#), a prominent Muslim human rights advocate who has reported on abuses in Jammu and Kashmir. The government also broadly targeted individuals documenting or sharing information about violence against Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities; as one example, UAPA [complaints](#) were filed against individuals for tweeting about attacks on mosques in Tripura. In September, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights [stated](#) that the “[o]ngoing use of the [UAPA] throughout India is worrying, with [the Muslim-majority state of] Jammu and Kashmir having among the highest number of cases in the country.”

The government erected hurdles against the licensure and receipt of international funding by religious and charitable nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under the Foreign Contribution

(Regulation) Act (FCRA), significantly impacting religious communities. Numerous groups that document religious freedom violations or aid marginalized religious communities have been forced to shut down operations in the country given the [restrictions](#) under [FCRA](#) that regulate access to and reporting on foreign funds and prohibit their receipt for any activities purportedly “detrimental to the national interest.” At the close of 2021, the licenses of nearly [6,000 organizations](#), including religious and humanitarian organizations such as Missionaries of Charity and [Oxfam India](#), were not renewed under the FCRA (after an outcry, Missionaries of Charity’s license was [renewed](#) in January 2022).

Government action, including the continued enforcement of anti-conversion laws against non-Hindus, has created a culture of impunity for nationwide campaigns of threats and violence by mobs and vigilante groups, including [against Muslims](#) and [Christians](#) accused of conversion activities. Anti-conversion laws have increasingly focused on interfaith relationships. Existing laws in approximately one-third of India’s 28 states limit or prohibit religious conversion. Since 2018 (and [continuing](#) in 2021), [multiple states have](#) introduced and enacted laws or revised existing anti-conversion laws to target and/or criminalize interfaith marriages. [Public notice requirements](#) for interfaith marriages have at times facilitated violent reprisals against couples. Authorities also assisted, if not encouraged, the targeting by nonstate actors of [interfaith couples](#), converts, their families, and their religious communities in an effort to [prevent interfaith marriages](#).

National, state, and local governments demonized and attacked the conversion of Hindus to Christianity or Islam. In October 2021, Karnataka’s government [ordered](#) a survey of churches and priests in the state and [authorized](#) police to conduct a door-to-door inspection to find Hindus who have converted to Christianity. In June 2021, Yogi Adityanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, [warned](#) that he would invoke the [National Security Act](#), which allows for the detention of anyone acting in any manner that threatens the security of state, and that he would also deploy a team of over 500 officials to counter those (including, by his account, [children](#)) who were carrying out conversion activities.

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 violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for severe

violations of religious freedom by freeing those individuals’ or entities’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States; and

- Advance human rights of all religious communities in India and promote religious freedom, dignity, and interfaith dialogue through bilateral and multilateral forums

and agreements, such as the ministerial of the Quadrilateral.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

Background

India is the world's most populous democracy, with an estimated population exceeding [1.3 billion](#), 79.8 percent of whom are 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 a democratic republic, and Article 25 of the constitution grants all individuals freedom of conscience, including the right to practice, profess, and propagate religion.

The Indian government has been led since 2014 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP-led government, leaders at the national, state, and local levels, and increasingly emboldened Hindu-nationalist groups have advocated, instituted, and enforced sectarian policies seeking to establish India as an overtly Hindu state, contrary to India's secular foundation and at [grave danger](#) to India's religious minorities.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC)

The religiously discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)—a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who are residing in India—passed in December 2019 and came into force in January 2020. 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."](#)

In an ongoing state-level NRC effort in Assam, in 2019 approximately 1.9 million persons were omitted from Assam's NRC list; approximately [700,000](#) Muslim residents of Assam are at [risk](#) of being stripped of citizenship. It is unclear how those excluded can be reinstated. This process has left families in fear, in turmoil, and deeply harmed, as documented in a 2021 [report](#). In May, the government of Assam asked for [reverification](#) of the Assam NRC list of citizens in some districts, threatening to exclude more Muslims. The NRC process in Assam has further aggravated [communal tensions](#), and in September, escalating tensions led to government security forces [violently evicting](#) thousands of [primarily Muslim villagers](#), resulting in the brutal deaths of at least two.

Attacks on Religious Communities

In 2021, numerous attacks were made on religious minorities, particularly Muslims and [Christians](#), and their neighborhoods, businesses, homes, and houses of worship. Many of these incidents were violent, unprovoked, and/or encouraged or incited by government officials. Both officials and nonstate actors have used [social media](#) platforms and other forms of [communication](#) to intimidate and [spread hatred](#) and disinformation against religious minority communities. The quick spread of [misinformation online](#) has contributed to violent attacks. In October, mobs attacked mosques and torched properties of Muslim residents in [Tripura](#), which borders Bangladesh. USCIRF received

documented reports of at least 50 incidents between June and October 2021 targeting the Christian community in the state of Uttar Pradesh alone.

Violent attacks have been perpetrated across the country under the guise of protecting cows in line with India's constitution and laws in 20 states (and [growing](#)) criminalizing cow slaughter in various forms. Vigilante mobs, often organized over social media, have attacked religious minorities—including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits—under suspicion of eating beef, slaughtering cows, or transporting cattle for slaughter. Most such violent incidents are reported in states where cattle slaughter is banned. For example, in June 2021, three Muslim men were [lynched](#) on suspicion of cow smuggling in Tripura, and a [vigilante mob](#) beat two men they accused of smuggling cattle, resulting in one's death and hospitalization of the other in Madhya Pradesh.

Other Developments

Throughout the pandemic, patients reported different treatment by religion and by caste in hospitals, hindering their access to health-care. In a survey conducted by [Oxfam India](#) during the alarming surge in COVID cases within India in 2021, [33 percent of Muslims](#) said that they experienced religious discrimination in hospitals. Dalit and Adivasi survey respondents also reported discrimination in hospitals at significant rates.

In 2021, mass protests [continued](#) against farm laws enacted in September 2020. Despite the widespread and diverse nature of the protests, efforts—including by [government officials](#)—were still made to discredit the protesters, especially Sikh protesters, as [terrorists](#) and religiously motivated separatists. The government repealed the farm laws in November 2021.

Key U.S. Policy

With [shared interests](#) in global security and economic trade, in 2021 the United States and India continued to maintain strong relations through various bilateral and multilateral engagements. In [January](#), the United States welcomed India joining the UN Security Council for a two-year term and supports a reformed council that includes India as a permanent member. In [July](#), Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to India to meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar to discuss a wide range of issues, including continued cooperation on COVID-19 response efforts, Indo-Pacific engagement, shared regional security interests, shared democratic values, and the climate crisis. In [September](#), Prime Minister Modi attended the [Quadrilateral Security Dialogue](#), hosted by President Joseph R. Biden, to discuss China's growing global influence. Also in September, Atul Keshap, the U.S. Chargé d'Affaires in India, met with [Mohan Bhagwat](#), the chief of [Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh \(RSS\)](#). In [December](#), Prime Minister Modi [participated](#) in the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Death of Jesuit Priest Imprisoned in India](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Democracy and Religious Freedom](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religion, Law, and Citizenship in Assam, India](#)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained poor. In February, then President Hassan Rouhani [signed](#) amendments to articles 499 and 500 of Iran’s penal code imposing prison time on those guilty of “insulting Islam” and conducting “deviant activity” that “contradicts or interferes with the sacred law of Islam.” In June, three Christians were arrested, [charged](#), and [sentenced](#) to five years in prison each on the basis of these amendments. Iran also continued using charges of “corruption on Earth,” “enmity against God,” and national security-related charges to persecute religious minorities. In April, the Arak Criminal Court [sentenced](#) two men to death for “insulting the Prophet,” and [upheld](#) the sentence on appeal in August. Iran’s government also continued to [arrest](#), [charge](#), [sentence](#), and [jail](#) scores of Christians on charges including “propaganda against the regime.” Christian converts from Islam faced particular targeting for persecution. Despite the prevalence of COVID-19 in Iran’s prisons, scores of religious minorities, including [Christians](#), [Baha’is](#), and [Sunnis](#), were called to begin prison sentences. Iran also continued to spread antisemitism. It [released](#) the results of its third Holocaust denial cartoon contest in January. Several submissions critical of Israel contained explicitly antisemitic tropes. In December, a state media outlet [criticized](#) a Shab-e Yalda display reminiscent of a Jewish Sukkah as a “distortion.” Smaller religious communities, including nontheists, also faced severe persecution. While Iran’s government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi’a Muslims who practice Sufism, members identify as a distinct and separate religion and are [estimated](#) to number up to two million. The Yarsani community’s January bid to

gain [recognition](#) under Iran’s constitution failed, and Iran’s National Defense University published an article in Spring 2021 calling the community a “security threat.”

Iran continues to detain those calling for greater religious freedom, including USCIRF Religious Prisoners of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) and [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#). On April 12, 2021, Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Iraee in abstentia to an additional year in prison, a two-year travel ban, and a two-year ban on participating in political organizations. Authorities arrested Iraee in 2016 for “insulting Islamic sanctities” after discovering an unpublished short story in her home criticizing the religiously-grounded practice of stoning adulterous women to death.

Iran continues to [harass](#) and [imprison](#) women who protest religious headscarf laws. In July, officials in Mashhad [arrested](#) five people for not observing “Shari’a criteria” after women modeled at a fabric store’s opening event without headscarves. Iran also continued detaining lawyer [Nasrin Soutoudeh](#) despite serious health problems requiring multiple prison [furloughs](#) to receive medical treatment throughout the year. The Iranian government also targets and fails to protect members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Iran actively executes people who engage in same-sex relations, citing religious grounds. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [arrested](#) a lesbian woman in November on charges including “supporting homosexuality.” In May, authorities [failed](#) to fully prosecute the honor killing of a 20 year-old gay nonbinary person.

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);
 - 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 bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Iran’s government on issues of regional and international security;
 - Work with members of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) as well as others throughout the international community to exert multilateral pressure on Iran to improve religious freedom conditions; and
 - Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) and [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#).
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States, and extend this Amendment to religious minorities in Iran who are citizens of Afghanistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran](#)
- **Hearing:** [State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Restrictions in Iran](#)

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a theocratic, authoritarian government that allows only 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 school of Shi'a Islam is the official religion, the constitution extends full respect to the five major Sunni schools. The constitution 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 in Iran, but current data on the populations of both communities are sparse. Iran is home to several other smaller persecuted religious groups, including Mandeans, [Yarsanis](#), nonbelievers, and spiritual movements.

Religious Minorities

Throughout 2021, the government [arrested](#) scores of Baha'is [across](#) Iran. Many detained Baha'is were held incommunicado or [taken](#) to undisclosed locations. Ministry of Intelligence agents also [searched](#) the home of a Baha'i citizen and [confiscated](#) her belongings. Iranian universities continued to [deny](#) education to Baha'is on account of their faith. In November, Places Administration agents in Qaemshahr [closed](#) six Baha'i businesses. In August, officials from the Natural Resources Department of Mazandaran Province [demolished](#) the homes of three Baha'is without warning. In December, the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO) [announced](#) the auction of thirteen Baha'i farms in Kata. The government of Iran also continued to [deny](#) Baha'is the right to bury their deceased in empty plots at the Golestan Javid cemetery outside Tehran which the community has used for decades. Instead, Baha'is are being forced to use the Khaveran mass grave site where victims of the 1988 prison massacres are buried.

Iran also continued to target Christians, especially Christian converts. In January, Christian converts Sam and Mariam Khosravi [lost](#) an appeal against a sentence for charges of "propaganda against the state," months after a judge [forced](#) them to give up custody of their daughter on the basis of their religious beliefs. In February, the prosecutor's office in Sarbaz summoned Christian convert Ibrahim Firouzi after he [published](#) six online [videos](#) regarding his mistreatment. After being jailed in Zahedan prison for "insulting the sacred," Firouzi [undertook](#) a hunger strike until receiving assurances he would be freed. Iranian authorities [released](#) him on bail in late February but charges against him remain in place. In April 2021, Christian convert Hamid Ashouri was [sentenced](#) to ten months in prison on charges of "propaganda against the state," which he began serving at Karaj Central Prison in July.

Iran continued detaining USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani](#), who led a 400-member house church and was arrested in 2018 on charges of "acting against national security" and "promoting Zionist Christianity." In February 2021, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [declared](#) Nadarkhani's detention a violation of international law. In November, Iran's Supreme Court [ruled](#) that nine Christian converts

serving prison sentences for involvement in house churches did not "act against national security," a decision that may positively affect similar cases. The converts were [released](#) in December pending review of their sentences.

Sunni Muslims in Iran, particularly religious leaders, faced [persecution](#) and [sentences](#) on spurious charges. Authorities [demolished](#) the foundations of a Sunni mosque in Iranshahr in January, and [demolished](#) another in Zahedan in December. In March, the Urmia Special Clerical Court [sentenced](#) cleric Rasul Hamzepour to three years in prison for "propaganda against the state." In June, the Special Court for the Clergy [summoned](#) a Sunni cleric, Fazul al-Rahman Kuhi, during his furlough from Vakilabad prison. In December, intelligence officials in Azadshahr [arrested](#) Sunni cleric Nematollah Mashouf after he refused to lead Friday prayers following the [removal](#) of the previous cleric.

Gonbadi Sufis in Iran also faced ongoing persecution in 2021. Journalist Kasra Nouri [remains](#) in prison on a six-year term at Adelabad Prison. After being [denied](#) medical care at Evin Prison, Sufi prisoner Benham Mahjoubi fell into a coma in February and died soon thereafter. Also in February, Branch 28 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Abbas Deghan to prison time following his participation in 2018 protests against the Gonbadi Sufi leader's house arrest. Iran [executed](#) a Sufi man, Hossein Mohammadi, in July. In August, Sufi cleric Hafiz Sedigh was [arrested](#) in Zabol. In November, Azad University [denied](#) Gonbadi Sufi Mostafa Daneshjoo admission despite a court order. During demonstrations in Isfahan over water scarcity in November, Persian social media websites likely funded by Iran's government blamed the protests on the Gonbadi Sufi community.

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration [began](#) negotiations with Iran's government in November 2021 over nuclear issues. At a United Nations (UN) speech in September, President Biden [confirmed](#) the administration's intention to seek a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

In April 2021, a bipartisan group of senators led by Ronald L. Wyden (D-OR) introduced [S.Res. 183](#), condemning Iran's treatment of Baha'is and citing USCIRF's [2021 Annual Report](#). Representative Theodore E. Deutch (D-FL) introduced a companion bill in the House, [H.Res. 744](#) in October. That same month, members of Congress [sent](#) a bipartisan letter to the White House urging steps to promote greater internet freedom in Iran, which is often particularly critical for religious minority communities. In December, Senator Patrick J. Toomey (R-PA) and Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD) introduced a [bill](#) to [impose](#) mandatory sanctions on Iranian officials targeting dissidents inside and outside Iran, including dissidents actively supporting religious freedom.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) Iran a CPC under IRFA and imposed as the relevant presidential action sanctions on Iranian officials who [targeted](#) peaceful protesters. Following Iran's attempted kidnapping of an American-Iranian in New York who opposes religious headscarf laws, the State Department sanctioned on Iranian officials who target dissidents [abroad](#).

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor as both state and nonstate actors continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations. Despite Nigeria's constitution protecting religious freedom, Nigerian citizens faced blasphemy charges and convictions, violence, and attacks during religious ceremonies.

State authorities in the north of the country, particularly in Kano State, charged and convicted several individuals for blasphemy in 2021. In June 2021, the Department of State Security (DSS) [arrested Ahmad Abdul](#) for allegedly insulting Allah in a song he released that was not vetted by the Kano Censorship Board. The chair of the board had recently announced a [new policy](#) that required poets and singers to submit their material to the board for approval. In July, authorities arrested Sheikh Abduljabara Kabara and charged him with blasphemy and incitement, claiming his sermons were "[mortifying \[to\] the companions and the Holy Prophet Muhammad.](#)" The arrest followed a debate [organized by the government](#) in which Kabara argued precepts of Islam with state-backed clerics. Also in July, authorities charged prominent humanist leader Mubarak Bala with causing a public disturbance by posting blasphemous content on social media. Authorities had detained Bala without charge for 15 months prior to announcing the official charges. Moreover, [a mob](#) in Kano State killed a reverend in retaliation for his alleged involvement in converting a local member of a Muslim family to Christianity.

In a positive development, in January the Kano State High Court [overturned](#) the blasphemy conviction and death sentence

of 16-year-old Omar Farouq, citing irregularities. The same court, citing the same irregularities, ordered that the blasphemy case against Muslim gospel musician [Yahaya Sharif-Aminu](#) be retried, but he remains in detention. In July, a court [acquitted](#) Ibrahim el-Zakzaky of all charges related to his activities leading the Shi'a Muslim group the Islamic Movement of Nigeria.

A diverse array of nonstate actors in Nigeria also continued to conduct attacks on houses of worship, religious leaders, and religious congregations in 2021. Activity by criminal and armed groups throughout the year accounted for six attacks on houses of worship, including at least five [attacks](#) against [mosques](#) in [Katsina](#), [Niger](#), and [Zamfara](#) states and six [attacks](#) against [churches](#) in [Kaduna State](#). In November, churches in Zamfara State received [threatening messages](#) from local armed groups demanding that they close or risk ferocious attacks. At least 13 religious leaders were [kidnapped for ransom](#) over the course of the year, including eight [priests](#), two [pastors](#), and two [imams](#). Although government efforts to hold perpetrators accountable appear to have increased compared with previous years, the Nigerian government has often failed to respond sufficiently to violence against religious leaders and congregations.

While Boko Haram's top general, Abubakar Shekau, died this year, militant Islamist groups Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) continued to [control territory](#), conduct attacks based on belief, and [enforce their interpretations](#) of religious law and practice in communities under their control.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), 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;
 - Fund programs to:
 - Support interfaith civil society action on decriminalizing blasphemy and promoting religious freedom in Nigeria;
 - Increase access to justice for victims of attacks on religious leaders and congregations, including supporting judicial and security sector reform where appropriate and considering options for utilizing the recent \$2.1 billion (USD) assistance package announced in November 2021; and
 - Direct U.S. Embassy officials to urge the Nigerian government develop and implement a plan to decriminalize blasphemy across the country and, in the interim, make blasphemy a bailable offense and protect the safety of individuals accused of blasphemy
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Request a briefing from the U.S. Department of State to explain how it is implementing U.S. policy on Nigeria to promote religious freedom and report on the effectiveness of such efforts.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Violations in Kano State, Nigeria](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Nigeria](#)

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated [219 million people](#). Of its population, an estimated 53.5 percent identify as Muslim; 45.9 percent as Christian; and 0.6 percent with other religious beliefs, including atheism, African traditional religions, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Religious traditions, practices, and communities play a strong role in social life across Nigeria, with religious institutions providing health and educational services and opportunities for community and civic engagement.

Nigeria's [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 northern states use criminal and family codes based in Islamic Shari'a alongside civil and customary laws; these codes prohibit blasphemy and other offenses based on a particular state interpretation of Islamic law.

Other Religious Restrictions in Kano State

In addition to the blasphemy cases discussed above, in February 2021, the Kano government [sent](#) heavily armed personnel from the DSS to prevent a local Muslim community from protesting the closure of their mosque and prohibited the community from carrying out its annual *Mauqibi* religious festival. This action followed Kano authorities [banning Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara](#) from preaching in the state and ordering the closure of his mosque and schools in February, accusing him of inciteful rhetoric and sermons.

In July 2021, Kano's Hisbah Board, which oversees a religious police force, [arrested and charged five men](#) suspected of engaging in homosexual activity. Individuals convicted of sodomy under Kano's Shari'a Criminal Code may be [sentenced](#) to caning of 100 lashes and one year in prison if unmarried or with stoning to death (*rajm*) if married or previously married.

Attacks on Religious Leaders and Congregations

Throughout the year, religious leaders and congregations faced both state and nonstate violence based on their beliefs or their religious identity. State officials reportedly [used violence against](#) Shi'a Muslims during a procession marking the religious holiday of Arbaeen in September. During Ramadan, [bomb blasts](#) near a mosque killed at least 27 worshipers in Mubi, while armed assailants [kidnapped 11 worshipers](#) from a mosque in Katsina State. In May, armed actors [burned down a church](#) during an attack in Kaduna State that killed eight people. In July, armed actors reportedly [burned four churches](#) in attacks against communities in Kaduna. In September, a violent mob in Kano State [attacked and killed](#) a local reverend in retaliation for his alleged involvement in converting a member of a Muslim family to Christianity. In October, two worshipers were killed in Kaduna State in an [attack on a church](#) during morning prayers. In November, churches in Zamfara State received [threatening messages](#) from local armed actors demanding that they close or risk ferocious attacks. Attacks on mosques killed [18 worshipers](#) in Niger State in October,

[five worshipers](#) in Zamfara State in November, and [16 worshipers](#) in Niger State in December.

Meanwhile, criminal gangs substantially increased their kidnap-for-ransom activities and did not spare religious institutions. Attacks and abductions targeting religious institutions, regardless of their motives, infringe on Nigerians' freedom to worship safely and impinge on their rights of religious practice. Across the country, [at least 13 religious leaders were kidnapped for ransom in](#) 2021. While most abducted religious leaders have been released, some have died during these abductions, including a [pastor](#) in Akoko Ondo, a [priest](#) and an [imam](#) in Katsina, and an [imam](#) in Ogun. Kidnappers also targeted two religious schools, abducting hundreds of school children from [Salihu Tanko Islamic School](#) and [Bethel Baptist High School](#).

Key Developments Regarding EPCs

Since 2002, militant Islamist group [Boko Haram](#) has operated out of northeastern Nigeria and conducted attacks on the basis of religion and belief throughout the Lake Chad Basin region. In June 2021, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau was [reportedly killed](#). More than 6,000 Boko Haram fighters then [surrendered](#) to the Nigerian military and disarmed.

Despite the loss of its top general, Boko Haram reportedly [expanded](#) its reach in northcentral Nigeria in 2021. In areas they have infiltrated, Boko Haram elements have [reportedly](#) directed residents to remove their children from formal schools and ordered both Muslim and Christian parents to marry off their daughters at the age of 12 or "face consequences." Additionally, ISWAP continued to conduct violence in pursuit of its goals to enforce a particular interpretation of Islam, including continuing to hold [Leah Sharibu](#) hostage for refusing to convert to Islam.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, U.S. officials raised religious freedom issues, including societal abuses and discrimination against individuals based on religion in the context of growing insecurity throughout the country, in meetings with key Nigerian government officials. U.S. officials in the country also frequently engaged [faith leaders](#) and stakeholders in [interfaith dialogue](#) and [broader peacebuilding work](#), including in Kaduna and Plateau states where religious violence has historically been particularly high.

In 2021, the U.S. government paused some military sales to Nigeria in response to alleged human rights violations in the country. While in July Nigeria [received](#) six of the 12 A-29 Super Tucano light attack airplanes it bought from the U.S. in 2017, Congress [halted](#) a nearly \$1 billion USD arms sale that same month after allegations emerged of human rights abuses by the Nigerian military in its campaign to neutralize terrorists in its territory.

On November 15, the State Department [removed](#) Nigeria from its list of governments that engaged in and tolerated particularly severe religious freedom violations, despite the country being designated as a CPC the previous year based on conditions similar to those in 2021. Also in November, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken announced a [\\$2.1 billion development assistance package](#) during a visit to Abuja.

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in North Korea remained among the worst in the world. North Korea’s ruling ideology, known as *Juche*, forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat. Rooted in *Juche*, the *Ten Principles* for Establishing a Monolithic Leadership System require absolute and unconditional loyalty and obedience to the teachings of the North Korean leader. The Ten Principles effectively override the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law and the North Korean *constitution*, which nominally grants religious freedom. The ruling Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) actively enforces the Ten Principles at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to religious freedom.

North Korea’s *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.” The government attempts to *provide* an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world through state-backed religious organizations and sites such as the Jangchung Cathedral. In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent in North Korea as authorities actively and systematically target and persecute religious groups and adherents, including Christians, shamanic adherents, Buddhists, and Chondoists.

According to Korea Future’s 2021 *report* on religious freedom violations in North Korea, authorities persecuted religious adherents for their religious practice, religious activities in China, possession of religious items, contact with religious persons, and sharing of religious beliefs. Religious adherents suffered a range of official violations and mistreatments, including arbitrary deprivation of liberty, torture, sexual violence, forced labor, and execution. Under WPK command, myriad central and local party and government organizations are directly *involved* in carrying out these egregious abuses.

Protestant Christians remain especially vulnerable to persecution. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors has long *ranked* North Korea as the country where Christians face the “most extreme” persecution. Most North Korean Christians are unable to meet for collective worship due to pervasive surveillance and severe repression. Owning religious materials such as Bibles is considered extremely risky and life threatening, if discovered. Christians who are caught practicing their faith face harsh abuses such as long-term imprisonment in various prisons or prison-like facilities, torture, forced labor, sexual violence, and summary execution. Korea Future *characterizes* the state’s persecution of Christians as “systematic” in nature and “purposely directed at the destruction of Christian communities.” The United Kingdom’s All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea *concluded* in its 2021 report that the atrocities against Christians in the country could amount to genocide. Based on credible evidence, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) is believed to be principally responsible for persecution against Christians. In addition, the Border Security Command works closely with the MSS and Chinese authorities to detain, identify, and repatriate North Korean Christians who are caught possessing Bibles or engaging in religious activities in China.

The practice of shamanism—which authorities define as a crime of “superstition”—is pervasive in North Korean society. Persecution of shamanic adherents has escalated in recent years after the WPK *issued* directives to “eradicate superstitious activities.” Some shamanic adherents reportedly received sentences of life in prison or death. The Ministry of People’s Security (MPS) is believed to be primarily responsible for abuses against shamanic adherents, though more recent reporting suggests that the MSS is becoming more involved in their persecution. 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 violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Integrate security and human rights as complementary objectives in broader U.S. policy toward—and in bilateral negotiations with—North Korea;
- Fill and maintain the position of Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights

Issues at the U.S. Department of State to promote and integrate religious freedom and human rights in U.S. policy toward North Korea, including by coordinating multilateral efforts in international fora, such as in the United Nations, and with the European Union and other like-minded countries; and

- Impose targeted and broad sanctions—including coordinated, multilateral sanctions with international partners—as

appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea, and consider lifting certain sanctions in return for concrete progress in religious freedom and related human rights.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act and urge the Biden administration to appoint the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Organized Persecution: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea](#)

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. Shamanism and traditional folk religion practices, such as fortunetelling, are widespread.

North Korean 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 significantly due to tightened security along borders between China and North Korea as well as between China and Southeast Asian countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a further decrease. In 2021, the Chinese government reportedly [detained](#) at least 1,170 North Korean refugees in China due to pandemic-related border closures, but it began to repatriate them to North Korea after the China-North Korea border reopened in July. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, only 63 North Koreans [defected](#) to South Korea in 2021, the lowest number in 20 years. 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, which is a violation of its international obligations.

North Korean Christians who have contact with Christian missionaries and NGO workers in China face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea. Since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, many of whom played an instrumental role in helping North Korean refugees escape. The situation of Deacon [Zhang Wen Shi](#)—whom USCIRF adopted as a Religious Prisoner of Conscience—remains unknown. North Korean authorities reportedly abducted Zhang in November 2014 and subsequently sentenced him to 15 years in prison in connection to his work assisting North Koreans in China.

United Nations Activity

In January 2021, the Office of the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights [issued](#) a report to promote accountability for human rights violations in North Korea. It found that the North Korean government committed crimes against humanity targeting “people considered a threat to the country’s political system and leadership, including people who [practice] religion,” and these atrocities may be ongoing.

In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a [resolution](#) condemning “long-standing and ongoing systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations and other human rights abuses committed” by North Korea. It expressed grave concerns over North Korea’s persecution of individuals 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, including consideration of religion. The UNHRC also called on the North Korean government to ensure the right to freedom of religion or belief. The United States [cosponsored](#) the resolution, but South Korea did not.

In December, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [delivered](#) a joint statement to the UN Security Council on behalf of eight nations condemning North Korea’s human rights violations and abuses that include religious persecution. The joint statement also called on UN Security Council members to support an open briefing next year to discuss the dire human rights situation in North Korea and its implications for peace and security. That same month, the UN General Assembly [passed](#) a resolution—sponsored by more than 60 countries—condemning North Korea’s human rights violations. The resolution called for swift investigations into these violations, which may amount to crimes against humanity, and a referral to the International Criminal Court. South Korea did not [cosponsor](#) this resolution for the third year in a row.

Key U.S. Policy

There has been little progress in U.S.-North Korea relations in 2021. In April, the Biden administration indicated that it [completed](#) its North Korea Policy Review, the content of which likely will [remain](#) classified. The Biden administration stated its intention to [take](#) a “calibrated and practical approach” toward North Korea and its willingness to engage without preconditions. The administration has repeatedly [reached out](#) to the North Korean government for dialogue, but as of December 2021 it had not received a positive response. During South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s visit with President Joseph R. Biden in May, the two leaders [issued](#) a joint statement that affirmed a mutual commitment to promote human rights—including efforts to improve the human rights situation in North Korea—and to expand cooperation to ensure the freedom of religion and belief.

On November 15, the State Department [redesignated](#) North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action existing, ongoing restrictions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974. In December, pursuant to Executive Order 13687, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) North Korea’s Central Public Prosecutors Office and senior official Ri Yong Gil for human rights violations. In March, 11 members of Congress [sent](#) a bipartisan letter urging the Biden administration to appoint the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues and promote human rights in North Korea.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued their negative trajectory. The year was filled with reports of targeted killings, lynching, mob violence, forced conversions, and desecration of houses of worship and cemeteries. These violations targeted religious minorities, including the Ahmadiyya Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Shi’a Muslim communities. The government continued systematically enforcing blasphemy, anti-Ahmadiyya, and cybercrime laws while failing to protect religious minorities from nonstate actors such as [Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan](#) (TLP), a far-right Sunni Islamist organization with growing influence in Pakistan.

Those accused of blasphemy faced violence, imprisonment with limited opportunity for bail, and even death. [USCIRF’s Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) highlights 55 individuals detained or imprisoned on blasphemy charges in Pakistan. Mere accusations of blasphemy have incited [mobs to violence](#) against members of minority communities and those with differing beliefs. In January 2021, Tabitha Gill, a [Christian nurse](#) accused of blasphemy by her colleagues, was beaten and tortured by hospital staff in Karachi. In December, a violent mob in Sialkot killed and burned the body of a [Sri Lankan national](#), Priyantha Kumara, over blasphemy [allegations](#). In August, an [angry mob](#) attacked a [Hindu temple](#) in Punjab Province after courts granted bail to an eight-year-old Hindu boy who was accused of blasphemy for allegedly desecrating a local religious school. In July, a man acquitted of blasphemy charges was [hacked to death](#) by a police constable in Punjab. Though the government has publicly condemned mob violence, it has done little to protect religious minorities or provide justice.

Targeted killings remained a threat to members of religious minorities. In September, a Sikh medical practitioner and [community leader](#) was [gunned down](#) at his clinic in Peshawar. In March, a Hindu journalist was [shot dead](#) in Sukkar for his reporting. There were also two [reported](#) targeted [killings](#) of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including a homeopathic doctor who was shot and killed in Peshawar in February.

Ahmadiyya Muslims continued to face severe official and societal persecution for their beliefs and self-identification as Muslims. In 2021, the [Ahmadiyya community](#) reported 49 police cases for reasons of faith as well as the desecration of 121 Ahmadiyya graves and 15 places of worship by mobs often assisted by authorities. In December, [70-year-old](#) Asghar Ali Kalaar, who was accused of blasphemy, died in detention awaiting a bail hearing.

Abduction, [forced conversion](#) to Islam, rape, and forced marriage remained imminent threats for religious minority women and children, particularly from the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh faiths. In [October 2021](#), a parliamentary committee rejected a bill proposed to protect minorities against forced conversion that was also opposed by Pakistan’s Ministry of Religious Affairs. Parliamentarians argued that setting an age limit for conversions by non-Muslims “goes against Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan.” In December, the Sindh High Court [handed custody](#) of [Arzoo Raja](#), a 14-year-old Christian girl who was abducted, forcefully married, and converted to Islam, back to her parents with the condition that she remain Muslim. Raja’s 44-year-old abductor and the [cleric](#) who conducted the marriage and conversion certification maintain their innocence, stating that Raja had reached puberty or the age of consent according to [Shari’a law](#).

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;
 - Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
 - 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; and
 - Reform educational textbooks, curricula, and teacher training materials to ensure content is inclusive of and not discriminatory toward religious minorities.
- 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:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations, and advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in Pakistan, including [Junaid Hafeez](#), [Asif Pervaiz](#), [Stephen Masih](#), [Notan Lal](#), and [Aneeqa Ateeq](#).

Background

Pakistan's [population](#) is 96.3 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.2 percent Ahmadi) with smaller populations of Hindus (1.6 percent); Christians (1.6 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians (<1.0 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 reserves 10 seats for religious minorities in the National Assembly, four seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. Furthermore, 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 Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others who do not adhere to the majority Sunni interpretation of Islam. Cases often violate legal procedures, and judges come under extreme pressure from religious groups to convict. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. Although some individuals have received death sentences and others have died in detention while awaiting trial, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. Even lawyers defending those charged with blasphemy, presiding judges, and individuals speaking against the law are targeted. [Pakistani lawyer](#) Saif ul Malook—who has successfully overturned several convictions for blasphemy cases, including those of Asia Bibi and of Shagufta Kausar and her husband Shafqat Emanuel—said he and others like him face grave danger from extremists.

In 2021, some individuals charged with blasphemy were acquitted while some others were released on [bail](#). [Shagufta Kausar](#) and [Shafqat Emanuel](#), a Christian couple sentenced to death in 2014, were [acquitted](#) by the Lahore High Court in June. Their [acquittal](#) came after the [European Parliament](#) adopted a [resolution](#) demanding that Pakistan allow greater freedom of religion or belief and asked the European Union (EU) to reconsider Pakistan's preferential trade status. In October, [Sajjad Masih Gill](#) was acquitted by the Lahore High Court after being sentenced to life in prison for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad in 2011.

Growing Intolerance and Extremism

Extremist and intolerant rhetoric put forth on [digital platforms](#) or in public spaces by organizations or individuals—including government officials, politicians, and religious clerics—often precede attacks

on religious minorities. The spread of extremist Islamist ideology in Pakistan has created an environment of increasing intolerance, exacerbating existing prejudices and inducing fear among religious minorities. The effects can be seen at both the micro and macro levels. For example, in [December 2021](#), staff at a bakery in Karachi refused to write “Merry Christmas” on cakes for Christian customers. Although the bakery relented after a public outcry on social media, instances like these are indicative of the intolerant climate fostered in Pakistan.

At the macro level, extremist organizations such as the TLP, which espouses intolerance toward religious minorities, often act with impunity. In [April 2021](#), the TLP demanded that the Pakistani government expel the French ambassador over the republication of cartoons in France depicting the Prophet Muhammad. Authorities responded by arresting TLP leader Saad Hussein Rizvi for inciting violence and banning the organization, prompting supporters to hold [violent protests](#) across Pakistan that resulted in several killed and hundreds wounded. However, in [November 2021](#), the government came to an [agreement](#) with TLP leaders and released Rizvi, removed his name from the state's terrorism watchlist, and lifted the [ban](#) on the TLP, allowing it to contest in elections and participate in political activities.

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 or receive national identification cards. It is a crime punishable by fine, imprisonment, or death for Ahmadis to profess their faith verbally or in writing. They are prohibited from citing the Qur'an or Hadith; displaying Qur'anic text on gravestones, houses of worship, wedding invitations, home decor, or jewelry; sharing their faith; printing or obtaining material related to their faith; or calling their places of worship “mosques.”

Key U.S. Policy

Pakistan continues to be one of the largest [recipients](#) of foreign aid from the United States since the onset of the war on terror, but the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 raised [tensions](#) in the bilateral relationship. In September, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken warned the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee that some of Pakistan's interests in the region [conflicted](#) with those of the United States. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee the [United States](#) needed to examine [Pakistan's](#) sanctuary for the Taliban.

On November 15, 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

- **Factsheet:** [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Shari'a and LGBTI Persons](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Destruction of Cemeteries](#)
- **Podcast:** [Pakistan's Laws Enable Islamist Extremism](#)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the Russian Federation continued to deteriorate, with the government accelerating its persecution of “nontraditional” religious minorities. Russian authorities punished peaceful Jehovah’s Witnesses with [record-breaking prison sentences](#) of up to eight years for alleged “extremism.” During the year, the state convicted [105 Jehovah’s Witnesses](#), including [elderly](#) and [disabled](#) members as well those residing in [Russian-occupied Crimea in Ukraine](#). Since the group was banned in 2017, there have been 1,678 raids and searches of members’ homes, with 404 occurring in 2021.

The Russian government continued to use an array of problematic legislation to persecute religious minorities, including Muslims, Protestants, members of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, [Falun Gong](#), and adherents of [indigenous religions](#). The [1996 religion law](#) 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. On April 5, President Vladimir Putin [signed](#) amendments to this law that further expanded the state’s ability to restrict religious practice, including more frequent reporting requirements for religious organizations, a mandate for all foreign-educated clergy to be recertified within Russia, and prohibitions for anyone on the government’s expansive [extremism and terrorism list](#) from participating in or leading religious groups. Other Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, and charges of “terrorism” require no advocacy or participation in violence, enabling the state to target a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. In 2021, the Russian government began applying the vague “[undesirable organization](#)” label to religious entities, including [four Evangelical](#)

[groups](#) and several organizations linked to the [Church of Scientology](#). Although the legal consequences of this designation remain unclear, it is widely perceived as a step toward an eventual ban on the peaceful religious activity of those targeted.

In 2021, as in past years, peaceful Muslims comprised the majority of political [prisoners](#) persecuted in connection with the realization of their right to freedom of religion, according to the Memorial Human Rights Center. Numerous prison sentences were given to peaceful [adherents](#) of the moderate Muslim theologian Said Nursi and the Tablighi Jamaat missionary group. Crimean Tatar Muslims opposed to the Russian occupation of their Ukrainian homeland continued to receive [lengthy prison sentences](#) for unsubstantiated charges of terrorism based on their Muslim identity and alleged involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a nonviolent Islamist group that is legal in Ukraine and most Western countries. Russia considers HT a terrorist group despite the lack of any corroborating evidence, and its prosecution of alleged members is often characterized by allegations of torture during interrogation, planted evidence, and the use of “[secret witnesses](#)” with links to Russian security services.

In the Republic of Chechnya, the authoritarian dictatorship of Ramzan Kadyrov maintained domination through the imposition of an official version of Islam that [venerates the Kadyrov family](#) and falsely claims to defend local belief and culture and combat violent extremism. President Kadyrov, who was recently reelected with an alleged [99.7 percent of the vote](#), 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. In 2021, authorities continued to force Chechens to apologize publicly in humiliating televised confessions for a variety of offenses, including [witchcraft](#) and criticizing Kadyrov.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Russia as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including Chechen Minister of Information and Press Akhmed Dudaev and Blagoveshchensk City Court Judge Tatyana Studilko, 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
 - Incorporate religious freedom concerns into Russia-facing diplomatic strategy with European allies, including the use of 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:
- Engage with affected religious communities in Russia and occupied Ukraine and raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by Russian Prosecution of International Memorial Society](#)
- **Podcast:** [Abuses of Traditional Religion in Russia](#)
- **Podcast:** [Unrest in Russia](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Dennis Christensen](#)

Background

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

Muslims

Russian authorities continued to target followers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi (who died in 1960). Although Nursi’s work emphasizes scientific rationalism and tolerance, the government accuses his followers of trying to establish a Turkic Muslim state. Outside observers find [no evidence](#) of this among those charged or of extremist content in Nursi’s writings. Between October 5 and 6, 2021, at least 16 individuals were [detained](#) in Moscow for supposed ties to Nursi. On November 2, [Gabbrakhman Naumov](#), a respected [Islamic scholar](#) at the Russian Islamic University in Tatarstan, was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for allegedly leading a Nursi group. Also in November, seven individuals in [Dagestan](#) were charged with extremism for supposedly belonging to a Nursi “cell.” On December 17, Nakiya Sharifullina, a [respected teacher](#) and founder of Islamic schools for girls in Tatarstan, remained under house arrest after losing her appeal against charges of possessing Nursi literature.

In occupied Crimea, Russian authorities continued to conflate ethnic Muslim identity with terrorism in their efforts to suppress opposition to their rule on the indigenous Crimean Tatar population. In March 2021, [Mustafa Jemilev](#), a former leader of the Crimean Tatar Majlis (or parliament), was barred from entering Crimea for 13 years. Upon invading Crimea in 2014, Russia labeled the Majlis an “extremist” organization and banned it. On June 1, 2021, [Refat Chubarov](#), another exiled leader of the Majlis was sentenced to six years in prison. In August, four Crimean Tatar activists were sentenced to between 12 and 18 years for [religious studies](#) supposedly linked to HT, which is legal in Ukraine and not credibly linked to acts or advocacy of violence. Imprisoned Crimean Tatars report inhumane conditions, including [rat-infested cells](#) and lack of access to beds, medicine, clean water, and sanitary toilet facilities. In October, four [Crimean Tatar activists](#) were sentenced to between 14 and 17 years for alleged ties to HT. A Crimean Tatar activist, Zekirya Muratov, currently faces 12 years in prison for religious studies supposedly related to HT after refusing pressure to provide [false testimony](#) against fellow activists.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Other Religious Minorities

As of November 2021, five Jehovah’s Witnesses were [imprisoned](#) in Russian-occupied Crimea, with seven more under house arrest and two forbidden from traveling outside their immediate locale. In 2021, sentences given to Jehovah’s Witnesses were longer than ever, with Judge Tatyana Studilko condemning Aleksei Berchuk in June to eight years in prison, the [harshes sentence](#) to date. On October 28, the Supreme Court ruled that the criminal prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses for collective worship was [unlawful](#), but courts subsequently sentenced [eight members](#) to prison. On January 17, 2022, after the reporting period, [father-of-three](#) Maksim Beltikov was sentenced to two years in prison for being a Jehovah’s Witness. On January 19, 2022, Alexei Yershov was sentenced to three years for participating in Jehovah’s Witness [collective worship](#). On January 25, 2022, Anna Safronova received six years in prison, the [longest sentence](#) yet given to a female Jehovah’s Witness.

On September 24, 2021, Russia designated several institutions linked to the [Church of Scientology](#) as “undesirable organizations” that posed “a threat to the security of the Russian Federation.” This designation, which could criminalize possession of Scientologist literature, included the L. Ron Hubbard Library. Members of the indigenous [Mari religion](#) continued to face hostility, with one local official instructing municipal authorities to block the Mari from worshiping on [public property](#), which includes forests sacred to their religion.

Closure of Memorial International Society

On December 29, 2021, the Supreme Court ordered the [liquidation](#) of the Memorial International Society, the umbrella organization for the oldest and most prestigious human rights network in Russia. Memorial documents religious freedom abuses and maintains extensive lists of current political prisoners in Russia, the majority of whom are [imprisoned for their peaceful religious belief or practice](#). The closure of this esteemed institution irreparably harms future efforts by Russian citizens to hold their government accountable for its many abuses of religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russia relations continued to deteriorate in 2021 amid concerns that Russia was poised to expand its invasion of Ukraine, elevating existing tensions over Russian military involvement in Syria, the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory, and allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections. On April 15, 2021, the U.S. government [expanded sanctions](#) against the Russian Federation. On November 15, the U.S. Department of State for the first time [designated](#) Russia as a CPC under IRFA for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. On December 7, President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with President Putin. U.S.-Russian relations collapsed dramatically in response to Russia’s brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, as the United States and its allies levied [unprecedented sanctions](#).

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor but had some incremental improvements. The government lifted some restrictions to allow women to [change](#) their legal names and [conduct](#) the Hajj pilgrimage without a male guardian's permission. As in years prior, the government also [removed](#) from textbooks some intolerant content directed at religious minorities, but other intolerant passages remained, and the government continued to [support](#) intolerant messaging in [other](#) areas. At the same time, Saudi Arabia continued to violate religious freedom egregiously, targeting religious minorities in particular.

In June, the government [executed Mostafa al-Darwish](#), a Shi'a Muslim participant in 2011 protests in the Eastern Province. In August, the government [executed](#) Ahmed bin Sa'eed Al Janabi for his participation in the same protests. In March 2021, the government [commuted](#) the death sentences of Shi'a prisoners Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon, and Abdullah al-Zaher, arrested in relation to protest activity in 2011. All were minors at the time, and human rights organizations allege they were [tortured](#) into confessions. Also in March, several United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs [expressed](#) concern that the charges against them represented "criminalization of the exercise of fundamental rights." The Saudi Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) resentedenced the accused to 10 years in prison. However, Saudi Arabia [released](#) Ali al-Nimr in October 2021, Abdullah al-Zaher in [November](#) 2021, and Dawood al-Marhoon in [February](#) 2022.

The government also persecuted those who [published](#) dissenting religious views on social media. In October, a court sentenced Yemeni journalist Ali Abulohoom to 15 years in prison on apostasy charges for posts on his Twitter account. Throughout the year, the government also [continued](#) to forbid any public

non-Muslim worship or the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship. It also delayed trials for several religious prisoners of conscience, including [Hassan Farhan al-Maliki](#) and [Salman al-Ouda](#). Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh [remains](#) in prison on an eight-year sentence on [charges](#) of blasphemy and promoting atheist thought.

Four members of the Bohra Shi'a community remained in prison in Riyadh on multiyear sentences following spurious charges of money laundering and violating charity collection regulations. Three are in their 60s and two have underlying medical issues, putting them at high risk. The government also continues to detain activists who protested peacefully against religious guardianship laws that position women as legal minors for life. In February, authorities [released](#) anti-guardianship activist Loujain al-Hathloul following the suspension of her prison sentence. In March, however, the Public Prosecution called for reimposition and extension of her sentence. In May, the Interior Ministry's General Directorate of Investigation in Riyadh [summoned](#) al-Hathloul to sign a document informing her that the Supreme Court had upheld her conviction. She remains under a travel and media ban. In June, the President of State Security [arrested](#) Asmaa al-Subaie over tweets criticizing the harsh sentences against those calling for changes to the guardianship system and other laws affecting women.

While the government has [limited](#) the power of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), it continues to harass religious minorities. During 2021, the CPVPV and police officers harassed pilgrims who visited cemeteries with religious significance in Mecca and Medina. Those who paused to reflect at significant gravesites were ordered to leave for allegedly worshipping those buried at the cemetery, a practice forbidden under the Saudi government's interpretation of Islam.

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, and work

with like-minded parliamentarians in other countries to advocate for them and other prisoners of conscience to be released; 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](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Condemns Saudi Arabia's Latest Execution of Shi'a Man](#)
- **Hearing:** [State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Raif Badawi](#)

Background

Saudi Arabia has a population of approximately [34.8 million](#), 85–90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims and 10–15 percent of whom are Shi'a Muslims. The 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](#).

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. In February 2021, the Crown Prince [announced](#) the drafting of four laws, including a Personal Status Law, Civil Transactions Law, Penal Code for Discretionary Sentences, and Law of Evidence, that would standardize elements of Saudi law that directly impact freedom of religion or belief and would also mitigate discrepancies in court decisions on similar issues. In October, Minister of Justice Waleed al-Samani [confirmed](#) that creation of the draft laws was still in progress.

Restrictions on Minority Religions and Dissent

Saudi Arabia continued serious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in 2021. No non-Muslim houses of worship may be constructed in the country. Shi'a Muslims 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 Muslim mosques remained restricted outside majority-Shi'a Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and authorities often prohibit the Shi'a Muslim call to prayer in these areas. Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities meet only in private and have in the past faced harassment and targeting by the government. Saudi Arabia has sometimes used charges of [espionage](#) to target religious dissidents, a position endorsed on religious grounds by the CPVPV. In April 2021, the CPVPV [posted](#) a clip of a sermon on Twitter entitled “The Obligation to Kill Spies,” in which the late Sheikh Mohammed bin Saleh al-Othman says that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is “obligated” to kill spies and that they are “not Muslim.”

Detention of Religious Prisoners of Conscience

While it has commuted the sentences of some Shi'a Muslim minors, the Saudi government continued its systematic [persecution](#) of

prisoners on the basis of religion or belief. Saudi Arabia's [SCC](#) routinely targets religious minorities and dissidents, imposing egregious and unduly harsh sentences, [denying](#) access to legal counsel, [delaying](#) judicial decisions, and convicting defendants based partially on confessions [obtained](#) through torture. Many SCC verdicts enforce laws whose overly vague and poorly defined terms lead to severe restrictions on Saudis' freedom of religion or belief, including the Anti-Cybercrimes Law (2007) and the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and Its Financing (2014). The court also targets both Shi'a and Sunni clerics. Throughout 2021, the SCC continued to deny Sunni cleric [Hassan Farhan al-Maliki](#) due process. Authorities detained al-Maliki in September 2017 and charged him with 14 crimes for allegedly calling into question the fundamentals of Islam. A [September](#) 2021 SCC hearing for Maliki was [postponed](#) until October, then November, and [finally](#) December. Shi'a cleric Mohammad Hassan al-Habib, whom the SCC convicted in 2018, [suffered](#) a serious deterioration in health in 2021 while jailed at Dammam Prison. Authorities arrested al-Habib over the content of his sermons and his support of 2011 protests opposing government discrimination against Shi'a Muslims. In March 2021, the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention [concluded](#) that Sheikh al-Habib's detention was “a direct consequence of the exercise of his fundamental rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.” Saudi Arabia also continued its detention of talk show host [Ali al-Omari](#), who discussed religious issues on his television network “4Shbab” and on his [personal](#) website. In 2017, he was arrested and charged in the SCC with “forming a terrorist youth organization,” among many other charges. His trial has not yet been completed, nor a sentence delivered.

Key U.S. Policy

The Joseph R. Biden administration indicated its intent to “[recalibrate](#)” the U.S.-Saudi relationship in February 2021. It released a [report](#) noting Saudi state responsibility for the killing of U.S. resident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi and announced a new form of visa restriction, a “[Khashoggi Ban](#),” that can be imposed on people who engage in “serious, extraterritorial counter-dissident activities” on behalf of a foreign government.

In June 2021, Senators Marco A. Rubio (R-FL) and Ronald L. Wyden (D-OR) [introduced](#) S.2142, the Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act. Similar to a 2019 resolution [introduced](#) in the House of Representatives by Joseph C. Wilson (R-SC), S.2142 would require the State Department to publish an annual report assessing the state of religious intolerance in textbooks in Saudi Arabia.

On November 15, the State Department [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA but issued a national security waiver exempting it from punitive actions to which it would otherwise be subjected.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom in Syria remained threatened from numerous quarters, reflecting the country’s 10-year violent conflicts and humanitarian crises. President Bashar al-Assad’s May [reelection](#) further cemented his authoritarian regime, which [styles itself](#) as protecting religious minorities from militant Islamists—even as the [fallout](#) from its clashes with opposition groups imperiled religious minority communities in contested areas, including their property and places of worship. While the regime [preserved synagogues](#) and promoted outreach to exiled Syrian Jewish communities abroad, this likely was an attempt to maintain its [posture](#) of paternalism toward religious minorities. Although [ostensibly secular](#), the regime is [dominated](#) by the President’s Alawi-minority branch of Islam; in 2021, it [accelerated its nationalization](#) of religion by [increasingly subsuming](#) the Sunni Muslim majority’s power within its own religious institutions. In November, Assad [fired](#) the most senior Sunni leader, Sheikh Ahmed Hassoun, by abolishing his position of Grand Mufti—the powers of which the President had already limited since 2018—and [redistributing](#) authority to the Majlis al-Im al-Fiqhi, a regime-managed jurisprudential council. The government also continued to strip religious minorities of their autonomy; in February, it finalized its [classification](#) of Yazidis as a sect within Islam, forcing them under the legal and religious jurisdiction of a religion to which they do not subscribe.

At the same time, armed opposition forces and militant Islamist groups targeted vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities in their attempts to wrest power from the Assad regime and one another. The al-Qaeda offshoot [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#) remained the

[dominant governing and religious force](#) in the northwestern region of Idlib. It continued to brutalize minority communities, [restricting](#) the worship of Idlib’s indigenous Christians and [displacing](#) them by seizing their properties and churches—already rendered vulnerable from attacks by the Assad regime. Additionally, Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups—collectively sometimes called “[TSOs](#)”—such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) and factions of its Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) leveraged their Turkish financing and military support to [merge](#) under the Syrian Liberation Front, further enabling their campaigns of destruction and harassment against minority communities. In acts of religious and ethnic cleansing, TSOs near Afrin [terrorized](#) Yazidis and Kurds with shelling and [targeted](#) them—especially women and girls—for kidnapping, sex trafficking, and lethal torture. Although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not regain territory, it [increased its presence](#) in areas defended by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), such as Deir al-Zor in eastern Syria, where the militant Islamist group waged [almost daily attacks](#) on SDF bases and checkpoints.

Promising environments for religious freedom and intrareligious cooperation remained limited to the areas of north and east Syria held by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), including its military branch, the SDF, and the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). As in prior years, the AANES continued to openly support pluralism and collaboration among religious and ethnic groups. That positive environment reflected the AANES’s status as one of the only principal actors within Syria to actively and intentionally foster religious freedom and [diversity](#).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria 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 HTS as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Impose targeted sanctions on additional Syrian government agencies and officials, HTS principals, and the leadership of TSOs 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 Turkey to withdraw from all territory that it occupies as a result of cross-border operations into north and east Syria; in the interim, ensure enforcement of Turkey’s obligations under the 2019 ceasefire agreement; and demand that Turkey order armed factions under its control or influence to cease all activities negatively impacting religious and ethnic minorities in Syria;
- Recognize the AANES as a legitimate, local government; grant a waiver of sanctions in areas it governs; and demand its inclusion in any U.S.-backed final solution for Syria, 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 pluralism and advance religious freedom and related rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commends Targeted Sanctions against Religious Freedom Violators in Syria](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Commemorates Fifth Anniversary of ISIS Genocide Recognition](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Accountability for Crimes against Humanity](#)

Background

Article 3 of Syria's [constitution](#) identifies Islam as the religion of the President and Islamic jurisprudence as a major source of legislation. It also requires the state to ensure the freedom of religious rituals that do not disrupt "public order." Other laws and legal interpretations [restrict](#) religious freedom, including bans on Jehovah's Witnesses, prohibition of Muslims' conversion to other religions, and deterrents to religious extremism and proselytization.

Despite Syria's rich history of religious and ethnic diversity, a decade of conflict and instability has significantly affected its demography, displacing Syrians from both the Sunni Muslim majority and religious minority communities inside and outside the country. Approximately 87 percent of Syria's estimated current population of [20 million](#) belong to branches of Islam; Sunni Muslims represent up to 74 percent, while Alawi, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslims together comprise at least 13 percent. Christians, including Syriac-Assyrians, Maronites, Armenians, and other groups, officially comprise 10 percent—although some estimates suggest that emigration has dramatically reduced that figure. Druze comprise three percent and Jews are nearly nonexistent. Estimates for the numbers of [Yazidis](#) remain [confounded](#) by the Syrian government's classification of them as Muslims.

Alawi Muslims rose to power in the 1970s under the late Hafez al-Assad, whose son President Bashar al-Assad has further advanced the group's dominance since assuming the presidency in 2000. The civil war—which began in 2011 after a peaceful [grassroots uprising](#) triggered a brutal crackdown—has amplified once-subdued fault lines between religious groups, imparting a [heightened sectarian element](#) to the conflict.

In 2021, the Assad regime—buoyed by [relationships](#) with outside actors such as Russia and Iran—maintained or had regained control of approximately [70 percent of Syria](#); various opposition forces continued to control or contest the remaining territory. The regime has actively contributed to intrareligious tensions by casting many Sunnis as violent extremists who [threaten](#) both religious minorities and the purported modernism of the state.

Contrasting Religious Freedom Conditions in AANES- and Turkish-Controlled Areas

The AANES's Executive Council and Bureau of Religions and Beliefs maintained a [diverse leadership and membership](#) of Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, and Turkmen; Yazidis; Syriac-Assyrians and other Christians; and Sunni Muslims. Following several years of efforts to increasingly reflect such diversity, the SDF is now [majority Arab](#) and the AANES offers a [broadly pluralistic](#) environment, including religious minorities—in stark contrast to the violent intolerance of nearby TSOs in Turkish-occupied areas.

Turkey continued to threaten the AANES and religious freedom in north and east Syria. Direct Turkish occupation and military attacks in northern Syria as well as TSO operations—by factions such as Faylaq al-Sham and others—laid waste to vulnerable [Yazidi](#), Christian, and Turkmen areas. Turkish attacks included airstrikes and continuous [shelling](#) in AANES/SDF areas across northeastern Syria and a [September attack](#) on the civilian infrastructure of the Christian-majority town of Tel Tamer, forcing many residents into [targeted displacement](#).

The Turkish government also persisted in falsely [conflating](#) the AANES with the U.S.-designated terrorist group the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey made similar accusations of terrorism against other Syrian Kurdish and Arab actors, including the People's Protection Units (YPG), a division of the SDF. In June, a Turkish court [sentenced](#) three Syriac Orthodox Christians to life in prison for "membership in a terrorist organization" for alleged or actual ties to the YPG in fighting the Turkish occupation of their village in northern Syria. These men were among up to 200 other Syrian nationals whom TSO forces had captured in 2019 outside Ras al-Ain following Turkey's invasion and [transferred](#) to detention in Turkey.

Key U.S. Policy

In May 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken and the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom issued a [statement](#) warning that the forthcoming presidential elections in Syria would be "neither free nor fair" and "denouncing" the Assad regime for holding an election outside [UN Security Council Resolution 2254's](#) roadmap for the Syrian peace process. In June, Secretary Blinken [announced](#) \$436 million in humanitarian assistance, building on the more than \$13.5 billion the United States has provided to Syrians during the conflict.

Although the United States withdrew the majority of its forces from northeastern Syria in 2019, it has maintained a small [military presence](#) that many local religious and ethnic minority [communities](#) regarded as crucial to [maintaining stability](#). On February 25, the United States executed [airstrikes](#) on the Syria-Iraq border in response to Iran-backed militias' rocket attack on U.S. coalition personnel at an airport in Erbil, Iraq.

Pursuant to the [Caesar Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#), the administration continued to issue targeted sanctions against Syrian officials and TSO leaders for atrocities against civilians. In July, the Departments of [State](#) and the [Treasury](#) sanctioned TSO Ahrar al-Sharqiya. The Treasury Department also sanctioned Ahrar al-Sharqiya's leader [Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes](#)—commonly known as Abu Hatem Shaqra—for trafficking Yazidi women and children and integrating former ISIS members into his TSO's ranks. Additional Treasury Department sanctions targeted the Syria-based terrorist [Farrukh Fayzimatov](#) for his "material support" to HTS, which the State Department in November [redesignated](#) as an EPC.

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, the Tajikistani government's record on religious freedom remained bleak. State repression of the country's Muslim majority gained momentum amidst government fears about threats emanating from neighboring Afghanistan, especially after the Taliban's August takeover. In Tajikistan, alleged extremism and terrorism are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence. Charges are often arbitrarily issued against religious individuals and their trials lack due process and procedural safeguards. During 2021, the government conducted several mass arrests and imprisoned individuals for alleged involvement in illegal Muslim groups.

Muslim women reported an intensification of the government's [anti-hijab campaign](#), with frequent checkpoints at hospitals, schools, and public facilities in the capital denying entrance to covered women. Male police publicly harassed women in hijabs and in some cases detained them. Bearded young men continue to report [being denied passports](#) unless they shave, although there is no legal requirement for them to do so. In October, the lower house of Parliament introduced legislation increasing the punishment for "underground" [religious education](#), including over the internet. In 2016, Tajikistan banned private religious education and children are only allowed religious instruction by their parents at home. Since 2011, minors are barred from all public religious activity except funerals and receive only limited instruction in the history of religion at public schools. The new legislation introduces higher fines for illegal instruction and now includes the possibility of prison sentences of up to three years. The state claims there have been at least 1,833 incidents of illegal

religious instruction since 2019, involving 43 imams, 983 unofficial clerics, and 32 teachers.

In 2021, the government continued its sweeping campaign against Muslim clerics, leaders, and intellectuals. On February 12, Imam Sirojiddin Abdurahmonov was sentenced to five-and-a-half years in prison. Despite being widely acknowledged as not critical of the regime, the state targeted him for preaching without an official appointment and his case has become a warning to other [independent clerics](#), many of whom are reportedly afraid to speak publicly. Official appointment is also no guarantee of immunity. On March 5, Mahmadsodyk Sayidov, the state-appointed [imam](#) of a mosque in Kulob, was arrested immediately after refusing to preach the official sermon provided by the State Committee on Religious Affairs (SCRA). On June 4, Sayidov was sentenced to five years in prison for allegedly participating in an "extremist" organization. Tajikistan regularly uses extradition treaties to target political dissidents and religious non-conformists abroad. On September 5, Russian authorities arrested Barakatullo Ghoziev at Tajikistan's request to repatriate him to the country to face up to 25 years in prison for "high treason and inciting religious hatred." Ghoziev is the son of late cleric and Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) member Eshoni Ghozi, who was supposedly killed by Islamic State supporters during a [prison riot](#) in 2019. Shamil Khakimov, a 70-year-old Jehovah's Witness, remains in prison in Tajikistan for "extremism" despite his [seriously declining health](#) and in September was forbidden from attending the funeral of his son in violation of the United Nations (UN) [Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#).

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. security assistance to the Tajikistani government 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;
- 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

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan in 2021](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Tajikistan's Inhumane Treatment of Religious Prisoner Indicative of Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Freedom and Taliban Fears in Tajikistan](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Shamil Khakimov](#)

Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and ruled since 1992 by President Emomali Rahmon, who has concentrated power in his family's hands. The government faces financial catastrophe in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. In 2021, the situation was further complicated by numerous crises, including a [border conflict](#) with neighboring Kyrgyzstan, [violent protests](#) in the ethnic Pamiri city of Khorog, and the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly ethnic Pamiris located in the mountainous east, account for roughly four 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. 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-issued religious garments, and the content of sermons is commonly dictated by the government.

Mass Arrests of Muslims

Similar to its activities in 2020, the government continued to conduct mass arrests and detentions for alleged religious extremism in 2021. On April 9, 117 individuals received prison sentences between five and 23 years for supposed involvement in the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). Defendants came from all over the country and included prominent Muslim leaders, scholars, and local politicians. In June, a closed trial began against 18 men accused of [Salafism](#), an ill-defined but illegal category in Tajikistan, frequently applied to Muslims who do not practice in the state-approved fashion. Defendants claim they confessed to the charges under torture, which is endemic in Tajikistan, particularly in prisons. Religious prisoners are singled out for particularly harsh treatment by both authorities and fellow prisoners.

UN Human Rights Review

During Tajikistan's [Universal Periodic Review](#) in November, the UN Human Rights Council noted Tajikistan's misuse of vague and broad legislation concerning terrorism and extremism to limit peaceful religious practice, target political dissidence, and facilitate authoritarian overreach. The Council noted that Tajikistan routinely applies

unfounded extremism charges to journalists, human rights activists, political opposition, and religious minorities or non-conformists. A planned trip by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, was canceled after the Tajikistani government failed to extend a promised official invitation.

Repression of the IRPT

In 2021, Tajikistan continued its relentless campaign against the IRPT, a moderate Islamic party that constituted the only real political opposition in the country prior to the state banning it in 2015 on [unsubstantiated charges of terrorism](#). State persecution of the IRPT is motivated by fear of political opposition, but justifications are framed in terms of combating religious extremism and terrorism. On June 1, a former IRPT member was sentenced to five years in prison for membership in a banned [extremist](#) organization, despite having cut ties with the party in 2015. In September, the imprisoned 70-year-old spokesman for the IRPT, Hikmatullo Sayfullozoda, was [attacked](#) in the prison hospital while recovering from heart surgery. Violent attacks against IRPT members are common in prison and numerous prominent members have been murdered while serving out their sentences. In November, the wife of an imprisoned IRPT leader was inexplicably denied her bi-annual visitation and suspects that her husband is recovering from [torture](#).

Key U.S. Policy

In 2021, the United States and Tajikistan [marked 30 years](#) of "productive and friendly relations" on the anniversary of the U.S. government's recognition of an independent Tajikistan in 1991. Since that time, the U.S. government has provided \$1.8 billion in assistance to promote economic development, education, and health, as well as regional security, including \$330 million in security sector assistance to help combat terrorism and narco-trafficking. Over the next two years, the U.S. government has pledged an additional \$60 million in [security sector assistance](#). Since 2020, the United States has provided Tajikistan with 2.5 million doses of [COVID-19](#) vaccines, and more than \$12 million in equipment and technical support to combat the pandemic.

On December 6, Peter Riley was [sworn in](#) as the first director of the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) new mission in Tajikistan. 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. [In July](#), Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Tajikistan Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin in Washington, D.C. reaffirming the strength and importance of the U.S.-Tajikistan bilateral relationship and expressing appreciation for continued leadership on regional security issues.

On November 15, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA, although 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." It has designated Tajikistan as a CPC each year since 2016.

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world. Government control of religion is highly restrictive, with the state appointing Muslim clerics, surveilling and dictating religious practice, and punishing 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. 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. Turkmenistani 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. In March 2021, authorities in the region of Dashoguz posted notices in residential buildings [warning](#) residents not to participate in unregistered religious activity. Sources continue to report official harassment of religious individuals, including local police detaining groups of bearded men and [forcing them to shave and drink alcohol](#) to prove they are not “extremists.” In the city of Mary, a man was arrested for “[sorcery](#)” apparently linked to his practice of traditional medicine.

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. On December 1, 2021, the Prove They Are Alive campaign published an updated [list of disappeared prisoners](#), which now includes 162 individuals.

Of these, 58 individuals are vaguely accused of “Islamic extremism,” including many affiliated with Kurdish theologian Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen, an influential Turkish preacher heavily influenced by Nursi’s moderate teachings. The authorities 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](#).

[COVID-19 restrictions](#) have made public religious practice even more difficult than normal. Periodic lockdowns limited most in-person public activity, but mosques and other religious facilities were even more stringently targeted, remaining [closed](#) when parks and restaurants were allowed to open. Inexplicably, the government continued to [deny the existence of the virus](#) in Turkmenistan even as it imposed these measures. Large mandatory [public mourning](#) ceremonies in regional mosques for President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow’s father, who died on April 18, were a notable exception to the rule. Senior male officials and some in the private sector were [ordered to shave their heads](#) and wear skullcaps for a month-long mourning period, while women in state offices were ordered to wear black.

Online activity remained limited by blocked internet access and extremely slow network speeds. On January 12, 2022, after the reporting period, President Berdimuhamedow instructed the head of the Ministry for State Security to further increase [state control of the internet](#) and restrict public access to internet sources that “threaten the constitutional order.”

President Berdimuhamedow’s May 9 [pardon of all 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) imprisoned for their conscientious objection to military service was one significant positive development.

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 an acceptable civilian alternative to military service and to cease imprisoning citizens for conscientious objection.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Controlling Civil Society’s Purse Strings](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Amnesty of Jehovah’s Witness Prisoners in Turkmenistan](#)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Berdimuhamedow 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 Berdimuhamedow was “reelected” in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote. On February 11, 2022, the 64-year-old president, who is rumored to be in bad health, announced the [nomination](#) of his 40-year-old son, Serdar, to the presidency, to be confirmed at snap “elections” currently scheduled for March 12, 2022. This managed transition comes at a moment of significant political and social fragility amid the ongoing pandemic and the August 2021 takeover of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. For several years, the government has been 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. This has not stopped it from hosting [official visits from the Taliban](#), with whom it maintains relatively cordial relations in pursuit of regional economic connectivity and especially a proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline to transport Turkmen gas to southern ports.

The majority is Sunni Muslim (89 percent), while Orthodox Christians represent the second-largest group, comprising around nine 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.

Targeting Religious Holidays

Although the government continued to deny the existence of [COVID-19 in Turkmenistan](#), the country’s mosques have been largely closed as a “[prophylactic](#)” measure since 2020—a restriction that did not apply to public memorials for President Berdimuhamedow’s father in the month following his death on April 18, 2021. Large [public gatherings](#) in honor of Turkmenistan’s [national horse and national dog](#) also remained unaffected by the general moratorium on public assembly.

In stark contrast, Turkmenistani authorities appeared to [target Muslim religious holidays](#) deliberately in 2021. During the festival of Eid al-Fitr in May, mosques remained closed even though cafes,

restaurants, and parks were allowed to remain open. On May 13, worshipers who attempted to commemorate the holiday by praying outside the main mosque in the city of Mary were forcibly dispersed. On July 21, during the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, police in Lebap conducted [raids](#) on private homes in at least four cities, demanded that residents turn over all religious literature, and said that only possession of the Qur’an was permitted in Turkmenistan.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Conscientious Objection

Although not technically banned, Jehovah’s Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a “sacred duty” incumbent on everyone. After 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against [conscientious objection](#), Turkmenistan 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. In early 2021, Turkmenistan continued this trend, again conscripting Ruslan Artykmuradov, a 20-year-old Jehovah’s Witness who previously served time in prison for his conscientious objection. In an unexpected development, on May 9, 2021, President Berdimuhamedow [pardoned](#) all 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses who remained imprisoned for their conscientious objection. Although mass presidential amnesties are a regular state ritual in Turkmenistan, they rarely include religious prisoners. It is notable that the pardons did not include any Muslim religious prisoners despite occurring during the month of Ramadan.

Despite the presidential pardon, conscientious objection remains illegal in Turkmenistan, and Jehovah’s Witnesses—or any believers who refuse military service for religious reasons—face legal jeopardy. Although the government did propose a non-combat alternative service option to Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2021, it was perceived as too closely affiliated with the military and rejected by community representatives.

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. On November 12, 2021, President Joseph R. Biden sent a [letter](#) to President Berdimuhamedow expressing gratitude for assistance and cooperation offered during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although the U.S. government is cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, it has prioritized security concerns.

The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014 and [redesignated](#) it on November 15, 2021, but it 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 2021, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as in 2020. The government continued to enforce the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion, which, as written and implemented, contravened international human rights standards. Authorities persecuted members of unregistered independent groups and subjected believers and religious freedom advocates to long-term imprisonment.

Authorities continued to persecute independent religious communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, and adherents of other religious movements such as Falun Gong, Duong Van Minh, the World Mission Society Church of God, and Ha Mon. The government [designated](#) many of these groups as “strange,” “evil,” or “heretical” religions and often cited security grounds to suppress them, causing some—such as Ha Mon—to reportedly face [extinction](#). As of April 2021, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs (GCRA) [listed](#) 85 groups as “strange religions.” In June, Deputy Minister of Home Affairs and head of the GCRA Vu Chien Thang [stated](#) that “Vietnam is ready to welcome all religions, even strange ones.” In an official [document](#) published in November, the GCRA [discussed](#) the positive and negative aspects of new religious movements but offered no indication as to when the government would recognize and permit these new religions.

Throughout 2021, authorities routinely disrupted religious services, training, and ceremonies and harassed, detained, and threatened adherents and activists belonging to independent religious groups. Unregistered Hmong and Montagnard Christian groups remain particularly vulnerable to persecution. Local authorities [harassed](#), detained, intimidated, and [physically abused](#) members of the Montagnard Evangelical Church of Christ in Phu Yen Province. The group reportedly tried to register with the government but received no response in the past few years. The Protestant Church of Christ in Dak Lak Province similarly [had](#)

[trouble](#) registering their religious activities and gatherings with local authorities. Moreover, authorities subjected members of these Protestant groups to “[criticism sessions](#)” and forced them to [renounce](#) their faith in public. Thousands of Hmong and Montagnard Christians remain effectively stateless because local authorities refused to issue them identity cards and household registration documents, in many instances in retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith. In a positive development, this past year Lam Dong provincial authorities [issued](#) identity cards to stateless residents of Subdivisions 179 and 181 and allowed them to vote in elections.

Authorities harassed independent Hoa Hao Buddhists and [disrupted](#) their observance of important religious rituals and holidays, forcing them to carry out religious activities at home. USCIRF received reports that in January 2021, local authorities in Ben Cau Township, Tay Ninh Province, harassed adherents of a home-based independent Cao Dai group and disrupted its religious service. In September, authorities in Cho Gao District, Tien Giang Province, detained and interrogated independent Cao Dai followers and forced them to join the state-sanctioned group. Several independent Cao Dai groups tried to register their religious activities in early 2021 but received no response.

Land disputes between the Catholic community and local governments persisted. The An Hoa Parish [dissented](#) from the Da Nang City government’s decision that sold and repurposed the land the parish owned prior to 1975. The parish petitioned the government to return its land and cease construction by a private entity that had begun in March 2021. The Da Nang government, however, agreed to [resettle](#) Catholic residents of Con Dau Parish after over 10 years of land disputes that had led to violent clashes between parishioners and local authorities in the past. Moreover, authorities in Loan My Village, Tam Binh District, Vinh Long Province, [denied](#) a Khmer-Krom Buddhist group’s request to build a religious site.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a new binding agreement with the government to address key areas of concern to further improve religious freedom;
- Engage with the Vietnamese government and relevant academic and civil society

stakeholders to encourage amendments to the Law on Belief and Religion and its implementing decree to conform to international standards, including by making registration simpler and optional;

- Work with the Vietnamese government to provide a pathway to full citizenship—based on the existing model of Subdivisions 179 and 181 in Lam Dong Province—for all Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Northern and Central Highlands, including

by providing funding to facilitate improving religious freedom conditions among those communities; and

- Direct the U.S. Mission in Vietnam to highlight and monitor the conditions of religious prisoners of conscience and to advocate for their wellbeing in prison and their release.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation pertaining to religious freedom in Vietnam, such as the [Vietnam Human Rights Act](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [The State of Religious Freedom in Vietnam](#)
- Country Update: [Religious Freedom in Vietnam in 2021](#)
- Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project: [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#)

Background

Vietnam's [constitution](#) states that citizens “can follow any religion or follow none” and that “all religions are equal before the law.” The constitution also mandates respect and protection for freedom of belief and religion. However, it allows authorities to [restrict](#) human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of “national defense, national security, social order and security, social morality, and community wellbeing.” Vietnam's [2018 Law on Belief and Religion](#) contains similar provisions permitting restrictions on the right to religious freedom.

Vietnam is a religiously [diverse](#) country with religious demographics [varying](#) greatly across research studies and reports. Religious traditions with a significant presence in the country include Buddhism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Catholicism, and Protestantism. At the end of 2020, the government had officially recognized a total of 16 religions and 43 religious organizations. Many groups, however, refuse to register for fear of persecution or concern over their independence, which has led state-sponsored and independent religious groups to compete over who represents their religion.

Legal and Policy Developments

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion presents notable improvements compared to the 2004 ordinance, including reducing the waiting period for religious organizations to register with the government and granting legal personhood to registered religious organizations. Nevertheless, the law imposes burdensome and complex requirements on religious groups to register with the government. For example, the law requires religious groups to register for religious activities, religious gatherings, and official recognition. Each of these steps entails a separate registration process, requiring groups to submit extensive information about their organizations and activities. Moreover, groups seeking official recognition as a religious organization must have legally operated for at least five years before applying. Over the past three years of implementation, USCIRF has observed uneven and inconsistent application of the law throughout Vietnam.

In September 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs [issued](#) an Action Plan for State Management of Belief and Religion, which included an emphasis on state control of religion to ensure political and social stability. In November, the GCRA [held](#) a meeting to amend and supplement the implementing Decree (162/2017/ND-CP) for the 2018 Law on Belief and Religion. Deputy Minister Vu Chien Thang stated that the decree has demonstrated shortcomings that need to be addressed, but he did not identify these shortcomings.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

USCIRF has long [expressed](#) concerns regarding religious prisoners of conscience in Vietnam. This year, many believers and religious freedom advocates remained in prison, serving long sentences. These prisoners included Montagnard Christian pastor [Y Yich](#) (sentenced to

12 years), founder of the Buddhist An Dan Dai Dao religious group [Phan Van Thu](#) (sentenced to life imprisonment), and many others who reportedly have been abused or otherwise mistreated in prison and are suffering from deteriorating health conditions. USCIRF has consistently advocated for the release of Hoa Hao Buddhist [Nguyen Bac Truyen](#) (sentenced to 11 years)—a renowned religious freedom advocate adopted under USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience \(RPOC\) project](#)—who has reportedly been in poor health.

Key U.S. Policy

The Biden administration has [emphasized](#) that human rights—which includes the fundamental freedom of religion and belief—are an integral part of U.S. foreign policy, including policy toward [Vietnam](#). In his July 2021 visit to the country, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin [expressed](#) concerns over Vietnam's human rights record. Prior to Vice President Kamala D. Harris' trip to Vietnam in August 2021, [members of Congress](#) and politicians in [other countries](#), as well as [civil society groups](#), called on the Vice President to raise Nguyen Bac Truyen's case and urge the government of Vietnam to release him immediately and unconditionally. Vice President Harris later said at a news conference in Hanoi that she had [raised](#) the issues of human rights abuses and the release of dissidents with her Vietnamese counterparts. Then nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam Marc Knapper voiced the same concerns during his Senate confirmation hearing and [said](#) that bilateral relations could only reach their fullest potential if Vietnam makes significant progress on human rights. In November 2021, during the 25th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, U.S. officials [raised concerns](#) with their Vietnamese counterparts about religious freedom conditions, the situation of ethnic minority groups, and other human rights issues. With U.S.-Vietnam relations trending in a positive direction and the United States considering a potential [upgrade](#) of bilateral relations from a “comprehensive partnership” to a “strategic partnership,” experts [observe](#) that human rights remain a challenge in the growing relationship.

In May, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) [introduced](#) the bipartisan [Vietnam Human Rights Act](#) (H.R. 3001), which would allow the U.S. government to sanction Vietnamese officials and others who are complicit in systematic violations of internationally recognized human rights, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In August, Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) [sent](#) a letter to Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken urging him to take action to address the Vietnamese government's human rights abuses and discrimination against religious groups and religious expression. 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.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Algeria deteriorated, with the government increasingly enforcing blasphemy laws and continuing to restrict worship. Algerian authorities convicted and sentenced individuals for blasphemy and proselytization, maintained the closure of dozens of Protestant churches, and charged religious minorities with illegally gathering while not providing a legal path for them to worship collectively. These actions impacted religious minorities across many faiths and beliefs, including Protestant Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and freethinkers.

In January 2021, a court sentenced [Hamid Soudad](#), a Christian, to five years in prison for “insulting the prophet of Islam” by sharing a caricature of the Prophet on social media. In February, a court sentenced freethinker [Saïd Djabelkhir](#), an expert on Sufism and advocate for a progressive interpretation of Islam, to three years in prison for “offending the precepts of Islam.” In March, authorities sentenced opposition activist [Walid Kechida](#) to three years in prison for “offending the precepts” of Islam in internet memes. In June, a court upheld a proselytization conviction against pastor and bookshop owner [Rachid Mohamed Seighir](#) and his book shop assistant Mouh Hamimi, sentencing them to suspended one-year prison sentences. In October, a court sentenced two Ahmadiyya Muslims to two years in prison for defamation

based on religion and denigration of common rituals of Islam.

In June, a court in Oran [ordered](#) the government to physically seal three churches despite the ongoing appeal by the Protestant community protesting the order for their closure. Since 2017, the Algerian government has ordered the closure of 20 Protestant churches under Ordinance 06-03, which prohibits non-Muslim organizations from establishing places of worship without authorization. The Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA) applied for authorization but the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which reportedly never meets, has not adequately responded to the request.

In November, following the U.S. Department of State’s announcement adding Algeria to its Special Watch List for engaging in and tolerating severe religious freedom violations, the Algerian government [summoned](#) the president of the EPA to court for practicing non-Muslim rites without permission. Algerian authorities also continued to prosecute Ahmadiyya Muslims and Protestants for gathering without authorization. The Algerian government insists the Ahmadiyya Muslim community register with the Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, while Ahmadis, who consider themselves Muslim, believe that to be in violation of their conscience as Muslims.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain 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); and
- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to:
 - Urge the Algerian government to develop and implement a plan to decriminalize blasphemy and proselytization;
- Meet with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and other relevant government officials, and insist the Algerian government deliver clear and timely responses to registration requests by non-Muslim organizations as required by Ordinance 06-03; and
- Attend and observe court proceedings on blasphemy charges or cases related to

houses of worship to emphasize the U.S. government’s concerns about such cases.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Continue to raise the implementation of blasphemy laws and closure of houses of worship with the State Department and relevant Algerian counterparts to ensure religious freedom concerns are incorporated into the U.S.-Algeria bilateral relationship.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)

Background

Algeria is home to [nearly 43 million people](#), 99 percent of whom are estimated to be Sunni Muslim. The remaining 1 percent of the population is comprised of Jews, nonbelievers, Muslim minorities (including Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims), and Christians (including Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians). [Algeria's constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official state religion.

Algeria has a long history of repression and persecution of religious minorities, including against [Jews](#), [Baha'is](#), Protestant Christians, and [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#). Despite Algeria's constitution affording all Algerians the right to freedom of opinion and worship, the Algerian government limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor a particular interpretation of Islam and restrict religious activities. Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize blasphemy with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to approximately \$829 USD (100,000 Algerian dinars). Algeria's Criminal Code also censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals."

Through [Ordinance 06-03](#) passed in 2006, the Algerian government requires all non-Muslim organizations register with the Algerian government to conduct affairs and establish places of worship. The process for registration has been opaque and poorly implemented, yielding legal uncertainty for some non-Muslim religious communities, which the government exploits to repress and prosecute religious minorities. Ordinance 06-03 also criminalizes proselytization by non-Muslims with punishments of up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of approximately \$8,347 USD (1 million dinar).

Blasphemy and Proselytization Convictions

In January, a court sentenced [Hamid Soudad](#), a Christian, to five years in prison for "insulting the prophet of Islam" by sharing a caricature of the Prophet on social media. Upon appeal, the Oran City Court of Justice upheld the sentence in March. Soudad has appealed the verdict, a process that can take over a year, and in the meantime remains imprisoned. In April, a court convicted [Said Djabelkhir](#), a scholar and free thought leader, of blasphemy for "offending the precepts of Islam" and sentenced him to three years in prison and an approximately \$375 USD fine (50,000 dinar), reportedly after a fellow academic [filed a complaint](#) that his writings constituted "an attack and mockery of the authentic hadiths of the Sunna [the custom and practice] of the Prophet," and had caused individuals psychological harm.

In March, authorities sentenced opposition activist [Walid Kechida](#) to three years in prison for insulting President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and "offending the precepts" of Islam in internet memes. Also, in April authorities detained Christian convert Foudhil Bahloul, interrogating him on his conversion, searching his house, and confiscating Christian materials. In July 2021, a court sentenced Bahloul to six months imprisonment and fined approximately \$750 USD (100,000 dinar) for "illegally accepting donations" from religious groups when local Christians raised funds to help him cover costs after he lost his job due to his conversion.

In June, a court upheld a proselytization conviction against pastor and bookshop owner [Rachid Mohamed Seighir](#) and his book shop assistant Mouh Hamimi for "printing, storing, or distributing materials that can 'shake' the faith of a Muslim," sentencing them to a suspended one-year prison sentence and an approximately \$1,500

USD (200,000 dinar) fine. In August, alleged plainclothes agents abducted Algerian national, Christian convert, and UN-recognized refugee [Slimane Bouhafis](#) in Tunisia and transferred him to Algeria, where he remains detained on several charges including blasphemy. In October, advocates reported that two Ahmadiyya Muslims were convicted of defamation based on religion and denigration of common rituals of Islam and unlicensed fundraising and sentenced to two years in prison, although they were not incarcerated after the verdict due to time served awaiting trial for six months.

Restrictions on Houses of Worship

In 2021, Algerian authorities continued to uphold and implement restrictions on houses of worship for both Protestants and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Since 2017, Algerian officials have ordered the closure of [20 Protestant](#) churches. The Algerian government [justifies](#) these closures by citing Ordinance 06-03, which requires that non-Muslim religious organizations register to establish houses of worship. Protestant organizations report that government authorities systematically refuse to provide them the necessary receipt for registration, effectively rendering their activities illegal. In June 2021, a court in Oran ordered the physical sealing of three churches despite the ongoing appeal by the Protestant community protesting the order for their closure. In November, a court [charged](#) the leader of the country's largest Protestant church and three other Christians with worshipping without the prior approval of the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups.

Algerian authorities have also [restricted Ahmadiyya Muslims](#) from establishing houses of worship. The Algerian government, which does not consider Ahmadiyya Muslims to be Muslims, has required that the Ahmadiyya Muslim community register as a non-Muslim organization under Ordinance 06-03. Since doing so would violate Ahmadiyya Muslims' conscience, as the community considers themselves Muslim, the Ahmadiyya community remains unregistered in Algeria and is subject to forced closure of its mosques and prosecution for unauthorized gathering under existing regulations. The majority of pending court cases against Ahmadiyya Muslims pertain to accusations of [unauthorized gatherings](#) for the purposes of worship.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States is one of Algeria's [top trading partners](#), and professional exchanges play a valuable role in strengthening the U.S.-Algeria law enforcement and security partnership at both the senior and working levels. The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) "has supported the work of Algeria's civil society through programming that provides training to journalists, businesspeople, female entrepreneurs and parliamentarians, legal professionals, and the heads of leading non-governmental organizations."

In April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [spoke](#) with Algeria's Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum over the phone and discussed strengthening the bilateral relationship founded on shared values and mutual interests. In July, a group of bipartisan Senators sent a [letter](#) to Secretary Blinken requesting that the State Department take action against systematic, discriminatory treatment toward members of religious minority groups. On November 15, the State Department [placed](#) Algeria on its Special Watch List for the first time for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan generally trended negatively, with a few notable positive developments. In the beginning of the year, the Azerbaijani government unexpectedly [announced](#) plans to amend the country's restrictive 2009 law On Freedom of Religious Beliefs (religion law); these amendments passed swiftly and entered into force mid-year. Several entities, including USCIRF and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, had previously called for the government to revise the law to guarantee the protection of freedom of religion or belief and to remove provisions that constituted violations of this right. The amendments not only failed to address existing problems but also introduced new restrictions on religious communities. Prominent among those additions were requirements that the government approve the appointment of essentially all religious leaders; religious communities cease religious activity in the absence of an appointed cleric; certain categories of religious activities only take place in approved spaces; and worship and religious ceremonies only be carried out by Azerbaijani citizens, unless given express permission otherwise. Moreover, despite public [urging](#), the Azerbaijani government declined to seek feedback on the amendments from the general public or international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Ongoing issues stemming from the religion law and other policies that impact the exercise of freedom of religion or belief also saw no improvement. During 2021, the government did not register any non-Muslim religious communities that had pending applications under the religion law. According to the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), the government [registered](#) at least 16 Muslim communities. Although sources stated that the Azerbaijani government was considering adopting a civilian alternative to mandatory military service for conscientious objectors, nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported that an official from the Presidential Administration

[refuted](#) that claim. Azerbaijan's human rights commissioner additionally [hinted](#) that the government may repeal a ban prohibiting women and girls from wearing headscarves in passport photos.

In mid-March, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev unexpectedly [pardoned](#) 31 religious activists, many of whom were considered members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), as part of a broader release of prisoners ahead of the Novruz holiday. The pardon and release of other religious activists upon the completion of their sentences brought down the total number of individuals imprisoned for their religious affiliations or activities to between 11–21 prisoners. However, law enforcement authorities detained or arrested other religious activists throughout the year, including MUM members Razi Humbatov and Vugar Hajiyev, and briefly [rounded up](#) a number of Shi'a Muslim clerics before releasing all but one of them.

Concerns remained regarding the protection and preservation of religious and cultural heritage sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the territories returned to Azerbaijani control following the November 2020 ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Caucasus Heritage Watch, a research initiative supported by Cornell University, [documented](#) through satellite imagery the razing of two Armenian cemeteries and a mosque. It also catalogued several churches that appeared damaged or that researchers considered "threatened" due to nearby construction projects. And while the Azerbaijani government announced in [2020](#) that two soldiers would face charges for destroying Armenian gravestones, authorities have since [refused](#) to release any information regarding those cases. In December, the International Court of Justice [ordered](#) Azerbaijan to "take all necessary measures to prevent and punish acts of vandalism and desecration affecting Armenian cultural heritage, including . . . churches and other places of worship . . . [and] cemeteries." Finally, Azerbaijani military forces reportedly [blocked](#) a group of pilgrims from visiting monasteries in these areas.

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, as most recently amended in 2021, 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 OSCE;
- Assist the Azerbaijani government, in collaboration with international partners, to develop an alternative civilian service and permit conscientious objection pursuant to its commitment made 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:

- Raise concerns, through public hearings and other actions, about Azerbaijan's religious freedom and broader human rights abuses, including treatment of the MUM, directly with the Azerbaijani Embassy and other government officials and advocate for the release of all prisoners of conscience.

Background

The U.S. government [estimates](#) the population of Azerbaijan at nearly 10.3 million people. Roughly [97](#) percent of citizens are Muslim, with [around](#) 65 percent identifying as Shi'a Muslim and 35 percent identifying as Sunni Muslim. The remaining less than three percent of the population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

Although Azerbaijan defines itself as a secular state whose constitution [requires](#) the separation of state and religion, the Azerbaijani government conversely actively involves itself in, regulates, and interferes in religious affairs. Primarily, it has legislated an increasingly complex set of regulations that require official approval, consent, or notification for most religious activities.

Problematic Amendments to the Religion Law

In February, chair of the SCWRA Mubariz Gurbanli [stated](#) that the government planned to introduce changes to the country's religion law to "further improve the legal framework regulating the sphere of religion." In the following months, Azerbaijan's National Assembly [rapidly](#) considered and passed a series of amendments that the President [signed](#) into law on June 16, 2021. Rather than reduce bureaucratic barriers to the free practice and expression of one's beliefs, the updates further tightened existing restrictions on worship and other religious activities. Several additions to the law require government authorization or notification for certain actions, such as holding "mass religious worship, rites, and ceremonies" outside designated places of worship and organizing religious pilgrimages abroad. Furthermore, the appointment of all religious leaders in the country requires official approval, and religious communities must cease religious activities in the absence of an approved religious figure until a new one is appointed. The law also bans "forcing children to believe in a religion," which a representative of the official Caucasus Muslim Board [claimed](#) would only apply to "certain religious movements whose participation in rituals and religious conversations is not considered appropriate by the state." The representative clarified that it would not prevent children from practicing Azerbaijan's "traditional religions," namely Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, despite concerns that the vagueness of the amendment would give law enforcement such wide discretion that it could easily be abused.

Imprisonment of Religious Activists

Various NGOs have maintained lists of political prisoners in Azerbaijan for years. In recent years, the total number of individuals imprisoned in connection with their religious activism has continued to decrease. In March, President Aliyev [issued](#) a sweeping pardon in advance of the Novruz holiday that released from prison an estimated 31 religious activists, the majority of whom had some connection to the

MUM. Other individuals were [released](#) following the completion of their sentences. By the end of the year, NGOs assessed that between 11–21 religious activists remained behind bars, a significant drop compared to previous years. In spite of these releases, however, a report by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe [found](#) that "the problem of political prisoners in Azerbaijan. . . has been neither duly recognized nor adequately addressed by the authorities, let alone resolved."

Authorities continued to detain or arrest others, ostensibly on charges related to their religious affiliations or activities. In May, authorities [detained](#) MUM representative Elchin Gasimli for unclear reasons. In July, news outlets [reported](#) the detention of Razi Humbatov, a MUM member, on seemingly spurious drug charges that he [believed](#) were in retaliation for his criticism of the government. According to human rights defenders, Humbatov was [tortured](#) for six days to extract a confession. Yet another MUM member, Vugar Hajiyev, was also [arrested](#) during this period on similar charges. Relevant to the ongoing official pressure against the MUM, human rights activists in the country [maintained](#) that authorities continued to restrict access to the settlement of Nardaran, often associated with the group, and enforced a ban on visiting mosques there. In October, Azerbaijan's State Security Service [detained](#) six Shi'a religious leaders, including cleric Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, likely as a result of increased tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran. Family members reported that government agents brought the clerics in for questioning and confiscated several personal possessions, including phones, computers, and religious books. Ultimately, all but one individual were released by the end of the reporting period.

Key U.S. Policy

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Azerbaijan is [motivated](#) mainly by joint efforts to promote European energy security, increase trade and investment, and combat terrorism and transnational threats. In its role as a cochair—along with France and the Russian Federation—of the [OSCE Minsk Group](#), the United States also continued to push for a peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The State Department engaged the Azerbaijani government publicly on religious freedom and human rights concerns. In March, the Office of International Religious Freedom [welcomed](#) the Novruz pardoning of hundreds of individuals and called for the release of all prisoners of conscience. In June, the same office [criticized](#) the government's passage of new restrictive amendments to the country's religion law. Over the course of the year, U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Earle D. Litzenger visited Quba, where he [noted](#) the country's "spirit of tolerance," and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan, where it has been difficult to monitor religious freedom conditions. It is not [clear](#) whether the ambassador raised issues related to religious freedom during that trip.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Stalled Progress in Azerbaijan](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Destruction of Cemeteries](#)
- **Interview:** [Azerbaijan and Turkey Should Be Included in Special Watch List](#) (in ArmNews TV)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by Azerbaijan Religion Law Amendments, Condition of Ghazanchetsots Cathedral](#)

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions deteriorated in the Central African Republic (CAR). Following a year of progress and reduced religious freedom violations in 2020, violence on the basis of religion, especially the targeting of Muslim minorities, appears to have increased in CAR in 2021. CAR authorities in select prefectures and state-backed foreign fighters with links to the Russian government committed arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and torture and inhumane treatment against Muslims based on their assumed affiliation with rebel groups due to their religious or ethnoreligious identity.

In February, national security forces and foreign fighters [overran a mosque](#) in Bambari and shot dead at least three Muslims. In May, CAR authorities arrested a Muslim shopkeeper in Kaga Bandoro and the next day his [charred body](#) was found on the outskirts of town, cut into pieces. In June, foreign fighters reportedly stormed the home of the [Sultan of Kouï](#) and insisted he and two companions accompany them. The Russian-linked fighters returned a few hours later and told the Sultan's family that he and his companions had been killed by a landmine. A United Nations (UN) human rights investigation found that they had in fact been shot. A few months later, foreign fighters reportedly raided the home of the second most influential Muslim cleric in Kouï, the [imam of Kouï central mosque](#), and disappeared him after harassing him for weeks to stop teaching children in the Quranic School.

In [January](#), CAR security forces arrested a Muslim man accused of being an informant to rebel groups and tortured him for two days to obtain a confession. In April, CAR authorities in Bambari arbitrarily arrested [18 Muslim civilians](#) and subjected them to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. Also in April, CAR authorities arrested a [Muslim trader](#) and beat him and confiscated his motorbike and a sum of money. In [May](#), CAR security forces in Bang arrested and tortured 20 Muslim civilians due to their perceived association with a local armed group.

The CAR government has [opened investigations](#) into some of these allegations against national security forces and foreign fighters, but it has thus far not held anyone accountable for these violations and has even obstructed some investigations. CAR authorities have also [obstructed](#) the work of the Special Criminal Court (SCC), a hybrid court mandated to investigate and try individuals responsible for grave human rights abuses during the civil war.

Muslim Central Africans also continue to face discrimination and displacement. Government authorities [charge Muslims](#) higher fees and fines than non-Muslims for the same services or penalties. Displacement increased in 2021, with [more than 100,000](#) Central Africans newly displaced. Although data is lacking, analysts familiar with the situation on the ground assess that Muslims are disproportionately represented among CAR's displaced population.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include CAR on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Provide financial, administrative, and diplomatic support to the SCC and other investigations into ethnoreligious targeting and other human rights abuses by state actors or state-backed foreign fighters in CAR, including urging the CAR government to cease all obstructions to such investigations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on CAR government agencies and officials and other relevant foreign actors 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
- Continue to allocate funding for humanitarian assistance, including for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and returnees, as well as funding programs to rebuild mosques destroyed during the civil conflict.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Central African Republic](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa](#)
- **Podcast:** [Central African Republic: From Sectarian Violence to Progress on Religious Freedom](#)

Background

CAR's [constitution](#) provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and "religious fundamentalism." The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion. Roughly [89 percent](#) of CAR's population identify as Christian, while nine percent identify as Muslim, one percent practice folk religions, and one percent are religiously unaffiliated.

In 2012, predominantly Muslim militias in CAR's north mobilized and marched on the capital in response to longstanding grievances based in the government's marginalization of and discrimination against Muslim minorities. In response, militias from predominantly Christian- and folk religion-practicing communities mobilized for self-protection and began retaliating against Muslim civilian communities. This triggered more than half a decade of political and [ethnoreligious violence](#), including attacks on individuals based on their religious identity and deliberate attacks on houses of worship and religious enclaves in cities across CAR. Muslim minorities bore the brunt of the conflict, with violence displacing an estimated [80 percent](#) of CAR's Muslim population in the first two years. In light of these violations, from 2015 to 2019 USCIRF recommended that the State Department designate CAR as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under IRFA for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations.

In 2019, the CAR government [signed a peace accord](#) with 14 armed groups. CAR authorities also began to [increase cooperation](#) with Russian nationals, including fighters affiliated with the Wagner Group, a military contractor with ties to the Russian government. In 2017, the UN Security Council [loosened an arms embargo](#) on CAR to facilitate Russian security assistance and training to the CAR government, and by 2021 there were an estimated [1,200 Russian-linked fighters](#) operating there. In 2019 and 2020, instances of religious violence decreased leading USCIRF to recommend SWL status, a lesser category, for CAR in 2020 and then to [remove CAR](#) from its SWL recommendations in its 2021 Annual Report.

However, following contested elections at the end of 2020 and the remobilization of a united rebel militia, state-sponsored abuses against Muslims have been on the rise. In June, the UN Secretary General found that targeted arrests of alleged rebel collaborators "[disproportionately affected religious and ethnic minorities](#) such as Muslims and Fulanis." A joint human rights investigation by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported a notable "increase in targeted attacks against the civilian population, [especially Muslims](#)," in several prefectures and found that CAR authorities used a state of emergency in early 2021 to [commit](#) abuses that "specifically targeted certain communities (Muslims and Peuhl)."

Executions, Abductions, and Torture

In 2021, CAR authorities and state-sanctioned foreign fighters with links to the Russian government killed or facilitated the execution of Muslims on the basis of their religious identities. These violations included [shooting three Muslims](#) as they exited a mosque in Bambari, abducting and allegedly [dismembering a Muslim shopkeeper](#) in Kaga Bandoro, and abducting and allegedly executing Muslim leaders in Kouï in [June](#) and [October](#). CAR authorities also subjected religious minorities to torture and inhumane treatment, detaining and torturing at least 39 Muslim civilians in four separate incidents detailed in the Key Findings section.

Obstructions of Justice

The CAR government has been inconsistent in its response to the abuse and religious targeting committed by its security forces and partners. In May, the Minister of Justice and Human Rights [established](#) a Special Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of human rights abuses, among other infractions, committed by state-backed security personnel in the country between December 2020 and April 2021. However, the UN recently criticized actions the CAR government has taken to [obstruct ongoing human rights investigations](#) in the country.

National security forces have also obstructed judicial institutions from fulfilling their mandates. In November, the SCC issued a warrant for the arrest of Hassan Bouba Ali, a former armed group leader and current government official. However, national security forces [prevented](#) the SCC from accessing Mr. Bouba for his scheduled appearance and released him in contravention of the SCC's warrant.

Houses of Worship

In April, government authorities collaborated with local civil society and the UN to rehabilitate and reopen the [Petevo mosque](#) in Bangui. While this demonstrates progress, Muslims in CAR continue to struggle to access houses of worship, as the civil conflict [destroyed](#) an estimated 417 of the country's 435 mosques.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to support religious freedom efforts in CAR, including [increasing its financial support](#) for the SCC and [imposing sanctions](#) on a warlord who broke with the 2019 peace accord. The United States also [continued to restrict](#) defense assistance to the CAR government because "control mechanisms for the use of U.S.-provided equipment had not been fully implemented." In 2022, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas Greenfield expressed [deep concern](#) over human rights abuses in CAR during a Security Council meeting, specifically calling out CAR security forces and foreign mercenaries for targeting predominantly Muslim communities.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom in Cuba remained highly restricted. The Cuban government continued to use surveillance, [harassment](#), and ad hoc interpretations of legislation to suppress religious freedom and persecute religious freedom advocates. During 2021, the Cuban government's crackdown on widespread protests severely impacted religious communities.

On July 11, Cubans all over the country held unprecedented, large-scale [protests](#), initially in response to the deepening economic and COVID crises and eventually encompassing criticisms of the Cuban government's rule and crackdown on human rights. In the largest demonstrations in decades, protesters rallied for liberty and freedom, chanting "*Patria y Vida*" ("homeland and life"). The Cuban authorities responded by detaining, often violently, an [estimated](#) 700 demonstrators and activists. Those detained included several [religious leaders](#) and members of religious communities. For example, Pastor José Álvarez Devesa was [beaten](#) by police in Camaguey and released the following day. At the end of the year, an unknown number of protesters, including religious leaders and members of religious communities, remained detained, [disappeared](#), and under house arrest. Others were released during 2021 but [continued](#) to face ongoing harassment. Many were held [incommunicado](#) without access to family or legal support. Cuban authorities have charged some of the detained individuals with [crimes](#) such as inciting unrest and disobedience and held mass "trials" that lack any semblance of [due process](#). Some faced criminal charges, including "disrespect" and "public disorder," while others were placed under [house arrest](#) or fined.

Four months later, a group of artists and activists known as Archipiélago planned another country-wide protest for November 15. In the weeks preceding the protest, the nongovernmental organization Christian Solidarity Worldwide [received](#) over 30 reports of authorities targeting religious leaders and religious freedom advocates. Police issued summons and interrogated religious leaders about their connection to the planned protest or warned them not

to participate in the protest under threat of [arrest](#). Others were placed under house arrest in the weeks leading up to the protest. As a result of the government's repression of religious and lay community leaders before November 15, the protests did not take place as planned.

Additionally, 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.

A month after the July protests, the Cuban government [enacted](#) a new telecommunications law that severely [restricts](#) freedom of expression online and threatens religious freedom. Under [Decree-Law 35](#), telecommunications providers must interrupt, suspend, or terminate their services when a user disseminates "fake" information or affects "public morality" and the "respect of public order." This effectively [criminalizes](#) online criticism of the government and incitement to "[public disturbances](#)," which is the same term the government used to describe the peaceful July 11 protests.

The government [continued](#) to [target independent](#) journalist Yoel Suárez and his family for his reporting on religious freedom issues. This ongoing harassment prompted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to [request](#) that the Cuban government protect the rights to life and personal integrity of Suárez and his family and allow him to "carry out his activities as an independent journalist without being subjected to acts of violence, intimidation, harassment and detention."

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; and
- Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by USCIRF, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, and the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation to require sanctions against Cuban officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [Protests in Cuba Impact Religious Freedom](#)
- Factsheet: [Protests in Cuba and Religious Freedom](#)
- Podcast: [Santería in Cuba](#)
- Factsheet: [Santería in Cuba](#)

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 percent 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.

Cuba is a one-party system under the ruling Cuban Communist Party, with no independent judiciary. The state tightly controls religious institutions. A new [constitution](#) adopted in April 2019 [protects](#) the freedom of religion or belief and prohibits religious discrimination, but [provisions in the penal and administrative codes contravene](#) these protections, such as Decree-Law 35. 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.

Detention of Religious Leaders following July 11 Protests

USCIRF received reports of a number of religious leaders and members of religious communities detained during and following the July 11 protests. Select cases are included in USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), including Christian pastors and Santería practitioners.

[Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo](#) of the independent Monte de Sion Independent Church participated in the July 11 protests and was detained that day. In the months since his detention, Rosales Fajardo endured beatings, degrading treatment by prison guards, and the denial of [familial contact](#). The government sought to impose a 10-year sentence and tried him in December on charges of "disrespect," "assault," "criminal incitement," and "public disorder." He was told he would be sentenced in January 2022, but the process has been repeatedly delayed.

In the Santería community, at least [five](#) members of the independent and unregistered Free Yoruba Association of Cuba (Asociación de Yorubas Libres de Cuba or "Free Yorubas") were detained for their participation in the protests, while others were [fined](#). [Donaida Pérez Paseiro](#), President of the Free Yorubas, and [Loreto Hernández García](#), the community's vice president, were detained and charged with "public disorder," "disobedience," "spreading the epidemic," and "incitement." USCIRF received reports in January 2022 indicating that Paseiro and Hernández García were on trial at that time. Prosecutors were reportedly seeking eight years imprisonment for both of them.

Harassment of Religious Communities and Leaders

During 2021, Cuban authorities harassed and intimidated certain religious communities and their leaders. The Cuban government

continued to harass Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente, leader of the Emanuel Church in Santiago de Cuba and member of the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered religious group. Pastor Toledano received [several](#) police summons falsely accusing him and his church of holding services allegedly in contravention of COVID protocols, which banned such gatherings. However, Pastor Toledano produced written permission from the MOJ that [guaranteed](#) his right to hold services with proper health protocols starting in August and testified that his congregation observed all such protocols. Yet, in August, police arbitrarily detained Pastor Toledano in his home for holding a service and [threatened](#) to charge him with the crime of "spreading the epidemic." Followers of Pastor Toledano also [suffered threats](#) and [intimidation](#) from police.

Police searched the residence of Pastor Karel Parra Rosabal, leader of the unregistered Fuego y Dinámica Apostolic Church in Jobabo and owner of a small bicycle repair shop. In January, police conducted a search of the pastor's home, informed him that he was under arrest for the crime of "hoarding" due to the number of tools he owns for the bicycle repair shop, and confiscated nearly \$2,000 USD (50,000 Cuban pesos) worth of his equipment. Pastor Parra Rosabal was [detained](#) for 10 days.

Key U.S. Policy

Upon taking office, the Biden administration [considered](#) taking a review of the United States' policy toward Cuba. The administration [indicated](#) that the forthcoming policy would put democracy and human rights at its center and empower the Cuban people to determine their own future. Following the July 11 protests, the administration and members of Congress declared their support for the Cuban people and denounced the detentions and violence by Cuban authorities. President Joseph R. Biden [expressed](#) solidarity with Cuban protesters asserting their fundamental rights and later [reiterated](#) his support and unequivocally condemned the arrests and sham trials. Congress drew attention to the situation and expressed solidarity with the Cuban people, including by holding a [hearing](#) on the protests and resulting crackdown and introducing legislation and resolutions such as [Senate Res. 310](#) and [H.Res.760](#), which condemn the Cuban regime's acts of repression and call for the release of arbitrarily detained Cuban citizens.

The U.S. government continued to impose robust sanctions against Cuban officials. The Biden administration took steps to hold accountable those responsible for repression in the wake of the July 11 protests, including issuing sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act on Cuban security forces on [July 22](#), [July 30](#), [August 13](#), and [August 19](#). Among those sanctioned were Cuba's Policía Nacional Revolucionaria, responsible for the assault on Father Álvarez. Additionally, on [November 30](#), the administration imposed visa restrictions on Cuban officials responsible for repression in advance of the planned November 15 protests. On November 15, the State Department again [placed](#) Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, while religious freedom conditions in Egypt improved somewhat, several systematic and ongoing obstacles to religious freedom remained. The administration of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi publicly promoted religious tolerance as a goal for Egyptian society. The President himself again attended a Coptic Orthodox Christmas liturgy in January, and in a September public statement referenced his “[respect \[for\] nonbelievers . . . \[who\] are free to choose.](#)” At the same time, the Egyptian government continued to closely manage church construction and the legalization of preexisting buildings for church-related purposes. As in 2020, the pace of approvals for existing churches requesting legalization reflected a substantial decline from prior years, leaving a backlog of applications and many rural Christian communities unable to worship legally. Construction of churches remained largely limited to new, government-planned cities, as governors in rural communities with large Christian populations failed to reply to construction applications within the legally mandated four-month limit.

Egypt’s criminal justice system was responsible for a significant number of religious freedom violations. Throughout 2021, authorities maintained the long-term detention of [religious prisoners of conscience](#), including Christians Patrick Zaki and Ramy Kamel and Qur’anist Muslim [Reda Abdel Rahman](#). Zaki and Kamel were released in December 2021 in advance of trial and January 2022, respectively, and Abdel Rahman was released in February 2022. State security continued to harass religious minorities such as [Shi’a Muslims](#), while the judiciary maintained its robust enforcement of blasphemy laws and wielded counterterrorism and other laws disproportionately against both religious minorities and human rights and religious freedom advocates. While President El-Sisi [lifted](#) the state of emergency that his administration had long invoked to justify violations of civil liberties, the administration also [introduced amendments](#) that functionally replaced the emergency laws, and

detainees already subject to the emergency law [remained bound](#) by courts’ flawed judicial procedures.

As in 2020, reports of anti-Christian mob attacks and church destruction decreased in 2021, possibly corresponding to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) maintained a presence in the Sinai region, with affiliated groups claiming responsibility for the [April 2021 execution](#) of a Copt (Egyptian Christian), Nabil Habashi Salama. Acts of violence against individual Coptic victims, especially in rural areas, occurred in social environments with [persistent imbalances](#) in the treatment of perpetrators from the Muslim majority and their Coptic victims. The government did not ban communities’ use of “[customary reconciliation](#)” [councils](#), extra-judicial local tribunals that regularly issue minimal penalties to assailants from the religious majority and often revictimize Christians by forcing them to admit culpability in attacks against them.

The Egyptian government did not take visible, systematic efforts to address ongoing obstacles to religious freedom specified in USCIRF’s Annual Reports and recommendations from recent years, including [2021](#). The government’s requirement for national identity cards to list religion continued to render all religious minorities vulnerable to forced self-identification and potential discrimination. [Baha’is, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other smaller communities’](#) religions are excluded from the short list of approved faiths from which ID card applicants may choose, causing additional marginalization. In December, the Alexandria Administrative Court [ruled](#) that authorities in the governorate did not need to provide cemetery space for Baha’is and members of other minority religions. The single [Cairo cemetery](#) with space allotted to Baha’is is limited in capacity and situated hundreds of miles away from many Baha’i communities. In justification for its ruling, the [court referred](#) to a State Litigation Authority opinion stating that only Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are recognized as religions in Egypt.

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 violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Egyptian government to 1) remove religion as a required category from official identity documents, 2) take concrete steps toward phasing out the longstanding use of customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of violence against religious minorities, and 3) repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes “ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect following it,” and until that is accomplished limit the conditions under which the law is applied and allow charged individuals to post bail;
- Encourage Egypt to 1) resume expeditious approval of church registrations under Law 80 of 2016, and 2) fully implement national educational curriculum reforms promoting religious diversity and tolerance; and
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all U.S. assistance to Egypt and continue to withhold a portion of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) for specified international religious freedom violations along with broader human rights concerns.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

Background

Article 2 of [Egypt's constitution](#) identifies Islam as the state religion and the “principles of Shari’a” as the primary source of legislation. Article 64 provides for “absolute” freedom of belief, although only adherents of “heavenly religions” (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) may practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. [Bans](#) from 1960 remain in effect on Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baha’is.

Egypt’s population is approximately 105 million people, an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims; non-Sunni Muslims, such as Shi’a, are believed to comprise less than one percent. At an estimated 10 percent or more, Egypt’s indigenous Copts constitute the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa. Christian leaders [estimate](#) over 90 percent of Copts belong to the traditional Coptic Orthodox Church, with Coptic Catholics, Coptic Evangelical Protestants, and other denominations forming small but prominent subcommunities. There are reportedly at least 2,000 [Baha’is](#), approximately 1,500 Jehovah’s Witnesses, and fewer than 20 [Jews](#).

Legal and Judicial Challenges to Religious Freedom

In 2021, Egypt continued to enforce Law 98(f) of Egypt’s Penal Code, a blasphemy statute that bans “insulting the heavenly religions,” presenting one of the most serious and [systematic challenges](#) to religious freedom. On June 14, State Security officers [arrested](#) Marco Girgis Salib Shehata, a Copt, for possessing sexual-themed material on his phone characterized as “offensive to Islam.” Authorities detained him for a month before interrogating him on his personal behaviors including possible consumption of alcohol—permissible in Christianity—and prosecuted him on charges including violation of Law 98(f), eventually convicting and sentencing him in early 2022. Prosecutors likewise invoked the blasphemy law in the November trial and sentencing to five years in prison of [Ahmed Abdo Maher](#), a Muslim lawyer and scholar whose [critiques](#) of the Islamic conquest attracted attention on social media and satellite television.

Throughout 2021, Egyptian authorities also targeted religious minority group members and human rights and religious freedom activists through strategic deployment of other laws, such as counterterrorism statutes and laws penalizing “spreading false news [against Egypt].” Courts operating under state security emergency laws issued multiple consecutive renewals of the detentions of religious prisoners of conscience, including Ramy Kamel and Patrick Zaki, the latter of whom—though released after 22 months of detention—is [scheduled](#) to stand trial for publishing an [online testimonial](#) of the harassment he and other Copts have endured. Security forces likewise continued the detention since August 2020 of [USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience](#) Reda Abdel Rahman—a blogger from the [Qur’anist](#) community, a Muslim minority that holds the text of the Qur’an as the only legitimate source of authority for religious rulings—finally releasing him in February 2022.

Other Positive Developments

In a potential boost to [religious tourism](#), the government undertook, completed, and planned projects renovating historic houses of worship and shrines of importance to [Christians, Jews, and Shi’a Muslims](#) around the world. President El-Sisi demonstrated attention to Copts’ internal diversity through his [decree establishing](#) separate religious endowments for the country’s smaller Catholic and Evangelical Protestant communities, distinct from the predominant Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate.

In September, the administration widely publicized its release of a new National Human Rights Strategy, [touted as the first](#) in the nation’s history, which promotes religious tolerance and anti-sectarianism within educational, religious, and community institutions. The Strategy refers to a “target result” of addressing “guarantees related to the regulation, justifications, and durations of pretrial detention [so that they] are enhanced in national laws.” The document also makes several references to programs to reform the curricula of schools run by both the government and Al-Azhar—a leading academic institution within Sunni Islam—to remove exclusionary material and reflect messages of religious tolerance. The Ministry of Education has long promised such reforms, which remain [a work in progress](#).

Key U.S. Policy

Egypt remained an important U.S. partner in 2021, mediating between parties to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict and maintaining vigilance toward potential threats of Islamist insurgent violence. Its “critical role” in securing a [ceasefire](#) between Israel and Hamas-led Gaza in May garnered praise from President Joseph R. Biden. However, the Biden administration also took steps to fulfill a campaign pledge that the United States would issue “no more blank checks” to Egypt given its human rights abuses.

In February, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken “raised concerns over human rights” in his [first call](#) with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and during November’s [strategic dialogue](#). The FMF aid package to Egypt emerged early in the year as a focal point for both the executive branch and Congress. In January, Representatives French Hill (R-AR) and David Cicilline (D-RI) [cosponsored](#) a House resolution calling on the Egyptian government to “end this culture of impunity,” while in May, Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) called on the Biden administration to freeze a tranche of aid contingent on Egypt’s improvements in human rights.

In September, President Biden imposed temporary [human rights-related conditions](#) on \$130 million of the \$300 million FMF tranche. Early in 2022, the State Department announced the United States would [reprogram](#) the \$130 million for Egypt’s failure to meet U.S. demands, which included releasing 16 detainees, although the administration allocated as planned \$170 million in aid and [authorized](#) \$2.5 billion in arms sales.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom in [Egypt in 2021](#)
- **Podcast:** [Qur’anists in Egypt](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Calls on Egypt to Release Qur’anist Reda Abdel Rahman](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Reda Abdel Rahman](#)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, Indonesia’s religious freedom conditions trended the same as in 2020. Despite ongoing rhetoric from national leaders—including President Joko Widodo (Jokowi)—promoting Indonesia’s moderate version of Islam, there was minimal to no progress in addressing parts of the legal system that conflict with international standards of freedom of religion or belief. These include laws utilized to hinder faith communities’ right to build and maintain houses of worship, such as the 2006 joint regulation on houses of worship, as well as blasphemy laws, such as Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS/1965, Criminal Code Article 156(a), and Law No. 11/2008 on Electronic Information and Transaction (known as the ITE law) Articles 27(3) and 28(2).

Authorities actively enforced blasphemy laws, with a majority of charges and allegations stemming from perceived insults to Islam. Minister of Religious Affairs Cholil Qoumas [asked](#) the police “to equally” crack down on people from different religions who commit blasphemy. In May, Desak Made Darmawati, a professor in Jakarta, was [questioned](#) for blasphemy after making an online video declaring that Hinduism had many deities and Hindu cremation rituals were strange. In July, the Singaraja District Court in Bali [sentenced](#) a Danish citizen to two years imprisonment for blasphemy after he kicked a temple. In August, police [arrested](#) Muhammad Kece in Bali for blasphemy under the ITE law after he made a YouTube video that criticized the Islamic religious curriculum used in Indonesia and allegedly insulted the Prophet Muhammad. In August, police [arrested](#) preacher Yahya Waloni in East Jakarta for blasphemy and hate speech under the ITE law for a sermon stating the Bible was fiction and for statements on social media that Jesus was a failed prophet and that the Prophet Muhammad did not instruct people to pray.

Efforts continued to replace the existing Criminal Code, which dates to the Dutch colonial era. In 2019, a draft Criminal Code was introduced, infringing on the [rights](#) of religious minorities. The draft code also 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. Following protests, the 2019 draft was [withdrawn](#) in September 2019, but revising the Criminal Code remained on the legislative agenda throughout 2020 and 2021. Reports from the nongovernmental organization (NGO) community continue to indicate that the government has failed to revise the problematic provisions in the 2019 draft that would violate international human rights standards, including religious freedom.

Throughout 2021, Islamist extremist attacks remained a threat to minority faith communities in certain regions. In March, a suicide bombing [occurred](#) outside a Catholic cathedral in Makassar, Sulawesi, injuring 21 parishioners and killing the two bombers. In June, suspects linked to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) were arrested for targeting a Papuan bishop. In July, Indonesia security forces [killed](#) two suspected ISIS members in Sulawesi following the murder of Christian farmers. There is some [evidence](#) that regional Islamist organization Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) is attempting to evolve into a militant-political force to pursue its goal of an Islamic state in Southeast Asia through militancy. In November, Detachment 88, Indonesia’s counterterrorism squad, [arrested](#) Farid Okbah, the head of the political party People’s Da’wah Party, alleging the party was operating as a political cover for JI.

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);
- Work with the Indonesian government to revise the draft Criminal Code bill to comply with international human rights standards, including by removing 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 the 2006 Joint Regulation on houses of worship;
- Incorporate training on international human rights standards related to religious freedom—including concerns regarding 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 use its relationships and upcoming leadership in regional organizations, particularly in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ASEAN’s Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, to publicly advocate for religious tolerance, plurality, and inclusion throughout the region.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Indonesia’s ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Podcast:** [Indonesia’s State Ideology of Pancasila](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Democracy and Religious Freedom](#)
- **Podcast:** [Enforcing Blasphemy Laws Have Dire Consequences](#)

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 seven percent, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent identify as adhering to another minority religion such as Buddhism or Confucianism.

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 Pancasila, an ideology that 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. However, in recent years, the country has experienced a simultaneous increase in religious intolerance and a democratic backsliding. In the last two decades, more than 700 Shari'a-inspired [regulations](#) have been put in place across the 34 provinces of Indonesia.

The government 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 in Aceh

The autonomous province of Aceh remains a site of significant religious freedom violations. Religious police enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a that includes and administers corporal punishment. Muslims have no ability to opt out of this official interpretation, and their behavior is heavily regulated within its framework. In July, a woman was [caned](#) for being "too close" to her boyfriend. Women are also prevented from straddling motorbikes and are forced to wear hijabs. Religious minorities are not exempt from the Shari'a criminal system. In February, two Christians were publicly [flogged](#) for drinking and gambling.

The 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship

The 2006 joint regulation on houses of worship continued to prevent the construction and renovation of faith centers, especially for minority communities. In March, the Ministry of Religion [explored](#) the idea to update the regulation, but at the end of the calendar year no changes had been applied.

Throughout 2021, the application of the regulation continued to restrict minority faith communities' ability to maintain houses of worship and emboldened violence and harassment against them. In June in Ponorogo, East Java, residents [appealed](#) against the plans for a new church. In July, residents protested in Banyuwangi [against](#) the construction of a Muhammadiyah mosque, attempting to use the joint regulation to prevent the faith center. In West Java, Bogor, the [ongoing dispute](#) over the construction of the Yasmin church continued without resolution.

In September in Balai Harapan, West Kalimantan, 10 people were [arrested](#) for attacking an Ahmadiyah Muslim mosque and burning

a nearby building. In January 2022, just after the reporting period, these men were [sentenced](#) to four months, 15 days imprisonment in what local activists decried as a lenient sentence for the attack on the house of worship.

In December, Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan [granted](#) permission to a Catholic community to build a church in Kampung Duri, noting the need for all faith communities to have the impartial opportunity to obtain building permits.

Promotion of State Interpretation of Islam and Religious Tolerance

The government of President Jokowi has emphasized tolerance, Indonesia's moderate form of Islam, and mutual respect for faith communities, including through the promotion of its favored interpretation of Islam and the revamping of Pancasila. Minister Qoumas [continued](#) to advocate for tolerance and mutual respect. In September, he [condemned](#) mob attacks on an Ahmadiyah mosque in Sintag, West Kalimantan. Minister Qoumas has consistently spoken of the need to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their faith identity. In 2021, there were also displays of intercommunal harmony as Indonesian Muslims and Hindus [celebrated](#) religious holidays in the same month, and Christian communities in [Bali](#) went silent in celebration of the Hindu Day of Silence. However, these efforts to promote tolerance exclusively among officially recognized religions have not resulted in greater religious freedom or expanded recognition of other religious minorities.

Mandatory Religious Attire in Schools

Ongoing struggles over what women and girls can wear have led schools to enact over 60 mandatory religious attire [regulations](#) since 2001. In May, the Supreme Court [revoked](#) a ban on mandatory religious attire in state schools, despite outcry after a Christian girl was [forced](#) to wear the hijab in school. [Reportedly](#), women have also been denied access to government services because of their decision not to wear the hijab.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Indonesia recently [celebrated](#) 70 years of bilateral relations. On November 1, [President Joseph R. Biden](#) met with President Jokowi, and on December 13 [Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken](#) traveled to Indonesia and also met with President Jokowi. The United States continued to engage on several initiatives and commitments, such as combating climate change and maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Throughout 2021, 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; counter extremist narratives through community, university, and school-based campaigns; and rehabilitate women and children returning from conflict zones in the Middle East and Philippines. The United States also maintains exchange programs such as the International Visitor Leadership Program to host Indonesian leaders in the United States.

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Iraq improved slightly but remained concerning. Both the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) took several positive steps. In March, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi designated March 6 as a national holiday to celebrate the country's ethnic and religious diversity. In March, Iraq's Parliament passed the [Yazidi Survivor Law](#) to compensate members of the Yazidi community. In October, KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani [declared](#) Ankawa, the Christian suburb of Erbil, a district, giving its residents more authority in their local affairs. Internationally, the German government was the first to prosecute members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) for committing crimes against humanity, war crimes, and [genocide against the Yazidis](#). In April, it [prosecuted](#) one of its citizens who abused Yazidi women while she was an ISIS member; the court found her guilty of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity, among other crimes. Similarly, in November, a German court [sentenced](#) another ISIS fighter to life in prison for killing a five-year-old Yazidi girl.

However, nearly five years after the United States and its allies declared ISIS defeated, religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq continue to struggle to return and live peacefully in their homes. [Almost one million](#) Sunni Arab Muslims, over 200,000 Yazidis, tens of thousands of Christians, and smaller numbers of Kaka'is, Turkmen, and others remain forcibly displaced. Renewed ISIS [attacks](#) in 2021 reignited fear among religious and ethnic minorities seeking to return and rebuild their homes in former ISIS-controlled areas. Militias, some backed by foreign actors such as Iran and operating under the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs)—routinely [targeted](#) Sunni Arab Muslims and accused them of affiliation with ISIS. The PMF also regularly used checkpoints to stop and harass Sunni

Arab Muslims returning to territories once controlled by ISIS. These militias reportedly used similar tactics against other religious minorities, including Yazidis, Christians, Kaka'is, and others. The Iraqi government continued to allow these groups to operate with impunity; for example, in June, authorities [released](#) Gasim Muslih, the head of PMF operations in Anbar Province, without prosecution. He was accused of targeting members of non-Shi'a Muslim communities, and authorities had arrested him for the [killing](#) of Sunni Muslim activist Ihab al-Wazni. Al-Wazni's murder in May had led to protests to which the government [responded with lethal force](#), killing more than 600 peaceful protesters.

Seven years after the ISIS genocide, Yazidis continued to [languish](#) in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Duhok and elsewhere, and the whereabouts of around 3,000 abducted Yazidi women and girls remained unknown. In June, a [fire](#) at the Sharya IDP camp destroyed almost 1,400 homes, temporarily leaving many Yazidis without shelters. Similarly, many Iraqi Christians remained displaced, with the PMF making returns to their homes in the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq extremely difficult. Individuals and families who managed to return found some of their lands, including sacred places, either destroyed or expropriated.

Ongoing [airstrikes](#) in northern Iraq by the Turkish military against alleged positions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBS), for its alleged alignment with the PKK, further impeded religious freedom improvement in 2021. These operations disproportionately impacted ethnic and religious minority groups, particularly Yazidis, in Sinjar and Dohok, impeding their ability to resettle in their original communities and to [worship](#) safely. The Turkish government reportedly made little effort to minimize or avoid civilian casualties.

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);
- Use diplomatic and other available channels to encourage the IFG and the KRG to resolve conflicts over the disputed areas per Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, while including all religious and ethnic minorities in the process, and to 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.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Iraq bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, and congressional delegations.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Iraq in 2021](#)
- **Hearing:** [Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States](#)
- **Factsheet:** [CPC and SWL Recommendations](#)

Background

The population of Iraq was about [39.7 million](#) in 2021. Most of the population is Muslim; 64–69 percent are Shi'a Muslims, who [live](#) predominantly in the southern and eastern regions of the country, and 29–34 percent are Sunni Muslims, who mainly reside across the western, center, and northern regions. The remaining [1–5 percent](#) of the population are from various religious and ethnic groups, including Yazidis and Christians of different denominations (Syriac, Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Assyrian Church of the East), Kaka'is (also known as the Yarsan or Ahl al-Haq), and a small number of Jews. These communities predominantly [live](#) in the northern region as well as in Baghdad and Erbil. Reportedly, there is a [growing number](#) of atheists, agnostics, and religiously unaffiliated individuals in Iraq, mainly living in large cities.

Political instability remained of serious concern throughout the country, particularly given the role it has played in enabling religious violence in prior years. For example, Iraqis took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the October parliamentary elections and reportedly [clashed](#) with security forces. In November, several drones carrying explosives [targeted](#) Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's Baghdad residency, injuring six bodyguards; although no group openly claimed responsibility, Iranian-backed PMF groups have been widely [blamed](#) for the attack.

Positive Developments

There were some positive developments to advance religious freedom in Iraq in 2021. Following the announcement of March 6 as a national holiday of [tolerance and coexistence](#), Pope Francis, on a historic visit to Iraq, and preeminent Shi'a cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani [jointly](#) released a statement to encourage religious and ethnic minorities to work together to advance peaceful coexistence in Iraq and beyond. The Pope's [visit and prayers](#) with victims of ISIS in Mosul and other Iraqi cities reinvigorated religious minorities, especially Iraqi Christians. Reacting to his visit, Qaraqosh resident Yusra Mubarak [said](#), "I can't describe my happiness, it's a historic event that won't be repeated." The passage of the [Yazidi Survivors Law](#) represented crucial governmental recognition of the particularly heinous crimes the community suffered under ISIS rule. However, this law had not been implemented by the end of the reporting period. The lack of a [lasting solution](#) for Yazidi children born as a result of ISIS's rampant use of sexual violence remains another challenge for the community.

Ongoing Border Dispute between the IFG and KRG

Longstanding border disputes between the KRG and IFG continued to represent another challenge to the advancement of religious freedom in 2021. Although the [2020 Sinjar Security Agreement](#) was aimed at reducing tension between the two parties and protecting the Yazidi community, its slow implementation and lack of Yazidi representation

have raised concerns about the future of the accord. In fact, there was no meaningful implementation of the agreement by any of the signatories throughout 2021; for example, the two parties failed to appoint an independent mayor or deport militia groups from Sinjar, both of which are terms [mandated](#) by the accord. This failure has directly impeded the ability of Yazidis to return to their Sinjar homeland.

Other Religious Freedom Issues in Iraq

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in the KRG-controlled areas remained consistent with the previous year. The region continued to be a crucial [safe destination](#) for Iraqis displaced from elsewhere in the country, and the KRG's extension of greater municipal representation for religious and ethnic components is commendable. However, the lack of security for religious and ethnic minority groups in and along disputed areas continued to hinder religious freedom improvements. Furthermore, some of those minority communities—particularly Syriac-Chaldean-Assyrian Christians—maintained their longstanding demands for the restitution of land and properties that had been previously expropriated by or under KRG authorities.

In 2021, blasphemy and apostasy laws remained [in place](#) throughout the country, and the federal government continued to deny formal recognition of religious minorities and nontheist groups such as the Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, humanists, Kaka'is, and others. Finally, the federal government continued to exploit the "de-Ba'athification" [process](#), originally intended to remove former Baath party officials post-2003, as a pretext to discriminate against Sunni Muslims in government employment and other practices.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Iraq continues to prioritize stability, development, and democratization. In July 2021, President Joseph R. Biden met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in Washington to formally conclude the United States combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021. In [July 2021](#), the State Department [provided](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance for Iraq and Iraqi refugees in the region, totaling over \$200 million dollars for fiscal year 2021. The additional funds were primarily earmarked to support Iraqis who were displaced by ISIS, including members of several religious minority communities. Also, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [maintained](#) financial and programmatic support for Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to recover and rebuild what ISIS had destroyed. Since the defeat of ISIS, USAID has spent almost \$500 million dollars on reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Additionally, the U.S. government has used punitive measures against individuals responsible for human rights violations. In January 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on PMF Chairman and Iraqi former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh, who has also been accused of direct links to religious freedom violations, for engaging in serious human rights abuses.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan improved in some areas but remained problematic as the government failed to deliver on long-promised reforms. Since 2019, Kazakhstan has engaged in a religious freedom working group in consultation with U.S. government representatives, including USCIRF, and civil society stakeholders. At those sessions, and in numerous separate meetings between USCIRF and Kazakhstani officials, the government of Kazakhstan solicited and received recommendations for reforming the 2011 Religion Law to bring it into compliance with international standards. Despite repeated assurances that the recommendations would be considered and implemented in certain cases, the [amendments](#) passed on December 29, 2021, did not contain substantive reforms and seem likely to further restrict religious activity in Kazakhstan in some cases.

There were 128 known [administrative prosecutions](#) for religious offenses in 2021, virtually identical to the 131 known cases in 2020. This marked the first year since 2017 without a significant decline in such cases from the previous year. These prosecutions included significant punitive fines, in some cases equivalent to four months' average wages, for peaceful religious activities such as selling religious literature, instructing children in religion without state approval, praying without state approval, and unregistered missionary activity. Although USCIRF has been encouraged by the previous decline in such cases, the prosecutions still constitute systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom.

The government of Kazakhstan participated in religious freedom roundtables across the country, enabling representatives of various religious communities to meet with government officials

and discuss their concerns and recommendations for reform. While such initiatives are admirable, some participants have expressed frustration that officials have not seriously considered their input and that the meetings were largely symbolic. On July 15, 2021, the government of Kazakhstan [signed](#) a Memorandum of Understanding with the Love Your Neighbor Committee (LYNC), a U.S.-based nonprofit that organizes religious freedom roundtables, facilitates interreligious dialogue, and provides cross-cultural religious literacy training for officials and law enforcement.

Although seldom rising to the level of egregious, ongoing religious freedom violations and allegations of abuse remained. In September 2021, 1,641 parents from across Kazakhstan signed a [petition](#) to the government requesting that Muslim girls be allowed to wear hijabs in public school. Authorities denied the request and Muslim girls are still forbidden to wear head coverings in school. As in years past, the government used [vague charges](#) of “propaganda of terrorism,” “extremism,” or “inciting religious hatred” to justify the arrests of religious activists and political opponents. In June 2021, local officials slandered residents protesting the [illegal and unexplained closure](#) of their historic local mosque in Zhympty as adherents of a “nontraditional” religious interpretation. The community, which recently renovated the mosque at its own expense, denies any links to extremism or terrorism and only seeks to preserve a beloved and iconic local landmark. The Kazakhstani government continued to [persecute](#) opponents of China’s ethnoreligious genocide in Xinjiang and even [banned](#) a prominent researcher of these tragic events from entering Kazakhstan for five years.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan 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);
- Discontinue the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group until the government delivers on promised reforms, including:
 - The repeal or amendment of religious registration laws, including reducing the required number of founding members of a religious organization to register, currently set at 50;
 - The end of mandatory expert review of founding documents and religious literature, or a significant reform of the process to make it more transparent;
- The reduction of the specific personal data from founding members required to register and the inclusion of legal protections to ensure that such information shall not be used to discriminate against or harass individuals; and
- The repeal of provisions that allow for the prosecution of individuals for “insulting religious feelings” in violation of international standards of religious freedom and freedom of expression.
- Advocate for religious freedom reforms in all engagement with the government of Kazakhstan on improving the human rights landscape; 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.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Advocate for religious freedom reform and other measures aimed at improving the human rights landscape in Kazakhstan through the Congressional U.S.-Kazakhstan Caucus.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Podcast:** [Reforms in Kazakhstan Could Improve Religious Freedom](#)
- **Factsheet:** [CPC and SWL Recommendations](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Controlling Civil Society’s Purse Strings](#)

Background

Kazakhstan is territorially the largest state in Central Asia and has the region's second-largest population, with [around 19 million citizens](#). The population is approximately 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 one percent Shi'a and Sufi Muslim. Approximately two-thirds of the population are ethnic Kazakhs, a Turkic people, 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 and is generally wary of Islamic practices emanating from other countries. It classifies other religions with a long-established presence and good relations with the government as traditional and nonthreatening—like Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, and Judaism—while it views newer arrivals to the region with suspicion, such as Evangelical Christianity and Scientology. The government is particularly concerned about the spread of religious extremism—which it defines broadly and uses as a charge to target political opponents—as well as the potential for perceived social disruption from proselytism and missionary activity. While the government has legitimate concerns about extremist violence, its vague concept of religious extremism is often applied to any activity it sees as potentially disruptive, even targeting households and familial practices.

Failure to Reform

Since 2019, the government of Kazakhstan has engaged in the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group (RFGW) with counterparts in the U.S. government and civil society stakeholders to discuss the reform of its problematic 2011 Religion Law. Before it enacted this 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 relating 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.

The RFGW was predicated on the government's recognition of deficiencies in the existing 2011 Religion Law and its stated intent to address these problems through tangible legislative reforms. In 2021, USCIRF held more meetings with Kazakhstani government officials than in previous years. As late as November 2021, Kazakhstan once again provided the U.S. government with assurances that at least some of the key issues raised during nearly three years of engagement would be addressed in legislative amendments by the end of the year. However, the amendments, which passed on December 29, 2021, reflected minimal consideration of U.S. government recommendations and, on the contrary, contained new and problematic restrictions on peaceful religious activity.

The new amendments failed to address some of the most troubling features of the 2011 law, including the mandatory nature of registration, the number of members required for registration, restrictions on religious materials by nonregistered religions, registration of missionary activity, and ambiguity about whether missionary materials used by registered religious organizations need expert review. Although the government had promised to replace the requirement of official permission for religious activity outside of registered spaces with a [notification system](#) that presumed approval, the system that the government passed is virtually indistinguishable from a permission-based system. The requirements are extremely onerous and leave significant discretion for officials to forbid the notified event. Furthermore, it is unclear whether these requirements will apply to communities without an officially registered space every time they wish to meet.

Popular Protest and Government Crackdown

Although occurring immediately after the reporting period, the government's [response to widespread popular unrest](#) in Kazakhstan from January 2–11, 2022, raises significant concerns about the trajectory of serious religious freedom reform. USCIRF has long been troubled by the extent to which authorities use Kazakhstan's vague and expansive “extremism” laws and supposed counterterrorism concerns as an excuse for authoritarian overreach. The government's [unsuccessful attempt](#) to attribute popular anger over corruption and unrealized reforms to religious extremism only reinforces this perception. While USCIRF cannot rule out the participation of extremists and terrorists in these events, it is clear that they were not a significant contributing factor. The Kazakhstani government's response, which included [mass arrests](#), [torture](#), and the indiscriminate [shooting](#) of unarmed civilians, raises concerns over human rights and religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

The governments of the United States and Kazakhstan enjoyed a close partnership in 2021, as in past years. On October 18, 2021, USAID announced \$2.4 million in [COVID assistance](#), which builds on more than \$6.8 million in COVID assistance it provided since the start of the pandemic. On December 9, 2021, USAID publicly supported Kazakhstan's application to the Open Government Partnership, an international platform that includes 78 governments and thousands of civil society organizations committed to making their governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens. On December 13, 2021, the State Department sought bids for a [religious freedom initiative](#) that would allocate \$740,740 for a project that would support efforts to improve national laws impacting religious freedom in Kazakhstan and help bring them in line with international standards. On December 16, 2021, the United States congratulated Kazakhstan on [30 years of independence](#) and joined celebrations to mark the occasion. On January 6, 2022, Secretary Blinken [spoke](#) to Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi about the unrest in Kazakhstan to express concern over Russian influence in the region and reiterate U.S. support for the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia trended downward. The 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 increasingly little freedom to practice their religion according to their conscience. Article 160 of the constitution links Malay ethnicity with Islam, which continues to infringe on the religious freedom rights of ethnic Malays.

Malaysia maintains a dual legal system that devolves the maintenance and regulation of Shari'a to the states. Some states use this ability to restrict the freedom of religion or belief for Muslim and non-Muslim residents. Political actors in the federal government have consistently supported these restrictions, including during 2021. [Article 11\(4\)](#) of the constitution provides that state and federal law "may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam." In February, then Minister of Religious Affairs Zulkifli Mohamad Al-Bakri [cited](#) this article in justifying the states' power to formulate laws to prohibit conversion of Muslims. In March, then Deputy Religious Affairs Minister Datuk Ahmad Marzuk Shaary [supported](#) state governments' actions to ensure adherents of religions other than Islam would be limited in propagating their beliefs, also citing Article 11(4).

Throughout 2021, federal and state authorities continued to implement and expand measures that infringe on religious freedom. In May, the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) [digitalized](#) *Pendedahan Agenda Kristian* (Exposing the Christian Agenda), a 2014 book that portrays Christians as "enemies of Islam." Curriculum for Muslim students in public schools at the Form 5 level (ages 16–17) includes federally approved material claiming Sunni Islam as the "superior" and only acceptable form of Islam, labeling Shi'a Islam as "deviant." In November, the Sultan of Kelantan, Muhammad V, [consented](#) to the Kelantan Shariah Criminal Code (I) Enactment 2019, allowing it to come into effect. This new code contains 24 provisions that all Muslims in the state

of Kelantan are now obliged to follow, including the criminalization of attempting to convert out of Islam, distorting Islamic teachings, and disrespecting the month of Ramadan. Penalties include imprisonment of up to three years and a fine or corporal punishment. 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.

In early 2021, two judicial decisions asserted the secular courts' purview over certain issues that involve religious freedom. On February 25, Malaysia's Federal Court ruled against Selangor's religious court and [declared](#) that state Syariah laws banning gay sex "against the order of nature" were unconstitutional; however, the judgment does not repudiate federal statutes that criminalize same-sex relations. On March 10, the Kuala Lumpur High Court [overturned](#) a ban on the use of the word "Allah" by certain non-Muslim publications. Another case relevant to religious freedom remained unresolved: on January 11, the High Court [set](#) March 19 as the date to determine whether Ahmadiyya Muslims would be considered Muslim in Malaysia, regardless of how they self-identify. This deadline passed without a ruling. The determination will affect Ahmadiyya Muslims' ability to use Islamic terms in their faith practices and will decide if they are subject to official interpretations of Islam as regulated by the state Shari'a systems.

The leading Malay-majority parties and political institutions continue to be existentially afraid of perceived threats to the supremacy of Islam and ethnic Malays, which has heightened tensions between the secular and Shari'a court systems and inter-ethnic/confessional communities. On March 24, the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) pledged to "harmonize" Malaysia's dual-track legal system, arguing that the foundation of Malaysia's legal system was Islamic. On March 28, the president of leading Malay-ethnic party United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, [pledged](#) that should the party gain a supermajority in Parliament, it would amend the Federal Constitution of Malaysia to "empower" Shari'a law.

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);
 - Extend training by the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security to their Malaysian counterparts on community-based policing to promote better shared practices on interacting with faith communities and protecting houses of worship and other religious sites; and
 - Urge the Malaysian government to repeal the federal and state-level laws criminalizing blasphemy and apostasy, remove the constitutional link between the ethnic Malay identity and Islam, and release the findings of the special task force investigating enforced disappearances, such as the case of Pastor Raymond Koh.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Malaysia's ongoing religious freedom issues in any engagement through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, or other actions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Ahmadiyya Persecution Factsheet](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Malaysia](#)
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project:** [Pastor Raymond Koh](#)

Background

Malaysia is a highly pluralistic society. Around 61.3 percent of the population identify as Muslim, the vast majority of whom adhere 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.

Malaysia is one of a few multiparty democracies in Southeast Asia. However, throughout 2021, Malaysia continued to experience political instability at the federal level. At the beginning of the year, then Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin [suspended](#) Parliament through a declaration of a state of emergency over the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the suspension, observers had [noted](#) the fragility of Yassin’s coalition. When the suspension of Parliament ended in August 2021, at the urging of the king, the Perikatan Nasional coalition collapsed with the resignation of Yassin. On August 20, 2021, the king [appointed](#) Ismail Sabri Yaakob, a member of UMNO, as prime minister.

Continuing Politicization of Ethnicity and Religion

Against the backdrop of this political instability, the leading Malay-Muslim parties, UMNO and PAS, continued to emphasize the ethnoreligious supremacy of ethnic Malays and Islam to garner support. In August, with Yaakob’s appointment as prime minister, UMNO returned as the dominant political power. PAS, as well as other political actors, have [attempted](#) to reorient Malaysia’s secular constitutional foundation based on Article 3(1)’s proclamation of Islam as the official religion. During the long period of UMNO-dominated government from 1957 until 2018, the political branches of government consistently restricted the civil courts, including the Federal Court, with amendments to the constitution that curtailed their authority, especially over religious issues.

Interfaith and Child Forced Marriages

The dual legal system complicates the issue of interfaith marriage and the right to choose or change one’s religion. Children of interfaith marriages are sometimes automatically registered as Muslims on their national identification cards, even if they do not identify as Muslim, placing them in the Shari’a court system to abide by certain rules. In January, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) [highlighted](#) this issue for indigenous communities in Sarawak where interfaith marriages occur. With strict apostasy laws, official registration as a Muslim limits a person’s ability to identify and practice according to their own faith identity.

Some nongovernmental organizations, including Sisters in Islam, have [reported](#) an increase in child marriages during the pandemic. This may be due in part to the lowered age of marriage for Muslim women, who can legally marry at 16, as compared to non-Muslim women, who cannot marry until 18. In December, the federal Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) [committed](#) to maintaining this system. There has been ongoing debate as to whether to harmonize the protected rights of women and girls regardless of faith.

Criminalization of Blasphemy and Apostasy

Blasphemy is a criminal act under Articles 295–298A of the Penal Code. In June, a task force within the federal government [proposed](#) modifying laws governing social media to link the “promotion” of “LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex] lifestyles” to laws that target insulting Islam. Such changes affect members of the LGBTI community who either identify as Muslim or, in the case of ethnic Malays, are constitutionally classified as Muslim, equating the expression of their sexual or gender identity to blasphemy and insulting Islam.

On January 6, the Shah Alam Syariah High Court charged [Nur Sajat](#), a trans woman, with bringing contempt to Islam for dressing in clothes that matched her gender identity at a religious event. In March, the Selangor State Religious Authority (JAIS) prompted authorities to find and arrest Nur Sajat for failing to appear in court. In October, Nur Sajat [announced](#) she received political asylum in Australia. In December, the state [auctioned](#) her household items.

Enforced Disappearances of Religious Leaders

The government of Malaysia continued to withhold the report of the special taskforce set up by the former governing coalition Pakatan Harapan to investigate the whereabouts and disappearances of several individuals, including USCIRF’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience [Pastor Raymond Koh](#) and [Amri Che Mat](#). There were no updates in 2021 on their whereabouts or when the report would be made publicly available.

Key U.S. Policy

Malaysia and the United States maintain strong bilateral ties. There is continued partnership in counterterrorism efforts through information sharing, capacity-building programs for law enforcement and judicial authorities, and assistance to improve immigration security and border controls. On December 15, [Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken](#) met with Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah to discuss regional and international issues of mutual interest, which included Malaysia-U.S. bilateral relations, regional security, COVID-19, and other matters.

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, which brings Muslim educational leaders to the United States in part to observe conditions for freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua remained the same as in 2020. During April 2018 protests against reforms to the public pension system, Catholic clergy provided aid and sanctuary to and voiced support for [the protesters](#). As a result, President Daniel Ortega used his government and supporters to persecute members of the clergy, worshipers, and Catholic organizations. This pattern of harassment continued in 2021, as the government maintained its campaign against the Catholic Church. In 2021, the backdrop for religious freedom violations was not ongoing protests as in the last few years, but rather the runup to the general election in which President Ortega sought reelection for a fourth consecutive term. In the process, President Ortega's government [arrested](#) or disqualified numerous opposition candidates, imprisoned other critical figures such as journalists and human rights defenders, and [raided](#) the last remaining printed newspaper, *La Prensa*. Members of the Nicaraguan Catholic Church denounced the government's tactics, expressed their support for free and fair elections and human rights, and called for the release of political prisoners.

As in preceding years, in 2021, President Ortega and his wife, Vice President Rosario Murillo, made verbal attacks against the Catholic Church that contributed to the perilous environment in which the Church operated. In June, Vice President Murillo [accused](#) priests of stealing and raising funds to distribute among themselves. At an anniversary celebration of the Nicaraguan Army Air Force in July, President Ortega [called](#) priests "Pharisees . . . speaking as if they were saints [with] no respect for Christ, no respect for God." USCIRF received reports that on August 13, President Ortega said that protesters opened fire on their fellow

citizens and tortured police officers "with the applause and support of priests." The next day, Vice President Murillo [called](#) clergy "sons of the devil" and accused them of condoning crimes and approving of the deaths of Nicaraguans. In the same speech, she said bishops were "fake shepherds" performing "satanic rites" and "witchcraft" to allegedly overthrow the government. On October 4, President Ortega again attacked clergy by [calling](#) the bishops "terrorists," a potentially grave accusation considering the government adopted a wide-reaching and strict [antiterrorism law](#) in the wake of the 2018 protests.

The government also continued to cancel visas or prevent the return of foreign-born priests as a tactic to pressure Catholic clergy. In January and February, the Directorate General of Immigration and Nationality (DGME) [prevented](#) two Franciscans—Friar Santos Fabián Mejía, head of the San Francisco de Asís parish in Juigalpa, and José Lemus Aguilar, parish priest of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Matagalpa—from returning to Nicaragua from El Salvador. There was no official [reason](#) given for the denials of entry, but an immigration officer allegedly told Friar Fabián that he had gotten too involved in politics. On April 30, the DGME [canceled](#) the permanent residency of another Franciscan, Father Damián Muratori, director of El Tepeyac, a Franciscan sanctuary in the city of San Rafael del Norte. He was given 90 days to leave the country. Originally born in Italy, Father Muratori had lived in Nicaragua since 1976. Although he was given no explanation for why he was being deported, he [suspects](#) it may be because of his popular sermons and the false [accusation](#) that he had participated in the 2018 protests.

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);
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for violence and other punitive actions against houses of worship, religious leaders, and organizations 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
 - Collaborate with and encourage multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States, to monitor and investigate religious freedom violations that occur in Nicaragua and work to identify perpetrators and tolerators of religious freedom violations, and seek the repeal of problematic laws such as the Foreign Agents Regulation Law.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to raise human rights and democracy concerns in Nicaragua and bring attention to religious leaders and organizations silenced by the Ortega regime.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [Nicaragua's Assault on Religious Freedom](#)
- Factsheet: [Controlling Civil Society's Purse Strings](#)

Background

President Ortega is the head of state and government of Nicaragua. He and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), exercise authoritarian control over the government and electoral process. Roman Catholics [account](#) for about 50 percent of Nicaragua's population, followed by Evangelical Christians at 33.2 percent; followers of unspecified religions at 13.2 percent; Jews, Muslims, and others at 2.9 percent; and 0.7 percent adhering to no religion.

Nicaragua is embroiled in a social and political crisis that started after the government's repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The Ortega administration began lashing out at the Catholic Church after it aided demonstrators and individual Catholic clergy voiced opposition to the government.

Leading up to the 2021 November election, Catholic clergy were outspoken in their support for free elections and the release of political prisoners. In a June 10 letter, Nicaraguan bishops [decried](#) "arbitrary and illegal restrictions of citizens' freedoms and the persecution of the opposition and media outlets." Clergy increasingly called the election [illegitimate](#) and an Ortega victory a forgone conclusion. Monsignor Carlos Aviles, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Managua, [posited](#) that "[these] are not elections. It's a way to legitimize a period of increasing dictatorship."

Harassment of Worshipers and Clergy

Supporters of the Ortega regime continued to enter churches disruptively during Mass. In the northwestern town of Chinandega, a mob shouting [slogans](#) in favor of the Ortega government [interrupted](#) an April mass held in tribute to the victims of the violence against April 2018 protesters and political prisoners. Also in April, Father Edwin Román [claimed](#) that at a mass he held at the St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Masaya nearly 80 police, paramilitaries, and other bystanders gathered outside. At the end of the mass, some of those outside threw stones at the church.

The Archbishop of Managua, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes, is an [outspoken](#) critic of the Ortega regime and was vocal in the runup to the election. According to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, police have kept Cardinal Brenes under supervision ever since he left the hospital after contracting COVID-19 in September. Agents surround his home and monitor his movements with the intention of intimidating him, despite the fact that he has not been charged with a crime and is not a suspect in any ongoing investigation.

Vandalism and Theft of Church Property

In late March, thieves stole money from El Tepeyac, supposedly entering the church via the roof and hogtying the security guard. On July 5, the Immaculate Conception of Mary parish church in Jalapa was [broken into](#) in the middle of the night, with damage to the church's door and a statue of Jesus and Mary. Later in July, an unknown assailant [broke](#) into the chapel at the San Caralampio Church in Diriamba, stealing sound equipment and desecrating the Eucharist. As in previous

years, no one has been held to account for crimes committed against churches, and the government did not offer additional security for houses of worship.

Abuses against Protestants

The government also targeted Protestant institutions and individuals, especially those who have spoken out against the government. USCIRF received reports that the government exerted pressure on Protestants by increasing taxes on institutions, closely examining foreign funding, and harassing pastors who speak out against government abuses. In January, police in Jinotepe arrested and [beat](#) Pastor Rudy Palacios on his way to a meeting of the Democratic Restoration Party (PRD), a popular Protestant political party in Nicaragua. Pastor Palacios [supported](#) and provided food supplies to protesters in 2018.

After the elections, the Nicaraguan Institute of Telecommunications and Postal Services (TELCOR) arbitrarily [canceled](#) the license for Enlace Canal 21, Nicaragua's only Christian television channel. It is believed that the government took this action after the leader of the channel, Pastor Guillermo Osorno, challenged the results of the presidential election and denounced electoral irregularities.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the State Department issued a press statement [expressing](#) concern for the Nicaraguan government's crackdown on civil society, specifically through the [Foreign Agents Law passed](#) last year. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [condemned](#) the Ortega-Murillo government for "repression and electoral manipulation" that "stripped the November 7 vote of any real significance." Around the time of the election, the U.S. Congress passed and President Joseph R. Biden signed the [RENACER Act](#). The act establishes "measures to monitor, report on, and address corruption and human rights abuses in Nicaragua," including calling for sanctions on Nicaraguan officials responsible for the unfair election, requiring State Department reports on senior government officials involved in gross human rights violations, and advocating oversight of foreign assistance for projects in the country.

The U.S. government continued to enact robust sanctions against Nicaraguan officials, though none referred to religious freedom violations. On June 9—a week after the Nicaraguan government arrested four presidential candidates—the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [sanctioned](#) four government officials, including President Ortega's daughter. Then, on November 15 OFAC [imposed](#) sanctions on the Public Ministry of Nicaragua and nine government officials in response to the sham elections. On January 10, 2022, the State Department [announced](#) "visa restrictions on 116 individuals complicit in undermining democracy in Nicaragua," including local leaders and justice officials. OFAC also sanctioned six members of the Ortega regime. On November 15, 2021, the State Department again [placed](#) Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained poor, with no improvement from the previous year. Many religious communities continued to face bureaucratic obstacles that prevented or seriously impeded their ability to practice their religion or belief. Notably, the government maintained its refusal to grant legal personality to religious groups and yet again rejected a petition to allow religious foundations to hold long-delayed board member elections. Similarly, the government took no steps to reopen the Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary), preventing the Ecumenical Patriarchate from training clergy for more than 50 years. The Turkish government also [did not permit](#) conscientious objection to mandatory military service and convicted those who attempted to exercise that right.

Throughout the year, both religious and ethnic minorities faced governmental or societal targeting along religious lines. In July, police reportedly [detained](#) 28 imams—and of those, they formally arrested nine—for preaching in Kurdish. Police officers questioned the imams about praying in Kurdish and their failure to adhere to the government’s official sermons, acts that law enforcement equated with support for a terrorist organization. As in previous years, Alevis were beset by a number of threatening incidents. In August, unidentified individuals [broke into](#) and damaged an Alevi house of worship (*cemevi*) in Istanbul, and several Alevis’ houses were [marked](#) and [vandalized](#) in separate episodes in the cities of Adana and Yalova. Protestant communities experienced persistent difficulties. Foreign Protestants whom the Turkish government either deported or prevented from entering the country in recent years unsuccessfully sought to overturn those bans and [appealed](#) to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In late December, a Protestant church in

the Istanbul neighborhood of Kadıköy was discovered with “Allah 1” [graffitied](#) across the front door. The Turkish government also failed to protect other religious sites, including historical places of worship and cemeteries. For instance, a private citizen [demolished](#) the Surp Toros Armenian church in Kütahya, and construction in the province of Van [toppled](#) headstones in an Armenian cemetery.

Government officials at various levels expressed antisemitism through statements and social media posts. In May, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used antisemitic [language](#) in a televised speech, prompting strong [condemnation](#) from the U.S. Department of State. In November, a court in Bursa [ruled](#) that a man who called President Erdoğan “a Jew” on social media had insulted the President, and it ultimately convicted the man and fined him approximately 721 USD (7,000 Turkish lira). President Erdoğan’s lawyer argued that the remark was “humiliating [and] damaging to his honor and respectability.” In other instances of antisemitism, unknown individuals [set fire](#) to the gateway of a disused synagogue, and online groups [hacked](#) and carried out [cyberattacks](#) on *Şalom*, Turkey’s only Jewish newspaper, and *Avlaremoz*, a Turkish-language Jewish news platform. The Turkish government maintained its law criminalizing blasphemy, or “insulting religious values,” and penalized those perceived to have insulted or mocked Islam. In January, authorities [arrested](#) two university students on charges of insulting religious values after they displayed a poster depicting a religious site alongside lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) flags, and in March, a government body [fined](#) two news networks on a similar basis. Individuals, including atheists, [reported](#) experiencing discrimination in societal and professional settings due to their beliefs.

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 Theological School of Halki (Halki Seminary) and for full compliance with ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief;
- Track and comprehensively document in the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report religious communities’ efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historic importance; include information on the vandalization, damage, and destruction of such sites; and work with the Turkish government to ensure their protection; and
- Prioritize travel to Turkey for officials at the highest levels of the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism to raise issues related to freedom of religion or belief and antisemitism directly with Turkish counterparts.

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, including in the context of proposed legislation such as the [Turkey Human Rights Promotion Act of 2021](#) and the [Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021](#).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Turkey in 2021](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Destruction of Cemeteries](#)
- **Podcast:** [Sivas Massacre and Turkey’s Persecution of the Alevi Community](#)
- **Podcast:** [50 Years and Counting: The Continued Closure of Halki Seminary in Turkey](#)

Background

Turkey has an [estimated](#) population of nearly 82.5 million people, of whom more than 99 percent [identify](#) as Muslim. Most Muslims in the country follow Sunni Islam, but between 10 million and 25 million identify as Alevi. Alevis represent the country's largest religious minority, but the government refuses to recognize or grant the community certain rights it accords to some other religious groups. Around 0.2 percent of the population 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 others.

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.

President Erdoğan and his government continued to support efforts to [promote](#) Sunni Islam, including through [educational policies](#) and controversial moves to [raise](#) the profile and influence of the Diyanet. Although many religious communities encountered obstacles related to their freedom of religion or belief, the government [rebuffed](#) their requests to try and resolve these issues during the year and instead [insisted](#) that "everyone lives as they wish, regardless of their beliefs." Turkey's acts of military aggression beyond its borders, including in Iraq and Syria, also contributed to destabilizing conditions for religious and ethnic minorities residing in those areas. For more information on religious freedom violations by Turkey and Turkish-backed forces, see the Annual Report chapters on Iraq and Syria.

Government Stifling of Religious and Other Minorities

Government policies—many of which have existed and been implemented for years and in some cases decades—stifled the ability of religious and nonreligious communities to express and practice their beliefs. Regulations and acts of government interference regularly impeded the functioning of those communities (both by denying them status as legal entities and [blocking](#) elections), prevented them from opening places of worship, and restricted them from training clergy and future religious leaders.

Authorities increasingly cracked down on members of religious and other minority groups in connection with elements of their speech and religion. In the case of the imams detained or arrested for conducting sermons in Kurdish, the prosecution [pointed](#) to their use of certain Kurdish words as "evidence" of their alleged connection with a terrorist organization. As of the end of the reporting period, their trial was still [ongoing](#). In September, civil servant and head of the Diyanet Ali Erbaş [warned](#) that citizens should conduct themselves on

social media in line with Islamic values and suggested that the government introduce regulations with this aim. Many charges related to blasphemy originated with social media posts that officials believed insulted Islam. In January, a prosecutor's office [launched](#) an investigation into an individual who posted commentaries on Islam to YouTube. In March, journalist Hakan Aygün [received](#) a 7.5-month prison sentence for a Twitter post in which he criticized President Erdoğan through a religious pun.

Vandalism and Threats to Religious Sites

Government negligence, vandals, and so-called "treasure hunters" posed serious threats to, damaged, or destroyed religious sites over the course of the year. In the city of Erzurum, an urban development project [threatened](#) to further damage the 18th-century Surp Minas Armenian church. Unknown individuals carrying out an unauthorized excavation also caused [damage](#) to the Surp Toros Gregorian Armenian church in Kayseri. Finally, in yet another example of the government converting a former church into a mosque, the Diyanet [opened](#) the Hagia Sophia in Edirne to Muslim worship in December.

Key U.S. Policy

Relations between the United States and Turkey remained strained despite continued high-level [engagement](#) that sought a [return](#) to "constructive relations" and the "effective management of disagreements." Although the U.S. government frequently [reiterated](#) its interest in improving the bilateral relationship, a host of issues continued to stymie cooperation, including the Turkish government's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system and its ongoing disregard for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In October, President Erdoğan [threatened](#) to expel then U.S. Ambassador to Turkey David M. Satterfield, along with nine other ambassadors, after they [called](#) for the release of Turkish philanthropist Osman Kavala on the fourth anniversary of his unjust imprisonment. Both countries are allies as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The U.S. government took a stronger stance on religious freedom issues in Turkey compared to previous years in both its public messaging and engagement. In June, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price [issued](#) a press statement on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the closing of Halki Seminary urging the Turkish government to respect freedom of religion or belief, allow the reopening of Halki Seminary, and permit all religious groups to train clergy. In October, President Joseph R. Biden [hosted](#) His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and discussed, among other issues, "the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental human right." Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken also met with the Ecumenical Patriarch during his visit, and he [underscored](#) U.S. concern for religious minorities in Turkey and the U.S. government's continued prioritization of the reopening of Halki Seminary.

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan began to trend negatively. The government of Uzbekistan in some ways departed from its forward-leaning religious freedom reform agenda and resumed the use of certain repressive policies against Muslims and those who advocate on their behalf. Research by USCIRF [found](#) that the government continued to imprison approximately 2,200 political prisoners in connection with their religious activities or real or alleged religious affiliations. Although many of these prisoners were sentenced under the previous regime, the current administration has done little to review their cases systematically or release those wrongfully imprisoned. Moreover, the government added to that figure through the detention, arrest, and imprisonment of unknown numbers of Muslim individuals for peaceful religious activities such as [possessing](#) religious literature or [meeting](#) to pray. Notably, and particularly following the Taliban’s late summer takeover in Afghanistan, authorities in Uzbekistan [detained](#) hundreds of individuals with purported links to the Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir, often based on allegations related to their peaceful religious activity, association, or expression without evidence of the use or advocacy of violence. Over the course of the year, prisoners were allegedly [subjected](#) to beatings and other forms of [torture](#) at the hands of prison authorities.

In June, the government clamped down on citizens’ ability to pursue religious education abroad, [requiring](#) prospective students to obtain permission from the government’s Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) and [recalling](#) over 1,500 students from religious schools in Egypt and Turkey. That same month, government officials [fined](#) employees of news outlets Kun.uz and Azon.uz

for publishing religious material without having submitted it to the CRA for prior approval. On several occasions, law enforcement authorities throughout the country [rounded up](#) Muslim men and forced them to shave their beards, and police in the cities of Bukhara and Samarqand reportedly [warned](#) Shi’a Muslims against posting religious materials on their social media accounts.

In July, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev [signed](#) into law changes to Uzbekistan’s “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations” law. The changes resulted from more than three years of effort to revise this legislation that governs virtually all religious activity in the country. Despite having received extensive feedback from international partners, including USCIRF and the U.S. Department of State, the government declined to incorporate many recommendations to bring the law in line with international standards. While the amended law [presented](#) some improvements—halving the number of members required for a religious community to obtain registration from 100 to 50 and removing a provision that prohibited wearing religious clothing—it preserved many of the previous legislation’s most problematic and restrictive elements. Of note, the law maintained bans on unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and missionary activity; placed limitations on the location of religious rites and ceremonies; and continued to require the official review and approval of all religious literature and related materials. Similarly, a draft version of the Criminal Code published in February indicated that the government would likely retain provisions commonly used against political and religious prisoners, which Human Rights Watch has [asserted](#) “violate the rights to freedom of speech, association, and religion.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan 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 Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law, as amended in 2021, and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards, including by removing registration requirements on religious communities, permitting the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permitting 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

- **Special Report:** [Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners: Addressing a Legacy of Repression](#)
- **Podcast:** [Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Concerned by New Uzbekistan Religion Law](#)
- **Podcast:** [Uzbekistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back](#)

Background

The government of Uzbekistan estimates the population of the country at around 34 million people. Between 88 and 96 percent of people [identify](#) as Sunni Muslim; one percent identify as Shi'a Muslim; 2.2 percent identify as Russian Orthodox Christian; and 1.8 percent identify as atheist, Baha'i, Buddhist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Protestant, or a member of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Over the past few years, the government pursued unprecedented reform and sought out recommendations from the international community to improve conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Uzbekistan. In 2021, however, the government appeared to cease some of those efforts, resuming a number of repressive practices against Muslim individuals and dismissing continued calls for Parliament to further revise its changes to the "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" law.

Renewed Repression and Imprisonment of Muslims

While the government's recent expansion of religious freedom did not generally focus on members of the country's Muslim majority, many Muslims nevertheless noted positive changes under the reform agenda of the last several years, which better enabled them to practice and express their beliefs. Events of the past year, though, have led observers to [characterize](#) the government's shifting approach as a renewed "campaign on non-state Islam" (Islam practiced outside of that which is specifically promulgated and permitted by the state), with officials "reverting to restrictive practices" commonly used under the previous regime. Principally, the government [continues to incarcerate](#) roughly 2,200 individuals on religious grounds and has resumed prosecuting and imprisoning others on similar charges, [subjecting](#) some of them to torture.

Many arrests were tied to an alleged connection to Hizb ut-Tahrir or other groups the government has deemed "extremist," but the evidence used is of a religious nature. In addition, some arrests have been linked directly to speech on religious subjects or the possession of religious texts. In June and July, authorities detained Muslim blogger Fazilhoja Arifhojaev twice—for 15 days and five months, respectively—after he questioned a progovernment imam. Law enforcement then [opened a criminal case](#) against Arifhojaev after discovering a months-old Facebook post he had shared on the subject of Muslims congratulating non-Muslims on their religious holidays. After the end of the reporting period, he received a sentence of 7.5 years in prison. Odilbek Hojabekov, a Muslim who [received](#) a five-year suspended sentence for bringing unauthorized Islamic literature into the country from the Hajj, had a new warrant [issued](#) for his arrest in October following a change in the authorities' testimony. Muslim Laziz Asadov reportedly [fled the country](#) in December after the State Security Service raided his home and seized two Qur'ans, among other possessions, in what he believed was a reprisal for his public criticism of the government's religious policies.

Uzbekistan's Shi'a Muslim minority also continued to endure difficulties. In March, a court in the city of Samarqand [fined](#) Shi'a Muslim Rashid Ibrahimov under the Administrative Code for having unauthorized religious materials on his cell phone. In June, authorities reportedly [warned](#) Shi'a Muslims in the cities of Bukhara and

Samarqand not to publish religious materials on their social media. Shi'a Muslim communities also remained unable to open mosques that had been shut down during the Soviet era, despite an increasing need for the additional space.

Legislative and Policy Changes

The government's [adoption](#) of a revised religion law in July did not deliver the sweeping changes required to comply with international human rights standards. Although the amended version simplified some aspects of the mandatory registration process that religious groups must complete to operate legally, it [did not result](#) in the successful registration of all those that applied, including communities of Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants. The law retained broad prohibitions on unregistered religious activity, missionary activity, and private religious education; in particular, Muslims have stated that they [exert caution](#) when teaching or preaching due to these strict state controls. During the year, the government [fined](#) Baptists and Shi'a Muslims for the unapproved distribution or possession of religious materials, and it [introduced new limitations](#) on citizens' ability to obtain a religious education abroad. In one positive development, in September the Minister of Education [announced](#) that girls would be permitted to wear certain styles of headscarves in schools, but it remained to be seen whether schools would revise internal dress code policies and allow the wearing of religious garb or symbols in practice.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan's bilateral relationship has [focused](#) primarily on addressing regional security and improving economic relations. In the leadup to and aftermath of the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan and the U.S. military's withdrawal in August, both sides have sought increased engagement on mutual security concerns. Discussion of Afghanistan featured prominently in separate meetings between Uzbekistan's foreign minister, [Secretary of State](#) Antony J. Blinken, and [Secretary of Defense](#) Lloyd J. Austin amid [rumors](#) that the U.S. government was gauging interest among a handful of Central Asian states about hosting a continued U.S. military presence in the region. Throughout the year, Uzbekistan also [received several](#) congressional delegations. As part of the U.S. government's efforts to combat the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic, the United States [donated](#) over six million vaccine doses to the country.

The State Department frequently [raised](#) human rights concerns with counterparts in Uzbekistan and highlighted persistent issues related to freedom of religion or belief. In December, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu traveled to Uzbekistan to [participate](#) in the inaugural U.S.-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership Dialogue, where delegations from [both countries](#) "expressed their interest in further expanding cooperation in promoting respect for freedom of religion or belief." On International Human Rights Day in December, U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum [cohosted](#) a roundtable—attended by various government officials—on the rehabilitation of former political and religious prisoners.

OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENTS

This section highlights some important developments and trends that impacted religious freedom conditions around the world in 2021, particularly—but not only—in countries and regions not covered elsewhere in this report.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Religious Freedom

The COVID-19 global pandemic continued to [affect](#) freedom of religion or belief in 2021. Public health measures and general concern over the virus's spread reduced the extent of public association, including to teach, practice, worship, and observe religion. As such, repressive governments had fewer opportunities to actively stifle religious freedom despite little change in their policies toward religious minorities and those who peacefully dissented from officially endorsed religious beliefs. In some isolated cases, governments continued to enforce crackdowns in ways that discriminated against religious minorities. In Algeria, for example, Christian communities were [unable](#) to reopen their churches, even as mosques capable of supporting social distancing measures reopened. Finally, governments often failed to respond to, or in some cases encouraged, misinformation targeting religious minorities and blaming them for spreading COVID-19.

Several governments continued to gravely endanger the health and lives of religious prisoners of conscience by failing to provide adequate protection against COVID-19. They also continued to arrest and imprison scores of religious minorities (including nontheists) and dissidents on the basis of religion, creating potentially life-threatening conditions for those whose religious views differed from that of the government. In May, for example, two Baha'is in Iran [contracted](#) severe cases of COVID while detained at Adelebad Prison in Shiraz. Both survived and were released on bail in May but were [rearrested](#) to serve prison sentences in March 2022 after their sentences were [upheld](#) upon appeal. In India, advocates for and families of prisoners detained for religious freedom issues, such as protesting the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act, [raised renewed concerns](#) regarding the alarming rise in COVID-19 cases in overcrowded prisons.

Blasphemy and Hate Speech Law Enforcement

As USCIRF has previously [noted](#), 84 countries around the world continued to criminalize blasphemy as of 2020 in violation of international standards on freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. In 2021, individuals accused of blasphemy continued to face state

violence, mob violence, persecution for peacefully expressing their beliefs (including on social media), and violations of due process in countries that USCIRF recommends for "country of particular concern" (CPC) or Special Watch List (SWL) status in this report. Social media companies also censored expression based on requests from governments that enforce blasphemy laws. For example, from January to June 2021, Facebook [restricted](#) access to 2,286 items reported by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority as blasphemy and 415 items related to sectarian enmity. It also [restricted](#) several allegedly blasphemous posts based on a request from the Indonesian Ministry of Information and Communications Technology.

In addition, blasphemy prosecutions occurred in 2021 in countries not recommended for CPC or SWL status, including in Europe. In Poland, for example, three lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

and intersex (LGBTI) activists [faced charges](#) in January for "offending religious feelings" by displaying posters depicting the Virgin Mary with a rainbow halo. In February, a heavy metal singer was convicted on similar charges for posting a photo on social media of his foot stepping on an image of the Virgin Mary. In positive developments, the former group was found not guilty in March and a judge [over-](#)

[turned](#) the latter's conviction on appeal in September.

Vague and overbroad [hate speech laws](#) criminalizing speech that does not amount to incitement of violence also present human rights concerns. The peaceful public sharing of one's religious beliefs is both an integral part of religious freedom and protected by freedom of expression. This includes the expression of beliefs that may be offensive to others or controversial in society. During 2021 and early 2022 in Finland, authorities pursued such a [prosecution](#) against a member of Parliament and a bishop for a tweet, radio interview, and pamphlet expressing their religious views about homosexuality.

Transnational Repression

In addition to repression within their borders, some governments also continued to violate religious freedom abroad, targeting religious dissidents residing outside their borders and engaging in other forms of violations. In July, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [revealed](#) an Iranian attempt to kidnap an Iranian American activist who protested Iranian religious head covering laws on U.S. soil. Iran has also influenced others in the Arabian Peninsula region, such as the Houthi movement in Yemen, to increase their repression of Baha'is. In northern Syria, Turkey's recalcitrant occupation of a wide swath of

Several governments continued to gravely endanger the health and lives of religious prisoners of conscience by failing to provide adequate protection against COVID-19.

cross-border territory since late 2019 remained the locus of serious religious freedom and broader human rights violations against vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, largely by Islamist militias under its influence and control.

The Chinese government continued its transnational repression campaign—which, according to [Freedom House](#), is the most sophisticated, far-reaching, and comprehensive in the world—targeting ethnic and religious minorities, human rights activists, dissidents, and others. The government used its economic and geopolitical influence to pressure foreign countries, including majority Muslim countries such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Morocco](#), to [repatriate](#) Uyghurs, sometimes through Interpol Red Notices. Through its Sky Net and Fox Hunt operations, the Chinese government also [employed](#) other methods of “involuntary returns” to force its victims to return to China where they face severe persecution, including by threatening their family members in China and by [sending](#) undercover Chinese agents abroad to harass, intimidate, coerce, “persuade,” and in some cases kidnap victims. It used similar tactics to [silence](#) critics and their activities abroad.

Religious Intolerance in Europe

Religious intolerance remained a serious concern across Europe. For several years, including 2021, Muslims and Jews have faced rising levels of xenophobia and discrimination that have prompted many in both communities to [reconsider whether](#) Europe is a safe place in which to live. Christians also have experienced [increasing religious intolerance](#) in Europe in recent years.

Muslims and Jews in Europe face a confusing [patchwork](#) of ritual slaughter laws that adversely affect their ability to procure halal and kosher [meat](#). In some countries, such as France, governments restrict the wearing of religious dress in public and/or in public employment, as do some private employers. In July 2021, the Court of Justice of the European Union [ruled](#) that employers may under [certain](#) considerations forbid the wearing of visible religious symbols, such as Islamic headscarves and Jewish kippahs, but they must have a genuine need to do so and the employee’s rights must be considered. The decision reaffirmed and expanded upon a ruling by the same body in [2017](#).

A familiar pattern of antisemitism persisted in 2021 in the form of verbal attacks, physical assaults, discrimination, holocaust distortion, and rampant vandalism. [France](#) and [England](#) saw sharp percentage increases in the number of antisemitic incidents throughout the year, while Jews in [Germany](#), [Belgium](#), [France](#), [Italy](#), [England](#), and [more](#) experienced episodes of antisemitic physical and verbal aggression. Jewish [cemeteries](#), [synagogues](#), and kosher [restaurants](#) were targets for vandalism that involved swastikas, the destruction of headstones, [pig meat](#), and antisemitic [slogans](#). Poland began to enforce a 2018 law that made it [illegal](#) to blame the Polish nation for crimes committed by the Nazis. In February, two historians went on trial for their study of the [role](#) of a group of villagers who aided Nazis in the murder of Jews hiding in a nearby forest in 1944. In a positive development, an appeals court eventually [overturned](#) a verdict that had ordered the scholars to apologize for their research. The month of May was particularly fraught

with antisemitism due to the two-week violent [conflict](#) in Israel, leaving many Jews [despondent](#) about their safety in Europe. Numerous demonstrations across the continent featured antisemitic [language](#), the [burning](#) of Israeli flags in front of synagogues and community centers, [violent](#) threats, and vandalism. A [record](#) number of antisemitic incidents were reported in London that month. USCIRF released a [report](#) in April analyzing antisemitism in 11 countries in Europe and examining U.S. foreign policy as it relates to combating antisemitism in Europe.

As USCIRF highlighted in a February 2022 [hearing](#) on “Anti-Muslim Policies and Bias in Europe,” such bias manifests through laws, discrimination in public institutions, prejudice in the immigration process, online harassment, and violent [attacks](#). An inquiry into the United Kingdom’s Conservative Party [found](#) that the party is viewed as “insensitive” to Muslims and that “anti-Muslim sentiment remains a problem” at local and individual levels. Austria’s government released a [map](#) that showed the locations of more than 600 mosques and Muslim associations in the country in a move to reportedly “fight political ideologies, not religion,” ostensibly referring to political Islam. However, Austrian politicians and advocacy groups noted that the map would only [foster](#) more ill-will toward Muslim groups and could further [endanger](#) the lives of Muslims living in Austria. Muslim women in Germany [continued](#) to be denied job opportunities because they wear headscarves. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his spokesman came under [scrutiny](#) for their suggestion that the integration of Bosnia into the European Union will be difficult due to the country’s large Muslim population.

French President Emmanuel Macron is responding to the spread of what he [calls](#) “Islamist separatism,” alleging that it undermines French values and the principle of [laïcité](#). As a result, in July the French government [enacted](#) the Law Reinforcing Respect of the Principles of the Republic, which strengthens state oversight of mosques and other Islamic organizations. The government now has the power to close houses of worship and dissolve religious organizations without a court order if any members are “provoking violence or inciting hatred.” In addition, religious organizations must obtain a government permit every five years and are subject to an annual audit if they receive foreign funding. Critics of the new law say that it gives the government [too much](#) power over civic and religious groups and unfairly targets Islam in a country where Muslims have [faced](#) decades of discrimination, hate crimes, and marginalization. Contributing

to this unease in 2021 were the presidential aspirations of Eric Zemmour, a journalist with a history of anti-Muslim rhetoric.

European Christians also faced intolerance and hate crimes, representative of a [rising problem](#) over the past several years. Christians endured physical and verbal assaults, and in some cases their community property experienced [vandalism](#), [desecration](#), [theft](#), and

arson. Two French lawmakers investigated religious-based hate crimes in their country and found evidence of [857](#) anti-Christian incidents in 2021 alone, including an incident in which unidentified vandals [destroyed](#) a Marseille church’s marquee and burned all of its bibles. A series of vandalism incidents plagued a church in [Italy](#) in the fall, and there were arson attacks on numerous churches across the continent, including in [France](#), [Germany](#), [Italy](#), and [Switzerland](#). In December,

Muslims and Jews have faced rising levels of xenophobia and discrimination that have prompted many in both communities to reconsider whether Europe is a safe place in which to live.

Catholics taking part in a Marian procession in Paris were [subjected](#) to threats and doused in water.

While some governments struggled to contain physical and verbal threats to members of religious groups, social media companies have also come under fire for failing to contain hateful messaging on their platforms. This failure has been particularly acute regarding threats from extremist groups, who often express vehemently xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric and commit crimes aimed at Muslims and Jews. In May, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer [acknowledged](#) that “right wing extremism is the biggest threat” in Germany. A recent [study](#) showed that TikTok is a hotbed for targeting Muslims and Jews and espousing “violence-endorsing, hateful ideologies” such as the “Great Replacement theory” and “white genocide.” In one instance, a video showing a rabbi speaking about growing solidarity between Jews and Muslims was used as a justification for arguments that these communities were “against Europeans.” Similarly, antisemitic and anti-Muslim COVID-19 conspiracy theories [continue](#) to be created and disseminated on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, such as that Jews and Muslims are deliberately spreading the virus.

Deterioration in South Asia

USCIRF has long noted deteriorating religious freedom conditions across South Asia, and that trend persisted in 2021. In addition to its recommendations to designate Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan as CPCs, USCIRF is deeply concerned about worsening religious freedom conditions in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. In Bangladesh, communal violence [erupted](#) in October during Durga Puja festivities. The week-long wave of violence led to widespread attacks on the Hindu community and its places of worship despite government efforts to contain violence. The Bangladesh government continued to leave refugees, predominately Rohingya Muslims, in untenable conditions, closing schools and moving some of them to the remote island of Bhasan Char.

In [Sri Lanka](#), the government has exploited legal means such as the blasphemy law, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act to target religious minorities and deepen societal discrimination toward Muslims since the 2019 Easter bombings. State-led intimidation and surveillance of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, have led to communal tension in an otherwise multi-ethnic and religious society.

Elsewhere in the region, the persecution of [Christian converts](#) under Nepal’s proselytization laws continued to violate the religious freedom of those individuals who chose to convert from Hinduism. Religious intolerance toward non-Muslims in the [Maldives](#)—including tourists and foreign laborers—remained concerning, as they are only allowed to practice their religion in [private](#); there are no places

of worship for adherents of religions other than Islam. The Maldives government further prohibits the importation of icons (e.g., crosses) and religious statues, but it generally allows non-Muslims or foreigners to import religious literature, such as bibles, for personal use.

Political Upheaval Raises Religious Freedom Concerns

USCIRF has applauded Sudan’s dramatic improvement of religious freedom conditions following that country’s historic revolution in April 2019, which ended the 30-year regime of then President Omar al-Bashir. The hybrid military and civilian transitional government made the advancement of human rights, including religious freedom, a top priority. For example, in July of 2020, the government [passed](#) the Miscellaneous Amendment Act, which repealed the apostasy law, ended flogging for blasphemy, banned female genital mutilation (FGM), permitted non-Muslims to drink alcohol, and abolished the guardianship law that required women to get a permit from a male guardian for traveling abroad with their children. However, on October 25, 2021, Sudan’s top military leader, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Fattah al-Burhan, led a [military coup](#), declaring a national emergency and dissolving the civilian-led government. The general also suspended the transitional constitution and arrested key civilian cabinet members, including then Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who had been central to religious freedom advancements over the prior two years. Sudan’s religious minority communities fear that returning the military to power and banishing civilian leaders who led national advancements in religious freedom and

broader human rights may presage a reversal of those changes and improvements.

In Belarus, religious freedom conditions continued to follow a troubling trajectory in 2021. The government of authoritarian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has pressured religious institutions and officials over their support of political opposition following [fraudulent](#) presidential elections in August 2020. During 2021, the government continued to pressure the

Sudan’s religious minority communities fear that returning the military to power and banishing civilian leaders who led national advancements in religious freedom and broader human rights may presage a reversal of those changes and improvements.

Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) to remove pro-protest clergy and reportedly demanded that church officials provide a [list](#) of more than 100 priests whom it considered disloyal. Several priests included on this list were stripped of their positions in 2021, including [Archbishop Artemy](#), a popular cleric who refused to stop his public condemnation of regime violence. In addition, all foreign clergy must obtain official permission to serve in the country, the permits for which range from three months to a maximum of one year. They must constantly reapply and can be denied without explanation, which happens frequently in the case of Polish Catholic priests. According to Father Vyacheslav Borok, who [fled](#) the country under pressure in July 2021, “the Catholic Church is ready for repression and many bishops are simply prepared to go to prison.”

KEY USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS IMPLEMENTED IN 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, USCIRF’s mandate also includes tracking the U.S. government’s implementation of USCIRF’s recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, the effectiveness of such implemented recommendations in advancing religious freedom internationally. While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF’s recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights the key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2021, including several long-standing recommendations. The list, which is not exhaustive, is meant to showcase the effectiveness of U.S. government actions resulting from the implementation of USCIRF’s recommendations. Unless otherwise noted, the recommendations highlighted here were included in [USCIRF’s 2021 Annual Report](#).

Designating the Worst Violators

- In November 2021, 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 Russia as a CPC for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2017.
- In November, the State Department placed four countries on its Special Watch List (SWL) under IRFA, three of which—Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua—USCIRF recommended for such placement. Algeria was added for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended since 2020.
- In November, the State Department also designated nine non-state actors as “entities of particular concern” (EPCs), seven of which USCIRF has recommended for such designation.

Filling IRF-Related Appointments

- USCIRF urged the administration of President Joseph R. Biden to swiftly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to key IRF positions:
 - In July 2021, the Biden administration [nominated](#) Rashad Hussain to serve as the ambassador at large for IRF, and the Senate [confirmed](#) him in December 2021.
 - In July, the Biden administration [nominated](#) Deborah Lipstadt as the special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, granting the rank of ambassador to the position for the first time, and the Senate confirmed her in March 2022.
 - In December, the Biden administration [appointed](#) Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya to serve concurrently as the special coordinator for Tibetan issues.

Increasing the Use of Targeted Sanctions

- USCIRF has consistently 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. Over the course of 2021, the U.S. government issued eight Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Global Magnitsky) sanctions against individuals and entities specifically for religious freedom abuses. Significant sanctions issued during the year for religious freedom abuses are listed below.
 - In January 2021, the U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Chairman and former National Security Advisor Falih al-Fayyadh for engaging in egregious human rights abuses.

2021 State Department Designations Pursuant to USCIRF Recommendations	
CPC	Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan
SWL	Algeria, Cuba, Nicaragua
EPC	al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-Greater Sahara, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the Taliban

- USCIRF [recommended](#) that the U.S. government work with U.S. allies in a multilateral effort to coordinate targeted sanctions against Chinese leaders for their treatment of religious minorities. 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 targeted sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom, Canada, and the European Union against the same abusers.
- In July, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) religious freedom violators in Syria, including the Turkish-backed militia Ahrar al-Sharqiya as well as individuals Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes—commonly known as Abu Hatem Shaqra—and Farrukh Fayzimatov.
- In July, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) individuals in Cuba for suppression of peaceful protests, including the beating of a Catholic priest.
- In September, the Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) four Iranian intelligence operatives for attempting to kidnap an Iranian American activist living in Brooklyn who advocated for Iranian women’s freedom to choose whether or not to wear Islamic headscarves.

Implementation of Executive Order 13926 – Advancing International Religious Freedom

- USCIRF called on the Biden administration to continue to implement the [executive order](#) on [Advancing International Religious Freedom](#), signed by then President Donald J. Trump in June 2020. The executive order included several of USCIRF’s [long-standing 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. In 2021, the Biden administration implemented the executive order by:
 - At the State Department, continuing to pursue country-specific action plans, again dedicating \$50 million to IRF-related programming, and continuing to provide training on IRF issues to foreign service officers.
 - At the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), continuing to advance religious freedom within USAID’s [priorities and programming](#), including through activities to address the needs of vulnerable religious minority communities in [various parts of the world](#) as well as organizational initiatives such as the IRF Sector Council to foster agency-wide coordination and cooperation.

Increasing the Refugee Ceiling

- USCIRF has [called](#) for a return of the annual U.S. refugee resettlement ceiling to the previously established level of 95,000. In February 2021, President Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for fiscal year (FY) 2022, which then began on October 1, 2021. In May 2021, President Biden [announced](#) he was raising the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 from

15,000 to 62,500 and that he intended to prioritize vulnerable religious groups, including at-risk Uyghurs and Rohingya.

Designation of Uyghur Genocide

- In June 2020, 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, the Trump administration [designated](#) China’s treatment of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang as genocide and crimes against humanity. In March, the Biden administration [affirmed](#) the designation when it released the State Department’s annual country reports on human rights practices.

Diplomatic Boycott of the Beijing Olympics

- USCIRF urged the U.S. government to express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and for U.S. government officials to not attend the games if the Chinese government’s crackdown on religious freedom continues. In December 2021, the Biden administration [announced](#) that U.S. officials will boycott the Olympic Games because of the Chinese government’s ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses.

Confucius Institutes

- Since 2019, USCIRF has recommended the U.S. government strengthen efforts to counter Chinese government influence operations in the United States that suppress information regarding religious freedom violations in China, such as Confucius Institutes. In large part due to U.S. government and congressional scrutiny over the Confucius Institute’s foreign influence in the United States—for example, a provision in the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the designation of the Confucius Institute U.S. Center as a foreign mission in 2020—many American universities have severed ties with or closed Confucius Institutes on their campuses. The National Association of Scholars [reported](#) there were approximately 103 Confucius Institutes in the United States in 2017, but as of February 22, 2022, there are only 19 left, with four more scheduled to close. Many of the remaining institutes are likely near the end of their operation.

Raising IRF Issues in Multilateral Engagement

- Over the past year, USCIRF urged the Biden administration to maintain the United States’ leadership role in the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#) (IRFBA). In 2021, the U.S. government continued to serve as the Secretariat of IRFBA. During the year, the Alliance made multi-country statements regarding religious freedom in Burma and Afghanistan, on behalf of missing Yazidi women and children, and in support of persecuted Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- USCIRF recommended the U.S. government continue to support and participate in future [Ministerials](#) to Advance Religious

Freedom. The United Kingdom is set to [host](#) the next Ministerial in July 2022 and the U.S. government plans to participate.

- USCIRF recommended the U.S. government prioritize freedom of religion or belief in its renewed engagement in the United Nations (UN) human rights system. In March 2021, the State Department [announced](#) its candidacy to rejoin the UN Human Rights Council. At the session that month, the United States cosponsored a resolution in the council on freedom of religion or belief. In October, the United States was [elected](#) to serve on the council for the next term, beginning in 2022.
- USCIRF [recommended](#) that the U.S. government support the UN Alliance of Civilizations 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.

Raising IRF Issues in Bilateral Engagement

- In certain contexts, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. government 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 Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Sustained U.S. attention and engagement contributed to or encouraged tangible actions and/or improvements to religious freedom conditions in some of these countries. This includes the government of Kazakhstan ending mandatory expert review of founding documents and religious literature for registered religious groups and the Uzbek government releasing some religious prisoners of conscience.
- USCIRF recommended the U.S. government expand its engagement with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). State Department and National Security Council officials [visited](#) northeast Syria in May and met with the AANES, including the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and senior U.S. officials [met](#) with a delegation from the SDC in Washington, D.C. in September.
- USCIRF called on the U.S. government to 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. In September 2021, and then confirmed in January 2022, the Biden administration [reprogrammed](#) \$130 million in military aid to Egypt because of the country's failure to remedy specified human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations.
- USCIRF urged the U.S. government to press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary in Turkey. In July 2021, the State Department [issued](#) a statement on the 50th anniversary of the closure of the seminary urging the Turkish government to reopen it and allow the Ecumenical Patriarchate to again train clergy in the country. In October, Secretary

of State Antony J. Blinken [reaffirmed](#) that opening the seminary is a priority for the Biden administration.

Advocacy 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.
 - The State Department highlighted the cases of [Pastor Rosales Fajardo](#) in Cuba and imprisoned Jehovah's Witness [Alexander Ivshin](#) in Russia. It furthermore called for the release of all [Jehovah's Witnesses](#) imprisoned for practicing their faith.
 - Members of Congress actively [advocated](#) for the release of RPOCs, including by adopting RPOCs through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#), [pushing](#) for the release of Egyptian RPOCs, [posting](#) videos commemorating RPOC birthdays, [providing](#) remarks for events, [speaking](#) on the Senate floor, and [bringing](#) attention to RPOC cases during hearings.

Increased 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 2021.
 - In May 2021, the U.S. government [announced](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance to meet the urgent needs of Rohingya refugees and other minority groups affected by ongoing violence in Burma that specifically has targeted them because of their religion and ethnicity.
 - USCIRF recommended the U.S. government continue to assist Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities to rebuild communities devastated by ISIS. In July, the State Department [announced](#) an additional \$155 million in humanitarian assistance for the people of Iraq as well as for Iraqi refugees in the region and the communities hosting them.

Congressional Action Promoting Religious Freedom

- USCIRF recommended Congress highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation.
 - In January 2021, the Senate introduced the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Reauthorization Act](#).
 - In January, Congress reintroduced the [Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act](#).
 - In March, the Senate introduced a [resolution establishing the Senate Human Rights Commission](#).
 - In May, the [Turkey and Ecumenical Patriarchate Religious Freedom Act of 2021](#) was introduced in the House.
 - The Senate reintroduced the [Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act](#) in June.

- In October, Congress introduced the [Burma Act of 2021](#) to address widespread human rights abuses in Burma, including religious freedom violations.
- The [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#) passed Congress and was [signed](#) by President Biden in December.
- USCIRF recommended Congress hold hearings and briefings highlighting IRF issues. In July, for example, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a [hearing](#) on the state of religious freedom around the globe and also a [hearing](#) cohosted with USCIRF on ending genocide and holding perpetrators accountable.
- USCIRF urged Congress to hold public hearings highlighting religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua and U.S. policy toward the country. Congress held [hearings](#) on the human rights situation in Nicaragua, including religious freedom violations, and passed the [RENACER Act](#) in November 2021, addressing broad human rights issues in the country.

Strong action by the U.S. government in 2021, including the developments highlighted above, have significantly contributed to advancing freedom of religion or belief internationally. Pursuant to USCIRF's mandate, USCIRF will continue to track the implementation of its recommendations by the U.S. government and their effectiveness, to the extent practicable. USCIRF encourages the Biden administration and Congress to continue to implement USCIRF's recommendations, including those detailed throughout this report, and to continue supporting the advancement of freedom of religion or belief abroad.

APPENDIX 1 COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES



Nadine Maenza,
Chair

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.



Nury Turkel,
Vice Chair

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



Anurima Bhargava,
Commissioner

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, former Justice Department official.



Khizr Khan,
Commissioner

APPOINTED BY
President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2022. Founder of Constitution Literacy and National Unity Center, author, attorney, and religious freedom advocate.



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.



Sharon Kleinbaum,
Commissioner

REAPPOINTED BY
President Joseph R. Biden (D) for a term expiring in May 2023. Spiritual leader of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York City and Commissioner on New York City's Commission on Human Rights.



Frederick A. Davie,
Commissioner

APPOINTED BY
Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2022. Senior Strategic Advisor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and Senior Advisor on Racial Equity at Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC).



Tony Perkins,
Commissioner

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.

APPENDIX 2 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].”

To implement this provision, USCIRF created the [Freedom of Religion or Belief \(FoRB\) Victims List](#), a database that catalogues individuals who have been detained, imprisoned, disappeared, tortured, placed under house arrest, or subjected to forced renunciation of faith for their religion or belief in countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or Special Watch List status as well as nonstate actors USCIRF recommends for EPC status.

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 and has typically relied on receiving submissions from outside individuals and organizations. As such, the data contained in the database does not reflect country, regional, or global trends. Furthermore, percentages highlighted in this section should not be used for extrapolation purposes nor interpreted as a particular group experiencing greater violations than another or a particular country committing violations at a greater rate than another. To support this project, USCIRF invites those with credible information on victims to submit information using the [Victims List Intake Form](#). Additional information about the FoRB Victims List can be found on USCIRF’s [website](#).

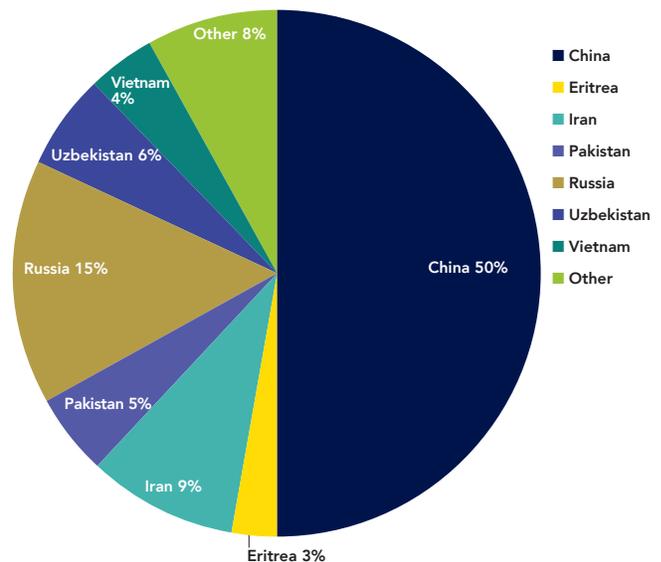
Perpetrators

By the end of 2021, the FoRB Victims List included over 1,300 individuals targeted by 21 different countries and entities. More than 1,000 victims remain in some form of state or entity custody, while fewer than 200 have been released. The detention status of approximately 40 cases remains unknown. Three individuals are listed as deceased after dying in state custody.

Among the violators, China imprisoned the most FoRB victims in the database, constituting half of all entries, followed by Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Eritrea. All other countries and entities individually constituted less than 1 percent of the victims in the database.

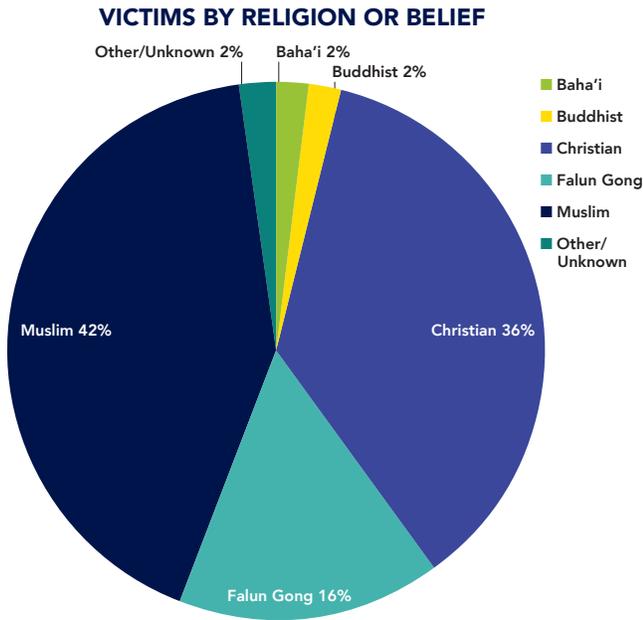
Perpetrator	Number of Victims Documented
Algeria	2
Azerbaijan	2
China	646
Cuba	13
Egypt	4
Eritrea	47
Houthis	2
India	3
Iran	115
Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP)	1
Kazakhstan	13
Malaysia	4
Nigeria	7
North Korea	9
Pakistan	62
Russia	191
Saudi Arabia	17
Tajikistan	10
Turkmenistan	22
Uzbekistan	81
Vietnam	50
Total	1,301

VICTIMS BY PERPETRATOR



Religion or Belief

The FoRB Victims List contains individuals from a wide variety of religions and faith backgrounds. Over 40 percent are identified as Muslim. Christians represent the second-largest group in the database. The third-largest group is Falun Gong practitioners, followed by Buddhists and then Baha’is.



Religion or Belief	Number of Victims Documented
Baha'i	27
Buddhist - Hoa Hao	6
Buddhist - Tibetan	3
Buddhist - Unspecified/Other	22
Christian - Catholic	17
Christian - Jehovah's Witness	96
Christian - Orthodox	4
Christian - Protestant	66
Christian - Unspecified/Other	281
ECKist (Eckankar)	1
Erfan-e Halgheh Practitioner	2
Falun Gong	208
Hindu	2
Humanist	1
Jewish	1
Muslim - Ahmadiyya	14
Muslim - Shi'a	14
Muslim - Sufi	58
Muslim - Sunni	237
Muslim - Unspecified/Other	219
Santeria	5
Scientologist	1
Unknown/Unspecified/Other	16
Total	1,301

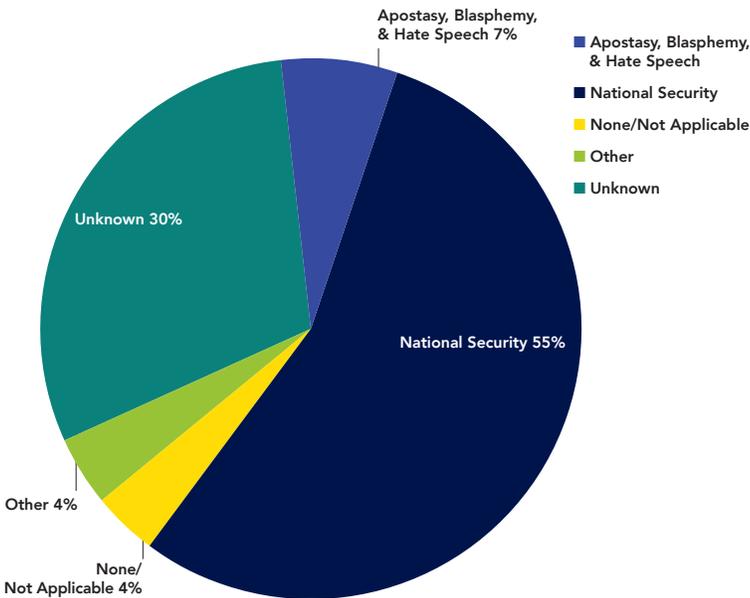
Charges

Individuals included in the FoRB Victims List face a range of charges. Although USCIRF excludes from the FoRB Victims List individuals known to have promoted violence, most victims face unsubstantiated national security-related charges, including terrorism, extremism, separatism, subversion, affiliation with a banned group or cult, and other related accusations such as promoting, financing, organizing, or participating in any of these activities. The second-most-identified category of charges is related to apostasy, blasphemy, and hate speech. Other charges include public disorder, refusing military service, and miscellaneous offenses. USCIRF is also in the process of identifying charges for almost a third of the victims.

Dozens of victims are not facing any charges, yet they remain imprisoned or have been subjected to other violations included in the FoRB Victims List—such as enforced disappearance or forced renunciation of faith—that do not involve legal charges.

Charge Type	Number of Victims Documented
National Security	712
Unknown	388
Apostasy, Blasphemy, & Hate Speech	86
Other	59
None/Not Applicable	56
Total	1,301

VICTIMS BY CHARGE



APPENDIX 3 RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT

Through the Religious Prisoners of Conscience (RPOC) Project, USCIRF seeks to raise awareness of individuals imprisoned for their religion or belief, reduce their numbers, and highlight the religious freedom conditions in their country of imprisonment. Current RPOCs, for whom USCIRF Commissioners are advocating, are only a fraction of the many individuals who have been unjustly imprisoned for their religious beliefs, actions, and/or advocacy.

Current RPOCs

CHINA

China pervasively tries to control and suppress various religious groups as it seeks to sinicize perceived foreign religions and crack down on religious beliefs and actors viewed as incompatible with Communist Party ideology.

GULMIRA IMIN



USCIRF ADVOCATE

Anurima Bhargava

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Uyghur Muslim

STATUS

Detained since July 14, 2009; sentenced to life imprisonment, reduced to 19 years and eight months

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Moderator of Salkin, a Uyghur-language website; participated in demonstration protesting deaths of Uyghur migrant workers

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Reports of torture

AGE

45

JIMMY LAI



USCIRF ADVOCATE

Tony Perkins

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Catholic Christian

STATUS

Detained since December 12, 2020; sentenced on May 28, 2021, to 14 months plus the six months already served; on December 13, 2021, sentenced to an additional 13 months for "unauthorized assembly" for participating in a June 2020 Tiananmen Square vigil

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Political activism and outspoken criticism of the government's human rights abuses, including abuses of religious freedom

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

Alleged collusion with foreign forces under National Security Law, as well as fraud

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Unknown

AGE

73

CHINA (continued)

PANCHEN LAMA (GEDHUN CHOEKYI NYIMA)		
	<p>USCIRF ADVOCATE Nadine Maenza</p> <p>RELIGION OR BELIEF Tibetan Buddhist</p> <p>STATUS Unconfirmed since kidnapping May 17, 1995</p>	<p>REASON FOR PERSECUTION Second-highest-ranking leader in Tibetan Buddhism</p> <p>CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST N/A</p> <p>TREATMENT IN DETENTION Unknown</p> <p>AGE 33</p>
HU SHIGEN		
	<p>USCIRF ADVOCATE Tony Perkins</p> <p>RELIGION OR BELIEF Protestant Christian</p> <p>STATUS Detained July 10, 2015; sentenced August 3, 2016, to 7 ½ years</p>	<p>REASON FOR PERSECUTION Founding figure for China Free Democratic Party and the China Free Labor Union; leader of Protestant house churches</p> <p>CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST “Subverting” state power through his religious activities</p> <p>TREATMENT IN DETENTION In poor health because of ill treatment in prison; request for medical parole denied</p> <p>AGE 66</p>
ADIL TUNIYAZ		
	<p>USCIRF ADVOCATE Nury Turkel</p> <p>RELIGION OR BELIEF Uyghur Muslim</p> <p>STATUS Detained since December 25, 2017</p>	<p>REASON FOR PERSECUTION Translated religious materials, including hadiths</p> <p>CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST Unknown</p> <p>TREATMENT IN DETENTION Unknown</p> <p>AGE 51</p>

IRAN

The Iranian government severely represses its citizens' freedom of religion, belief, and expression, often through legal amendments designed for persecuting specific religious minorities.

GOLROKH EBRAHIMI IRAEE


USCIRF ADVOCATE

Anurima Bhargava

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Shi'a Muslim

STATUS

Detained since October 2016; sentenced to six years in prison; sentenced to additional year in 2021

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Human and women's rights advocate; critic of the official policy of stoning women to death for adultery

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Insulting Islamic sanctities" and "spreading propaganda"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Conducted hunger strike due to bad prison conditions; denied family visits and phone access; prohibited from visits with her husband, Arash Sadegj, who is ill with cancer.

AGE

41

YOUCEF NADARKHANI


USCIRF ADVOCATE

Nadine Maenza

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Evangelical Christian

STATUS

Originally sentenced July 6, 2017, to 10 years in prison and two years of internal exile; imprisoned July 22, 2018; sentence reduced to six years in prison in 2020

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Practicing Christianity as a convert from Islam

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Acting against national security" and promoting "Zionist Christianity"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Conducted hunger strike

AGE

45

MALAYSIA

The Malaysian government imposes a state-sponsored version of Sunni Islam through a vast network of state and federal religious laws. Non-Muslim communities face extreme pressure from authorities, and religious converts and those evangelizing face dire consequences. Malaysian authorities have continued to refuse to release the report of an official investigation into cases of enforced disappearances.

PASTOR RAYMOND KOH


USCIRF ADVOCATE

James W. Carr

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Christian

STATUS

Disappeared February 13, 2017

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Humanitarian actions motivated by his Christian religious beliefs; allegations of proselytizing

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

N/A

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Unknown

AGE

67

NIGERIA

Both state and nonstate actors in Nigeria commit egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, including the abduction and detention of individuals based on their beliefs. State courts have sentenced individuals to death for blasphemy and held individuals accused of blasphemy in prolonged detention, while militant Islamists have violently targeted individuals who do not share their religious beliefs.

MUBARAK BALA



USCIRF ADVOCATE
Frederick A. Davie

RELIGION OR BELIEF
Humanist

STATUS
Arrested April 28, 2020

REASON FOR PERSECUTION
Expression of humanist views

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST
Formally charged in August 2021 for causing a public disturbance by posting “blasphemous” content

TREATMENT IN DETENTION
Held incommunicado for several months; detained without charge for over a year; poor response to health issues while in detention

AGE
37

LEAH SHARIBU



USCIRF ADVOCATE
Tony Perkins

RELIGION OR BELIEF
Christian

PERPETRATOR
Islamic State - West Africa Province (ISWAP)

STATUS
Abducted February 19, 2018

REASON FOR PERSECUTION
Refused to convert to Islam

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST
N/A

TREATMENT IN DETENTION
Unconfirmed

AGE
18

YAHAYA SHARIF-AMINU



USCIRF ADVOCATE
Frederick A. Davie

RELIGION OR BELIEF
Sufi Muslim; part of Tijaniyya Order

STATUS
Detained since March 2020; sentenced to death August 10, 2020; higher court ordered a retrial in January 2021

REASON FOR PERSECUTION
Circulating a private audio message on WhatsApp

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST
Blasphemy

TREATMENT IN DETENTION
Held incommunicado for several months

AGE
23

NORTH KOREA

Religious freedom conditions in North Korea are among the worst in the world, with the government viewing religion as a competing ideology that poses an existential threat to its absolute control.

DEACON ZHANG WEN SHI (JANG MOON SEOK)


USCIRF ADVOCATE

James W. Carr

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Protestant Christian

STATUS

Kidnapped from China and detained since November 2014; sentenced to 15 years in prison

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Ministered to North Koreans who crossed into China

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Defaming the regime, attempting to incite subversion of state power, and providing aid and gospel to North Koreans"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Unknown

AGE

Unknown

RUSSIA

The Russian government views independent religious activity as a threat to its control and social and political stability, enforces laws restricting religious freedom, and persecutes religious and ethnic groups.

DENNIS CHRISTENSEN


USCIRF ADVOCATE

James W. Carr

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Jehovah's Witness

COUNTY OF ORIGIN

Denmark

STATUS

Detained May 25, 2017; sentenced February 6, 2019, to six years in prison

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Peacefully expressing his faith

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Continuing the activities" of an extremist group

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Inadequate medical care; harassment and arbitrary reprimands

AGE

49

TAJKISTAN

The Tajik government suppresses displays of public religiosity by people of all faiths, represses the country's Muslim majority, and persecutes minority communities.

SHAMIL KHAKIMOV


USCIRF ADVOCATE

Nury Turkel

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Jehovah's Witness

STATUS

Detained since February 26, 2019; sentenced to five years in prison

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Sharing his faith with others

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Inciting religious hatred"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Health has deteriorated in detention

AGE

71

VIETNAM

The Vietnamese government systematically violates the religious freedom of government-recognized groups and especially independent religious minority communities, including Protestant Hmong and Montagnard Christians, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Unified Buddhists, Cao Dai followers, Catholics, and Falun Gong practitioners.

NGUYEN BAC TRUYEN



USCIRF ADVOCATE

Anurima Bhargava

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Hoa Hao Buddhist

STATUS

Arrested July 30, 2017; sentenced April 5, 2018, to 11 years' imprisonment and three years' probation

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Human rights and religious freedom advocacy

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

"Carrying out activities aimed at overthrowing the people's administration"

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Medical neglect

AGE

53

Former RPOCs

EGYPT

The Egyptian government uses its laws, regulations, and practices to target a wide range of religious minorities and their civil society allies.

REDA ABDEL RAHMAN


USCIRF ADVOCATE

Sharon Kleinbaum

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Qur'anist Muslim

STATUS

Released February 27, 2022; detained August 2020

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Religious beliefs; blogging about Qur'anism; familial relationship with a prominent Qur'anist scholar

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

Joining the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and promoting religious extremism

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Denied adequate medical care

AGE

45

ERITREA

The Eritrean government severely restricts the activities of officially recognized religious groups and systematically persecutes members of unregistered religious communities.

Patriarch Abune Antonios


USCIRF ADVOCATE

James W. Carr

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Eritrean Orthodox Christian

STATUS

Died under house arrest February 9, 2022

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Called for release of political prisoners and refused to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who opposed the government

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

Unknown

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Unknown

AGE

94

SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudi government imprisons dissenting members of the majority Sunni Muslim community, imposes harsh punishments on Shi'a Muslim detainees, and forbids non-Muslims from public communal worship.

RAIF BADAWI


USCIRF ADVOCATE

Nadine Maenza

RELIGION OR BELIEF

Muslim

STATUS

Released March 11, 2022; detained since June 17, 2012; sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes

REASON FOR PERSECUTION

Blogger who criticized Islam and the Saudi government

CHARGES/BASIS OF ARREST

Violating Islamic values and propagating liberal thought

TREATMENT IN DETENTION

Flogged 50 times January 9, 2015; deemed too unwell to endure more lashes; health has worsened since flogging; hunger strike in 2019

AGE

38

APPENDIX 4 HIGHLIGHTS OF USCIRF'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES IN 2021

In addition to releasing an Annual Report by May 1 of each year, USCIRF presents research and additional information related to international religious freedom throughout the year. This Appendix highlights USCIRF's events and other materials from calendar year 2021. USCIRF's 2021 [press releases and statements](#) and [op-eds](#) are available on USCIRF's website at www.uscirf.gov. USCIRF's 2021 Tweets can be found [here](#).

Hearings

- **February 2021:** ["Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution"](#)
- **March 2021:** ["A Religious Minority Enslaved: Addressing the Complicity of U.S. Companies in Uyghur Forced Labor"](#)
- **May 2021:** ["Ending Genocide - U.S. Government Genocide Determinations and Next Steps"](#)
- **June 2021:** ["Religious Freedom in Nigeria"](#)
- **July 2021:** ["Ending Genocide - Accountability for Perpetrators"](#)
- **September 2021:** ["Strategies for Religious Freedom in Fragile States"](#)
- **October 2021:** ["Targeted Sanctions - Implications for International Religious Freedom"](#)
- **December 2021:** ["State-Sanctioned Religious Freedom Violations and Coercion by Saudi Arabia and Iran"](#)

Events

- **February 2021:** ["Engaging State and Local Government in Nigeria to Protect Religious Freedom"](#)
- **February 2021:** ["FoRB Victims List and Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project Update"](#)
- **April 2021:** ["New Report on Antisemitism in the OSCE Region and U.S. Policy Responses"](#)
- **April 2021:** ["USCIRF 2021 Annual Report Virtual Launch"](#)
- **May 2021:** ["Update on Religious Freedom Progress in Sudan"](#)
- **June 2021:** ["Ten Years after the Arab Spring: How Has Religious Freedom Changed across the Middle East?"](#)
- **June 2021:** ["Exodus of Religious Minority Communities in Afghanistan"](#)
- **August 2021:** ["New Report on Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea"](#)
- **August 2021:** ["Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria"](#)
- **September 2021:** ["Accountability for Crimes against Humanity"](#)

- **October 2021:** ["Update on At-Risk Religious Communities in Afghanistan"](#)
- **October 2021:** ["New Report on Uzbekistan's Religious Prisoners"](#)
- **December 2021:** ["Democracy and Religious Freedom: India and Indonesia"](#)

Publications

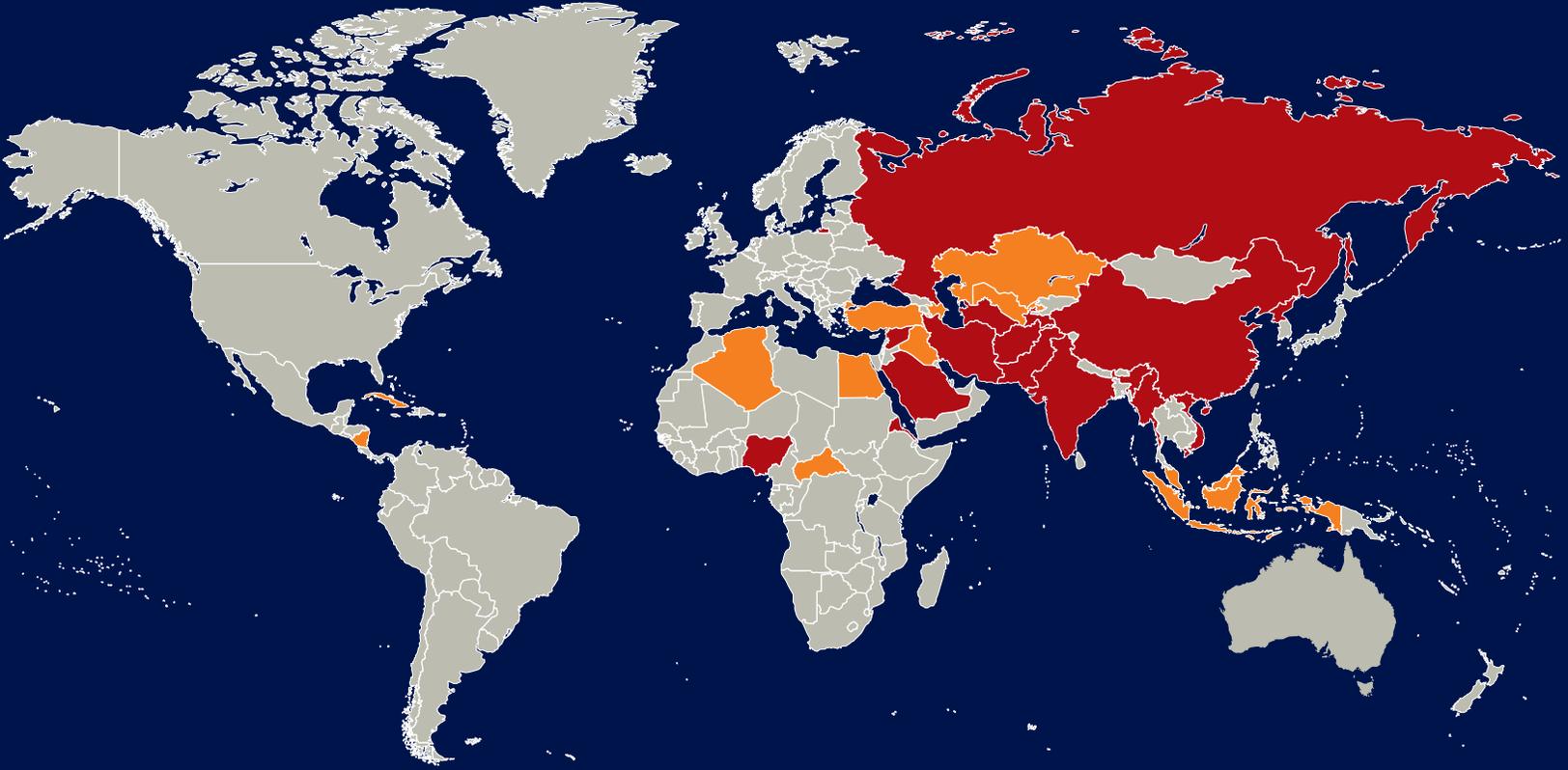
- **January 2021:** ["Key U.S. Government Positions Related to International Religious Freedom"](#) (Factsheet)
- **February 2021:** ["Violent Islamist Groups in Northern Nigeria"](#) (Factsheet)
- **February 2021:** ["The Santería Tradition in Cuba"](#) (Factsheet)
- **March 2021:** ["Indonesia's Pancasila"](#) (Factsheet)
- **March 2021:** ["The Use of Shari'a as Religious Justification for Capital Punishment against LGBTI Persons"](#) (Factsheet)
- **March 2021:** ["Stalled Progress in Azerbaijan"](#) (Country Update)
- **March 2021:** ["International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\)"](#) (Factsheet)
- **March 2021:** ["The Impact of Financial Regulations on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom"](#) (Factsheet)
- **April 2021:** ["Antisemitism in Europe: Implications for U.S. Policy"](#) (Special Report)
- **May 2021:** ["Violent Islamist Groups in the Central Sahel"](#) (Factsheet)
- **June 2021:** ["The Conditions of Nonbelievers in Africa"](#) (Factsheet)
- **June 2021:** ["Religious Freedom Conditions in Central African Republic"](#) (Country Update)
- **August 2021:** ["Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran"](#) (Country Update)
- **August 2021:** ["Organized Persecution: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea"](#) (Special Report)
- **August 2021:** ["Religious Freedom Conditions in Eritrea"](#) (Country Update)
- **September 2021:** ["Destruction of Cemeteries"](#) (Factsheet)
- **September 2021:** ["Religious Freedom Conditions in Yemen"](#) (Country Update)
- **September 2021:** ["Laos' Decree 315"](#) (Factsheet)
- **September 2021:** ["Protests in Cuba and Religious Freedom"](#) (Factsheet)

- **September 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Conditions in Saudi Arabia”](#) (Country Update)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Violations in Kano State, Nigeria”](#) (Issue Update)
- **October 2021:** [“Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners: Addressing a Legacy of Repression”](#) (Special Report)
- **October 2021:** [“Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims”](#) (Factsheet)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria”](#) (Country Update)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Violations against Muslims in Africa”](#) (Factsheet)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Conditions in Sri Lanka”](#) (Country Update)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya”](#) (Issue Update)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Minorities in Afghanistan”](#) (Factsheet)
- **October 2021:** [“China’s 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy”](#) (Factsheet)
- **November 2021:** [“Burma: Religious Freedom since February 2, 2021, Coup”](#) (Country Update)
- **November 2021:** [“USCIRF Recommendations for State Department CPC and SWL Designations”](#) (Factsheet)
- **November 2021:** [“Entities of Particular Concern \(EPCs\) and Religious Freedom”](#) (Factsheet)
- **November 2021:** [“Religious Freedom in Egypt in 2021”](#) (Country Update)
- **November 2021:** [“Religious Freedom in Malaysia”](#) (Country Update)
- **November 2021:** [“Preserving Religious Freedom Progress in Sudan”](#) (Policy Update)
- **November 2021:** [“Religious Freedom in Belarus in 2021”](#) (Country Update)
- **December 2021:** [“Saudi Arabia’s Specialized Criminal Court”](#) (Factsheet)
- **December 2021:** [“Protecting Religious Freedom Online”](#) (Factsheet)
- **December 2021:** [“Religious Freedom in Turkey in 2021”](#) (Country Update)
- **February 2021:** [“Repercussions of the Burma Coup for Rohingya Muslims”](#)
- **March 2021:** [“Santería in Cuba”](#)
- **March 2021:** [“Uzbekistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back”](#)
- **March 2021:** [“Shifting Trends of Religious Freedom in Egypt”](#)
- **March 2021:** [“Governments Using Shari’a to Impose Death Sentences on LGBTI Persons”](#)
- **April 2021:** [“China Sanctions U.S. Religious Freedom Officials”](#)
- **April 2021:** [“Indonesia’s State Ideology of Pancasila”](#)
- **April 2021:** [“The State of Religious Freedom in Vietnam”](#)
- **April 2021:** [“USCIRF Releases 2021 Annual Report with Recommendations for U.S. Policy”](#)
- **May 2021:** [“Religious Restrictions in Iran”](#)
- **May 2021:** [“Violent Insurgents in the Sahel Region of Africa”](#)
- **May 2021:** [“50 Years and Counting: The Continued Closure of Halki Seminary in Turkey”](#)
- **May 2021:** [“Enforcing Blasphemy Laws Have Dire Consequences”](#)
- **June 2021:** [“Bahrain Takes Steps to Improve Religious Freedom”](#)
- **June 2021:** [“Top Priorities of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief”](#)
- **June 2021:** [“Do USCIRF Policy Recommendations Get Implemented?”](#)
- **June 2021:** [“Ethiopia’s Tigray Massacre and Implications for Religious Freedom”](#)
- **July 2021:** [“Sivas Massacre and Turkey’s Persecution of the Alevi Community”](#)
- **July 2021:** [“Central African Republic: From Sectarian Violence to Progress on Religious Freedom”](#)
- **July 2021:** [“Qur’anists in Egypt”](#)
- **July 2021:** [“Protests in Cuba Impact Religious Freedom”](#)
- **August 2021:** [“Reforms in Kazakhstan Could Improve Religious Freedom”](#)
- **August 2021:** [“The Impact of Majoritarianism on Religious Minorities in South Asia”](#)
- **August 2021:** [“Fourth Anniversary of the Rohingya Genocide”](#)
- **September 2021:** [“Religion, Law, and Citizenship in Assam, India”](#)
- **September 2021:** [“Islam in Africa”](#)
- **September 2021:** [“Hazara Community Threatened in Afghanistan”](#)
- **September 2021:** [“Why the State Department Should Redesignate Nigeria as a CPC”](#)
- **September 2021:** [“Religious Freedom and Taliban Fears in Tajikistan”](#)
- **October 2021:** [“Saudi Arabia’s Religious Reforms Not Enough”](#)
- **October 2021:** [“Religious Cemeteries as Targets of Destruction”](#)

Spotlight Podcast Episodes

- **January 2021:** [“Nigeria: A Country of Particular Concern”](#)
- **January 2021:** [“2021 Update on Religious Freedom Conditions”](#)
- **January 2021:** [“Uyghur Genocide”](#)
- **February 2021:** [“Religious Freedom Priorities for the Biden Administration”](#)
- **February 2021:** [“Unrest in Russia”](#)
- **February 2021:** [“The Situation in Sinjar”](#)

- **October 2021:** [“Ahmadiyya Muslims Face Persecution, Discrimination, and Hostility”](#)
- **October 2021:** [“Abuses of Traditional Religion in Russia”](#)
- **November 2021:** [“Algeria’s Increasing Hostility towards Religious Minorities”](#)
- **November 2021:** [“Political Instability Fuels Decline for Religious Freedom in Malaysia”](#)
- **November 2021:** [“Religious Tolerance Efforts in the Middle East”](#)
- **November 2021:** [“Uzbekistan’s Religious and Political Prisoners”](#)
- **December 2021:** [“Renewed Concerns over Religious Tensions in Bosnia”](#)
- **December 2021:** [“An Update on Religious Freedom Conditions in Turkey”](#)
- **December 2021:** [“State Department Designations and USCIRF Recommendations: Where Do They Line Up?”](#)
- **December 2021:** [“Pakistan’s Laws Enable Islamist Extremism”](#)



2022 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN ■

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

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES ■

Algeria	Cuba	Iraq	Nicaragua
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Central African Republic	Indonesia	Malaysia	Uzbekistan



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