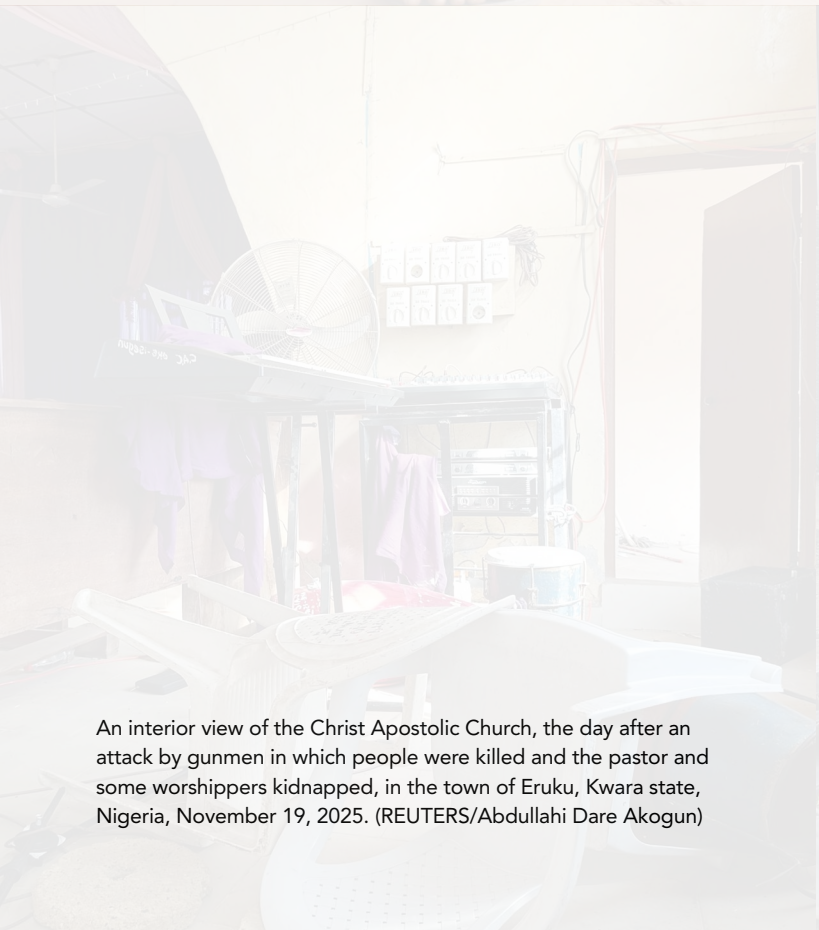
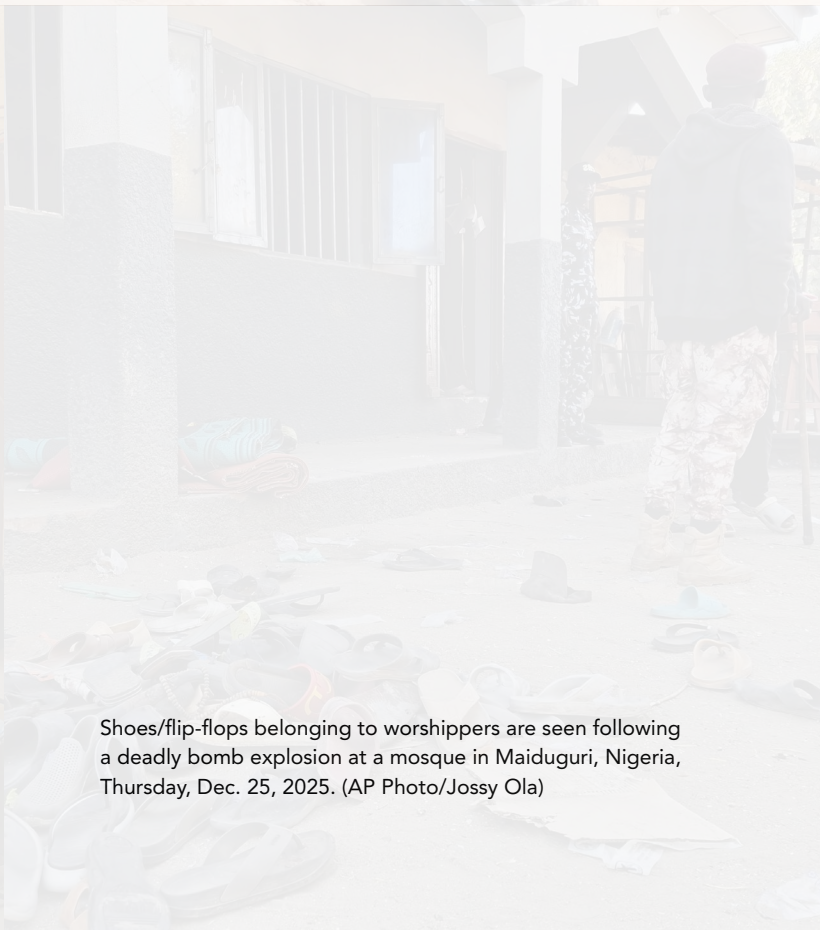
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

Precious Njikonye, the mother of a student at St. Mary's Catholic School, who was abducted by gunmen and later released, sits outside her house in Papiri, Nigeria, Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2025. (AP Photo/Afolabi Sotunde)



An interior view of the Christ Apostolic Church, the day after an attack by gunmen in which people were killed and the pastor and some worshippers kidnapped, in the town of Eruku, Kwara state, Nigeria, November 19, 2025. (REUTERS/Abdullahi Dare Akogun)



Shoes/flip-flops belonging to worshippers are seen following a deadly bomb explosion at a mosque in Maiduguri, Nigeria, Thursday, Dec. 25, 2025. (AP Photo/Jossy Ola)

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

732 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401
202–523–3240
www.uscirf.gov

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Nigeria is facing a terrifying crisis of religious violence. According to recent estimates, targeted violence has claimed the lives of nearly 53,000 Nigerian civilians since 2009—the same year that the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) first recommended Nigeria's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)—including around 21,000 in the last five years alone. The violence has also forced millions of people to flee their homes and communities to find safe harbor in camps and other shelters for internally displaced persons. The unfolding catastrophe is the outcome of a lethal confluence of trends: religiously motivated extremist violence; economic and ethnic tensions, long left to fester; corrosive, state-level blasphemy laws; and years of both inadequate response and pervasive corruption from the Nigerian government. Together, these dynamics have fostered an environment of rampant fear and unchecked religious attacks, abductions of schoolchildren, and killings.

Consider these tragedies from 2025 alone:

- On a still night in November, gunmen charged into the dormitories of St. Mary's School in Niger State at 2:00 a.m., burning a statue of the Virgin Mary as they seized 303 children and 12 teachers in the country's worst-ever mass school abduction—just days after kidnappers swept away 25 girls from a school elsewhere in Niger and 12 from a school in Borno.
- Amaye was a food vendor in the village of Kasuwan-Garba in Niger. In August, a verbal altercation with a customer spiraled into accusations that Amaye had insulted the Prophet Muhammad. This allegation prompted a vigilante mob to seize her from her stall and set her aflame, murdering her on the spot.
- In September, Father Matthew Eya of St. Charles Catholic Church in southern Nigeria's Enugu State was returning home from his pastoral duties when unidentified gunmen pulled up on a motorcycle, shot out his tires, and then executed him there in his vehicle.
- The threat of violence from Boko Haram militants has driven thousands of families from their farms and homes in recent years; as one Muslim farmer told BBC News in October, standing on her farm in northeastern Nigeria from where she and her family had fled: "There is fear—we fear for our souls."

These examples provide only a brief but illustrative snapshot of the persistent horrors that befell innocent Nigerians in 2025, sacrificing Father Matthew, Amaye, and many thousands of other innocents on the altar of religious bigotry. Meanwhile, an interminable stream of mass abductions by bandits or extremists—some of whom hold their captives indefinitely—has traumatized religious communities in north and central Nigeria since 2009. Such examples sadly abound, such as Leah Sharibu, a young Christian woman whom Islamic State in West Africa Province seized in 2018 and who remained in captivity throughout 2025, or the 18 Muslim women and children whom militants kidnapped in September as the victims prepared for morning prayers in Zamfara. This year's Annual Report cover reflects Nigeria's dire realities as such: its two largest religious communities, Christians and Muslims, have long shared their lives with each other, with followers of traditional African religions, and with many others—and yet they now face an existential struggle and dangerous confluence of armed conflict, nonstate violence, state restrictions, and societal challenges. These dynamics threatened religious freedom and millions of lives across not only Nigeria but also many parts of the African continent throughout the year.

Nigeria's religious freedom environment is contextually unique in terms of its violent and complex perfect storm of religious, political, social, and economic factors, but it is representative of the alarming persistence of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations that continue to plague millions of people across the globe. Each country in which such violations persist represents a distinct set of internal dynamics that have combined to repress religious freedom: in some places, violent extremist groups act as the primary FoRB violators, while in others, governmental authorities or religiously bigoted mobs assume that shameful role with impunity. In a few select locales, extremist ideology dominates the government's priorities, rendering these categories essentially indistinguishable from one another.

Several key contexts around the world demonstrated these persistent or emerging challenges to FoRB in 2025. In Syria, former leaders and members of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham—which USCIRF had recommended as an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) for the previous seven years—have led transitional authorities since the fall of the former regime in December 2024. Despite their rhetorical support for the rights and protection of religious minorities, some of their militant supporters massacred an estimated 1,500 Alawi civilians in the coastal areas in March and around 1,000 mostly Druze civilians in Suweida in August. Along with the June suicide attack on Mar Elias Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus, which killed 22 and injured 63 Christian worshipers, those violent incidents—and the tepid response from leadership in Damascus—have raised serious concerns that mass FoRB violations and sectarian violence are likely to plague post-war Syria.

Each country in which such violations persist represents a distinct set of internal dynamics that have combined to repress religious freedom

Elsewhere, China continued its longstanding campaign to destroy all independent religious expression in the country by broadly targeting religious leaders with insidious tools of repression and launching a massive crackdown against Protestant Christian house churches. In October, Chinese Communist Party officials ordered the detention of Zion Church founder Pastor Mingri "Ezra" Jin as well as the brutal arrest of dozens of other religious leaders and church staff in multiple regions.

Anti-Muslim sentiment continued to threaten lives in South Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. Beginning in May, India expelled hundreds of its own Muslim citizens and dozens of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh; during the same campaign, authorities reportedly detained 40 Muslim and Christian Rohingya refugees and then beat, interrogated, and tossed them into the ocean with lifejackets near the coast of Burma, forcing them to swim back to those same shores from which they had fled ongoing genocide. In July, a man stabbed to death 26-year-old Rahma Ayat, a Muslim Algerian nursing student in Hannover, Germany, after months of harassment about her hijab.

In Central Asia, backsliding predominated over improvement as Kyrgyzstan followed the precedent of neighbors such as Kazakhstan by passing a new religion law that compounded challenges to registration for religious groups and further enabled authorities to penalize peaceful religious activities, among other concerning elements. In Africa, nonstate militant groups continued to wage war against peaceful religious communities; the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – Democratic Republic of the Congo (also known as the Allied Democratic Forces) murdered nearly 180 Christians, beheading many of them, in four separate incidents during the year. A brutal drone strike by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) struck a mosque in al-Fasher, Sudan in September, killing over 70 people. In fact, religious violence in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan—where one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters continues to unfold—led USCIRF to recommend the RSF's designation as an EPC for 2026.

the direct correlation between mass atrocities and religious freedom violations remained disastrously evident

In Latin America, the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela each wielded political repression hand-in-hand with pervasive harassment, arrests, surveillance, and other tactics against religious communities and clergy. And in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia continued to execute Shi'a Muslim dissidents for actions they allegedly took as minors; Qatar continued its recent crackdown on the Baha'i community, including sentencing one leader to five years in prison; and Iran persisted in repressing religious minorities, women, and religious dissidents as it continued to revel in its antisemitic ideology by elevating Holocaust denials, publishing Jewish caricatures, and harassing Iranian Jews at their sacred sites. Antisemitism continued its disturbing rise far beyond Iran, including through societal harassment internationally as well as repeated instances of targeted mass violence.

Along with these country-specific threats to religious freedom, USCIRF reported throughout 2025 on several alarming trends that persisted or deteriorated across the world. Many of the countries that USCIRF recommended for CPC designation often torture FoRB victims or subject them to a cruel menu of ill-treatment options, from medical neglect to forced religious conversion. As highlighted above in relation to Burma, refugees fleeing religious persecution in South and Southeast Asia have faced a particularly dire era of displacement and an increasing threat of refoulement along with other threats. Additionally, the direct correlation between mass atrocities and religious freedom violations remained disastrously evident—serving both as an early warning tool to identifying potential hot zones of religious violence and as a reminder that advancing FoRB contributes to protecting the lives of whole communities. And perennial religious freedom violators such as Eritrea, Iran, and Turkmenistan continued to deprive prisoners of their basic religious rights, including access to religious literature, while subjecting FoRB prisoners to torture, isolation, forced conversion or recanting of their beliefs, and other egregious conditions, including execution in some cases.

In terms of U.S. policy, 2025 brought some significant and positive developments to U.S. and global efforts to advance FoRB. The religious freedom crisis in Nigeria in particular, as described above, sparked a groundswell of related attention and advocacy that brought together civil society organizations and U.S. government officials, and others—including USCIRF, which has devoted substantial attention to the issue in recent years. In fact, President Donald J. Trump personally announced the designation of Nigeria as a CPC in October, while senior members of the administration also spoke out on related issues, such as Vice President JD Vance's pledge of support for protecting FoRB during his remarks at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit in February. The U.S. Department of State also recognized the importance of IRF amid its 2025 reorganization with a new role of Undersecretary for Foreign Assistance, Humanitarian Affairs, and Religious Freedom. Furthermore, members of the U.S. Congress held various hearings and put forward nearly 50 bills and resolutions related to religious freedom conditions in specific countries, including China and Nigeria, as well as to global IRF issues such as global religious freedom restrictions and refugees fleeing religious persecution.

Throughout the year, the administration of President Trump enacted several policy shifts involving agencies and programs that have often played an integral role in advancing IRF. For example, the administration subsumed the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) into the State Department in July, impacting key foreign assistance to faith-based and other related humanitarian programs for Burma, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, and other contexts in which religious persecution had devastated millions of lives. The State Department terminated or ended approximately 25 existing IRF-specific programs, leaving a handful in place. Furthermore, the Office of International Religious Freedom did not fund any new IRF-specific programs in fiscal year 2025. The administration also significantly scaled back refugee and asylum admissions, including for individuals fleeing religious persecution. It also ended temporary protected status (TPS) for asylum seekers from countries with significant FoRB challenges, including Afghanistan, Burma, Syria, and Somalia, while several other TPS designations are set to expire in 2026. This report's chapter on implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) provides a fuller discussion of these policy shifts, the implications of which continued to emerge at the end of the year.

About this Report

Created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory

body, separate from the State Department, that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on the provisions of its authorizing legislation and the standards in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and other international documents. USCIRF's mandate and annual reports are different from, and complementary to, the mandate and annual reports of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

USCIRF's 2026 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress in 29 countries during calendar year 2025 and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including hearings, travel, and meetings. The annual report is approved by a majority vote of Commissioners. IRFA expressly provides each Commissioner the right to include in the annual report a statement with his or her own individual or dissenting views. Various Commissioners have done so many times over the years either to elaborate on or to disagree with some aspect of the report. This year, the chapters on implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act and Azerbaijan include individual or dissenting views.

This 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 Special Watch List (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, recognizes the ways that the administration and Congress met USCIRF's recommendations to more effectively advance religious freedom abroad, and provides new and updated policy recommendations for the same. This year, the report delineates USCIRF's recommendations in a standalone chapter, including all relevant designations as well as policy options for the administration and Congress.

Additionally, this report includes a chapter discussing key global developments in religious freedom during the reporting period, including countries in which religious freedom challenges are present but that did not merit CPC or SWL designation. This section assesses trends involving attacks on houses of worship, state targeting of religious leadership, the FoRB impact of global foreign assistance cuts, religious freedom in conflict zones, religious deregistration as a tool of FoRB violations, transnational repression against religious communities, and other issues.

In this report, USCIRF uses the terms "religious freedom," 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. As USCIRF monitors and identifies concerns about religious freedom conditions abroad, its reporting documents violations of FoRB perpetrated or tolerated by governments and entities not covered in this report. The full range of USCIRF's work on a wide variety of countries and topics can be found at uscirf.gov.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Key Developments

Last year brought several significant accomplishments related to the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Trump administration made swift appointments to several key positions vital to advancing international religious freedom (IRF). In January 2025, President Donald J. Trump nominated former Senator Marco Rubio to serve as the U.S. secretary of state, who was confirmed by the Senate also in January. In April, President Trump nominated former Congressman Mark Walker as U.S. ambassador at large for IRF and Yehuda Kaploun as special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism to serve at the U.S. Department of State. Kaploun's confirmation hearing was held in November, and he was confirmed in December. As the Senate did not confirm Walker's nomination by the end of 2025, this nomination expired, requiring the administration to reappoint a new candidate.

The U.S. government also issued notable high-level statements confirming its commitment to IRF. In July, President Trump issued a statement that noted the administration's work to "expand and strengthen America's efforts to defend religious freedom around the world." In September at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), President Trump stated, "Let us protect religious liberty." Along similar lines, Vice President JD Vance spoke at the civil society-led IRF Summit in February 2025, where he affirmed that the second Trump administration would continue critical steps to protect religious communities abroad. Secretary Rubio underscored the importance of IRF through press statements, including expressing concern for persecuted Christians on Easter, commemorating the National Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust, calling for the protection of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, condemning violence targeting Rohingya in Burma, condemning the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) detention of leaders of the Zion Church, and reaffirming a commitment to championing IRF. Religious freedom was a component of certain bilateral discussions, including with Turkmenistan, Syria, and the Vatican.

In October, President Trump announced the designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). In response to religious freedom violations in the country, the State Department established a new visa restriction policy under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) in December. This policy restricts visas for individuals and their immediate family members who have "directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom" in Nigeria and "any other governments or individuals engaged in violations of religious freedom." However, there were no additional CPC, Special Watch List (SWL), or Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) designations issued during 2025. Then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken did not issue these designations by the conclusion of the Biden administration in January 2025, thereby leaving December 29, 2023, designations in effect as outlined by IRFA. IRFA provides that the president—who has until the 2025 Nigeria designation delegated this power to the secretary of state—has 90 days after the release of the State Department's annual IRF Report to make each year's CPC, SWL, and EPC designations and another 90 days to notify Congress of the designations and accompanying presidential actions. As the Trump administration failed to release the IRF report and issue comprehensive designations by December 2025, any presidential action taken as a result of these designations terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

In October, President Trump announced the designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC)

Alongside the administration, Congress took meaningful action to advance IRF abroad. Members of Congress held various hearings on religious freedom conditions, participated in USCIRF hearings and events, and engaged with the administration to address international religious freedom concerns. Congress pursued innovative legislative strategies to advance religious freedom abroad. Additionally, Congress conducted various congressional delegations, including to Nigeria, where religious freedom was a primary focus.

Legal Framework

Key IRFA Provisions

IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, seeks to make religious freedom a priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. These include governmental institutions (USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency requiring regular reauthorization, the ambassador at large and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, and a special adviser on the White House's National Security Council staff); ongoing monitoring and annual reports on religious freedom violations abroad; the imposition of consequences for the worst violators; and a public list of victims of certain violations of religious freedom. The consequences set forth in IRFA consist of CPC or EPC designations and related policy actions or placement on the State Department's SWL for governmental violators, and the ability to bar entry to the United States of foreign officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations. IRFA outlines additional policies the U.S. government may adopt in response to official religious freedom violations abroad, including public condemnation in multilateral fora; the reduction or cancelation of foreign assistance funds; the delay or cancelation of cultural exchanges; and the delay or cancelation of working, official, or state visits.

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 thought, conscience, and religion or belief as recognized in international law and as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international instruments and regional agreements.

IRFA Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Designations

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."

Pursuant to IRFA, USCIRF's Annual Report sets forth USCIRF's policy recommendations to the U.S. government, which includes highlighting countries and entities that, in USCIRF's view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. The report is intended to focus U.S. policymakers' attention on the worst violators of religious freedom globally. The fact that this report does not specifically cover a country or nonstate group does not mean that it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year. It only means that, based on the information available to USCIRF, the conditions during that year did not in USCIRF's view meet the high threshold—the perpetration or toleration of particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom—required to recommend the country or nonstate group for CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. In the case of a nonstate group, it also could mean that the group did not meet other statutory requirements, such as exercising significant political power and territorial control.

Targeted Sanctions beyond 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 permanently reauthorized 2016 Global Magnitsky Act allows the president, who has delegated these authorities to the secretaries of the treasury and state, to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for "extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights" against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. 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.

IRFA added a provision to the INA, contained in INA Section 212(a)(2)(G), making foreign officials who perpetrated particularly severe religious freedom violations ineligible for visas to the United States. Other visa ineligibilities found in Section 212(a) may also apply to religious freedom violators in some cases, particularly the bars on foreigners who perpetrated genocide, torture, or extrajudicial killings (INA 212(a)(3)(E)(ii) & (iii)) or whose admission the secretary of state determines would have serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States (INA 212(a)(3)(C)). In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department's fiscal year (FY) 2024 annual appropriations (P.L. 118-47), as carried forward by the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2025 (Div. A, P.L. 119-4), requires the secretary of state to make foreign officials and their immediate family members ineligible for U.S. entry if there is credible evidence that such individuals have been involved in "a gross violation of human rights." Unlike the visa ineligibility provisions contained in the INA, the names of those subject to visa bans under this provision may be announced publicly.

Key USCIRF Resources & Activities

- **Press Release:** USCIRF Urges Resumption of Lautenberg-Specter Program
- **Report:** Barriers to Protection as of 2024: Updated Recommendations on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The Status and Significance of CPC, SWL, and EPC Designations
- **Report:** Preventing Mass Atrocities Targeting Religious Communities
- **Press Release:** Congress Takes Encouraging, Bipartisan Steps on International Religious Freedom
- **Report:** The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution - Examples from South and Southeast Asia
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The IRF Ambassador: A Key Component of U.S. Leadership on Religious Freedom
- **Press Release:** Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern Is an Important Step to Advance Religious Freedom

Multilateral Engagement

The administration underscored its commitment to religious freedom during participation in multilateral fora. At the 80th session of UNGA in September, the U.S. government delegation announced it would prioritize a number of fundamental rights, including religious freedom, as referenced in President Trump's speech mentioned above. In November, the United States Mission to the United Nations (UN) hosted an event on religious violence targeting Christians in Nigeria and reiterated its concerns about increasing activities in West Africa and the Sahel by insurgent groups espousing a violent interpretation of Islam in a briefing at the Security Council. The administration delivered remarks

at the Security Council on religious freedom violations occurring in a number of other contexts, including Afghanistan, Burma, Syria, and West Africa, and highlighted the repression of Uyghurs in China and Rohingya in Burma. In addition, the U.S. government continued to serve as secretariat for the Article 18 Alliance.

In February 2025, E.O. 14199 withdrew the United States from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The UNHRC historically served as a key avenue to promote IRF on the global stage, including through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, the work of the UN special rapporteur on the freedom of religion and belief, and resolutions promoting the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The State Department engaged with regional human rights institutions with a focus on combating antisemitism. For example, the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism (SEAS) briefed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on antisemitism. Alongside the U.S. Mission to the UN, SEAS held a meeting with global Jewish leaders to discuss the rise of antisemitism. SEAS engaged with the Organization of the American States (OAS), including through hosting a high-level dialogue on confronting antisemitism in the Americas.

Sanctions on Individual Violators of Religious Freedom

There were no known visa denials to foreign officials in 2025 for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the INA, the provision added by IRFA. However, in December, the State Department established a new visa restriction policy to combat religious freedom violations in Nigeria and globally, as referenced above. Also, in March, the State Department established a new visa restriction policy to promote accountability for the forced return to China of Uyghurs or members of other ethnic or religious groups with protection concerns under INA Section 212(a)(3)(C). This policy allows the State Department to impose visa restrictions on current or former foreign government officials involved in these abuses, including Thai government officials involved in the forced return of 40 Uyghurs in February.

During 2025, the administration did not utilize the Global Magnitsky Act and the related E.O. 13818 to advance accountability for serious human rights abuses related to FoRB. However, the U.S. government used non-Global Magnitsky Act tools to hold religious freedom violators accountable. Pursuant to E.O. 13902, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned individuals and Iranian entities and individuals responsible for facilitating Iran's continued repression of Iranian citizens and evasion of U.S. sanctions. Pursuant to E.O. 13581, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a transnational criminal organization connected to Iran for carrying out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe. The Treasury Department also imposed sanctions on Sudanese actors pursuant to E.O. 14098 to limit the influence of efforts to enforce a singular interpretation of Shari'a law. In addition, the State Department imposed visa restrictions on Cuban judicial and prison officials involved in the detention and torture of July 2021 protesters, which included a number of FoRB victims.

In February, President Trump extended E.O. 14014, which allows for the sanctioning of entities that support the Burmese military's ongoing violence against civilians. In July, the Treasury Department removed several sanctions against entities supplying weapons and support to Burma's junta. The UN special rapporteur for Myanmar decried this move as "unconscionable," noting that these entities have supported the junta's violence against civilians. In September, the Treasury Department further sanctioned three Burmese nationals and a Yangon-based company to disrupt their weapons sales to the armed forces of Burma (also known as the Tatmadaw).

In May, President Trump announced that the United States would lift sanctions on Syria. The administration initially implemented this change in U.S.-Syria policy through temporary and incremental waivers of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. This gave the United States leeway to enact the administration's vision of opening Syria to reconstruction and growth while still monitoring and adjusting for Syrian interim authorities' progress on religious freedom. In December, the President signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which repealed the Caesar Act sanctions and requires presidential certification that Syria has taken certain steps to protect religious freedom.

Key U.S. Administration IRF Positions

Throughout 2025, the State Department advanced IRF in several ways. Among its activities, the Office of the SEAS held bilateral meetings with countries including Poland, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. SEAS continued to advocate for the endorsement of the Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism as a vital tool to strengthen government responses to antisemitism.

The State Department underwent a reorganization that was completed in July 2025. As part of this reorganization, the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (J) position was removed and replaced with a new position entitled the Under Secretary for Foreign Assistance, Humanitarian Affairs, and Religious Freedom (F). This new undersecretary role—the highest at the State Department to reference religious freedom in its title—includes a mandate to advocate for religious freedom.

As part of the reorganization, several functional offices that reported to J and contributed to broader IRF efforts were eliminated. Furthermore, the IRF Office and the Office of the SEAS were reconsolidated under the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). This reversed the first Trump administration's elevation of the IRF Office out of DRL. While some have argued that merging the IRF Office into DRL could diminish IRF advocacy, the administration maintained it would strengthen efforts by placing IRF and countering antisemitism at the center of human rights diplomacy. As part of the reorganization, the regional bureaus and posts are now primarily responsible for human rights policy and programming.

While the State Department released its 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in August, which included references to IRF and other enabling rights, the State Department had not yet released its 2024 IRF Report as of the end of 2025.

Programs and Other Initiatives to Advance IRF

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. The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other agencies historically fulfilled this mandate through a robust portfolio of global

programs, including supporting civil society. In recent years, Congress has directed certain amounts of funding for the IRF Office and for IRF foreign assistance programs.

E.O. 14169 paused all foreign assistance in January 2025. During the pause, the administration conducted a review to determine that programs were efficient and consistent with U.S. foreign policy under the administration. The pause applied to programs advancing religious freedom and benefiting religious communities, including a program that provided emergency assistance to victims of religious persecution. The suspension in funds left hundreds of victims of religious persecution receiving support in immediate need of life-saving assistance in countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Egypt, Nigeria, and Vietnam. This suspension also impacted religious minorities receiving foreign aid. For example, humanitarian programs halted post-genocide recovery efforts for Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, including those that provided psychosocial services and electricity, water, and other essential utilities for internal displacement camps. The pause further impacted funding to civil society organizations that promote religious freedom programs globally. While the administration lifted the freeze on some organizations' funding, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in March, the pause constituted a major operational disruption for organizations receiving U.S. government funding.

Soon after the suspension of foreign assistance, the administration initiated significant structural changes to USAID, which played a key role in the prioritization of religious freedom through policy and foreign assistance, expanded through E.O. 13926. The agency maintained a robust portfolio of programs advancing IRF, including direct assistance to victims of religious persecution, and democratic governance and human rights work focused on IRF and other enabling rights. In March, Secretary Rubio announced cuts to 5,200 USAID programs—representing 83 percent of all USAID programs, including 85 percent of human rights and rule of law programs. In July, USAID ceased to implement foreign assistance and certain functions of USAID were realigned under the State Department.

USCIRF received information that a significant portion of programs that utilized funds directed by Congress to promote IRF were terminated. This included projects to combat blasphemy laws and other legal restrictions on FoRB, provide for early warning systems to protect religious minorities, promote interfaith dialogue, and document IRF violations, including crimes against humanity and genocide. Emergency assistance for religious freedom activists in Burma and Afghanistan, as well as a flagship USAID program that had supported 4,000 members of religious minority groups facing discrimination and persecution, were also terminated. As an example of how such cancelations could impact religious freedom conditions, one source argued that ending a USAID program that supported early warning systems in Nigeria's Middle Belt could leave communities without support to prevent violence, creating vulnerability for future attacks against Christians.

Programs that provided humanitarian assistance to persecuted religious communities were canceled. For example, witnesses that testified at USCIRF's hearing on Burma shared their concerns that substantial cuts to humanitarian assistance funding severely and directly impact the lives of Rohingya refugees by removing the critical support they need for survival. Over 80,000 ethnic Karen refugees residing along the Burma-Thailand border, many of them Christians who fled persecution prior to the 2021 coup, lost significant food aid. In addition, more than 227,500 Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar lost access to education. U.S. funding cuts to multilateral funding contributed to 11.6 million refugees, including many fleeing religious persecution, losing access to humanitarian assistance. These cuts also reduced funding to UN institutions that advanced FoRB, such as the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar, which gathers evidence of mass atrocities to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes against the Rohingya.

Cuts to programs focused on increasing access to information have also limited the amount of information available regarding religious freedom violations. E.O. 14238, issued in March, significantly reduced the activities of the executive agency U.S. Agency for Global Media, the parent company for a number of broadcasters, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia, and Voice of America (VOA), which resulted in a major reduction in reporting for these and other outlets. These agencies delivered news independently from foreign government-controlled media outlets, including reporting on religious freedom conditions in repressive countries such as Burma, Cuba, China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Vietnam. The president of RFE/RL testified at USCIRF's hearing on Russia, providing examples on the use of reporting on religious freedom to counter Russian propaganda.

Other congressionally mandated initiatives to advance IRF were also impacted. E.O. 14217 limited the activities of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to its statutory minimum in March. Congress founded USIP in 1984 to promote peace by preventing, mitigating, and resolving violent conflict abroad. USIP worked to understand the role of religion in peacebuilding and maintained a number of programs related to the intersection of religion and conflict, including in Afghanistan, Burma, and Nigeria. The Wilson Center, chartered by Congress in 1968 to provide nonpartisan counsel and insights on global affairs to policymakers, was also reduced to its statutory minimum in March. The Wilson Center provided analysis on a range of topics relevant to IRF, including religion, refugees, and human rights.

In moving forward with new foreign assistance aligned with administration priorities, there were no public notices of funding opportunities announced by DRL or the IRF Office in 2025. In March, the State Department confirmed its provision of $73 million in financial aid, through the World Food Program, to provide critical food and nutrition assistance for more than one million Rohingya refugees. In September, the administration committed an additional $60 million to support the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and $32.5 million to support internally displaced people in conflict-affected areas in Nigeria. In October, the State Department announced humanitarian aid for Suweida, Syria, to support 60,000 people—mostly religious minorities affected by violence.

Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

Refugee Resettlement

Under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), individuals displaced abroad—who cannot return home due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on one of the five grounds that U.S. and international law provide, which include religion—may be eligible as refugees for resettlement to the United States. The president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad

each year and provides an annual report to Congress on that ceiling. Under Section 6472(d) of IRFA, the president is required to include information in that annual report on the religious persecution of refugee populations eligible for consideration for admission in the United States.

In January, E.O. 14163 suspended the refugee program pending a review. This suspension halted the progress of resettlement for all refugees in the pipeline, including refugees fleeing religious persecution. According to reports, about 130,000 conditionally approved refugees, including religious minorities from Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iran, and countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, remain in limbo along with 15,000 registered Iranian Christians, Jews, and Baha'is. USRAP remains suspended and has not resumed the processing of refugees, except for an exemption allowing the resettlement of Afrikaners.

In October, the administration issued its presidential determination that set the refugee ceiling at 7,500 to be primarily "allocated among Afrikaners from South Africa, and other victims of illegal or unjust discrimination in their respective homelands." This historically low ceiling leaves little room to resettle refugees fleeing the most egregious forms of religious persecution. Lawmakers expressed concern that the ceiling was set without the legally required consultations with Congress.

Congress reauthorized the Lautenberg-Specter Amendment for the remainder of FY 2025 in March. However, this legislation is not yet permanent and requires reauthorization for the current FY 2026. The amendment is a family reunification program providing a legal path for resettlement for religious minorities from Iran and former Soviet Union countries who are fleeing government persecution.

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

According to U.S. law, any noncitizen who is physically present or who arrives in the United States may apply for asylum, a legal protection for those who can establish that they meet the definition of refugee in U.S. and international law, as outlined above. IRFA authorized USCIRF to examine the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers to quickly deport—without immigration court hearings—noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documentation unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution. As mandated by Congress, USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in reports it released in 2005, 2007, 2013, 2016, and 2025 that documented many problems that successive administrations have failed to address. These flaws raise concerns that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution in violation of both U.S. and international law.

In January, the administration suspended entry at the border and shut off avenues for individuals to apply for asylum, including those fleeing religious persecution. At the same time, DHS expanded the scope of Expedited Removal to "the fullest extent authorized by Congress," now applying to individuals apprehended anywhere in the United States who have been present less than two years. The expansion of Expedited Removal has exposed more individuals to this process, increasing the risk of refoulement. For instance, at least 11 Iranian Christian converts fleeing religious persecution in Iran entered the United States in February and were summarily deported to Panama. Members of this group reportedly requested asylum but did not receive credible fear interviews, despite the risks these individuals would face if returned to Iran. In September, the administration deported 54 Iranians back to Iran, including a Christian convert who was unable to seek U.S. asylum.

Additional Protections for Individuals Fleeing Religious Persecution

Under domestic law, DHS has the discretion to grant parole (commonly referred to as humanitarian parole) to allow noncitizens to temporarily enter or remain in the United States for a specific time period for a specific public benefit or humanitarian need. It has historically been used as a last resort to provide temporary lawful status for vulnerable groups. During 2025, the administration reduced access to humanitarian parole programs for individuals fleeing religious persecution, including through E.O. 14165, issued in January, which directed the termination of "all categorical parole programs" that conflict with administration policy. That same month, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) paused processing new applications for all programs. Following these directives, there were reports that some individuals fleeing religious persecution whose parole was revoked received notices to self-deport, including Afghans and Iranians. Also in January, DHS published guidance to apply Expedited Removal on individuals whose parole status was revoked, exposing individuals that had utilized authorized pathways to summary deportations.

When parole is terminated, the government can proceed with deportations unless an individual secured protection from another legal status, such as Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS is a temporary immigration status that protects individuals who cannot safely return to their home country due to ongoing armed conflict or other extraordinary circumstances. During 2025, DHS curtailed TPS for countries with significant religious freedom concerns, including Afghanistan, Burma, Nicaragua, and Syria, and indicated it would end protections for Somalia, eliminating this lifeline for individuals who fear religious persecution upon return.

In June, Proclamation 10949 suspended or limited entry to the United States for nationals from 19 countries, 10 of which USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation, or from countries in which EPCs operate, thereby impacting individuals fleeing religious persecution. These restrictions apply to both immigrants and nonimmigrants, although it includes exceptions for immigrant visas for ethnic and religious minorities facing persecution in Iran, individuals granted asylum by the United States, and refugees already admitted. In December, invoking national security reasons, DHS issued a policy memorandum that paused immigration applications for individuals from these countries and placed a hold on all asylum applications pending a review. Proclamation 10998, also issued in December, suspended or limited entry for nationals from 20 additional countries, including five that USCIRF recommends for designations under IRFA.

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

Members of Congress engaged in efforts to promote IRF throughout the year, including the 33 members who advocated for prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project. Out of 26 prisoners without congressional advocates in the project, there are 15 FoRB victims who would benefit from congressional advocacy.

Congress held hearings to evaluate U.S. policy options in response to religious freedom violations. For example, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on the need for a CPC designation for Nigeria, a subsequent hearing on the outcomes of the CPC designation of Nigeria, and additional hearings on the ongoing crises in Burma and Sudan. The TLHRC held hearings on transnational repression and the worldwide persecution of Jews as well as on human rights and religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Pakistan. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) held a hearing on China's policies targeting those who practice a religion. Further, numerous members of Congress participated in USCIRF's hearings on China, Central Asia, and Turkey, along with the launch of USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report.

There were bipartisan initiatives to affirm the centrality of FoRB in U.S. foreign policy during 2025. USCIRF welcomed the U.S. House of Representatives' bipartisan resolution Expressing Concern Regarding Severe Restrictions on Religious Freedom Abroad (H.Res.738), reiterating the prioritization of religious freedom. This resolution spotlighted religious freedom conditions in countries USCIRF recommends for placement on the SWL, broadening congressional efforts to include several key U.S. partners. In February, the Senate introduced a bipartisan resolution Recognizing Religious Freedom as a Fundamental Right (S.Res.52), underscoring rising global threats to FoRB and reaffirming the central role of promoting IRF in U.S. foreign policy. Also in February, the House introduced the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025 (H.R. 1744) that sought to reauthorize USCIRF through FY2028 to ensure that robust religious freedom monitoring and reporting continues.

Members of Congress pursued other innovative approaches to advancing religious freedom abroad. For example, the Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act was introduced in both the Senate (S. 2747) and House (H.R. 5808) in September and October, respectively. Reflecting growing concern in Congress over religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, this act mandated the State Department to designate Nigeria as a CPC and required the president to impose targeted sanctions in response to these religious freedom violations. The Stop Funding Religious Oppressive Regimes Act of 2025 (S. 676), if passed, would have directed the president to identify countries that impose the death penalty or life imprisonment for blasphemy or apostasy, or impose these sentences for interfaith marriage, and bar U.S. foreign assistance to those governments. In response to the February 2025 deportation of Iranian Christians to Panama, the Artemis Act of 2025 (H.R. 3504) sought to amend Section 235 of the INA to create an exemption to Expedited Removal for individuals fleeing religious persecution in CPC or SWL countries. Although none of these initiatives ultimately passed, they collectively reflect congressional ingenuity in exploring new approaches and identifying new tools to promote IRF.

There was also significant congressional activity to address China's religious freedom violations and support impacted religious communities. Notably, the House passed the Uyghur Policy Act of 2025 (H.R. 2635) in September. In November, the Senate agreed to a bipartisan resolution condemning the CCP's persecution of Protestant house church Zion Church and other religious minorities.

Commissioners Meir Soloveichik and Maureen Ferguson and Chair Vicky Hartzler Dissent on IRFA Implementation

USCIRF's mandate includes monitoring the state of religious freedom abroad and advocating for US policies to be adopted in response to governments violating or tolerating the violation of religious freedom. How US foreign assistance advances the ideals and interests of the United States is an important policy issue, as is the urgency of assuring that the funding is received by those that share these ideals. Commentary—in this chapter and elsewhere in this report, including the introduction—on an administration's choices regarding the redirecting of funds, especially pertaining to the funding of NGOs, is, as we understand it, beyond the purview of USCIRF and our calling.

We further add our agreement to the view voiced by our former colleague Eric Ueland, in his dissent in USCIRF's 2024 report, that a proper response to those seeking religious asylum should include a "rigorous review process" along with the US working "to expand the number of countries" that can adopt "religiously based refugee admittance programs."

USCIRF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2026

For 2026, based on religious freedom conditions in 2025, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. Department of State:

- Redesignate as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) the following 13 countries: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following five countries: Afghanistan, India, Libya, Syria, and Vietnam;
- Maintain on the Special Watch List (SWL) the following two countries: Algeria and Azerbaijan;
- Include on the SWL the following 9 countries: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey, and Uzbekistan;
- Redesignate as Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) the following six nonstate actors: al-Shabaab; Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), formerly known as Boko Haram; the Houthis; Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP); Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), also referred to as ISIS-West Africa; and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM); and
- Designate as an EPC the following nonstate actor: Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

State Department Designations (Last Issued December 29, 2023*)	
CPC Designations	Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria**, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Algeria, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam
EPC Designations	Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, ISIS – Sahel (formerly known as Islamic State in Greater Sahara), the Islamic State in West Africa, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban

* Presidential actions associated with designations remain in effect for a two-year period, as outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).
** President Donald J. Trump separately designated Nigeria as a CPC on Oct. 31, 2025.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION:

- Promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill key roles relevant to U.S. international religious freedom (IRF) policy, including the ambassador at large for IRF, USCIRF Commissioners, special adviser to the president on IRF on the National Security Council staff, special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, and special coordinator on Tibetan issues at the State Department, and provide them with sufficient financial resources and staff to prioritize freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) issues in engagements with foreign governments;
- Provide sufficient financial resources, staff, and other necessary support to all offices in the administration involved in the implementation of IRFA requirements, including at the State Department, National Security Council, and others;
- Prioritize IRF in the planning and implementation of U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance programs, including reviewing policy toward countries that the administration designates as CPCs, to advance meaningful consequences and positive change;
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to religious freedom improvements in USCIRF-recommended CPC or SWL countries;
- Advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners in all relevant bilateral and multilateral engagements;
- Implement the State Department policy regarding visa restrictions on "individuals who have directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom and, where appropriate, their immediate family members," with a particular emphasis on countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation;
- Expand U.S. engagement on FoRB with the United Nations (UN) and regional entities such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), C5+1, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC);
- Advance the protection of individuals fleeing religious persecution by taking the following steps:
  - Increase the annual U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) admissions ceiling to provide sufficient slots for those at risk, such as Iranian religious minorities registered for the Lautenberg-Specter program;
  - Resume the resettlement of refugees fleeing religious persecution to help alleviate the ongoing crisis involving millions of such refugees worldwide;
  - Reestablish full asylum access for individuals fleeing religious persecution to mitigate the risk of refoulement as prohibited under international law;

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION: (CONTINUED)

- Reinstate other protections, such as Temporary Protected Status and humanitarian parole, to maintain these lifelines for individuals from countries with poor religious freedom conditions who fear religious persecution upon return;
- Lift or provide exceptions to existing restrictions to enter the United States for individuals fleeing religious persecution; and
- Fund programs that promote IRF, including initiatives that provide lifesaving emergency support for victims of religious persecution, as well as efforts to support civil society and news broadcasters—especially in CPC and SWL countries—that independently document or report on religious freedom violations.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS:

- Swiftly confirm key IRF-related appointments upon their nomination, including the ambassador at large for IRF and special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, and appoint USCIRF Commissioners;
- Advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners, such as sponsoring prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project, including those documented in USCIRF's Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, and raising their cases during congressional delegations or other engagements with relevant foreign governments;
- Exercise oversight of Expedited Removal and press for reforms to address concerns, which USCIRF has identified since 2005, about the treatment of asylum seekers in that process;
- Support IRF-related matters at the country, regional, and global level through:
  - An increase in funding appropriated for programs that advance IRF;
  - Existing task forces or caucuses such as the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism, the House IRF Caucus, or the Ahmadiyya Muslim Caucus;
  - Hearings on religious freedom conditions abroad; and
  - Congressional delegations to countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation, or in which EPCs operate, to raise religious freedom concerns with relevant governments and engage directly with civil society organizations, religious communities, and others.
- Introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy, such as:
  - Addressing the humanitarian needs of large populations displaced by religious persecution, including in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps in countries such as Bangladesh, Iraq, Nigeria, and Sudan, to include funding that supports education, healthcare, and other lifesaving initiatives;
  - Reauthorizing on a permanent basis the bipartisan Lautenberg-Specter Amendment to allow individuals legally residing in the United States to sponsor the resettlement of members of persecuted religious minority groups from their countries of residence to the United States;
  - Pass current and future legislation to directly advance IRF or address foreign policy issues with substantial IRF implications, such as:
    - H.R. 1744 – United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025
    - H.R. 959 – Combating International Islamophobia Act
    - H.R. 3504 – Artemis Act of 2025
    - S. Res. 52 – A resolution recognizing religious freedom as a fundamental right, expressing support for IRF as a cornerstone of United States foreign policy, and expressing concern over increased threats to and attacks on religious freedom around the world
    - S. 676 – Stop Funding Religiously Oppressive Regimes Act of 2025
    - S. 1542/H.R. 2635 – Uyghur Policy Act of 2025
    - S. Res. 525/H.R. 925 – A resolution condemning the Government of Iran's state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights
  - Prohibiting any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments of countries that the State Department designates as CPCs;
  - Conditioning U.S. security assistance and economic or budget support to CPCs, SWL countries, or countries in which EPCs operate on improvements in religious freedom conditions;
  - Amending IRFA to permanently reauthorize USCIRF and mandate the State Department to provide specific rationale for not implementing USCIRF recommendations on CPC and SWL designations; and
- Request that the Government Accountability Office conduct an:
  - Assessment of the use of the Global Magnitsky Act and other human rights-related financial and visa authorities to hold accountable severe religious freedom violators;
  - Accounting of U.S. foreign assistance provided to countries USCIRF recommends for CPC, SWL, or countries in which EPCs operate, including but not limited to Nigeria and Sudan, to determine whether such assistance supports or hinders efforts to advance religious freedom; and
  - Analysis of available tools to strengthen and enhance U.S. government policy and U.S. collaboration with allies to deter and counter transnational targeting of religious communities and religious freedom advocates.

Key USCIRF Recommendations Implemented in 2025

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended, mandates USCIRF to make independent policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. The recommendations are based on USCIRF's research on religious freedom conditions abroad and assessment of U.S. policy. In addition, USCIRF's mandate includes tracking the U.S. government's implementation of USCIRF's recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, the effectiveness of such implemented recommendations in advancing religious freedom abroad.

While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF's recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2025. The list, which is not exhaustive, is meant to showcase the effectiveness of USCIRF's recommendations.

Significant actions by the administration to advance religious freedom abroad

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. administration "promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill key roles relevant to U.S. IRF policy" and "deepen vital U.S. leadership and/or engagement on religious freedom" in multilateral and international fora.

Throughout the year, the administration indeed implemented these recommendations in part and in a variety of settings, including:

- In April, President Trump nominated former Congressman Mark Walker as U.S. ambassador at large for IRF and Yehuda Kaploun as special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism to serve at the State Department. The Senate confirmed Special Envoy Kaploun's nomination in December but Walker's nomination expired at the end of the year without confirmation, necessitating a new nomination in 2026 for that role.
- In July, President Trump issued a statement on Captive Nations Week highlighting the administration's work to "expand and strengthen America's efforts to defend religious freedom around the world." In September, he also called on representatives gathered at the UN General Assembly to "protect religious liberty."
- Vice President JD Vance spoke at the civil society-led IRF Summit in February, affirming that the second Trump administration would continue critical steps to protect religious communities abroad. He noted in his remarks that "part of our protecting religious freedom initiatives means recognizing in our foreign policy the difference between regimes that respect religious freedom and those that do not."
- U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio underscored the importance of IRF through press statements, including expressing concern for persecuted Christians on Easter, commemorating the National Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust, calling for the protection of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, condemning violence targeting Rohingya in Burma, condemning the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) detention of leaders of the Zion Church, and reaffirming a commitment to championing IRF.
- In November, the United States Mission to the UN hosted an event on religious violence targeting Christians in Nigeria and reiterated its concerns to the UN Security Council (UNSC) about increasing insurgent activities in West Africa and the Sahel.
- Representatives for the administration delivered remarks at the UNSC on religious freedom violations in several other contexts, including Afghanistan, Burma, Syria, and West Africa, and highlighted the repression of Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims. Religious freedom was also reportedly a component of some bilateral discussions, including with Turkmenistan, Syria, and the Vatican.
- The State Department engaged with regional human rights institutions, with a focus on combating antisemitism. For example, the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism (SEAS) briefed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on antisemitism. Alongside the U.S. Mission to the UN, SEAS held a meeting with global Jewish leaders to discuss the rise of antisemitism. SEAS also engaged with the Organization of the American States (OAS), including through hosting a high-level dialogue on confronting antisemitism in the Americas.
- The U.S. government continued to serve as secretariat for the Article 18 Alliance.
- In December, the State Department announced a policy under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) to restrict visas for individuals and their immediate family members who have "directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom" in Nigeria and "any other governments or individuals engaged in violations of religious freedom."

Congressional action promoting religious freedom

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. Congress "introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy" as well as "highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, congressional delegations, and other actions."

The 119th Congress was particularly active throughout 2025 in terms of its IRF-related efforts, with a broad range of legislative and other activities related to countries, regions, and issues. Members of the Senate and House of Representatives introduced over 50 relevant pieces of legislation, including bills and resolutions referenced above as well as:

- H.R. 1774: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025, extending and authorizing annual appropriations for USCIRF through fiscal year 2028; Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced this bill with a bipartisan group of six co-sponsors.
- H.R. 738: Expressing Concern Regarding Severe Restrictions on Religious Freedom Abroad, spotlighting religious freedom conditions in countries USCIRF recommends for placement on the SWL, broadening congressional efforts to include several key U.S. partners.
- S. 2747/H.R. 5808: The Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act, reflecting growing concern in Congress over religious

freedom conditions in Nigeria, including mandating the CPC designation (prior to President Trump's decision as such in October).

- S. Res. 463: Condemning the CCP's persecution of religious minority groups, including Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists and the detention of Pastor Mingri "Ezra" Jin and leaders of the Zion Church, and reaffirming the United States' global commitment to promote religious freedom and tolerance.
- H.R. 1848: Houthi Human Rights Accountability Act, imposing sanctions on the EPC-designated Houthi movement in Yemen for its efforts to impose its "violent, anti-Semitic, and extremist worldview" on all Yemenis.
- S. Res. 540: Recognizing Human Rights Day on December 10, 2025, and commemorating the 77th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including recognizing that "religious minorities, religious freedom advocates, and missionaries are unjustly targeted, detained, and repressed for exercising their freedom to believe or not to believe."

In addition, Congress engaged in a wide range of activities to advance IRF apart from legislation, including:

- Congress held several hearings on or relevant to IRF issues, including House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on Nigeria, Burma, and Sudan, in addition to Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Hong Kong and Syria.
- In December, the House Committee on Appropriations convened a joint briefing with the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Nigeria's religious freedom crisis, in which several members of Congress and USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler participated.
- The TLHRC held hearings on transnational repression and the worldwide persecution of Jews as well as on human rights and religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Pakistan.
- Members of Congress participated in USCIRF's hearings on China, Central Asia, and Turkey, along with the launch of USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report.
- Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart (R-FL) led a congressional delegation to Nigeria in December to assess religious freedom conditions and engage with the government of the country following the CPC designation.
- Reps. Brad Sherman (D-CA), French Hill (R-AR), Mike Lawler (R-NY), and Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY) provided statements supporting Coptic Christians in Egypt during a civil society gathering devoted to that community's religious freedom challenges.
- In November, a bipartisan group of 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter to Secretary Rubio to express support for President Trump's designation of Nigeria as a CPC the previous month.

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. Congress "advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners, including those documented in USCIRF's Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, in multilateral fora and bilateral meetings with relevant governments."

Members of the House and Senate engaged in advocacy on behalf of FoRB prisoners around the world throughout the year, pursuant to this recommendation, including:

- Thirty-three members of Congress advocated for religious prisoners through the TLHRC Defending Freedoms Project.
- Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), and Rep. John Moolenaar (R-MI) sent a letter on behalf of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) to President Trump in which they requested, among other items, that he prioritize the cases of Gulshan Abbas, Pastor Ezra Jin, and Ekpar Asat—all three of whom USCIRF includes in its FoRB Victims List—including personally raising their plight with General Secretary Xi Jinping.
- Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) introduced S. Res. 472 in support of the designation of October 30 as the International Day of Political Prisoners, expressing "unwavering solidarity with all those who are imprisoned around the world for peacefully expressing their political or religious beliefs."
- Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) also introduced S. Res. 350 in response to Eritrea's "widespread decades-long human rights abuses"; it calls on that government to "release all unjustly and arbitrarily detained political prisoners" and points out that "religious persecution remains widespread in Eritrea, with members of faiths not recognized by the government routinely imprisoned and subjected to torture and other cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment for practicing their beliefs."

USCIRF recommendations on specific countries

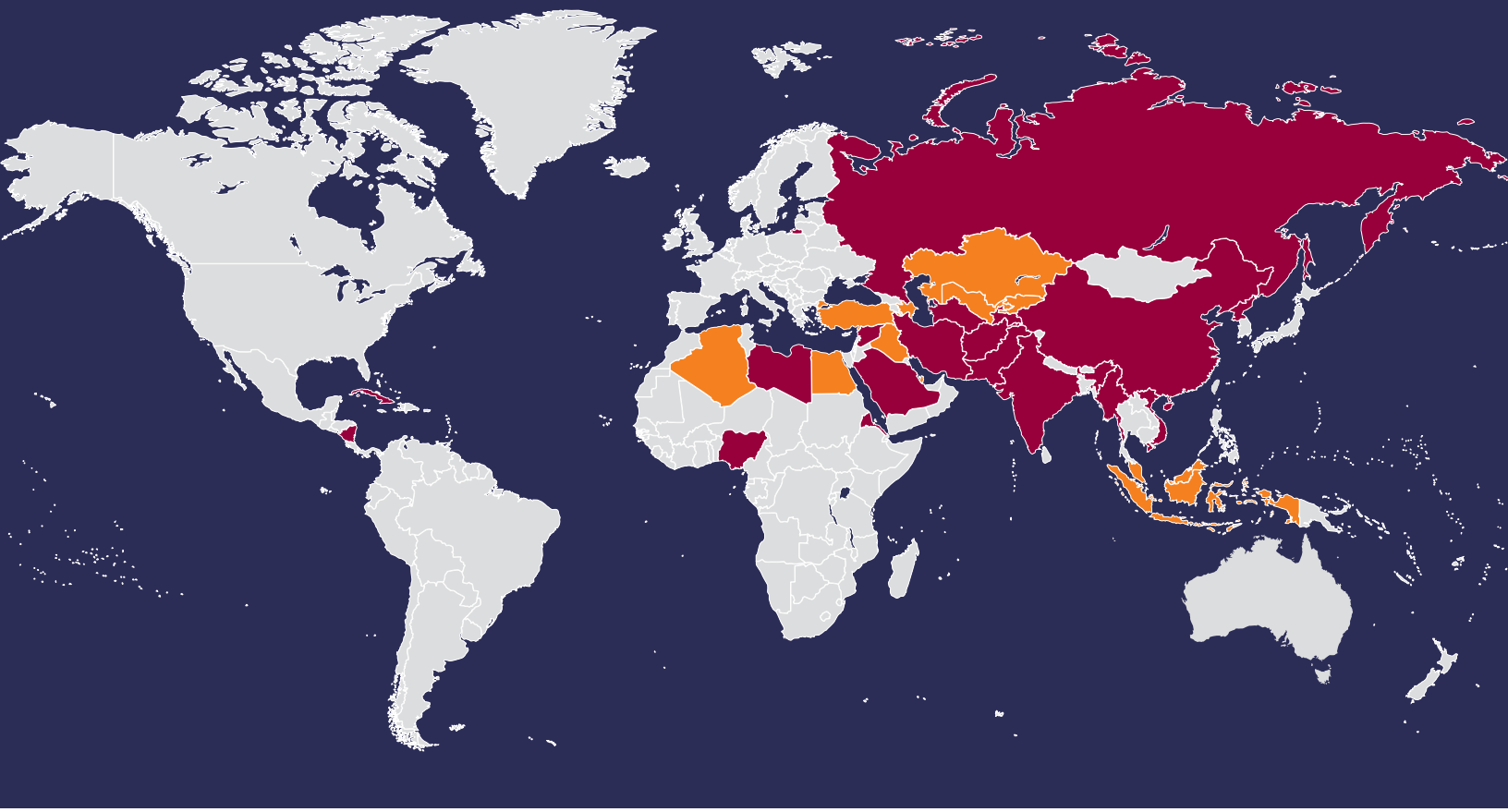
Individual country chapters throughout this report provide details on specific actions the U.S. administration and Congress took throughout the year that partially or fully met USCIRF's recommendations related to those respective countries. However, a representative sample of such actions includes:

- **Burma:** In September, the U.S. Department of the Treasury further sanctioned three Burmese nationals and a Yangon-based company to disrupt their weapons sales to the Tatmadaw. In addition, the State Department confirmed in March its provision of $73 million in fiscal year 2025 financial aid for Rohingya refugees through the World Food Program, and in September, the administration stated it had secured an additional $60 million in commitments from partner countries to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- **China:** The CECC held a hearing in November on the CCP's policies targeting those who practice a religion.
- **Cuba:** The State Department imposed visa restrictions on Cuban judicial and prison officials involved in the detention and torture of July 2021 protesters, which included a number of FoRB victims.
- **Iran:** The Treasury Department sanctioned individuals and Iranian entities and individuals responsible for facilitating Iran's evasion of U.S. sanctions and continued repression of Iranians as well as separate sanctions on a transnational criminal organization connected to Iran for carrying out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe.
- **Nigeria:** President Trump designated Nigeria as a CPC in late October, which USCIRF has recommended since 2009, including in its 2025 Annual Report. In September, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) introduced S. 2747, the Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act of 2025, which called for that very designation; in March,

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced H.R. 220 with 23 co-sponsors, calling for the same action.

- **Syria:** In October, the State Department announced humanitarian aid for Suweida, Syria, to support 60,000 people—mostly religious minorities affected by violence. In addition, President Trump signed into law Public Law 119-60 in December (S.1071 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026), which included a repeal of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 while requiring the president to certify that Syrian transitional authorities were "upholding religious and ethnic minority rights in Syria, including with respect to freedom of worship and belief, and allowing for fair and equitable representation in the government, including ministries and parliament."

2026 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

Algeria	Iraq	Qatar
Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Egypt	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Indonesia	Malaysia	

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Al-Shabaab	Islamic State – Sahel Province	Rapid Support Forces
Boko Haram	Islamic State in West Africa Province	The Houthis
	Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin	

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan remained extremely poor. De facto Taliban authorities continued to impose a singular interpretation of Islam, affecting all Afghans but particularly women, girls, and religious minorities. To enforce this interpretation of Shari'a, authorities imposed corporal punishment, surveillance, and arbitrary detention.

Throughout the year, Taliban leaders cracked down on Islamic scholars and clerics who publicly criticized official rulings or supported more "moderate" policies or teachings conflicting with its interpretation of Islam. In January, the Taliban's deputy foreign minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, fled the country after giving a speech criticizing the continued ban on girls' education. The Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, ordered Stanikzai's arrest and issued a travel ban. Subsequently, in April, the Taliban's higher education minister stated that criticizing the supreme leader was equivalent to insulting the Prophet Muhammad. In July, authorities forcibly closed the office and religious school of a prominent Shi'a cleric in Kabul, Ayatollah Waezzada Behsudi.

De facto authorities intensely monitored Afghan citizens to ensure compliance with their strict interpretation of Islam, with women and Hazara reporters facing the most severe restrictions. In February, Taliban authorities raided a well-known women's radio station, arresting two employees and suspending the station for "multiple violations." In October, the Taliban issued a nationwide internet shutdown to prevent consumption of "immoral" activities. This ban received international backlash and condemnation from the United Nations (UN). The Taliban also continued to enforce mandatory prayers and regular attendance at mosques, and detained men and their barbers for having hairstyles deemed "un-Islamic."

Afghan women continued to bear the brunt of the Taliban's restrictive religious edicts. In addition to the education ban, women remain barred from seeking employment and speaking in public as well as privately reciting the Qur'an in their homes. In July, the UN Mission to Afghanistan expressed concern about the arrest of dozens of women and girls in Kabul for failing to observe the hijab decree. In September, the Taliban banned books written by women from the university system, claiming they were "anti-Shari'a" and violate Taliban policies.

The Taliban also enforced blasphemy laws and arrested several individuals throughout the year. In July, a Taliban court sentenced Abdul Alim Khamoosh to death over blasphemy accusations and for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. The judicial process of this sentencing remains unclear, and it is not reported whether Khamoosh had access to legal representation. The same month, the Taliban's Supreme Court announced the public flogging of four individuals on allegations of "insulting religious rituals and Islamic values." In August, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) announced the arrest of another man accused of "insulting sacred beliefs."

More broadly, the Taliban continued to impose restrictions on religious minorities' ability to publicly practice their faith and facilitated forced conversions to Islam. During the month of Muharram, the Taliban limited public processions across several provinces. It restricted the display of traditional black flags to mark the religious ceremony. Reports also indicate that Taliban officials forced Ismaili Muslims in Badakhshan Province to convert to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. In Ismaili-majority districts, the Taliban reportedly banned marriages between Ismaili and Sunni families. Salafis also faced increased restrictions, including Taliban officials dismissing imams from mosques, claiming that no Salafi religious leader is allowed to lead prayers.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Afghanistan under the de facto rule of the Taliban as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations, including high-level officials of the MPVPV, by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities;
- Work with like-minded partners, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), to address the Taliban's religious freedom and other human rights violations;
- Retain the responsibilities of the special representative for Afghanistan and the special envoy for Afghan women, girls, and human rights within the U.S. Department of State and incorporate religious freedom into its priorities; and
- Reinstate Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Afghans in the United States to extend protection for religious minorities fleeing religious persecution by the Taliban, as the conditions in Afghanistan remain dire.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** Afghanistan – Assessing the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice
- **Hearing:** Religious Freedom in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Afghanistan's population is an estimated 40.1 million and includes a wide range of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Baloch. The country is 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a) and less than 0.3 percent other religions.

Many religious minorities fled following the Taliban takeover in 2021. However, small numbers of Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Buddhists remain in the country. The last member of the Jewish community left Afghanistan in 2021. Following the takeover, de facto authorities dissolved the country's 2004 constitution and made their interpretation of Shari'a the basis for all law in the country. Under this interpretation, religious minorities, including Christians and Shi'a Hazaras, are considered apostates.

In February, the Taliban announced that it no longer considered the Doha agreement to be valid, stating that the timeframe for the agreement expired, and called on the United States to remove Taliban leaders from sanctions lists. The 2020 agreement addressed four main issues including a cease-fire between U.S., Taliban and Afghan forces, the withdrawal of foreign troops, negotiations to form a transitional government, and guaranteeing that Afghanistan would not be used for terrorist attacks against the U.S. or its allies.

Repression of Women and Girls

De facto Taliban authorities continued to severely restrict the rights of Afghan women and girls. Religious edicts, including the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, also known as the "morality law," deem women's voices as immoral, thereby banning them from publicly practicing their faith. Under the law, women are required to completely cover themselves when leaving the home and must be accompanied by a male escort. In many cases, failure to observe these edicts resulted in arrests or fines. Reports indicate that men increasingly enforced restrictions on their female family members to ensure compliance with these policies to prevent Taliban reprisals.

In February, the Taliban's supreme leader defended religiously strict edicts, including the ban on women's education, asserting that such policies are derived from the "commands of Allah." He announced that every religious decree issued is based on consultations with scholars and "derived from the Qur'an and the Hadith." The same month, authorities arrested Wazir Khan, an educator who was vocal in his support for girls' education. In March, the Taliban issued a message claiming that the rights of Afghan women were "secured" under Islamic law. Further defending Taliban policies and dismissing international criticism, the chief spokesperson stated that an Islamic and Afghan society has "clear differences from Western societies and their culture."

Detention and Targeting of Religious Minorities

In 2025, the MPVPV continued enforcing religious edicts and detained those deemed to violate Taliban policies. In January, authorities arrested over 40 people across various provinces on charges ranging from "moral corruption" to witchcraft and violations of Islamic law. In September, the MPVPV arrested a Sufi leader, Ibrahim Gailani, along with several of his followers. Authorities accused Gailani of "misusing Sufism" and conducting practices "contrary to Shari'a."

The Taliban continued to target religious minority communities and their houses of worship, espoused hateful rhetoric, and justified violent punishment for failing to adhere to its interpretation of Islam. In March, the Taliban's supreme leader declared that obedience to him is a religious obligation for all Muslims to "ensure unity and order." Additionally, in April, the Taliban's supreme leader announced that executions were part of Islam, after four men were convicted of murder. The same month, MPVPV Minister Khalid Hanafi reportedly stated that non-Muslims, including Hindus and Sikhs, were "worse than animals." In October, a delegation of Afghan Hindu and Sikh refugees in India urged Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to restore religious sites in Afghanistan.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2025, the Donald J. Trump administration engaged with de facto Taliban officials to coordinate the release of detained U.S. citizens. In January, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the United States would place heavy bounties on top Taliban officials for holding U.S. citizens hostage. In March, a U.S. delegation traveled to Kabul to meet with Taliban officials to discuss the release of U.S. citizen prisoners. This marked the first U.S. delegation to Afghanistan since the 2021 withdrawal. Subsequently, Secretary Rubio announced the release of George Glezmann, a U.S. citizen detained for two and a half years, and Faye Hall, who was detained for a month. In September, Secretary Rubio announced the release of U.S. citizen Amir Amiry. Two other U.S. citizens, Ryan Corbett and William McKenty, were released in January 2025.

In January, President Trump signed an executive order suspending the U.S. refugee policy, bringing uncertainty to the future of 2,000 Afghan refugees seeking asylum in the United States, including members of religious minorities such as members of the Shi'a Hazara community. In May, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that it would not renew TPS for Afghanistan, based on a review of the country's security risks. The review determined that Afghanistan no longer met the statutory requirements for TPS designation. The same month, DHS sent emails to some Afghans revoking their humanitarian parole and ordering them to self-deport within seven days. TPS for Afghanistan expired in July. The U.S. Department of State noted in August that it continues to process Special Immigration Visas (SIVs) for Afghans. However, in November, following the shooting of two National Guard members in Washington, DC by an Afghan national, the Trump administration halted all immigration-related decisions for Afghans, including SIVs, for security concerns.

The U.S. Department of State did not designate Afghanistan as a CPC under IRFA in its most recent designations on December 29, 2023. However, it did redesignate the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern for particularly severe religious freedom violations. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

BURMA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Burma deteriorated as Burma's military junta regime—known as the Tatmadaw—unleashed indiscriminate airstrikes and artillery attacks against civilians, religious sites, and schools to regain some key lost territories. In 2025, Tatmadaw forces destroyed 379 religious sites—killing more than 259 religious clergy and civilians sheltering in these places of worship or participating in religious activities. The junta employed violence to terrify and retaliate against resisting religious communities, at times laying siege to their sacred sites. In 2025, over 2.5 million internally displaced people —including in Christian-majority Chin and Kachin States and Muslim-majority Rakhine State—faced dire situations as violence intensified.

Contrary to its claim of being the guardian of Theravada Buddhism, the Tatmadaw increasingly attacked Buddhist sites throughout the country in 2025. In March, the junta bombed Sein Yadanar Monastery in Shan State's Nawnghkio town, killing 14 people. In April, during Thingyan, when Buddhists were celebrating the new year, the Tatmadaw conducted airstrikes on six monasteries in Karen State, Mandalay, and Sagaing Region, killing at least 10. In July, the junta bombed a monastery in Lin Ta Lu village, Sagaing Region, killing over 23 sheltering in place. In August, the junta bombed a monastery in Mogoke, Mandalay Region, killing 21 and injuring seven. In October, the Tatmadaw bombed a Buddhist festival in Chaung U Township, Sagaing Region, killing over two dozen people and injuring dozens more. Other Buddhist sites in Mon, Rakhine, Kachin, and Kayah States as well as Bago, Magway, and Taninthayi Regions also came under attack.

Churches, particularly those in Christian-majority areas, continued to endure airstrikes and torching. In January, the junta bombed Zup-ra Kachin Baptist Church in Kachin State, killing six. Shortly after Pope Francis established the new diocese in Mindat, Chin State, the Tatmadaw bombed the Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church there. In March, the Tatmadaw torched St. Patrick's Cathedral in the Banmaw Diocese, Kachin State. Separate airstrikes in April destroyed three churches in Chin State, killing a pastor. In August, junta forces in Hakha, Chin State briefly detained over 40 Christian youths without cause. In September, the government-in-exile National Unity Government (NUG) sentenced nine resistance group members in Sagaing Region to 20 years of imprisonment for killing Father Donald Martin Ye Naing Win in February when they suspected him of being a junta informant.

Caught in intense armed conflicts between the Tatmadaw and its opponent the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State, predominantly Muslim Rohingya faced dire, unsustainable living conditions, resulting in a renewed exodus of 150,000 people to Bangladesh since 2024. Many lost their lives during the perilous journey. Those who stayed witnessed the junta's killing of dozens of villagers in Ramree Township; endured forced labor with health and food crises amid reduced U.S. aid; and faced the AA locking or converting their mosques into military bases and detention centers. The Tatmadaw also continued to forcibly conscript Rohingya men and boys who were stripped of citizenship, often using them as cannon fodder.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Burma as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals responsible for severe religious freedom violations by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities;
- Engage with the NUG, ethnic organizations, and prodemocracy organizations—as outlined in the BURMA Act of 2022—to ensure that respect for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is included in transitional governance and post-coup nation rebuilding policies;
- Restore humanitarian funding and contributions to relevant United Nations (UN) programs to investigate and collect evidence of atrocities committed against the Rohingya and other religious minorities, as well as provide post-secondary education for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazaar through coordination with Bangladeshi authorities; and
- Designate Burma for Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation to advance human rights and religious freedom, such as the BRAVE Burma Act (H.R. 3190) and the Burma Genocide Accountability and Protection (GAP) Act (H.R. 4140); and
- Introduce and pass legislation to ban the Tatmadaw's use of U.S.-based lobbying firms to dodge accountability for its crimes and boost ties with the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Victims
- **Press Release:** A Religious Freedom Lifeline to Burma's Persecuted People of Faith Needs to be Extended
- **Press Release:** Justice and Accountability Still Lacking Eight Years After the Rohingya Genocide
- **Factsheet:** The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution — Examples from South and Southeast Asia
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Approximately 88 percent of the population in Burma practices Theravada Buddhism, making it the country's dominant religion. The 2008 constitution granted Buddhism a "special position" while acknowledging the existence of other religious groups. Christianity in Burma accounts for six percent of the population's religion, while Islam comprises around three percent after the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya population since 2017. Additionally, the country is home to small communities of Hindus, Jews, practitioners of traditional Chinese religions, and animists.

In March, a 7.7-magnitude earthquake struck central Burma, killing more than 3,600 people. Instead of performing rescue and recovery operations, the Burmese military conducted airstrikes against churches and monasteries despite its self-imposed ceasefire. It also intentionally delayed reconstruction of mosques and churches.

Detention of Religious Persons

In 2025, the junta detained at least 135 religious persons, including Buddhist monks, Christians, and Muslims. Ethnic Chin pastors Salai Ayla Lone Wai and Thian Lian Sang were still serving yearslong sentences incommunicado. In July, pro-democracy monk Shwe Nya War died of liver disease, reportedly due to medical neglect during his incarceration which exacerbated his conditions. In September, the Tatmadaw charged DJ Violet under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code for playing a Buddhist song at a Mandalay club. In October, the junta released Burmese-American monk U Pinnya Zawta, previously imprisoned in 2024 on trumped-up charges, after the U.S. Department of State's intervention.

International Accountability

International organizations condemned the Tatmadaw's FoRB violations and atrocities as the country's multilayered crisis evolved, calling for accountability of perpetrators. In February, a federal criminal court in Argentina issued 25 arrest warrants for Burmese officials and military leaders who committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya community. This followed a similar call by the International Criminal Court in November 2024. In July, the International Court of Justice deemed the declarations of intervention filed by Slovenia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Belgium, and Ireland admissible in The Gambia vs. Myanmar case. In April, a Chin human rights group and its partners appealed to the Philippine Department of Justice to reconsider its decision not to fully investigate war crimes charges against top junta generals under the country's universal jurisdiction law.

The UN repeatedly expressed concerns over escalating violence and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Burma through its Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Human Rights Council, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar throughout 2025.

Canada, Switzerland, and the European Union imposed respective sanctions in 2025 to hold perpetrators in Burma accountable for their human rights violations. Additionally, the International Labour Organization adopted a landmark resolution to invoke Article 33 of its constitution against Burma, while the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions removed the accreditation and membership of the junta-controlled Myanmar National Human Rights Commission in 2025.

Throughout 2025, neighboring countries in the region, such as India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, turned away hundreds of refugees from Burma arriving by sea and failed to offer protection in accordance with international legal norms by returning individuals to Burma where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

In January, the U.S. Department of Commerce sanctioned Telecom International Myanmar Company Limited, a military-backed conglomerate, for providing surveillance and financial support to enable the junta to carry out human rights abuses against its people. In February, President Donald J. Trump extended Executive Order 14014, maintaining the national emergency status with respect to the situation in and related to Burma. In July, the Trump administration lifted sanctions on five individuals and companies allegedly linked to Burma's ruling generals. In September, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned three Burmese nationals and a Yangon-based company to disrupt their weapons sales to the Tatmadaw.

In January, the U.S. Mission in Geneva condemned the Tatmadaw's escalating violence, expressed support for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Five-Point Consensus on Burma, and welcomed collaboration between ASEAN and UN special envoys. In June, the U.S. Department of State fully suspended visa issuance to Burmese nationals pursuant to Presidential Proclamation 10949. In July, the Trump administration froze nearly $40 million of funds designated for programs supporting human rights, democracy, and independent media in Burma. In August, the State Department issued a press statement expressing its support for the people of Burma and commending Bangladesh and other countries for hosting refugees from Burma. In September, the U.S. UN Mission in New York announced intent to provide over $60 million in assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In November, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced the termination of TPS for Burma, placing about 3,000 Burmese nationals at risk for deportation.

In February, Representative Claudia Tenney (R-NY) introduced H.Res. 106 to call on the UN Security Council to impose an arms embargo against the Burmese military. In July, bipartisan efforts led to the introduction of three bills: the BRAVE Burma Act (H.R. 8863), the similar Burma GAP Act (H.R. 4140) to address the ongoing humanitarian crisis, and the No New Burma Funds Act (H.R. 4423) to withhold financial support for the regime.

In November, the House Foreign Affairs East Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee held a hearing on Burma's crisis and U.S. policy options.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Burma as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

CHINA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, China perpetuated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Chinese authorities sought to exert complete control over religion through an extensive web of laws, regulations, and policies that do not conform to international human rights standards. In September, the government published regulations that ban clergy from engaging in online religious activities outside of government-approved websites. Authorities continued to pursue the state's coercive "sinicization of religion" policy, which seeks to integrate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political ideology into every aspect of religious life and forcibly assimilate ethnic minorities, including through co-opting or prohibiting their unique religious traditions and destroying or modifying their houses of worship. Chinese President Xi Jinping touted the sinicization of Tibet and Xinjiang during his visits to the regions in 2025.

As part of the government's ongoing genocide, at least half a million predominately Muslim Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic minorities remained imprisoned or held in other internment facilities in Xinjiang. Authorities continued to expand forced labor programs and residential boarding schools used to forcibly assimilate the population. In January 2025, independent media reported that authorities had sentenced Uyghur Muslim Seylihan Rozi to 17 years in prison for teaching her children and a neighbor Qur'anic verses used for daily prayers. In March, officials ordered Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang to provide video proof they were not fasting during Ramadan.

Authorities cracked down on Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and disappeared and imprisoned monks who publicly or privately honored the Dalai Lama. In or around May, authorities in Sichuan Province demolished three hundred Tibetan Buddhist stupas and statues. Officials provided no details on the whereabouts or well-being of 11th Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, 30 years after his enforced disappearance. Authorities reaffirmed their intent to interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession.

Law enforcement also ramped up its targeting of independent Protestant religious leaders and house church congregations. In June, authorities sentenced around a dozen members of the Golden Lampstand Church for alleged fraud, including 15 years' imprisonment for its pastor Yang Rongli. In October, law enforcement detained more than 20 members of Zion Church, including its pastor Ezra Jin, for "unlawfully using online information." Despite increased engagement between the Vatican and China, underground Catholic clergy faced government pressure to align with state-controlled Catholic organizations. Chinese authorities unilaterally appointed two Catholic bishops, one in Shanghai and another in Xinxiang, following the death of Pope Francis in April, in violation of Catholic Church protocols. Prison authorities have continued to deny activist Jimmy Lai access to the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist. In December, a court in Hong Kong convicted Lai on national security charges, further emblematic of China's repression of religious freedom and related human rights.

The government imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners, Church of Almighty God members, and followers of other unrecognized religious groups that authorities deemed illegal. In August, authorities reportedly forced an 87-year-old Falun Gong practitioner to begin serving a three-and-a-half-year prison sentence. Several elderly Falun Gong practitioners reportedly died while imprisoned in 2025.

China continued to harass, surveil, threaten family members of, and pursue the deportation of religious minorities and dissidents living outside the country as part of its transnational repression efforts. In February, Thailand deported 40 Uyghurs back to China despite concerns of severe punishment and torture upon their return. Chinese authorities engaged in online disinformation campaigns, especially about Xinjiang and Tibet, to whitewash the country's religious freedom record.

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);
- Sanction, in coordination with international partners, Chinese government agencies, entities, and officials—including the CCP's United Front Work Department and the public security and state security apparatus—responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- Appoint the special coordinator on Tibetan issues at the U.S. Department of State as part of efforts to address Tibetan religious freedom issues and combat China's attempts to interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession;
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom violations in China, such as Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the National Endowment for Democracy; and
- Instruct the U.S. Department of Justice to prioritize investigating and prosecuting Chinese government transnational repression against religious minorities and activists.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation to assist those fleeing religious persecution in China, support civil society working on religious freedom issues in China, and combat Chinese propaganda, disinformation, and transnational repression against religious communities;
- Tighten export controls on technologies China uses to facilitate religious freedom abuses, including through amendments to the Export Control Act of 2018; and
- Ban foreign lobbying by agents representing the Chinese government and its state-affiliated commercial entities that undermine religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** China's Persecution of Religious Leaders
- **Hearing:** State-Controlled Religion in China
- **Spotlight Podcast:** China's Religious Freedom Violations on the Basis of Article 300
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

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

Religious communities must register with the government to practice their religion legally. Major restrictions remain in place for registered religious communities, including a prohibition on minors engaging in religious activities or receiving religious education. Authorities surveil houses of worship and use other authoritarian means to ensure compliance with government regulations. Authorities have destroyed, shut down, and forcibly modified churches, mosques, temples, and other houses of worship under China's "sinicization of religion" policy. Religious leaders and community members who refuse to submit to the CCP's intrusive system of control face harassment, fines, detention, political reeducation, forced labor, imprisonment, enforced disappearance, torture, and other abuse.

Transnational Repression

China engaged in transnational repression, including through high-tech and emerging technologies, to silence religious and ethnic minorities living abroad. In February, the Swiss government alleged that China surveilled Uyghurs and Tibetans in Switzerland and pressured them to spy on their own diaspora communities. In May, Turkish authorities dismantled an alleged Chinese spy network conducting surveillance on Uyghurs in the country. In August, Australian authorities arrested a Chinese national for allegedly spying on a Buddhist group on behalf of Chinese state security.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

United Nations (UN) human rights bodies raised concerns about China's religious freedom record. UN mandate holders in February and July sought information about Chinese authorities' treatment of several human rights defenders whose cases are tied to religious freedom, including forcibly disappeared lawyer Gao Zhisheng, Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti, and Tibetan protester Namkyi. In July, UN special rapporteurs and independent experts raised Tibetan Buddhist religious freedom issues with the Chinese government, including the Dalai Lama's succession, government regulation of the Tibetan Buddhist reincarnation process, and the enforced disappearance of the Panchen Lama. That same month, UN mandate holders highlighted allegations of China's transnational repression against ethnic and religious minorities, among other activists. In August, UN experts inquired to China about the circumstances surrounding the mysterious death of Tibetan Buddhist religious leader Tulku Hungkar Dorje in Vietnamese custody. He had reportedly fled China to Vietnam in 2024 after Chinese law enforcement briefly detained him for unclear reasons.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of President Donald J. Trump brought attention to religious freedom issues in China, including freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) prisoners. Following Thailand's moves to forcibly return Uyghurs to China, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced in March a new visa restriction policy for foreign government officials involved in the refoulment of Uyghur Muslims and other religious minorities to China. In May, Secretary Rubio alongside members of Congress called for the immediate release of the Panchen Lama and an end to China's repression of Tibetan Buddhism. In August, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security identified new high-priority sectors of enforcement under the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. In October, Secretary Rubio condemned the arrest of Ezra Jin and others from Zion Church. Later that month, President Trump raised the case of Jimmy Lai when he met with President Xi in South Korea. In November, the United States alongside several other countries released a joint statement expressing concerns about China's human rights record, including its treatment of religious minorities.

The U.S. government's cuts to broader human rights programming and U.S.-funded international media affected organizations that documented and reported on religious freedom violations in China. RFA's Uyghur and Tibetan language services—which ceased operations in May—were among the only independent sources of information reporting out of the regions.

The U.S. Congress introduced several bills to address China's religious freedom and related human rights violations and support impacted religious communities, including the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Policy Act (S. 288), the Uyghur Human Rights Protection Act (H.R. 2349), the Transnational Repression Policy Act (S. 2525/H.R. 4829), the Preventing the Forced Return of Uyghurs Act of 2025 (S. 2502), the Uyghur Genocide Accountability and Sanctions Act of 2025 (S. 2560/H.R. 4830), the FREEDOM for Gao Zhisheng and All Political Prisoners Act (H.R. 5303), and the Combatting the Persecution of Religious Groups in China Act (S. 3056/H.R. 5838). In September, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the bipartisan Uyghur Policy Act of 2025 (H.R. 2635), which would require the State Department to prioritize Uyghur human rights issues. The bill is with the U.S. Senate for consideration. In November, the Senate agreed to a bipartisan resolution (S. Res. 463) introduced by Senators Ted Cruz (R-TX) and Chris Coons (D-DE) condemning the CCP's persecution of Zion Church and religious minorities. Representative Andy Barr (R-KY) subsequently introduced a companion resolution (H. Res. 861) in the House. Members of Congress appealed directly to the Trump administration on U.S. policy related to religious freedom in China, including about Uyghur forced labor, the special coordinator on Tibetan issues, and FoRB prisoners. In November, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China held a hearing on religious freedom in China and its importance in U.S. foreign policy.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated China as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

CUBA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Cuba remained poor. The government maintained its comprehensive legal framework for oppressing freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), under which religious leaders and communities were continually harassed and threatened. Authorities reneged on limited relief that was briefly granted to wrongfully imprisoned FoRB victims.

Cuba's Law of Associations continues to require religious organizations to apply to the Ministry of Justice, which houses the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), for registration. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over registration decisions, frequently denying registration or failing to respond to long-pending applications. Although state-sanctioned religious communities face government threats and intimidation, membership in or association with an unregistered group is a crime. For unregistered groups, the lack of legal recognition becomes the basis for sustained and flagrant harassment. Criminalized religious organizations, such as the Free Yoruba Association of Cuba, face regular interrogation, detention, threatened prison sentences, and property confiscation.

The government leveraged domestic surveillance and security structures, including the Department of State Security, the National Revolutionary Police (PNR), and local Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), to persecute religious leaders and worshipers. In July, a pastor was forcibly disappeared for 14 hours after delivering medication to the mother of two political prisoners incarcerated for joining the peaceful protests of July 2021 (the 11J protests) that called for greater freedom and economic relief. In April 2025, CDR and PNR officials threatened a *babalao* (a high priest in the Santería tradition) with prosecution for rituals performed in his home. In May, police placed a pastor under house arrest for buying cement they claimed was fraudulently purchased—charges not leveled against the seller or any other buyers. Authorities continually prevented the Ladies in White, a prominent organization of wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003, from attending Sunday Mass. Civil society reported hundreds of arbitrary detentions, fines, blocks on attending services, and official threats targeting religious communities throughout 2025 at even higher levels than documented in 2024.

Religious expression deemed critical of the government resulted in state reprisal, as in the case of a pastoral couple detained for five days for mentioning God during the trial of their son for allegedly evading mandatory military service in June. Authorities had indefinitely delayed their trial at the time of this report, and the couple could face eight years in prison. Leading up to the fourth anniversary of the 11J protests, religious leaders reported increased warnings not to hold large events or permit entrance by families of political prisoners. Religious leaders forced into exile, an ongoing strategy by the Cuban government to decapitate religious groups, continued to endure repression. Exiled Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente stated in May and again in October that Cuban officials twice prevented him from returning to Cuba to visit his ill daughter. Authorities also tolerated violence against religious leaders. In July, Bishop Jorge Luis Pérez, a leader in the unregistered Alliance of Christians of Cuba, was reportedly struck with a machete by a man whom authorities briefly detained before releasing with no charges.

Cuba continues to arbitrarily and wrongfully incarcerate FoRB victims, including religious individuals who peacefully participated in the 11J protests. The government released several FoRB victims in January, notably Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, Lisdiani Rodríguez Isaac, and Donaida Pérez Paseiro. After Pérez Paseiro continued to advocate for the freedom of her husband Loreto Hernández García, who remains imprisoned for his leadership role in the Free Yoruba Association, she was rearrested and returned to prison in June. FoRB victims are reportedly subject to inhumane detention conditions, including cold, hunger, and medical neglect.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Cuba as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Expand the use of targeted sanctions under 7031(c) and 212(a)(2)(G) authorities to place visa bans on Cuban officials—such as Caridad Diego Bello, head of the ORA—who have engaged in gross human rights violations against religious individuals or groups and/or severe violations of religious freedom, particularly those targeting FoRB victims, unregistered groups, and the Ladies in White; and
- Fund foreign assistance programs that support Cuban civil society to document religious freedom violations and use that documentation to promote accountability.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold hearings through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission to highlight religious freedom violations by the Cuban government and opportunities for U.S. policy responses.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** Cuba and Nicaragua's Escalating Crackdown on Religious Communities
- **Issue Update:** Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Authoritarian Triad – Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

While independent data are limited on Cuba's religious demographics, 60 percent of the country's population of 11 million are estimated to identify as Roman Catholic. A majority of the population, and especially Afro-Cubans, observe traditions rooted in Africa, including the syncretic religion of Santería. Cuba is also home to a variety of religious minorities, including Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Episcopalians, Anabaptists, Quakers, Moravians, Baha'is, Jews, Rastafarians, and members of the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox churches.

Cuba is a one-party authoritarian state under the ruling Cuban Communist Party with no independent judiciary. The 2019 constitution provides basic guarantees of religious freedom, but the Penal Code effectively nullifies these protections, including through the criminalization of unauthorized association or expression. Rights to assembly and association are purportedly constitutionally recognized but only when exercised with respect to public order and in compliance with the precepts established by law. The ORA tightly controls religious institutions through arbitrary registration decisions and approval requirements for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. Repressive legislation in Nicaragua is believed to have inspired Cuba's 2024 Citizenship Law, which allows the denationalization of Cubans residing abroad who undermine the nation's interests, including potentially through peaceful religious activity. Amid ongoing economic crisis and infrastructure collapse, religious organizations help meet the populace's humanitarian needs, often drawing additional harassment from Cuban authorities for indirectly highlighting government shortfalls.

Ladies in White

Cuban authorities employed arbitrary detention and surveillance to regularly prevent the Ladies in White from attending Catholic Mass on Sundays. In February 2025, state security agents arrested several members attempting to attend the funeral of a fellow Lady in White. In April, authorities placed organization leader Berta Soler Fernández and her husband under house arrest for 48 days, detaining them first for over 24 hours. The pair were detained after they attended Mass alongside the Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Havana Mike Hammer, a retaliation condemned by the U.S. Department of State as a further show of disregard for religious freedom. In August, the Cuban government exiled a Ladies in White member to the Dominican Republic after imprisoning her for more than eight years, demonstrating a forced exile strategy often deployed against religious leaders. Individual members and the group's headquarters (also Soler's home) were reported to be under unrelenting surveillance.

Harassment and Co-Optation through Registration

The Cuban government maintained its tiered system of religious groups, under which communities aligned with the state-recognized Cuban Council of Churches (CCC) enjoyed a relatively mutually supportive relationship with the government; non-CCC but registered groups were more heavily repressed, and unregistered groups were fully criminalized. The government leveraged the CCC as evidence of its commitment to religious freedom while subjecting less favored groups to abject harassment. Even CCC members, however, were not immune from FoRB violations. For example, in February, a PNR inspector fined a CCC-affiliated pastor 15,000 Cuban pesos ($625, a sum that eclipses the estimated median monthly income in Cuba) and threatened him with imprisonment for encouraging antigovernment sentiment by praying for Cuban women and the Cuban nation. The ORA regularly arbitrarily denied or failed to respond to registration applications, then used the denial of legal status as a pretext for targeting unregistered groups. Particularly targeting unregistered religious communities, the state extended its persecution by orchestrating or tolerating popular "acts of repudiation." These ostensibly spontaneous protests interrupted services and intimidated attendees, with one unregistered church in Cuba reportedly subject to weekly incidents in 2025 and the PNR declining to disrupt the harassment despite complaints.

FoRB Violations in Prisons

Systematic violations of FoRB in Cuban prisons continued throughout 2025. These violations included verbal and physical abuse on the basis of religious beliefs as well as routine and arbitrary bans on religious visits, literature, garb, and congregation for practice. Though withholding of FoRB rights had been documented as a psychological weapon against political prisoners in prior years, FoRB violations in 2025 occurred systematically across those in custody for a wide variety of alleged crimes. Common prisoners now reported even more consistent violations than political prisoners. Prison authorities appeared to consider religious freedom a penal benefit—not a right—that could be arbitrarily extended or revoked in conjunction with other benefits, such as phone calls.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government's relationship with Cuba remains strained, especially over human rights issues. In 2025, the U.S. reversed several measures that had eased pressure on the Cuban government and returned Cuba to the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. In Cuba, Chief of Mission Hammer met with pastors to discuss freedom of religion. In September, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio celebrated Berta Soler's receipt of the Polish Lech Wałęsa Solidarity Prize for promoting democracy and civil liberties. The United States also took significant action on the fourth anniversary of the 11J protests to sanction key regime leaders implicated in the response to the protests—specifically President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Cuba Álvaro López Miera, Minister of the Interior Lázaro Alberto Álvarez Casas, and their immediate family members—under Section 7031(c) for involvement in gross violations of human rights, which included detaining and continuing to imprison Donaida Pérez Paseiro and Loreto Hernández García.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Cuba as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

ERITREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government continued to systematically persecute individuals based on their religious beliefs. The government has registered and officially recognizes only four religious groups: Sunni Islam, the Tewahedo Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and evangelical Lutheran churches. It did not register any new religious organizations during the year. Without formal registration, the government can prohibit religious communities from building or owning houses of worship or engaging in religious practices such as praying in groups. During the year, members of officially recognized religions also faced obstacles and government punishment for practicing their religion, including stripping of citizenship. The government continued to use its diplomatic missions to harass Eritreans living in other countries who criticize its human rights abuses, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

In 2025, the Eritrean government incarcerated members of religious communities under egregious conditions in facilities across the country, including police stations, civilian and military prisons, and undisclosed structures. FoRB detainees in Eritrea endure particularly severe mistreatment, including sexual violence and physical abuse such as electrocution, exposure, waterboarding, hanging, noise torture, and denial of medical treatment, any of which can result in death. Government officials also coerced detainees to renounce their religious beliefs and banned praying aloud, singing, preaching, and possessing religious books. The government utilizes many detainment facilities that are severely dilapidated concrete structures, while others are metal cargo shipping containers that might house hundreds of detainees. Officials also hold detainees in simple holes in the ground, subjecting them to harsh weather conditions. The government is detaining approximately 10,000 prisoners of conscience and detainees of all types in over 300 facilities around the country.

In January, authorities detained 44 Christians including 27 teenagers from a private service at a home in Asmara. In May 2025, the government had reportedly picked up, interrogated, and released 245 Christians and was detaining 100 others long-term. Another 1,000 Christians had fled abroad to avoid detention. Government authorities targeted specific communities, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and evangelical Christians, for persecution and arrest. As in prior years, the government encouraged community surveillance of nontraditional Protestant Christians. Authorities sometimes release detainees on a short-term basis and apprehend them again subsequently if they do not renounce their faith and regularly report to authorities. The month of May marked the 21st anniversary of the arrests of Pastors Kiflu Gebremeskel and Haile Naizghe, both associated with the banned Full Gospel Church of Eritrea and whom the government is still imprisoning. September 27 marked the one-year anniversary of the two still-held elderly Jehovah's Witnesses, Letebrhan Tesfay and Berekti Habte, who were both attending a private religious service. In October, Jehovah's Witnesses marked the 31st anniversary of the Eritrean president's 1994 revocation of Jehovah's Witnesses' citizenship, which resulted in the group's subsequent ban and mass detention for refusing on religious grounds to participate in the country's independence referendum. The government detains Jehovah's Witnesses in both Mai Serwa and Adi Abeto prison facilities but rarely formally charges or sentences them. In 2025, 64 Jehovah's Witnesses remained detained. Government officials declined invitations to meet with Jehovah's Witness representatives to discuss the status of detainees from that community.

The government has detained Rev. Gebremedhin Gebregergis of the Eritrean Orthodox Church since 2004. Gebregergis is currently incommunicado at the Wengel Mermera Central Criminal Investigation Interrogation Center. Wengel Mermera is a dungeon-like maximum security prison in Asmara that houses many prominent FoRB prisoners, including church leaders, along with political dissidents.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government officials, including those in the police, judiciary, and correctional system, who are responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities; and
- Engage with the Eritrean government directly and through multilateral partners to end religious persecution of unregistered religious communities with the return of a nonmilitary, national service option for Jehovah's Witnesses as a path toward gaining full citizenship; and release the remaining detainees held for their religious activities.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** A Former Prisoner's Story and the Path to Religious Freedom in Eritrea
- **USCIRF Event:** Standing with the Silenced – Leveraging the Frank Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Eritrea has as estimated population of 6.3 million people. Approximately 52 percent of the population identify as Sunni Muslim and 39 percent as Tewahedo Eritrean Orthodox, five percent identify as Roman Catholic, two percent as Protestant, and one percent as Shi'a Muslim. The government allows the only known Jew in the country to maintain a historic synagogue and cemetery near Asmara.

In 2002, Eritrea acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), obligating it to use policies and practices that are in compliance with the Covenant. The Eritrean constitution nominally protects citizens' rights to FoRB, and laws in Eritrea ostensibly prohibit religious discrimination and provide for freedom of thought, conscience, and belief as well as the freedom to practice any religion and to change one's religion. The government, however, regularly violates these rights in practice, favoring certain denominations when applying registration requirements and obstructing the religious practices of minority groups.

Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 grants the government authority to completely regulate religious activities and institutions in the country by separating political and faith-based affairs. The law also strictly forbids any foreign financial support for churches, permitting only local donations. Finally, the law formalized the establishment of the Office of Religious Affairs, which itself monitors religious groups and requires them to register with the government or cease activities.

Conscientious Objection

The ruling People's Front for Democracy and Justice Party engages in coercion, imprisonment, torture, and killing as part of a strategy to divide and control different religious groups. The government justifies its detainment of members of Jehovah's Witnesses because Witnesses steadfastly refuse to serve in the military on the basis of their religion. As a result, the government generally holds them indefinitely, imposing egregiously long periods of incarceration on community members. Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 are subject to forced conscription and must serve in the military for 18 months, and there is no national service alternative to military duty. Government officers apprehend both male and female objectors and take them to military camps where they remain indefinitely to endure various punishments. Authorities, however, grant some exemptions to service to pregnant women and people with a physical disability. Jehovah's Witness school students also face detainment if they decline to participate in patriotic ceremonies such as national anthems or refuse to engage in any form of political participation.

In February, as a result of the ongoing political confrontation with neighboring Ethiopia regarding the Tigray region and access to the Red Sea, the president directed officials to mobilize potential conscripts under the age of 60 for readiness to serve in military units, prohibiting any individuals under 50 years of age from leaving the country. The government also persecutes family members of those who seek to evade military service by enforcing severe penalties on them. In March, at the behest of the Eritrean government, the Egyptian government forcibly returned 150 Eritrean refugees and migrants to Eritrea and requested that deportation processes continue, likely affecting many conscientious objectors.

Multilateral Observations of Religious Freedom Violations in Eritrea

In June, the Eritrean government announced it was seeking to end the United Nations (UN) annual mandate to investigate alleged abuses of human rights and religious freedom in the country. The UN special rapporteur reported in June that the government continues to "systematically violate civil and political rights and deny due process to thousands of Eritreans who remain in arbitrary detention or subjected to enforced disappearance" and that "freedom of religion is severely suppressed." The special rapporteur expressed particular concerns over the prolonged arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance of religious leaders and laity as well as the government's interference in religious institutions, including schools, adding that the regime sees such entities as sources of political dissent. In July, the UN Human Rights Council rejected Eritrea's attempt to end the mandate and instead renewed the mandate for another year.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government maintains diplomatic relations with the Eritrean government and operates an embassy in the capital, Asmara. The two governments, however, have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. At the same time, the Eritrean economy remains closed to U.S. investment and trade due to existing sanctions, the lack of an Eritrean commercial code, and strict government control of all imports and exports. In June, the U.S. government listed Eritrea as "restricted," thereby denying entry of Eritrean nationals into the United States as a way to advance U.S. foreign policy, national security, and counterterrorism objectives.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

INDIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate as the government introduced and enforced new legislation targeting religious minority communities and their houses of worship. Several states undertook efforts to introduce or strengthen anti-conversion laws to include harsher prison sentences. Indian authorities also facilitated widespread detention and illegal expulsion of citizens and religious refugees and tolerated vigilante attacks against religious minority communities.

Throughout the year, Hindu nationalist mobs across several states harassed, incited, and instigated violence against Muslims and Christians with impunity. In March, violence erupted in Maharashtra after a hardline Hindu nationalist group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), called for the removal of the tomb of Aurangzeb, a 17th-century Mughal ruler. Subsequent riots injured dozens of people and resulted in a curfew, fueled by rumors from Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officials that Qur'ans were desecrated in VHP-led protests. In June, a Hindu nationalist mob attacked 20 Christian families in Odisha after they refused to convert to Hinduism. The attacks, which did not prompt police intervention, left eight people injured and hospitalized.

In April, three gunmen attacked a group of predominantly Hindu tourists in the Muslim-majority territory of Kashmir, killing 26 people. The perpetrators reportedly asked the victims to recite the Kalma, an Islamic verse, and killed those who were unable to do so. The attack sparked a five-day conflict between India and Pakistan and intensified anti-Muslim sentiment in India, including targeted attacks. Muslims were reportedly killed in Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh in alleged hate crimes following the attack. In Uttar Pradesh, self-professed members of a Hindu nationalist group reportedly shot and killed a Muslim restaurant worker, vowing to avenge those killed in the Kashmir attack. The Indian government also seized the aftermath of the attack to justify deportations of religious minorities it considers "illegal" migrants.

In May, Indian authorities detained 40 Rohingya refugees, including 15 Christians, all of whom were transported into international waters near the coast of Burma and forced to swim to the Burmese shore with nothing more than life vests. In July, Indian authorities expelled hundreds of Bengali-speaking Muslims from Assam to Bangladesh despite being Indian citizens. Officials from the ruling BJP accused those expelled of being Muslim "infiltrators" from Bangladesh, threatening India's national identity. To further facilitate the crackdown in alleged "illegal migration," the government passed a new set of rules and orders for the Foreigners Act in September. The order expands the authority of Foreigner Tribunals to issue arrest warrants and send those suspected of being "foreigners" to holding centers without due process.

Throughout the year, the government also continued to target houses of worship to bring them under state control. In May, India's Parliament passed the Waqf Bill, which adds non-Muslims to the boards that manage Waqf land endowments that are traditionally staffed by Muslims. These endowments include religious sites, such as mosques, seminaries, and graveyards. In response to the bill, deadly protests erupted in the state of West Bengal, leaving three people dead. In September, the Supreme Court suspended key provisions of the bill, including one in which the government can decide whether a disputed property is Waqf or not. The court further limited the number of non-Muslim members of the federal board to four. The same month, Uttarakhand's legislative assembly passed the State Authority for Minority Education (USAME) Act, which dissolves the Madrasa Board and brings madrasas and other educational institutions for Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians under state control.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate India as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Press India to allow US government entities such as USCIRF and the U.S. Department of State to conduct in-country assessments of religious freedom conditions;
- Impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities, such as India's Research and Analysis Wing and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), for their responsibility and tolerance of severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' or entities' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States;
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies with India to improvements in religious freedom; and
- Enforce Section 6 of the Arms Export Control Act to halt arms sales to India based on continued acts of intimidation and harassment against U.S. citizens and religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reintroduce and pass the Transnational Repression Reporting Act of 2024 to require the annual reporting of acts of transnational repression by the Indian government targeting religious minorities in the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** Systematic Religious Persecution in India
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The State of Religious Freedom in India
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

India is the world's most populous democracy, with an estimated population of 1.4 billion. The majority of the population is Hindu (78.9 percent), with minority Muslim (14.2 percent), Christian (2.3 percent), and Sikh (1.7 percent) communities. Smaller numbers of Parsis, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Jews also reside in India. Article 25 of India's constitution guarantees freedom of conscience for all citizens, including the right to practice and profess their religion. Since 2014, however, the ruling BJP has implemented strict legislation and policies targeting religious minority communities.

Enforcement of Laws Restricting Religious Freedom

The Indian government enforces numerous discriminatory laws targeting religious minorities, including the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the 1967 Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC), the 2025 Waqf Bill, and the 2025 Immigration and Foreigners Bill. Article 295A of the Penal Code functions as a blasphemy law by criminalizing actions deemed to "outrage religious feelings."

Additionally, 12 out of 28 states maintain anti-conversion laws. In 2025, several state governments strengthened or introduced new laws to include harsher penalties and broader definitions of "religious conversion." In March, Arunachal Pradesh began pushing for the implementation of a decades-dormant anti-conversion law. This was met with widespread protests by hundreds of thousands of Christians.

In August, Uttarakhand state passed an anti-conversion law that criminalizes digital speech about religion. The new law increases the jail term for "illegal conversions" from 10 to 14 years. Similarly, Rajasthan state adopted legislation to include life imprisonment as possible punishment for conducting religious conversions. The law requires individuals to give the government two months' notice if they plan to change their religion voluntarily. It also requires the "converter" to give a month's notice if they perform a religious conversion. Failure to do so may result in three years' jail time.

In July, Maharashtra state announced plans to introduce in December a tougher law to prevent religious conversions. Similarly, Chhattisgarh state announced in October that a proposed new anti-conversion law would target faith healing meetings. The same month, Assam state announced it would introduce legislation to curb so-called "love jihad," a derogatory term for conversions occurring in the context of interfaith marriages. Following the submission of several petitions against anti-conversion laws, the Supreme Court announced in September that it would give the nine states facing legal challenges four weeks to provide replies and motions justifying their anti-conversion laws, with hearings to follow. In November, the Supreme Court issued a notice to Rajasthan state, directing the government to respond to a constitutional challenge against its anti-conversion law. The same month, Indian officials reportedly denied a visa to American Christian evangelist, Reverend Franklin Graham.

Throughout 2025, violent mobs attacked Muslims under the guise of protecting state-level cow slaughter laws. In May, vigilantes violently attacked four men whom they accused of transporting beef in Uttar Pradesh. In June, police arrested 16 people in Assam for allegedly "illegally" slaughtering cows during Eid-ul-Adha. While cow slaughter is not illegal in the state, the 2021 Assam Cattle Preservation Act prohibits cow slaughter and beef sales in areas that have a Hindu, Sikh, or Jain majority. Following the arrests, Assam's chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma, declared that the government would tighten enforcement of the Act.

Imprisonment of Religious Minorities

In 2025, authorities detained individuals accused of conducting "forced conversions." In October, police arrested a U.S. citizen, James Watson, and two Indian nationals, Ganpati Sarpe and Manoj Govind Kolha, accused of converting Hindus to Christianity in Maharashtra. The men were charged with "hurting religious sentiment" and for violating the state's anti-black magic law, luring individuals to convert by promising "miracle cures" and prosperity.

In addition, the government continued to wield antiterrorism laws to imprison religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf. Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, and several others involved in the 2020 CAA protests remained in prison for the fifth year without trials. Similarly, while a district court acquitted Jagtar Singh Johal in March of "conspiracy" charges and being a member of a "terrorist gang," he remains imprisoned in solitary confinement under eight additional charges. Johal, a British citizen, was arrested in 2017 for his religious freedom work.

In May, authorities arrested a Muslim university professor, Ali Khan Mahmudabad, under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (India's Criminal Code) for his comments on social media about Kashmir and subsequent attacks against Muslims in India. The complaint, filed by a junior BJP member, accused Mahmudabad of "insulting religious beliefs." In September, police arrested dozens of individuals for displaying "I love Muhammad" posters across Uttar Pradesh. Local Hindu groups objected to the posters, resulting in widespread protests across several states. In Kashipur, police registered a case involving 401 Muslims.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued diplomatic engagement with India. In February, President Donald J. Trump hosted Prime Minister Narendra Modi for an official state visit to Washington, DC. Religious freedom remained absent from public discussion.

In April, Vice President JD Vance conducted a state visit to India and met with Prime Minister Modi to discuss a trade deal. This visit coincided with the deadly attack in Kashmir, which India alleged was carried out by those from Pakistan. Following the attack, President Trump posted on social media affirming that the United States would continue offering its full support to India. Secretary of State Marco Rubio held separate conversations with Indian and Pakistani officials, urging them to "maintain peace." In May, President Trump offered to mediate with both India and Pakistan on a Kashmir "solution."

The same month, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing on transnational repression, which included testimony highlighting acts by the Indian government to target religious minorities abroad. In August, President Trump nominated Sergio Gor to be the U.S. ambassador to India; he also appointed Gor to be the U.S. special envoy for South and Central Asia.

IRAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained poor. The Iranian government escalated its systematic targeting of non-Shi'a Muslim religious minorities, including Baha'is, Jews, Christians, Sufis, and Sunnis. Authorities also persecuted dissenters from the government's interpretation of Islam and systematically enforced religiously grounded policies limiting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for Iranian women and girls.

In June, Iran's top judiciary official instructed prosecutors throughout the country to expedite trials and impose harsher punishments for individuals arraigned on religiously grounded charges of *moharabeh* (waging war against God) and *esfad-fil-arz* (corruption on Earth). In July, United Nations (UN) experts wrote to the Iranian government condemning the increase in hate speech in state media falsely accusing religious minorities as traitors and dehumanizing them as "filthy rats." Weeks later, hundreds of regime-aligned clerics endorsed a fatwa labeling threats against Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as *moharabeh*, a capital offense in Islamic legal jurisprudence. In October, Iran's Parliament and Guardian Council approved an espionage law expanding the range of punishable actions and use of the death penalty for individuals allegedly cooperating with the United States or Israel on the religious charge of "corruption on Earth." The law targets Baha'is, Christians, and Jews in Iran with ties to Israel but who pose no demonstrable threat.

The June military escalation exacerbated religious freedom concerns for religious minorities. Authorities coerced Jewish community leaders to vocalize government support and held Jews collectively responsible for Israeli actions. Authorities systematically arrested Jews in Isfahan, Yazd, Shiraz, and Tehran and subjected them to hours-long interrogations. In July, Ayatollah Khamenei posted a graphic depicting Israeli Jewish civilians and soldiers as rats, contributing to a hostile environment in which Iranian Jews feel increasingly threatened. Iranian state media also portrayed Christians as national enemies and accused Evangelical Christians of collaboration with foreign "Zionist" churches. In June, *Ferghe News* claimed Evangelicals harbor the same "racist and inhuman beliefs of the Zionist regime." In July, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence claimed to have "neutralized" over 50 Christian "Mossad mercenaries" allegedly trained by churches in the United States and Israel.

Of the more than 1,900 executions in 2025, including 152 in May alone, roughly half involved religiously grounded *qisas* (retributive justice) cases. In April, judicial authorities sentenced Iranian singer Amirhossein Maghsoudou to death for "insulting the Prophet." That month, five Sunni Muslim men were executed for their religious identity. In October, authorities affirmed the death sentence of Hossein Shahu, another Sunni detained for his religious identity.

In 2025, the Iranian government systematically targeted Sunni and non-Muslim minorities through torture, disappearance of prominent clergy, and destruction of homes. In January, prison authorities placed Abolfazl Pour-Hosseini, a member of the Erfan-e-Halgheh spiritualist movement, in solitary confinement for protesting unfair prison conditions. In May, authorities deployed security forces to Zahedan's Sunni Makki Mosque after Sunni cleric Molavi Abdolhamid condemned government arrests of Sunnis. In June, authorities detained 19 members of the Yamani religious movement during a religious gathering. That month, Kerman authorities arrested the sister of Gonbadi Sufi activist Behnam Mahjoubi, who died from medical malpractice while imprisoned in 2021.

A March report from the UN Fact-Finding Mission on Iran noted that Iranian women and girls "continue to face systematic discrimination, in law and in practice" regarding the enforcement of mandatory hijab laws against their individual religious beliefs. That same month, authorities arrested women journalists in Tehran who removed their headscarves to protest these laws. Authorities also deployed sophisticated and often foreign-sourced technology to surveil and harass women to ensure their compliance with the law.

Iran's government continued to recruit organized crime networks around the world to violently attack Jewish sites and individuals in Azerbaijan, Sweden, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.

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);
- Enforce the Mahsa Amini Human Rights and Security Accountability Act (MAHSA Act) by imposing sanctions on top Iranian officials responsible for human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations; and
- Reopen the legal pathway under the Lautenberg-Specter Program allowing persecuted Iranian religious minorities to resettle in the United States.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Permanently reauthorize and exercise oversight of the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment;
- Adopt legislation that enables U.S. support for Iranian dissidents protesting FoRB conditions and encourages the Donald J. Trump administration to issue general licenses that facilitate internet freedom in Iran; and
- Hold hearings through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission about Iran's transnational repression and other malign activities impacting religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** State Perpetration of Religious Freedom Violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran
- **Press Release:** USCIRF Calls on Trump Administration to Seek Iranian Concessions on Religious Freedom in Oman Discussions
- **Press Release:** USCIRF Urges Resumption of Lautenberg-Specter Program
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

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

Baha'is

Authorities conducted raids and arrests of Baha'is across Iran throughout 2025, seizing assets, destroying property, and sentencing Baha'is to prison time. In February, intelligence forces raided the Shiraz home of Mahboub Habibi, a Baha'i previously sentenced for "propaganda against the regime," seizing personal devices. That month, Judge Davoud Khatir sentenced nine Baha'is for membership in a group "opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran." In May, Yazd security forces raided the homes of six Baha'i citizens, confiscating religious books and electronic devices.

The government also subjected Baha'is to systematic economic discrimination for their religious practice and identity. In May, authorities shuttered four Baha'i businesses in Urmia, penalizing the owners for not working in observance of a Baha'i religious holiday. In June, authorities targeted Baha'i business owners in Shiraz with legally ambiguous procedures and interrogations about their religious practices. In August, judicial authorities began invoking Article 49 of the constitution to authorize government confiscation of Baha'i assets allegedly "obtained by illicit means." That month, over 20 religiously engaged Baha'is were notified of government plans to seize homes, autos, and other assets without legal recourse. In September, authorities barred Arshia Rowhani, a Baha'i resident of Isfahan, from reviewing court documents ordering the confiscation of his shop for allegedly "disrupting national security and promoting the Baha'i Faith among Muslims."

The government targeted Baha'i women during violent home raids, detaining 11 in January for peaceful religious activity, including teaching moral education classes or gathering for worship. In August, the Hamedan Appeals Court upheld the sentences of six Baha'i women charged for "teaching and propagating against Shari'a."

Promotion of Antisemitism

Throughout 2025, government leaders, state media, and regime-aligned clerics repeatedly promoted antisemitic tropes in public statements, including ideas that Jews are subhuman. In January, officials convened Iran's annual Holocaust cartoon competition, which promotes Holocaust distortion and denial. During Ramadan, the Iranian Broadcasting Authority aired a show depicting an antisemitic caricature of a Jewish man—including a long, crooked nose and distorted face—performing sorcery. In March, Ayatollah Ahmad Alam Al-Hoda—the Friday prayer imam for the city of Mashhad—claimed that "all the stories about the Holocaust are a complete lie." Also that month, individuals from the paramilitary Basij organization and Hezbollah engaged in intimidating expressions at the tomb of Esther and Mordechai, a Jewish religious site.

Christians

Iranian authorities systematically targeted Iranian Christians throughout 2025. At least 143 Christians have been arrested across 24 cities in Iran, with approximately 162 active court cases involving Christians prosecuted for religious activities. In February, authorities re-arrested Joseph Shahbazian, a pastor and house church leader previously sentenced for religious activity. Shahbazian was arrested with Christian convert Naser Navard Goltapeh. Authorities later charged both with "collusion" and "propaganda against the state." Their indictment cites peaceful religious activities as their alleged crimes, including praying, performing baptisms, taking communion, and celebrating Christmas. It deems the Bible a "prohibited book." In April, Christian converts Mehdi Rahmi and Kia Nourinia were sentenced in absentia under Article 500 for "propaganda activity of deviant Christian Zionist beliefs opposed to the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran." In June, prison authorities reportedly tortured Christian Morteza Faghanpour-Saasi during his pre-trial detention. In October, authorities upheld his conviction to serve nine years in prison, along with six other converts also sentenced on the charge of "propaganda activity contrary to Islamic law due to overseas connections."

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout 2025, the U.S. government backed policies aimed at addressing religious freedom conditions in Iran and holding the government accountable for its transnational repression abroad. In March, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced sanctions against the Sweden-based Foxtrot Network and its leader, Rawa Majid, who was recruited by the government of Iran to carry out attacks on Jewish sites in Europe.

In April, representatives Joe Wilson (R-SC) and James Panetta (D-CA) introduced the Maximum Support Act (H.R. 2514), which would require the Trump administration to develop a policy for supporting Iranian dissidents protesting religious freedom by issuing specific licenses that facilitate internet freedom in Iran. In August, the U.S. Department of State designated Iranian entities and individuals responsible for facilitating Iran's evasion of U.S. sanctions and continued repression of Iranians. In December, members of the U.S. House of Representatives introduced a bipartisan resolution condemning Iran's state-backed persecution of Baha'is.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Iran as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

LIBYA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Libya continued to spiral downward as the internationally recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) intensified its perpetration and toleration of ongoing, systematic, and egregious violations. The country's ongoing political fragmentation and insecurity continued to broadly erode human rights protections, including freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Authorities affiliated with both the GNU in Tripoli and the Government of National Stability (GNS)—a rival, unrecognized government based in the eastern city of Benghazi—maintained restrictive environments for religious expression while upholding a rigid interpretation of Islamic law as the basis for governance. The GNU actively restricted religious freedom in a variety of ways, particularly through the state-affiliated Internal Security Agency (ISA), which carried out arrests, arbitrary and prolonged detention, interrogation, and torture of people suspected of apostasy from Islam and proselytization on behalf of other religions or beliefs.

In April, a Tripoli court convicted 10 Christians and one atheist on charges related to their peaceful religious beliefs, sentencing them to prison terms ranging from three to 15 years. The written judgment reportedly relied on the defendants' "confessions" to public prosecutors without access to legal representation. These statements followed their earlier, coerced confessions to ISA personnel who reportedly subjected the detainees to torture, including beatings and psychological abuse. The 11 defendants have reportedly faced similar prison abuses since their conviction, allegedly leading one of them to attempt suicide. In a separate case, a Christian remained imprisoned and awaiting the death penalty for a 2022 apostasy conviction in Misrata; his appeal was still awaiting review by the Tripoli-based Supreme Court at the end of the year, even as he reportedly faced attempts by prison officials to coerce him to renounce his faith.

Across the country, minority religious communities continued to face ongoing persecution at the hands of government authorities, including harassment, arbitrary detention, and societal discrimination against foreign and local Christians, disfavored Muslim groups (including Sufis and Ibadis), and suspected converts from Islam. Authorities have reportedly collaborated with GNU-allied militias to target individuals accused of atheism, proselytization, or "sorcery," in some cases subjecting detainees to torture and coerced confessions. The ISA monitored online activity and detained an unknown number of individuals on allegations of "insulting Islam" or "promoting secularism." In April, authorities in Tripoli prosecuted one social media user on related charges and sentenced him to an undisclosed prison term for criticizing the nation's religious institutions.

Both the GNU and the GNS failed to implement legal or institutional FoRB safeguards. Instead, they actively persisted in violating religious freedom while extending impunity to security forces and their respectively allied militias for committing abuses against those perceived to have contravened religious norms. Several key international and local human rights organizations spoke out on Libya's poor FoRB conditions as part of the United Nations 2025 Universal Periodic Review, urging the government to align its laws and institutions with international FoRB standards. Key recommendations include decriminalizing apostasy and blasphemy, ending ISA abuses, and establishing constitutional guarantees for religious freedom. Obtaining consistent or substantial documentation of FoRB violations in Libya remained a significant challenge throughout 2025 due to the country's ongoing political instability and fragmentation as well as the highly restrictive civil society environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Libya 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);
- Implement targeted sanctions against nonstate actors and officials within both the GNU and the GNS who engage in or tolerate violations of FoRB;
- Condition any future extension of U.S. emergency funds to the Libyan government on its demonstrable progress toward improving religious freedom conditions, including safeguarding religious minorities and reining in the ISA's religiously repressive activities; and
- Amplify multilateral engagement with key U.S. allies who maintain close ties to either or both of Libya's rival governments to apply coordinated pressure for the release of, dismissal of charges against, and/or reversal of sentences for all individuals detained or convicted for exercising their religion or belief.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Introduce and pass legislation that directs U.S. policy to promote religious freedom in Libya, including advocating for the repeal of laws criminalizing apostasy and proselytization, and pressing for robust FoRB protections in Libyan institutions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Marks the 10th Anniversary of the Execution of 21 Christians in Libya
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Roughly 97 percent of the population in Libya is Muslim; most identify as Sunni Muslim, while a smaller Ibadi Muslim community—largely concentrated among the Amazigh ethnic minority—makes up an estimated 4.5 percent. Other, much smaller religious communities include Christians, Baha'is, Hindus, Buddhists, and Ahmadiyya Muslims.

The country's 2011 interim constitutional declaration, which remains in effect in the absence of a permanent constitution, designates Islam as the state religion and Shari'a as the principal source of legislation. Although the declaration nominally guarantees non-Muslims the freedom to practice their rituals, its lack of protections for other elements of FoRB such as conversion, proselytization, and religious expression systematically enables Libya's restrictive religious freedom environment.

Since 2011, Libya's political fragmentation has produced rival eastern and western authorities— along with their respective allied militias—to support policing and military operations, which have both severely undermined FoRB. Both the Tripoli-based GNU and the rival GNS in Benghazi restrict religious expression, enforce conservative interpretations of Shari'a law, and leave religious minorities vulnerable to arbitrary harassment, detention, and violence. Nonstate actors, including U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Islamic State in Libya (IS-L), have exploited Libya's governance gaps to attack political and civilian targets.

Libya's legal framework restricts FoRB through broad, vaguely worded criminal statutes. Article 291 of the Penal Code criminalizes "insulting Islam" and "public attacks" on religious institutions, while the Anti-Cybercrime Law (Law No. 5) of 2022 further criminalizes online content that "insults religious sanctities." The law also criminalizes conversion away from Islam and proselytization, providing the basis for the state to target individuals on related suspicions. In 2024, the GNS-affiliated House of Representatives also passed Law No. 6 criminalizing "witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and related practices," which authorities have used to detain Sufi and Ibadi Muslims. Enforcement of these laws largely falls to the ISA under its self-declared "guarding virtue" mandate, often resulting in arbitrary detention, torture, and coerced confession.

Heightened Persecution of Religious Minorities and Migrants

FoRB conditions have worsened for non-Muslim and disfavored Muslim minorities in recent years due to Libya's legal framework and the brutal actions of the ISA to enforce it. Under the agency's self-declared mandate to "guard virtue" and growing influence from religiously restrictive Salafi/Madkhali ideology, the ISA has reportedly detained dozens of individuals accused of apostasy, atheism, sorcery, or vaguely defined "deviant" beliefs. These actions particularly impacted the Ibadi and Sufi communities. Reports of torture and coerced confessions, along with the destruction of Sufi shrines by state authorities and militias, further illustrate the active disdain of the ISA—and of the government more broadly—toward the principles and standards of FoRB.

Since the fall of the Qadhafi regime in 2011, Libya has been both a primary destination and a crossroads for migrant workers and displaced persons from elsewhere in North or Sub-Saharan Africa. Migrants from non-Muslim religious communities—including Coptic Christians, Baha'is, and others—are especially at acute risk of persecution, arbitrary detention, and other abuses due to their lack of legal status or ability to register places of worship. Reports indicate that the ISA regularly detains migrants suspected of converting from Islam or engaging in even private worship, often targeting them for torture or deportation.

Morality Policing as a Rising FoRB Threat

Libya's Interior Ministry reinstated a formal "morality police" force in 2024, known as the Public Morality Protection Agency, with a mandate to enforce a strict state interpretation of Shari'a, including policing dress codes, gender segregation, and "acceptable" religious practices. As it operated throughout 2025, the ISA contributed its own authority to parallel moral policing efforts, worsening the country's already poor record of restricting FoRB and other personal freedoms for women, religious minorities, and dissenting Muslims. This policing perpetuated various forms of harassment and forced compliance throughout 2025—such as the use of arbitrary checkpoints and verbal intimidation—that fostered religious self-censorship and fear throughout the country. Human rights organizations have warned that these morality policing initiatives institutionalize systematic abuses, further eroding Libya's already fragile environment for FoRB, and place additional burdens on women, youth, and nonconforming religious groups.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, longstanding concerns over the country's political fragmentation, weak central institutions, and the enduring threat of violence by nonstate actors continued to shape U.S. policy toward Libya. However, the administration of U.S. President Donald J. Trump has begun to press for constitutional and legislative reforms in Libya that enshrine greater personal freedoms, such as FoRB. In February, President Trump extended national emergency funds in Libya for another year, following consistent U.S. precedent since 2011. In November, the Trump administration hosted a delegation of senior Libyan officials to strengthen bilateral partnerships as well as to discuss opportunities for economic investment.

The U.S. Department of State did not designate Libya as a CPC in its most recent designations on December 29, 2023.

NICARAGUA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Nicaragua continued to deteriorate. The government of President Daniel Ortega and self-appointed Co-President Rosario Murillo sustained its total crackdown on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) by arresting, imprisoning, and exiling religious leaders and adherents, arbitrarily canceling the legal status of religious organizations, and consolidating its power to harass and intimidate worshipers. The Ortega-Murillo government deployed arbitrary shutdowns and seizures against religious institutions it deemed adversaries. In January, the regime dissolved 15 nonprofit organizations, including the Ebenezer Christian Missionary Foundation, the Pentecostal Ministry Foundation Christ Is Coming, and the Dominican Nuns Foundation of Nicaragua. For the third consecutive year, the government dramatically restricted Holy Week celebrations. Worshipers reported heavy surveillance and restriction of activity to church premises, and up to 14,000 police were deployed nationally to prevent processions. In late 2025, reports emerged that for several months, the Nicaraguan government had prohibited travelers entering the country from carrying Bibles.

The government of Nicaragua employed state power to persecute religious groups throughout the year. For example, in July, a Catholic priest previously targeted by national police after calling for a day of prayer on behalf of Catholic Bishop Rolando Álvarez was detained and held incommunicado with his driver for over a week. Civil society actors have documented the banning of more than 16,500 religious processions and activities since 2018, as well as over 1,000 acts of repression against the Catholic Church, including property confiscation, arbitrary closures, and public threats. While recorded attacks in 2025 were lower in number than previous years, religious freedom advocates attribute this decline to pervasive fear of reporting and a lack of independent media coverage rather than an actual reprieve.

The government continued to arbitrarily detain and incarcerate religious leaders, which escalated into the unexplained deaths of two detainees during 2025. In July, outspoken government critic Pastor Rudy Palacios Vargas was arrested in a raid where authorities also detained his sister, two of his brothers-in-law, and a family friend. The pastor's friend Mauricio Alonso Petri was also arrested, alongside Alonso's wife and son, who is a member of the Pastor's worship team. Alonso died in state custody one month after his arrest, and the government ordered his family to bury him immediately under police guard. Days after Alonso's death, Carlos Cárdenas Zepeda, an attorney who previously endured years of state harassment in alleged retaliation for his work as a legal advisor to the Episcopal Conference of Nicaragua (CEN), also died in state custody following his own detention in August. Nicaraguan authorities similarly returned his body in an already sealed coffin, refused to provide information on the cause of death, and prevented his family from holding a funeral. Additional victims detained in Nicaragua for their faith include Catholic lay leaders Lesbia Gutiérrez and Carmen María Sáenz Martínez, who were released into house arrest in late November after nearly 16 months of incommunicado detention.

Nicaragua also adopted wide-reaching constitutional changes in 2025, further centralizing power under "co-presidents" Ortega and Murillo and buttressing the state's ability to repress FoRB through forced denationalization and restricting "foreign" religious influence. The United Nations Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (UNGHREN) assessed in October 2025 that the "total erosion of human rights and the rule of law culminated in early 2025" with the major constitutional overhaul. This followed the UNGHREN's observation in February that the regime has "further developed and amplified its patterns of victimization" of anyone perceived as disloyal to the government, including Catholic and other Christian groups, and has "finetuned its mechanisms of repression" since 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nicaragua as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted financial sanctions, including those pursuant to Executive Order 13851 and Section 203 of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), against Nicaraguan officials responsible for exiling or otherwise violating the human rights of religious adherents; and
- Fund foreign assistance programs that support Nicaraguan civil society to document religious freedom violations and use that documentation to promote accountability.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reintroduce and pass legislation to advance religious freedom in Nicaragua, such as the Restoring Sovereignty and Human Rights in Nicaragua Act of 2024 (H.R. 6954/S. 1881), which would expand legal grounds for sanctions against religious freedom violators and mandate that the U.S. government oppose international financial institutions' assistance to Nicaragua except under limited conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Spotlight Podcast:** Cuba and Nicaragua's Escalating Crackdown on Religious Communities
- **Issue Update:** Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Authoritarian Triad - Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Across Nicaragua, Roman Catholics account for approximately 43 percent of the population of about 6.6 million; Evangelical Protestants comprise 41 percent; religious believers without any affiliation comprise 14 percent; and Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, nonbelievers, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Moravian Lutherans together comprise two percent.

President Daniel Ortega is head of state and government alongside his wife, Rosario Murillo; since February 2025, they have appointed themselves "co-presidents." They and their party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over the government. The Ortega-Murillo administration began persecuting the Catholic Church after it provided sanctuary to demonstrators amid the government's repression of peaceful protests in April 2018. The crackdown has since expanded across essentially all faiths and amounts to crimes against humanity, according to the UNGHREN. Nicaragua withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council in February in response to the UNGHREN report on its human rights violations, including against religious bodies.

Persecution of Clergy and Laypeople

The Ortega-Murillo government systematically harassed, intimidated, detained, and otherwise oppressed religious leaders and worshipers throughout 2025. Churches across the country reported 24-hour surveillance during Holy Week 2025, and police routinely imposed an intimidating presence on worship services. Authorities publicly vilified religious leaders, with the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry condemning the Vatican in February as a "depraved, pedophile" ally of "darkness, barbarism, genocide and evil."

In May, a lay leader of a Catholic chapel was detained and told he was arrested based on informants reporting that he was praying for the freedom of Nicaragua. Police stripped him and took him to a cell in his underwear, then interrogated him three times before his release the next day. In February, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights requested an extension of provisional measures, used to attempt to protect individuals in urgent situations at risk of irreparable harm, for Lesbia Gutiérrez and Carmen María Sáenz Martínez. The government's lack of transparency or accountability around the deaths in state custody of Alonso Petri and Cárdenas Zepeda demonstrates the lethal consequences of the Sandinista administration's forced disappearance of religious leaders.

The UNGHREN warned in September that the government is expanding its use of transnational repression to target Nicaraguans abroad, hundreds of whom are exiled religious figures, through digital surveillance, threats, and intimidation of relatives in Nicaragua.

Government Closure and Seizure of Religious Organizations

The Ortega-Murillo government arbitrarily shut down or took possession of multiple religious entities. The regime's dissolution of religious organizations in January further extended the list of some 5,000 civil society organizations shuttered by the government since 2018. Also in January, authorities expelled about 30 nuns belonging to the Order of St. Clare from their monasteries overnight. In July, authorities expropriated the San José School in Jinotepe, levying allegations that the iconic religious school had been the site of crimes against Sandinista supporters during the 2018 protests.

Human rights researchers reported a complex web of government extortion and punishment targeting religious organizations, such as freezing bank accounts, confiscating buildings, and forcing purchases of compliance certifications.

Legal Weaponization

Nicaraguan officials continued to weaponize laws ostensibly punishing cyber and financial crime to justify the closure of religious organizations. The national constitutional changes adopted in early 2025 further empowered Ortega and Murillo to repress FoRB rights. The constitution provides for the stripping of nationality from anyone deemed a "traitor to the homeland." The government has aggressively used this penalty to expel opposition figures from the country. For instance, in April 2025, authorities prohibited priest Jalder Hernández, exiled in 2024, from entering Nicaragua when he attempted to return from pastoral work in the United States. In 2025, the National Assembly also approved an amendment to eliminate dual citizenship, another method of denying disfavored worshipers the fundamental right to a nationality and thus the ability to participate in Nicaraguan society. The constitutional reforms further mandate that "religious organizations must be kept free of all foreign control," potentially providing a legally enforceable basis to force the Catholic Church in Nicaragua to cut ties to the Vatican.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to pursue sanctions against the government of Nicaragua for human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom. On U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first international trip, undertaken to Latin America, he condemned the Nicaraguan regime's attempts to "eliminate the Catholic Church" and punish "everything religious or anyone who could threaten that regime's power." The U.S. Department of State also publicly lambasted the seizure of the San José School as an attack on religious freedom.

In April, the United States imposed visa restrictions on more than 250 regime officials under Presidential Proclamation 10309, which suspends entry into the United States for Nicaraguan government members and other individuals undermining democratic institutions. The action brought the number of U.S.-sanctioned Ortega-Murillo officials to over 2,000. In November, the State Department also imposed visa restrictions on individuals in Nicaragua knowingly facilitating illegal immigration to the United States.

In October, the U.S. Trade Representative determined that under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, Nicaragua's abuses of human rights, specifically including attacks on religious freedom, constitute an unreasonable burden on U.S. commerce. In 2025, U.S. officials were weighing corresponding new tariffs on imports from Nicaragua or depriving the country of free trade benefits.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Nicaragua as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

NIGERIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained abysmal. Federal and state governments continued to tolerate, inadequately respond to or investigate, or otherwise fail to pursue justice for religious violence by nonstate actors. These nonstate actors routinely seek to impose a singular interpretation of Islam on individuals and communities in their areas of operation, regardless of these individuals' or communities' own religion or belief. These actors include Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS, also known as Boko Haram), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Islamic State-Sahel Province (ISSP). In January, JAS assailants burned down a church auditorium, killing several people. Mahmuda, a new faction of JAS, killed four Fulanis in April in Kwara. In July, Lakurawa insurgents affiliated with ISSP killed 15 Muslims in Sokoto. In September, JAS/Boko Haram killed more than 60 Muslims in Borno, and the group's capture of Kirawa in Borno in October sent 5,000 people fleeing to Cameroon.

Assailants, including Fulani militants who manipulated Islam to justify their use of violence, frequently attacked religious communities throughout the year. Increasing violence in the Middle Belt region especially impacted Christians: Fulani gunmen killed around 200 displaced persons at a Catholic mission in Yelwata in June, after which some protesters accused the government of failing to protect the victims. Militants also killed Reverend Yahaya Kambasaya and abducted 20 other Christians in Kaduna in October, and attackers abducted 38 worshippers from a church service the following month, killing two and kidnapping the pastor. Assailants also abducted over 300 people, primarily schoolchildren, from a Catholic boarding school in Niger, to which parents of some of those children responded by criticizing the government for shutting down schools rather than securing them. These abductions are just the latest in a series of such incidents that have traumatized religious communities in Nigeria since 2009, as kidnappers have seized thousands of children for ransom or sexual slavery—like Christian Leah Sharibu, who has been in captivity since 2018. In August, attackers also abducted over 100 individuals, mostly women and children, from a mosque in Zamfara, and killed 13 worshipers at a mosque in Katsina. In September, assailants kidnapped 18 Muslim women and children in Zamfara as they were preparing for morning prayers and abducted three Muslims from a mosque in Zamfara.

The Nigerian federal government continued to enforce blasphemy laws that include a penalty of up to two years' imprisonment for acts "persons consider as a public insult on their religion." Several state governments also enforced more stringent blasphemy laws to prosecute and imprison individuals perceived to have insulted religion, including Christians, Muslims, and humanists. At least four prisoners remained in state custody on blasphemy charges at the end of the year, including Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, Isma'ila Sani Isah, Sheikh Abduljabar Nasiru Kabara, and Abdulazeez Inyass. In September, the Supreme Court of Nigeria held an initial hearing to review Sharif-Aminu's case challenging Kano State's blasphemy law.

In March, the states of Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, and Bauchi closed all schools during Ramadan, including Christian institutions. Roman Catholic Bishop Wilfred Anagbe received anonymous threats after testifying before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs Africa Subcommittee in March on the violence against Christians in Benue.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Redesignate JAS/Boko Haram, ISWAP, and ISSP as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enact targeted sanctions, visa denials pursuant to 212(a)2(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, and other penalties against Nigerian government and military officials who tolerate religiously motivated violence and/or violence against religious communities, or those who are complicit in attacks on these communities; and
- Enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, to encourage substantial steps to address violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), including reporting on religious violence, returning displaced persons to their homes, and improving security and military training; and tie foreign assistance as well as bilateral policies on trade, arms purchases, and visa reciprocation to benchmarks on religious freedom improvement.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Request that the General Accountability Office (GAO) monitor the efficiency of foreign assistance funds disbursed to protect FoRB in Nigeria; and
- Support efforts through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and other bodies working on human rights in Africa to highlight religious freedom challenges in Nigeria, including insecurity and atrocity risks, and pass bipartisan legislation holding accountable individuals and entities in Nigeria complicit in FoRB violations.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief
- **Spotlight Podcast:** Blasphemy and FoRB in Nigeria: A Conversation with Mubarak Bala
- **Op-Ed:** Nigerian Girls Are Being Kidnapped
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with a population of about 237 million. Around 53 percent of the population is Muslim, 46 percent is Christian, and other beliefs make up the remaining one percent.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution protects FoRB and prohibits the establishment of an official religion. It also recognizes common civil law courts, traditional law, and Shari'a courts for criminal and non-criminal proceedings, although common law theoretically takes precedence.

Twelve of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) utilize Shari'a-based criminal and personal status laws alongside civil and customary statutes, prohibiting blasphemy and other perceived religious offenses. As such, state courts often enforce penal codes according to their particular and rigid interpretations of Shari'a that assign corporal punishment for serious criminal offenses, including caning, amputation, and execution by stoning. State officials erroneously claim that blasphemy laws deter FoRB violence, and federal officials generally defer to their discretion. In November, some Nigerian Muslim leaders called the U.S. designation of Nigeria as a CPC "a direct assault on Islam" and dismissed calls to drop blasphemy and other religious laws.

Religious Violence by Fulani Militants

Ethnic Fulani militants continued to escalate violence in 2025, often against Christians in the Middle Belt, by attacking their villages and churches. In March, such militants killed at least 52 in Plateau, forcing many Christians to flee. In May, in Kogi, militants abducted pastors Adura Kayode and Kingsley Ebing of the City of Grace Prophetic Liberation Church, although they later escaped. That same month, a Catholic priest in Benue survived a murder attempt by a Fulani assailant, and in September, militants kidnapped and killed Pastor James Issa of the Evangelical Winning All Church in Kwara, despite receiving ransom money. Fulani militants also reportedly killed seven Fulani Muslim herders in Kano in October.

Criminal bandits also continued to target religious institutions, including a series of attacks on the Catholic Church. Unidentified assailants kidnapped and killed Father Sylvester Okechukwu in Kaduna in March. Armed attackers also kidnapped Father Philip Ekweli and seminarian Peter Andrew in Edo, subsequently freeing Ekweli but killing Andrew. In April, assailants kidnapped Catholic priest Ibrahim Amos in Kaduna but later released him unharmed.

Nigerian Government Actions

The Nigerian government largely continued to fail to decisively act to address or respond to the ongoing epidemic of religious violence throughout the country, as corruption, inadequate allotment of resources like funding or personnel, and other limitations persisted in 2025. However, the country's military carried out a series of counterinsurgency operations throughout the year, killing 100 militants in Zamfara in August and 17 in Borno in September, while arresting 85 and rescuing 10 abductees in the process. However, the military also faced a significant shakeup in October when President Bola Ahmed Tinubu replaced its leadership to "strengthen the national security architecture" after a reported coup d'etat plot. In November, in response to U.S. President Donald J. Trump's designation of Nigeria as a CPC and criticism of anti-Christian violence, the Nigerian government denied the existence of religious persecution and asserted the country's constitutional commitment to religious freedom and rule of law. Shortly afterward, President Tinubu "reaffirmed his commitment to defeating terrorism" as he redeployed 100,000 police officers from bodyguard duty to operations countering violent threats while ordering more forest guards to address the kidnapping epidemic. There were approximately 3.5 million internally displaced persons in Nigeria by the end of 2025, many of whom were victims of religious violence. The government has been slow and ineffective in rebuilding security and infrastructure necessary for them to return to their homes in a safe and dignified manner.

In August, police in Niger opened an investigation into the mob killing of a food vendor after rumors circulated that she made blasphemous remarks to a customer. In February, police in Numan captured one kidnapper and freed unharmed two priests, Father Mathew David Dusami of Yola Diocese and Father Abraham Samman of Jalingo Diocese. In April, police in Anambra rescued Catholic priest Father Stephen Echezona, whom bandits had abducted earlier. In December, troops rescued several hostages in Kaduna.

Key U.S. Policy

While the U.S. Department of State suspended most aid to Nigeria in January, military aid continued without conditions based on advances to FoRB. In August, the State Department approved Nigeria's purchase of $346 million worth of weapons, and it sent $32.5 million in humanitarian aid in September. Members of the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced resolutions in March and September, respectively, that called on the Trump administration to designate Nigeria as a CPC, while five senators sent a letter to the secretary of state in September to request the same. In October, President Trump designated Nigeria as a CPC, threatened to send U.S. troops to stop violence against Christians, and promised to halt all aid. In late December, the U.S. administration coordinated with the Nigerian government to conduct airstrikes on ISSP sites in Sokoto. The House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa held two hearings in 2025: one in March to call for Nigeria's CPC designation, and another in November to consider President Trump's designation as such. In December, the State Department announced visa restrictions on Nigerians engaged in religious freedom violations, including government officials, and extending those restrictions to other countries.

The U.S. Department State last designated JAS/Boko Haram, ISSP, and ISWAP as EPCs on December 29, 2023.

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, North Korea continued to be one of the worst violators of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the world. Organized religion in North Korea has reportedly been almost entirely eliminated. The Ministry of State Security counterintelligence departments treat religious activity as an "anti-state crime" and have intensified crackdowns against suspected religious activity since the enactment of the Youth Education Guarantee Act in 2021, particularly along North Korea's borders and among North Korean youth. Authorities have continued to intensify punishment against "superstitious activities" such as traditional shamanistic practices, and information on the state of other religious traditions in North Korea such as Buddhism, Catholicism, and Chondoism remains severely limited.

The overarching ideological and enforcement framework for repressing any exercise of religious freedom remained in force. North Korea's ruling ideology, known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, considers former leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as extraordinary beings whose guidance all North Koreans must follow in all aspects of life. It forbids competing ideologies—including religious ones—and treats religion as an existential threat to the Kim regime. North Korea's most fundamental legal document, known as the Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Leadership System, requires absolute loyalty and obedience to the teachings of North Korean leaders and contradicts the rights and freedoms enshrined in international law. The ruling Korean Workers' Party actively enforces the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology at all levels of government and across society, monitors and controls religious belief and activities, and systematically denies North Korean citizens the right to FoRB.

North Korea's discriminatory *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state, with religious practitioners and proselytizers belonging to the system's lowest level, or "hostile" class. The government views Protestant Christians as "collaborators of imperialistic forces and enemies of the nation and revolution." Possessing a Bible, interacting with Christian missionaries while escaping North Korea, or engaging in worship can lead to severe punishment, including torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and execution.

An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals, many of whom are Christian, are detained in North Korea's prisons and labor camps. In 2025, North Korean authorities continued to imprison South Korean Christian missionaries Kim Jung-wook, Choi Chun-gil, and Kim Kook-kie, who have been held in North Korea for over a decade. In November, Deacon Zhang Wen Shi was released from prison and returned to China after serving 12 years of a 15-year sentence.

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 FoRB, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted and broad sanctions through the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control—in coordination with the U.S. Department of State—and multilateral sanctions with international partners as appropriate for religious freedom violations in North Korea;
- Maintain and fill the position of special envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time position at the State Department and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Coordinate closely with South Korea to secure the release of prisoners of conscience held in North Korea and to offer protections and safe passage for North Korean refugees persecuted on the basis of religion; and
- Raise in engagements with China that North Korean refugees should not be repatriated to North Korea, particularly if refugees have encountered religious organizations or individuals within China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation focused on human rights and religious freedom that supports civil society and independent media documenting religious freedom violations, including the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2025. (H.R. 5959).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** The Degrading Freedom of Religion or Belief Conditions in North Korea
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

The U.S. government estimates that 26.3 million people live within North Korea. Decades of state-directed oppression against religious practices has led to the near elimination of organized religion in North Korea. By one estimate, there were up to 400,000 underground Christians in North Korea in 2025. As North Korea is one of the most repressive and isolated countries in the world, estimating the number of remaining religious adherents is challenging. Prior to the Korean War (1950–1953), Pyongyang for a time was called the "Jerusalem of the East" for its thriving Christian community. According to North Korea's own reporting in 1950, 23.7 percent of North Koreans adhered to Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, or Chondoism. The Korean Peninsula also has a long history of shamanism and other native Korean traditions. North Korean figures presented to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee in August 2002 stated that 0.16 percent of the North Korean population practiced Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, or Chondoism.

North Korea's constitution purports to guarantee freedom of religion, but escapees have reported that the government does not tolerate religious activities in the country. Authorities maintain state-controlled organizations that it claims are religious as well as a limited number of houses of worship for propaganda purposes when engaging international audiences.

North Korean Defectors and Escapees

The primary source of information on violations of FoRB within North Korea is North Korean escapee testimony. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 1,000 North Korean escapees would resettle in South Korea every year. However, since the pandemic, the North Korean government closed its border and instituted even stricter security policies on the North Korean population. The South Korean government reports that 96 North Korean escapees resettled in South Korea in the first half of 2025 after extended periods in China and in other countries before arriving.

China has become increasingly complicit in the North Korean government's persecution of religious adherents and particularly against Christians. Due to the severity of North Korean government repression of freedom of religion, North Korean escapees report that the first time they encounter missionaries and organized religion is during their time in China after fleeing North Korea. Escapees who are repatriated to North Korea by China and who are found to have met with Christian missionaries face harsh punishments. Chinese authorities are reported to be using enhanced surveillance and tracking tools to map networks supporting escapees within China and reporting to North Korean authorities repatriated escapees' encounters with religious groups and contacts.

International Attention

In February, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) declared that the imprisonment of South Korean missionaries Kim Jung-wook, Choi Chun-gil, and Kim Kook-kie are arbitrary detentions. In September, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released the Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), which states that the North Korean government has continued to exercise total control over the population in the 10 years since the landmark UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK in 2014. It notes that the restrictions on religious activities over the past decade "have not softened" and that, despite isolated steps, the human rights situation in North Korea "in many instances, has degraded."

In August, the South Korean Ministry of Unification suspended the publication of its annual North Korea Human Rights Report, and in October the South Korean government disbanded its North Korean human rights and humanitarian office and abductees response team, attracting concern from civil society organizations about the impact on support for human rights in North Korea.

For the 21st consecutive year, the UN General Assembly Third Committee adopted in November 2025 a consensus resolution on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK with support from the Republic of Korea and the United States. The resolution highlights that North Korean government control was tightened by new laws from 2020 onward that provide severe punishments, including the death penalty, for exercising the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, President Donald J. Trump issued executive orders that paused or terminated broader human rights programming and U.S. funded international media, which impacted independent organizations that documented and reported on human rights and religious freedom violations in North Korea and throughout Asia.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and the foreign ministers of Japan and South Korea issued a joint statement from their trilateral meeting in Brussels in April 2025 pledging to continue efforts to address gross violations of human rights in and by North Korea. In November 2025, the White House issued a factsheet on President Trump's meeting with South Korean President Lee Jae Myung in which the two leaders "agreed to coordinate closely on DPRK policy and called on the DPRK to return to meaningful dialogue and abide by its international obligations."

In November 2025, a bipartisan-supported bill, the North Korean Human Rights Reauthorization Act of 2025 (H.R. 5959), was introduced in the House of Representatives to reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, which lapsed in 2022. The bill includes calls for the position of special envoy for North Korean human rights to be filled and for the State Department to provide annual reports on activities to coordinate and to promote human rights.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated North Korea as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

PAKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued along a troubling trajectory. The government continued to enforce its strict blasphemy law, impacting people of all faiths, including religious minorities. Increasing vigilante attacks and mob violence targeting religious minorities, specifically Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians, contributed to an intensified climate of fear and intolerance.

Authorities continued to wield the blasphemy law and its death penalty provision to punish those deemed to have insulted Islam. In January, four individuals were sentenced to death for allegedly posting blasphemous content on social media. The same month, a mentally ill Christian man, Farhan Masih, was imprisoned on blasphemy and terrorism charges. Despite being acquitted, Masih could not return to his village out of fear for his safety. In February, a sessions court sentenced another man to death after a member of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) accused him of "insulting religious sentiment." The following month, the Lahore High Court removed from its case list Junaid Hafeez's appeal hearing related to charges of blasphemy. Authorities have held Hafeez in solitary confinement since 2014, and a sessions court sentenced him to death in 2019. His trial has been pending since 2020.

Violent attacks against religious minorities occurred with impunity and in some cases under accusations of forced conversions. In March, a Muslim man attacked his coworker Waqas Masih, a 22-year-old Christian man, by slitting his throat, accusing him of committing blasphemy by touching an Islamic textbook with "unclean hands." Days later, a Muslim man shot and killed a Hindu man, Nadeem Naath, after he allegedly refused to convert to Islam. In September, two gunmen attacked Christian pastor Kamran Naz as he traveled to Islamabad to lead a church service. The pastor previously received death threats and was accused of "proselytizing among Afghan refugees."

Reports of forced conversions among Hindu and Christian girls in Punjab and Sindh Provinces continued throughout 2025. In February, a 12-year-old Christian girl was reportedly forcibly converted to Islam and married to a 35-year-old man in Sindh Province. In July, the Sindh Human Rights Commission expressed concern about the alleged abduction and forced conversion to Islam of a 15-year-old Hindu girl, Shahneela, in Matli. In a police report, her uncle alleged that two armed men forcibly entered the family's home and kidnapped Shahneela.

Throughout Pakistan, authorities continued to impose restrictions on Ahmadiyya Muslims' ability to practice their faith and allowed for assaults against Ahmadiyya mosques. In February, a mob of TLP members destroyed minarets of an Ahmadiyya mosque in Sialkot without police intervention. In March, authorities arrested dozens of Ahmadiyya Muslims, including children, for offering Friday prayers. Days later, police issued two First Instance Reports against two dozen Ahmadiyya Muslims, based on a complaint from TLP members that the community was sacrificing animals for Eid-ul-Adha. In April, a mob affiliated with the TLP stormed an Ahmadiyya mosque to prevent the community from offering Friday prayers. During the attack, the mob beat to death an Ahmadiyya man, Laeeq Cheema. Police allegedly did not intervene to stop the attack. In December, parliament passed the National Commission for Minority Rights Bill, which the law minister insisted would not override the existing anti-Ahmadiyya 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);
- Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani officials and government agencies responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Enter into a binding agreement with the Pakistani government, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, to encourage substantial steps to address violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
  - Releasing individuals imprisoned for blasphemy or their religion or beliefs;
  - Repealing blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws and, until such repeal, enacting reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, conduct proper investigations by senior police officials, and allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations; and enforcing existing penal code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations; and
  - Holding accountable individuals who incite or participate in vigilante violence, targeted killings, forced conversion, and other religiously based crimes.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Incorporate religious freedom concerns into its larger oversight of the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral relationship through hearings, letters, resolutions, and congressional delegations and advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners in Pakistan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Pakistan
- **Spotlight Podcast:** Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a constitutional democracy, led by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif. Pakistan's estimated population is 252 million, of which 96.5 percent are Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a) and 3.5 percent belong to other religious communities, including Christians and Hindus. Pakistan's constitution establishes Islam as the state religion while including provisions designed to prohibit faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices, with the exception of Ahmadiyya Muslims. A 1974 amendment to Pakistan's constitution declared Ahmadis as non-Muslims, excluding them from political representation and equal voting rights. Additionally, Pakistan's stratified social system confines Christians, Hindus, and other religious minorities to low wage and dangerous jobs.

Long-Term Impacts of Blasphemy Accusations

While Pakistani authorities acquitted several individuals accused of blasphemy throughout the year, societal discrimination and years of poor treatment in prison continued to severely impact the released prisoners. In July, Pakistan's Supreme Court acquitted a Christian man, Anwar Kenneth, of blasphemy charges after he served 23 years on death row. In October, a high court acquitted Christian pastor Zafar Bhatti of blasphemy charges after he spent 13 years in prison. Days after his release, Bhatti succumbed to cardiac arrest after years of medical neglect.

Christian community members criticized the Pakistani government for failing to deliver justice and accountability for the 2023 Jaranwala attacks, where mobs destroyed churches following blasphemy allegations. In June, Christian communities accused authorities of ignoring evidence after a Pakistani court acquitted 10 Muslims involved in burning a church during the 2023 attacks. In August, victims of the Jaranwala attacks held protests to mark the two-year anniversary and reiterated calls for government action.

In July, Justice Ishaq Khan of Islamabad's High Court ordered the government to open an investigation into the use of the blasphemy law. This announcement received widespread opposition by the TLP, and the order was subsequently suspended. In October, the Pakistani government announced it would ban the activities of the TLP, known for its defense of Pakistan's blasphemy law. Prior to and throughout 2025, the TLP incited violent mobs to attack religious minorities, including Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims, under the guise of enforcing Pakistan's blasphemy law.

Opposition to Address Forced Conversions

In May, Pakistan's National Assembly unanimously passed the Islamabad Capital Territory Child Marriage Restraint Bill to curb child marriages and, by extension, forced conversions of underage girls. Under the legislation, those who facilitate or coerce a child into marriage, including family members or clerics, can face up to seven years' imprisonment. Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology strongly opposed the bill and declared it "un-Islamic" for not conforming with Islamic injunctions. Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rahman called for rallies protesting the law. Leaders of the Mili Yakjethi Council (MYC) similarly condemned the bill, calling it un-Islamic and unconstitutional.

Attacks on Places of Worship

In 2025, several attacks or threats of violence against places of worship occurred. In February, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad reported that Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) threatened to attack Faisal Mosque. In response, the embassy prohibited U.S. employee travel to the area. In March, at least six people, including a chief clerk, were killed by a suicide attack after Friday prayers at an Islamic seminary in northern Pakistan. In May, an estimated 445 religious seminaries in Pakistan-administered Kashmir closed for 10 days, citing fear of Indian air strikes following the deadly attack on Hindu tourists in Kashmir. In October, three gunmen attacked an Ahmadiyya mosque in Rabwah, wounding six worshipers. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

Deportation of Afghan Refugees

Throughout 2025, the Pakistani government continued its efforts to forcibly expel thousands of Afghan refugees, including religious minorities, back to Afghanistan. This included Hazara Shi'as, whom the Taliban persecute and view as apostates. In July, the United Nations (UN) reported risks of arbitrary detention and torture for those involuntarily returned to Afghanistan. Following its September deadline to repatriate Afghan refugees, including those holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards and seeking U.S. resettlement, the Pakistani government announced it would shut down 16 refugee camps in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, the United States continued to engage diplomatically with the Pakistani government on issues of counterterrorism, trade, and tensions in Kashmir. In May, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced a "U.S.-brokered" ceasefire between India and Pakistan over escalations in Kashmir. Subsequently, in June, President Donald J. Trump hosted Pakistani Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir at the White House to discuss Kashmir tensions. In September, President Trump hosted Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif at the White House to discuss trade negotiations. In April, the U.S. Department of State's senior official for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Eric Meyer, traveled to Pakistan "to advance U.S. interests in the critical minerals sector." In August, the governments of the United States and Pakistan held the U.S.-Pakistan Counterterrorism Dialogue in Islamabad, where they discussed approaches to addressing threats posed by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-Khorasan, and TTP. The same month, Secretary Rubio announced the designation of the BLA as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

In July, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission held a hearing examining political repression in Pakistan. Witness testimony included discussion of the Pakistani government's persecution of religious minorities. In September, Congress introduced the Pakistan Freedom and Accountability Act with bipartisan support. The resolution calls on the U.S. government to impose sanctions on those deemed to have violated human rights in Pakistan, including high-level officials.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

RUSSIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Russia perpetuated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Authorities criminalize the activities of several peaceful religious organizations by designating them as "extremist," "undesirable," or "terrorist," despite a lack of evidence or even specific allegations that those accused promoted, participated in, or plotted violence. Approximately 190 Jehovah's Witnesses remained in pretrial detention, imprisoned, under house arrest, or subjected to forced labor for their religious activities. In September, a court sentenced Jehovah's Witnesses Ivan Neverov and Mikhail Shevchuk to seven and six and a half years in prison, respectively, for holding religious meetings and discussing religious literature. In March, 67-year-old Jehovah's Witness Valery Bailo died in prison after authorities allegedly failed to provide him with adequate medical care.

Hundreds of Muslims, including Crimean Tatars, remained imprisoned on lengthy sentences ranging from 10 to 24 years for possessing religious literature and discussing religion and politics as alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. The government also prosecuted and imprisoned Allya Ayat members, Tablighi Jamaat missionaries, followers of Muslim theologian Said Nursi, Scientologists, and Protestants with perceived foreign connections. In July, a court sentenced Falun Gong practitioner Natalia Minenkova to four years in prison for her religious activities.

Russia enforced its religiously repressive legal system on the Ukrainian territories it illegally occupies, maintaining bans on certain religious groups, imposing fines for so-called illegal missionary activities, raiding houses of worship, seizing religious properties, and detaining religious leaders and community members. Russian de facto authorities often commit religious freedom violations to facilitate the dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in these territories. At least 47 Christian religious leaders have been killed, and at least 700 houses of worship and other religious sites—mostly Christian—have been damaged or destroyed since Russia's February 2022 invasion. In April, a Russian military court sentenced five Crimean Tatar Muslims to 14 years in prison each and another to 11 years in prison for their alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir membership. In May, Russia designated Crimean Tatar journalist and human rights defender Lutfiye Zudiyeva as a "foreign agent" over her reporting on the repression of predominately Muslim Crimean Tatars in Russian-occupied Crimea. Imprisoned Crimean Tatar Muslims reported experiencing torture, medical neglect, forced beard shavings, the confiscation of religious materials, prayer bans, pork-filled food, and other ill treatment.

Russian authorities have fined, designated as "foreign agents," and imprisoned religious leaders and others for expressing opposition on religious grounds to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In June, a court sentenced Buddhist leader Ilya Vasilyev to eight years in prison over a 2022 anti-war social media post. An appeals court later canceled Vasilyev's sentence and ordered a new trial. In September, a court sentenced Protestant pastor Nikolay Romanyuk to four years in prison for a 2022 anti-war sermon. Authorities cracked down on perceived offensive expression toward religion. In June, a court sentenced a comedian to more than a year of forced labor for jokes perceived as offensive toward Christianity.

Russia's religion law penalizes broadly defined "missionary activities" that lack government approval, including public and private religious gatherings. Authorities across the country banned at least ten Council of Churches Baptist communities and sealed their church building in Kurganinsk over their refusal to formally register their activities with local governments. These congregations remained banned at the end of the reporting period.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Russia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies, including the Federal Security Service (FSB), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Raise religious freedom issues in every bilateral engagement with Russian officials; and
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom and related human rights violations in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine, such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the National Endowment for Democracy.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation addressing the deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine to assist those fleeing state persecution for their freedom of religion or belief and to combat Russian propaganda and antisemitism; and
- Examine U.S. policy toward religious freedom in Russia through hearings, briefings, reports, and other actions, considering the impacts of the withdrawal of U.S. financial support for human rights reporting mechanisms and developing additional U.S. responses to address religious freedom conditions in Russia.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** Prosecuting Blasphemy in Russia
- **Country Update:** Russia's Persecution of Religious Groups and FoRB Actors
- **Hearing:** Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

As of 2023, 72 percent of Russia's population identified as Orthodox Christian, seven percent as Muslim, five percent as atheist, and 13 percent as having no religious affiliation. Several other religious groups each constituted one percent or less of the population, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Hindus, followers of indigenous religions, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Latter-day Saints, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Scientologists, and Tengrists. Russia's religion law defines only Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism as "traditional" religions. The government views independent religious groups who refuse to align with the state's political agenda as "non-traditional" and treats them as a threat to national security.

Legal Developments

In 2025, Russia instituted new laws and designations negatively impacting religious freedom. Authorities increased administrative penalties and made it easier to bring criminal proceedings for violating the country's "foreign agents" law. The government has designated several religious leaders as so-called foreign agents for publicly opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including in 2025 Father Aleksandr Khmelyov, a priest from the Old Catholic Church, and Orthodox priests Ioann Kurmoyarov, Andrey Kordochkin, and Kirill Govorun. In July, authorities made searching online for state-recognized "extremist" materials an administrative offense. The government has banned several religious materials as "extremist," and in 2025 recognized as "extremist" the Local Church's *The New Testament: The Restoration*, among other works. Authorities additionally banned more organizations as "undesirable," including Brigham Young University, which is affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Peace unto All, which provides assistance to anti-war Russian Orthodox clergy.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

United Nations (UN) and European human rights bodies repeatedly underscored Russia's religious freedom and related human rights violations. In February, a UN special rapporteur called on Russia to provide immediate medical care to Crimean Tatar activist Emir-Usein Kuku. In March, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered Russia to financially compensate applicants across 16 cases for violating their rights to freedom of religion or belief. In May, a UN Human Rights Council report on the human rights situation in Russian-occupied Ukraine highlighted Russia's religious freedom restrictions. In July, the ECHR found Russia had intimidated, harassed, and persecuted religious groups in Russian-occupied Ukraine from 2014 to 2022. In both September and October, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation Mariana Katzarova released reports documenting Russia's systematic repression of civil society, highlighting Jehovah's Witnesses, anti-war religious leaders, alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members, Said Nursi followers, and Tablighi Jamaat missionaries.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of President Donald J. Trump prioritized reengagement with the Russian government, with the objectives of creating proper conditions for U.S.-Russian normalization and mediating an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Saudi Arabia for the first in-person, high-level meeting between the two countries since 2022. In August, President Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Anchorage, Alaska. U.S. Special Envoy Steven Witkoff traveled to Russia on several occasions to meet with officials there, including President Putin. The Trump administration additionally pressured nations to end their purchases of Russian oil and imposed sanctions on two of Russia's largest oil companies.

The Trump administration paused or eliminated programs, including U.S. funded international media that documented religious freedom violations in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukraine. Additionally, the U.S. Department of State in April eliminated an office that had previously reported on Russia's weaponization of antisemitism and false war narratives, including against religious minorities.

In October, the U.S. Senate introduced a bipartisan bill, Designating the Russian Federation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism Act (S.2978), in response to Russia's abduction of Ukrainian children and attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure amid its ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Russia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor. Systematic challenges to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) included egregious punishments for individuals who deviate from the state's singular interpretation of Islam, the constitutional prohibition on public non-Muslim worship, criminalization of blasphemy, and a religiously based male guardianship system.

Judges issued and carried out approximately 355 death sentences throughout the year, including against Shi'a Muslims for protesting religious discrimination. In April and September, United Nations (UN) human rights experts called on the Saudi government to cease executions of young Shi'a Saudi men convicted of offenses allegedly committed as minors. In August and October, respectively, authorities executed Jalal Labbad and Abdullah al-Derazi, both Shi'a Muslim men who were sentenced to death despite being minors at the time of their involvement in 2011 protests over discrimination against Shi'a Muslims. Youssef al-Manasif, another Shi'a Muslim sentenced to death for protesting religious discrimination as a youth, faced imminent execution after the Saudi Court of Appeal upheld his death sentence in August.

Saudi Arabia continued imposing severe punishments for individuals expressing dissenting religious views, including excessively long prison sentences, travel bans, and cruel treatment in detention. In early 2025, judicial authorities resentenced Malik al-Dowaish, son of Sunni cleric Sulaiman al-Dowaish, to 15 years' imprisonment after previously sentencing him for posting a video about his father's mistreatment. Human rights lawyer and religious freedom advocate Waleed Abu al-Khair remained in Dhahban Prison, serving a 15-year sentence since 2015; prison authorities have reportedly denied him adequate medical care. Al-Khair was legal counsel to Raif Badawi, whom a court jailed in 2012 for "insulting Islam" and violating the cybercrime law. Although Badawi was released in 2022, he remains under a media and travel ban that prevents him from joining his family abroad.

Despite some reforms to the Saudi guardianship system, which is explicitly rooted in the state's particular interpretation of Islamic legal principles, the government continued penalizing individuals with religious beliefs that deviate from the system, which restricts women in marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance without the permission of a male guardian under a unique interpretation of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam. Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent activist who previously faced prolonged detention and criminal charges for protesting male guardianship, remains unable to leave Saudi Arabia despite the expiration of her travel ban in 2023. In February, al-Hathloul was barred from attending a UN conference in Riyadh over her previous criticism of the Saudi government, including religious restrictions on women driving.

The government undertook some changes in 2025 to advance religious freedom. Saudi government officials have expressed publicly that the law allows for all residents, including non-Muslims, to worship in private with full approval from relevant authorities. Throughout 2025, authorities allowed Christians of various denominations to gather privately under strict conditions. Additionally, in recent years, the government-funded Muslim World League has organized global conferences to promote interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance.

In April, authorities released four Uyghurs—including a minor—from prison, where for years they were at risk of forcible repatriation to China. Before their release, prison authorities reportedly subjected them to harsh conditions without sufficient air, sun, and medical treatment. The individuals were arrested in 2020 and 2022 after arriving on tourist visas to perform Umra, a Muslim religious pilgrimage. Chinese authorities had previously subjected one of them to torture in Xinjiang, China, where the government has perpetrated genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
- Integrate religious freedom improvements in Saudi Arabia into broader U.S.-Saudi security cooperation efforts, such as release of prisoners of conscience and lifting travel bans on religious dissidents; and
- Direct the U.S. Department of State to request through the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh updates from the Ministry of Justice about standardizing religiously grounded sentences and punishments through a draft penal code.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Conduct bipartisan congressional and staff delegations to Saudi Arabia to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB as a contributing factor to the success of Saudi Vison 2030; and
- Hold hearings to raise religious freedom conditions, including prolonged detention of FoRB prisoners, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims, the male guardianship system, and transnational repression.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** USCIRF Welcomes the Release of Two Religious Prisoners in Saudi Arabia
- **Press Release:** Saudi Arabia Undermines U.S. Bilateral Relationship with Execution of Shi'a Advocate
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

In 2025, of the 37 million Saudi nationals, 85–90 percent were Sunni Muslim and 10–12 percent were Shi'a Muslim. Nearly half of the population was composed of expatriates, including at least two million Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, practitioners of folk religions, and unaffiliated individuals. Saudi law identifies the Qur'an and Sunna (traditions of the Prophet) as the constitution, while the judicial system enforces an official interpretation of Shari'a according to its version of Hanbali jurisprudence. Apostasy and blasphemy remain capital crimes for which the government invokes an explicit religious justification.

Systematic Enforcement of Official Interpretation of Religion

In 2025, the Saudi government began implementing a new personal status law rooted in Islamic religious concepts. The 41-article regulation builds upon previous reforms to the religiously grounded guardianship system and offers women expanded legal rights in divorce and custody. The law also relies heavily on judicial discretion, creating a lack of transparency and consistency in relation to religious matters, which therefore renders proposed reforms uncertain.

In 2025, efforts to reform Saudi Arabia's penal code stalled. Experts have raised concerns that the draft code does not amend existing provisions in the law that authorities have used to repress religious dissenters. These include the 2007 Anti-Cybercrime Law and the 2017 Counterterrorism Law, both of which equate peaceful religious expression with "terrorism" and "impinging on public order" if it falls outside the government's limitations on religion or belief. Throughout the year, the government systematically wielded both laws to stifle individuals promoting ideas that deviate from the state's interpretation of Shari'a.

In February, authorities released Salma al-Shehab, arrested in 2021 and previously sentenced to 27 years for social media activity criticizing the male guardianship system. Nourah al-Qahtani continues to serve her reduced sentence of 35 years for criticizing the government's interpretation of the religiously grounded guardianship system. Authorities have reportedly held al-Qahtani in solitary confinement since February despite her rapidly declining health.

Mistreatment of Individuals Detained on a Religious Basis

In May, al-Ha'ir Prison authorities refused a UN expert visit to dissident Islamic scholar Salman al-Ouda—detained since 2017 and held in solitary confinement—to probe reports of continued mistreatment and declining health. Throughout the year, authorities continued to hold Sheikh Awad al-Qarni, another Islamic scholar detained in 2017 for expressing his religious views and government criticism online, in solitary confinement. Authorities subjected him to inhumane treatment and denied him needed medical care. Cleric Mohammad bin Hassan al-Habib continues to be denied sufficient medical treatment for his declining health and was repeatedly placed in solitary confinement throughout the year.

In August, after repeatedly prolonging judicial proceedings, the Specialized Criminal Court (SCC) overturned the 11-year sentence for social media influencer Manahel al-Otaibi but handed down a new five-year sentence, including a travel ban, for violating social media, counterterrorism, and male guardianship laws. Authorities arrested al-Otaibi in 2022 for not wearing "decent" clothing and protesting the male guardianship law's systematic religious restrictions on women and girls. Prison authorities denied her family contact and subjected her to abuse, affecting her ability to walk.

In 2025, Saudi women and girls remained forcibly detained in "care home" (Dar al-Reaya) facilities for purportedly violating religious guardianship laws. Security officials in these facilities have assaulted women and girls held there, including through whipping, medical mistreatment, and dragging them by their hair. Hundreds of Saudi women or girls are likely detained in such institutions, where they are subject to forced religious teachings.

Discrimination against Religious Minorities

Although the government's treatment of Shi'a Muslims was less severe compared to previous years, the community continued to face de facto discrimination in housing, employment, the judiciary, and access to senior government positions.

Throughout the year, authorities systematically targeted Christians, including by issuing deportation visas, interrogating converts from Islam, closing bank accounts of religious leaders, and creating challenges for worshipers to obtain exit visas.

Transnational Repression

Saudi Arabia continues to pursue religious dissidents abroad and impose punishments on their family in the country. In April, a young Saudi woman remained in a Jeddah detention center after authorities abducted her from a private residence in Australia and forcibly returned her to Saudi Arabia. In 2022, she fled Saudi Arabia to escape the male guardianship system. In February, authorities released Assad al-Ghamdi, brother of United Kingdom-based religious scholar and Saudi government critic Saed al-Ghamdi, whom the SCC sentenced to 20 years for "insulting religion." Their brother, Mohammad al-Ghamdi, continues to serve a 30-year sentence after the SCC overturned his death sentence in 2024.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States continued bilateral coordination with Saudi Arabia on regional security issues, including discussions of defense guarantees and cybersecurity cooperation, amid regional tensions surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict, tensions in Syria, Houthi violence, and other global issues. In May, President Donald J. Trump and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio traveled multiple times to Saudi Arabia for meetings with Gulf partners. In November, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Washington for the first time since 2018 for high-level meetings on increased military, technological, and commercial cooperation.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

SYRIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Syria dramatically deteriorated as the country's religiously diverse population struggled to regroup after almost 14 years of civil war. Even as the self-installed transitional authorities promised to reject the sectarianism of the regime they had overthrown, they demonstrated systematic and ongoing tolerance of particularly severe religious freedom violations throughout the year. Principally, transitional authorities failed to prevent, curb, or adequately administer justice for multiple mass killings, kidnappings, and other egregious acts of violence against Alawis, Druze, Christians, and other religious minorities—many of which occurred at the hands of purported loyalists to the new administration.

Among thousands of attacks throughout the year, several notable events amounted to sectarian massacres. On March 7, thousands of militant Sunni Muslim fighters loyal to, affiliated with, or serving directly within the transitional authorities answered Ministry of Defense officials' general mobilization calls to subdue a reported pro-Assad Alawi insurgence on the Mediterranean coast. Militants conducted mass door-to-door executions of Alawi civilians in Tartus, Latakia, and Hama, deploying religious slurs such as "Alawi Nusayri pigs" against their victims and killing at least 1,500 people in the first two days. In April, armed actors reacted violently to false social media reports that a Druze leader had insulted the Prophet Muhammad, firing on Druze residents in the Damascus suburb of Jaramana and kicking off several days of fatal clashes. In June, a likely suicide attacker bombed the Mar Elias Antiochian/Greek Orthodox Church in Damascus, killing at least 25 Christians during a Sunday liturgy. In July, Sunni Muslim Bedouin tribes kidnapped a Druze merchant from Suweida, triggering weeks of clashes. Advocates pointed to sensationalistic anti-Druze messaging in state television and other official outlets as a factor inciting militant actors. Furthermore, far from subduing the violence, transitional military forces intervened against the local Druze population, contributing to a reported death toll of at least 2,000. Reports suggested several of the same fighters who mobilized in March against Alawi communities reappeared to commit similar crimes in July against Suweida's Druze.

Most concerningly, investigations by the United Nations (UN), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and others have confirmed the direct and substantial role that security forces, the Ministries of Interior and Defense, and other authorities played in the extrajudicial and other unlawful killings of Alawis and Druze. In addition to these mass attacks, militant actors perpetrated hundreds of individual kidnappings, tortures, and murders of Alawi, Christian, and Druze community members.

Despite transitional authorities' obligations to administer justice against the perpetrators of these and other atrocities, official accountability processes suffered from slowness, lack of transparency, or inadequate or no punishment for the perpetrators. While the interim president and Ministry of Justice announced investigative committees in the wake of the Alawi coastal massacres in March and the Druze Suweida crisis in July, respectively, the former committee avoided confirming the number of transitional security forces among the suspects, and the latter's inquiry took until mid-November to implicate, arrest, and bring to trial some military and security members for unlawful killings. UN experts and others also highlighted authorities' unsatisfactory response to several potential kidnappings and sexual assaults of religious minority women. For example, officials reportedly failed to confirm whether two of the three perpetrators of the September gang rape of an Alawi woman in Hama Province were members of Syrian General Security or merely wearing its uniforms.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of any Syrian actors—whether nonstate or affiliated with the transitional authorities— responsible for religious freedom violations;
- Condition continued engagement with the transitional authorities on evidence of their active curbing of international religious freedom-based violence and manifest promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), such as through equal citizenship provisions in the constitution and protections for religious minority representation in transitional legislative bodies and electoral systems; and
- Assist transitional authorities with FoRB-specific training for leaders, military and security forces, and civil servants to identify and combat institutionalized sectarianism.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Syria to raise religious freedom concerns and the importance of protecting FoRB; and
- Ensure implementation of recent legislation conditioning the lifting of sanctions on the transitional authorities' improvement of religious freedom conditions, including investigating and bringing to justice state and nonstate actors' violations of FoRB and disciplining or purging from military ranks all fighters complicit in religiously motivated or targeted abuses.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** Religious Freedom and U.S. Policy in Post-Assad Syria
- **Hearing:** Religious Freedom in Syria's Post-Assad Transition
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Syria's demography remained in flux throughout 2025, with over one million former refugees, largely Sunni Muslim Arabs, returning to the country. Estimates from the prior year suggest that Syria's population of 23.9 million is 87 percent Muslim, of whom approximately 74 percent are Sunni, with Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a Muslims together constituting 13 percent. Druze likely amount to three percent of the population, while proportions of Christians and Yazidis remained unclear due to these groups' sustained displacement and emigration and the former regime's forced classification of the Yazidi religion as a sect of Islam – a policy the transitional authorities did not reverse.

Shortly after seizing power, the transitional authorities took several administrative actions that systematically limited FoRB. In January, officials announced they would dissolve and integrate into their new administration several rebel entities, ostensibly including their own predecessor organization, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—a longstanding USCIRF-recommended and U.S.-designated Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) for its egregious violations of religious freedom over the course of the civil war. Authorities took similar action to purge Alawis and Christians from government and other posts, appoint ministers and military and intelligence heads with records of violent religious freedom abuses, and put forward a constitutional declaration lacking adequate FoRB protections and related provisions. In February and October, the country held a national dialogue and parliamentary elections, respectively, that many observers regarded as insufficiently representative of Syria's regions or its diverse religious and ethnic communities.

Threats to Religious Freedom in Syria's Regional Enclaves

In 2025, HTS's former rebel stronghold of Idlib in the northwest remained a home base for the transitional authorities and for affiliated militant actors responsible for sectarian-motivated attacks throughout the year in other parts of the country. Large swathes of eastern Syria likewise remained inhospitable to religious freedom, partly due to increasingly resurgent Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) cells. In Suweida and on the Mediterranean coast, Druze- and Alawi-majority communities—once religiously tolerant and stable environments for other religious minorities such as Christians—faced militant actors' violent, sectarian, and ongoing threats and attacks.

In parts of the north and east with sizeable Muslim Kurdish and Arab, Christian, and Yazidi populations, the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (DAANES) and its U.S.-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued its multi-faith model of regional governance. However, neighboring Turkey continued to play a role in destabilizing religious freedom in the region—both through sporadic military attacks and support for militant factions that harassed or attacked Yazidis, Christians, and others. In March, Assyrian Christian advocates reported that a Turkish strike had hit the Mar Sawa Church in Tel Tawil, which a Turkish attack had already destroyed three years before. In June, rights organizations reported that many fighters from abusive Turkish-backed factions—by then affiliated with the transitional Ministry of Defense—remained active near Kobane.

Key U.S. Policy

In May, President Donald J. Trump announced that the United States would lift sanctions on Syria, and in June, he signed an executive order directing their cessation, in part due to "positive actions taken by the new Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa." In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio revoked the United States' designation of HTS as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. In November, President Trump welcomed President al-Sharaa to the White House, the first such meeting between a U.S. and Syrian leader since 1946. Shortly after, Secretary Rubio issued a suspension of sanctions on Syria mandated by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 (22 U.S.C. 8791). In March, Secretary Rubio responded to the coastal massacres by stating, "The United States stands with Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, including its Christian, Druze, Alawite, and Kurdish communities."

The U.S. Congress devoted consistent attention to Syria throughout the year, with some bipartisan alliances urging the administration to end broad economic sanctions. In August, the first official bipartisan congressional delegation to Syria in many years reportedly included interfaith events with international religious freedom advocates and local community leaders—including Hamza Shahin, a Druze physician whom armed actors later abducted, tortured, and murdered. In December, President Trump signed Public Law No: 119-60, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), repealing the Caesar Act's sanctions. In alignment with USCIRF recommendations, the NDAA requires the president to periodically certify that Syria has taken certain steps to protect religious freedom, such as removing foreign fighters from official positions and upholding freedom of worship and political representation for religious minorities.

The United States continued to help broker negotiations to integrate the religiously and ethnically diverse SDF into a transitional national army in which many members identified with groups that justify violence on Islamic religious grounds. The SDF remained a key U.S. partner in managing the ongoing threat of ISIS and in carrying out search and rescue missions for at least 2,594 Yazidis missing since 2014 following the terrorist group's genocidal enslavement or conscription. In February, soon after the administration announced a general freeze on U.S. foreign assistance, the United States granted some short-term waivers to contractors supporting al-Hol, an SDF-managed camp housing former ISIS fighters and families. In December, an ISIS member reportedly serving in the transitional security forces killed two U.S. service members and an interpreter. Later that month, U.S. and partner forces conducted a large-scale strike on ISIS targets in Syria.

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained poor. As in years past, the Tajik government tightly controlled religious activities as part of its longstanding campaign to maintain political influence under the guise of combating "extremism." Tajik officials particularly targeted independent Muslims who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam, including ethnically Pamiri Ismaili Shi'a Muslims and those allegedly affiliated with banned religious groups. In addition, the government intensified its efforts to protect state-sanctioned Islam by penalizing traditional spiritual practitioners.

Throughout the year, officials discriminately applied legislation to target peaceful religious activities and restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This restrictive legal framework includes the law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law) and the law On Resistance to Extremism (extremism law). The religion law limits religious education, restricts religious materials, maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, and prohibits unregistered religious activity. Additionally, the extremism law defines "extremist" activities broadly and does not clearly require that such activities be violent or incite violence. Authorities penalized violators through detainments, fines, prison sentences, medical neglect, and physical abuse. USCIRF monitors the cases of 14 FoRB victims who were imprisoned or detained in 2025 on "extremism"-related charges due to their peaceful religious activities.

Tragically, several FoRB victims died in custody in 2025. For example, in October, Saidazam Rahmonov died while detained. Tajik authorities returned Rahmonov's body to his family less than a week later and claimed he committed suicide. However, his body showed signs of torture, including a broken leg and electric shock marks. Officials told Rahmonov's family that they detained him because he was planning a terrorist attack. Authorities were reportedly suspicious of Rahmonov's beard and the contents of his phone, which included religious videos and photos of his wife wearing a hijab. Also, Zubaydullah Raziq, a religious scholar and prominent member of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), died in prison. In 2015, Raziq was imprisoned with dozens of other IRPT members for allegedly helping to organize a "rebellion," a charge Raziq and the IRPT have denied. For over a decade, the Tajik government has consistently targeted those affiliated with the IRPT. Banned in 2015, the IRPT is a moderate, religiously based political party that has also served as a popular social movement and community organization.

Tajik officials imprisoned members of the ethnolinguistic Yazgolumi community based on unfounded "extremism" charges. For example, in June, a Dushanbe court sentenced five Yazgolumi individuals from Darvoz to between five and five and half years in prison on charges of "extremism" for allegedly promoting Salafism. Salafism is a religious ideology that is banned in Tajikistan, and the detainees' relatives denied any affiliation. The criminal case, however, accused the men of promoting Salafism while criticizing Tajik government policies. Officials additionally claimed the men harassed those who attended their local mosque by arguing that Tajik religious leaders were government mouthpieces. Also, during a closed trial in July, a judge sentenced Obid Quvvatbekov to five years in prison for inciting "extremism" online. Quvvatbekov is the nephew of an imprisoned, prominent Yazgolumi cleric, Mavlavi Abdullobek. Some believe Quvvatbekov was punished because of his uncle's religious identity.

Officials also targeted those seemingly affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a religious group that is banned in Tajikistan. In May, the Bobojon Ghafurov District Court sentenced Farkhud Negmatov to eight years in prison for his alleged affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir. Negmatov's relatives deny the Hizb ut-Tahrir ties and believe he was targeted for criticizing the Tajik government online and reposting videos about the Islamic Caliphate.

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;
- Impose targeted sanctions on government 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
- Condition military-to-military engagements and economic partnerships on substantive improvement to the legal framework regulating religious activities.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

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

Article 26 of the Tajik constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom; yet, the legal framework regulating religion restricts FoRB. In addition to the laws on religion and extremism, the law On Parental Responsibility in the Upbringing and Education of Children (parental responsibility law) prohibits children from participating in the activities of religious associations. The law On the Regulation of Traditions and Ceremonies (traditions law) also restricts holiday traditions, religious clothing, and religious ceremonies.

Targeting of Ismaili Muslims

Throughout the year, authorities continued a campaign to target the religious activities of ethnically Pamiri Ismaili Shi'a Muslims. In June, Muzzafar Davlatmirov, a prominent Ismaili cleric imprisoned in 2022 for criticizing government violence against Pamiris in his sermons, died in custody due to medical neglect. Davlatmirov was 61 years old.

During the year, Tajik authorities continued efforts to isolate the Tajik Ismaili community from other Ismailis globally. In February, Prince Karim Al-Hussaini, the Aga Khan IV and spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims globally, passed away. The next day, many Ismaili Muslims gathered at the Ismaili Center in Khorough, GBAO, to mourn his death and watch the live broadcast of the ceremony naming the new Aga Khan. Due to the crowd, some individuals listened to the ceremony via loudspeakers outside of the building. National Security Committee (NSC) police arrived and removed the loudspeakers as mourners gathered. At the other Ismaili Center based in Dushanbe, reportedly officials turned off the electricity in an effort to prevent them from holding the ceremony. Also, in July, the governor of GBAO, Alisher Mirzonabot, banned Pamiri athletes from the region from participating in the Ismaili festival Global Games in Dubai, United Arab Emirates "due to unspecified concerns."

Regulation of Islam

The government continued to tightly control religious pilgrimages. Guidance from the Committee for Religion and Regulation of Celebrations and Ceremonies (SCRA) required anyone performing Hajj, an annual Islamic religious pilgrimage, to pay for their experience through Orienbank, a company run by President Emomali Rahmon's brother-in-law. In addition, the Civil Service Agency chairman, Ilyas Idriszoda, advised government officials to wait until after retirement to perform Hajj, which some interpreted as a threat to their employment. Furthermore, officials continued to urge Tajiks to spend their money on public projects instead of on Hajj.

The Tajik government also restricts access to religious education and materials. Since 2013, the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan has been the only institution where Muslims can pursue higher religious education in the country. Receiving religious education abroad without government permission is illegal. During the year, officials noted that 36 Tajiks received illegal religious education abroad, three of whom authorities have returned home. The religion law mandates that religious communities submit religious materials for state examination. In the first six months of 2025, the SCRA reported that it received 557 applications with religious materials to conduct examinations. Of those, officials determined 364 applications included signs of "extremism."

Officials typically enforced the traditions law to ensure adherence to the state's interpretation of Islam through fines and informational campaigns. In the first six months of 2025, Tajik officials fined around 600 individuals for violating the traditions law. In line with 2024 amendments, which banned the "import, sale, promotion and wearing of clothes alien to national culture," a government working group conducted informational campaigns at the Vatan Shopping Center in Dushanbe on "foreign clothing." Vatan Shopping Center vendors have stopped selling hijabs and Arab-style clothing since the amendments.

Crackdown on Belief Practices

During the year, the Tajik government, citing concerns for fraud, increased penalties for belief practices, which in turn affected ritual and ceremonial traditions deeply rooted in Tajik culture. Under international law, FoRB protects ritual and ceremonial acts giving direct expression to belief, including practices that draw on pre-Islamic cultural and traditional identity. In July, authorities introduced a fine of up to 4,500 somoni ($485) under Administrative Code Article 482.1 for those who receive such services. In 2024, officials had already increased administrative penalties under Administrative Code Article 482 for those who engage in such practices and introduced criminal liability under Criminal Code Article 240.1 for repeat offenders. Official rhetoric that accompanied the tightening of legislation revealed the government's intention of protecting its interpretation of Islam over the rights of traditional practitioners. In the first six months of 2025 alone, officials opened 495 cases against individuals under these provisions. At times, these charges resulted in prison sentences, such as case in June in which a woman was sentenced to six months' imprisonment.

Key U.S. Policy

In November, within the C5+1 framework, President Donald J. Trump met with President Rahmon to discuss expanding economic and security cooperation, particularly in countering terrorism and violent radicalization. However, U.S. and Tajik officials did not engage on freedom of religion or belief during these discussions.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government continued to use a restrictive legal framework to control the activities of all religious groups, with a particular focus on independent Muslims who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. The 2016 law On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations, or religion law, prohibits unregistered religious activity and heavily restricts authorized religious activity, including religious materials, education, and ceremonies. Additionally, the 2015 law On Countering Extremism, or extremism law, defines "extremism" using vague terms such as "the incitement of enmity." This broad definition allows authorities to arbitrarily prosecute peaceful religious activities. The president of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, and his father and former president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, continued to lead Turkmenistan through a cult of personality. During the year, efforts to shift religious devotion toward these leaders were a key driver of many of the government's freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations.

USCIRF has identified 10 FoRB victims in Turkmenistan, specifically Muslim men who remained imprisoned throughout 2025 for their peaceful religious activities on baseless "extremism" charges. Annamurad Atdaev is serving 15 years in prison after authorities arrested him in 2016 following his return from Egypt, where he studied Islam. Myratdurdy Shamyradow, Meret Owezow, Ahmet Mammetdurdyyew, Begejik Begejikow, and Jumanazar Hojambetow are serving 12-year sentences for meeting to discuss the writings of Said Nursi and praying. Shamyradow reportedly suffers from health issues and is no longer able to stand. Kemal Saparov and Kakadjan Halbaev are both serving 15-year sentences for holding religious discussions. Ashyrbay Bekiev is serving a 23-year prison sentence for conducting religious classes. Finally, authorities sentenced Bahram Saparov to 15 years in prison in 2013 for organizing unregistered religious meetings. While in prison, officials reportedly tortured Saparov. Notably, the actual number of FoRB victims in the country is likely underreported. For example, 20 other Muslims were arrested on the same day as Saparov, but their fates remain unknown.

In 2025, the government used religious leaders to promote its official agenda. For example, Ministry of National Security (MNS) officials recruited local state-paid Muslim religious leaders to report on those who adhere to religious beliefs outside of the state-sanctioned form of Islam, including Jehovah's Witnesses, "Krishnas," and those from "radical Islamic groups." During Ramadan, imams in Ashgabat increasingly used their pulpits to praise President Berdimuhamedow and his policies. The imams claimed that opposing the government's policies is similar to engaging in sedition, going against a ruler chosen by God, and opposing Islam.

Throughout the year, the Turkmen government continued to target religious Muslims who attend mosque. At the same time, officials forced its people to pay for the construction of new, expensive mosques. For example, authorities forced outwardly religious Muslims to pick cotton on state-owned land without pay in preparation for Turkmenistan's annual Harvest Festival. In Balkan Region during October, authorities detained those under 50 years old who attend mosque, including women who wear headscarves and bearded men. Police reportedly demanded that dozens of such individuals pick cotton each day until the end of the harvest under threat of imprisonment on charges of membership in a "banned religious group." These incidents of forced labor targeting those perceived as religious occurred amid a deepening economic crisis, making it difficult for citizens to afford the rising costs of food. Also in 2025, authorities coerced citizens to pay for the construction of an opulent mosque in the city of Arkadag, forcing citizens to pay for one of the Berdimuhamedows' extravagant vanity projects over basic necessities.

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;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmen 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
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies, including in the energy and critical minerals sectors, to improvements of religious freedom in Turkmenistan.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia
- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom under a Leadership with a Cult of Personality
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Of Turkmenistan's estimated population of 5.7 million, 93 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni); six percent is Eastern Orthodox, mostly Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic; and the remaining one percent includes small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is, Roman Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Protestants, and Jews. Article 18 of the Turkmen constitution guarantees the right to FoRB, but the government restricts this right through various legislation.

Turkmenistan is widely considered one of the world's most closed-off countries. The insular state's poor human rights records—with a severe lack of press freedom and internet access—makes it difficult and dangerous to report on religious freedom.

Ramadan Restrictions

As in years past, authorities forcibly targeted Muslims, including women and children, during Ramadan. This year in the city of Balkanabat, police and MNS officials increased their presence around mosques and targeted women and teenagers during Ramadan prayers. For example, police detained women working in the government and forcibly removed their headscarves. Additionally, authorities forced them to resign from their positions under threat of imprisonment. At times, officials summoned the women's bosses to the police station late at night to report that their employee is a member of a "radical religious group." In a separate incident, officials detained teenagers attending mosque during Ramadan night prayers that take place past the curfew mandated by an official schedule for Turkmen children. While detaining the teenagers, officials called their school principals and parents, threatening to fine and punish parents in the case of future "violations."

During the year, Turkmen officials responded to global security threats by cracking down on rights at home, particularly targeting religious activities during major holidays such as Ramadan. For example, in Dashoguz during Ramadan, MNS officials questioned young people who recently studied abroad in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Officials were allegedly concerned with the religiosity of such individuals and their potential connection to Syria, where some Central Asians held high-level positions at the time. Authorities physically abused and forcibly shaved the beards of some of the young men detained for questioning. In one such case, security officials hit a detainee with a copy of the Criminal Code and forced him to shave his beard without any shaving cream, resulting in cuts on his face. In another instance, officials forced a man to drink vodka and eat pork—two actions typically contrary to Islamic beliefs—while mocking him. According to a July 2025 report, MNS officials and police officers in Ahal Region additionally summoned men with beards to a police station for interrogation. While detained, officials asked the men about their religious activities and forced them to shave their beards. One detainee reported that officers beat him, shaved off half his beard, and forced him to choose between drinking alcohol or eating pork.

Targeting of Religious Minorities

In 2025, during Lent, which coincided with Ramadan, authorities obstructed religious services in Dashoguz and ordered worshipers not to practice their faith in public. Police officers threateningly told Orthodox Christians to "remember [that they] live in a Muslim state" and to refrain from drinking alcohol during Ramadan. Police also increased their presence around churches during the holy month.

In 2025, the Turkmen government increasingly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly for their conscientious objection. The Turkmen constitution mandates military service for all men, with no legal alternative available for conscientious objectors. In January 2025, the Mary Regional Court heard the appeal of 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness and conscientious objector Arslan Wepayew, who had been detained since November 2024, reducing his two-year prison sentence to two years of corrective labor. While detained, Wepayew suffered from seizures, unstable blood pressure, headaches, and chest pains. Also in January, prosecutors lodged a criminal case against another conscientious objector, Agabek Rozbayew. The Shabat District Court sentenced Rozbayew to one year and six months of corrective labor, with 20 percent of his wages to be garnished by the state.

Officials also targeted Jehovah's Witnesses for adhering to their faith in other ways, which at times escalated into violence. For example, in March, Dashoguz Region police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their faith. While detained, police slapped the Witnesses to coerce them to write a repentance statement. Later, police physically assaulted them and threatened to charge them under Criminal Code Article 189, which penalizes the incitement of religious hatred. In January, Balkan Region police summoned a female Jehovah's Witness to the local mayor's office where three Muslim religious leaders and a mayor's office representative ordered her not to share her faith. Also in 2025, in Ashgabat, school authorities attempted to coerce a Jehovah's Witness student to place his hand over his heart during the national anthem, an action against the beliefs of Witnesses. The following day, the principal called a meeting with the student's parents, which police joined, to warn him about the "possible negative consequences of his actions."

Key U.S. Policy

During the year, bilateral engagements between the governments of the United States and Turkmenistan included discussion of FoRB. In August, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov and U.S. Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs John Mark Pommersheim led a session of the United States-Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Consultations, during which they discussed the advancement of religious freedom. In November, President Donald J. Trump met with President Serdar Berdimuhamedow through the C5+1 format to discuss U.S.-Turkmen relations, including new opportunities for trade and transportation in the Central Asia-Caucasus Region.

The U.S. Department of State last redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

VIETNAM

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam remained poor, particularly for religious minorities, religious freedom dissidents, and predominantly Christian ethnic minority groups. The Vietnamese government targeted defenders of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and members of unregistered religious groups with threats, detention, and imprisonment.

The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) and its implementing decrees remained the principal tool for authorities to manage religious affairs. Authorities also used other ill-defined national security provisions in the Penal Code, such as Articles 116 ("undermining national solidarity"), 117 ("disseminating anti-state propaganda"), and 331 ("abusing democratic freedoms"), to prosecute targeted citizens.

Of the prisoners in USCIRF's FoRB Victims List, dozens are still serving their sentences, and authorities continued with more arrests and sentencings of independent religious adherents and religious freedom advocates throughout 2025. Central Highland authorities in Gia Lai and Dak Lak Provinces sentenced Montagnard Christians Ro Cham Grong, Y Po Mlo, and Y Thinh Nie to prison terms of seven to nine years in March and May and arrested pastor Y Nuen Ayun in October, all under Article 116. In July, authorities in An Giang Province sentenced Ho Trong Phuc, a 17-year-old independent Hoa Hao Buddhist, to one year in prison under Article 331, while a Vinh Long court sentenced Khmer Krom Buddhist monk Kim Som Rinh and two Khmer Krom activists each to three and half years in prison under Article 331 in November. In 2025, Long An authorities added three years of house arrest to a five-year sentence for Thien Am Buddhist (formerly known as Peng Lei Buddhist House Church) leader Le Tung Van and eight years of additional prison time to monk Le Thanh Nhat Nguyen's four-year sentence. In September, independent Hoa Hao Buddhist Vuong Van Tha died in prison while serving a 12-year sentence for "disseminating anti-state propaganda." In October, a Lam Dong court sentenced Protestant pastor Nguyen Manh Hung to six years in prison under Article 117.

Vietnamese authorities continued to pressure adherents of independent religious groups to join the approved state-sponsored religious organizations. This included authorities subjecting ethnic Montagnard and Hmong Christians to persistent surveillance and harassment, frequent home visits, disruption of religious gatherings, physical abuse, and forced renunciation of faith to pressure them to join state-sanctioned churches affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam or disband. Authorities throughout the year harassed Buddhists not practicing under the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), including publicly disparaging ascetic Dhutanga monk Thich Minh Tue and his followers as well as preventing Thien Am monks and nuns from shaving their heads.

In 2025, the Vietnamese government engaged in notable transnational repression. In February, Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) designated U.S.-based rights organization Boat People SOS and Thailand-based rights organization Montagnards Stand for Justice (MSFJ) as terrorist groups, creating pretense to extraterritorially suppress foreign nongovernmental organizations. In November, Thailand's government extradited Montagnard religious freedom activist Y Quynh Bdap to Vietnam despite Bdap being a registered refugee. Bdap faces a 10-year sentence for a terrorism conviction in absentia for his leadership of MSFJ. In February, Thai authorities—reportedly acting under Vietnamese pressure—raided a funeral for Bdap's mother-in-law in Bangkok and detained 65 Montagnard asylum seekers. In April, Sri Lankan police disrupted Thich Minh Tue's pilgrimage reportedly following pressure from VBS. Pro-government Vietnamese individuals continued to follow and surveil Thich Minh Tue's group as they journeyed through Asia. In January, the Vietnamese government attempted to disrupt Vietnamese participation in the 2025 International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, DC, by banning three followers of independent religious groups from leaving Vietnam while surveilling others present at the event with video recordings and online doxing.

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);
- Call on the Vietnamese government to amend or repeal Articles 116, 117, and 331 of the Criminal Code, all of which are used to target adherents of independent religious groups and violate Vietnam's international human rights commitments;
- Engage with the newly established Ministry of Ethnic and Religious Affairs in Vietnam to encourage amending the LBR in line with international standards to guarantee the right to FoRB for all; and
- Press Vietnam as a reelected United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) member to allow visits from UNHRC human rights experts or special rapporteur on FoRB to assess FoRB conditions.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Vietnam's ongoing FoRB concerns through the Congressional Vietnam Caucus by holding hearings, meetings, and congressional delegation visits advocating for the release of FoRB prisoners; and
- Introduce legislative efforts to improve religious freedom in Vietnam, such as the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 3122).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Vietnam
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Vietnam has a diverse religious landscape with prevalent influence of Buddhism, folk religion, and Chinese spirituality. Catholicism, Protestantism, Hoa Hao Buddhism, and Cao Daism are among the other religious traditions with notable representation. In 2025, the government officially recognized 43 religious organizations and 16 religions, with no increase from last year.

Vietnam's constitution guarantees freedom of religion and states that citizens may practice or not practice any religion. Yet Vietnamese authorities often override these rights by applying its legal framework—such as the 2018 LBR and certain provisions of the Criminal Code—in the name of maintaining national security and social unity.

In February, Vietnam established the Ministry of Ethnic and Religious Affairs as part of a sweeping government reorganization aimed at streamlining its political apparatus. The reorganization consolidated the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the Government Committee for Religious Affairs, formerly under the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Restrictions on Religious Groups

Catholic communities continued to face land disputes with the government in 2025. In January, Da Nang authorities demolished a property owned by An Hoa Parish. In August, police in Thai Nguyen Province raided a Mass at a Catholic home church that authorities labeled unlicensed and cut off its electricity. In June, authorities in Ho Chi Minh City demolished a state-requisitioned facility belonging to the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. In September, the Redemptorist Order in Hue protested authorities suddenly erecting fences in preparation for construction on its expropriated L'Accueil site.

In 2025, the Vietnamese government escalated efforts to eliminate new religious movements throughout the country. In January, Ha Giang Province celebrated the complete eradication of the San Su Khe To belief, officially labeled as an "evil cult." Also in January, Quang Nam authorities stopped followers of the Hoi Thanh Duc Chua Troi Me from holding an "unauthorized" religious gathering. Between July and September, Lao Cai provincial authorities cracked down on Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God's (CAG) proselytization activities and claimed that they had "eradicated" five independent religious groups in the province (Thien Tong Tan Dieu, the Duong Van Minh group, CAG, Gie Sua, and Ba Co Do). In September, MPS officially banned CAG and all its activities nationwide.

International Accountability

In July, the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) issued its findings on Vietnam's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights compliance, following its review of the country during its 144th session. UNHRC stated concern about Vietnam's alleged suppression of FoRB through criminalizing religious practices, preventing religious gatherings, seizing religious properties, coercing renunciation of faith, and denying legal recognition to religious groups. In the same month, in response to the 2023 Concluding Observations of the Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, while acknowledging the lack of cohesion in applying and enforcing the legal framework governing religious affairs, Vietnam denied its use of force and abuse of power by law enforcement and local authorities against individuals and leaders of ethnic and religious minority groups. In August, UN experts expressed serious concern over reports of escalating repression against Khmer Krom individuals in Vietnam, including more than 17 human rights defenders, Theravada Buddhist monks, and followers. In October, the Vietnamese government responded to UN experts' inquiry about Tibetan monk Tulku Hungkar Dorje's mysterious death in March while in country, denying state involvement.

Key U.S. Policy

In January, then Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Dafna Rand, joined by then Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain, traveled to Hanoi to convene the 28th U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue where they discussed a wide range of human rights issues, including the protection of FoRB. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son in Malaysia on the sidelines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Foreign Ministers' Meeting, during which they celebrated the 30th anniversary of U.S.-Vietnam diplomatic ties and discussed strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In September, Secretary Rubio met with Vietnamese President Luong Cuong and acting Foreign Minister Le Hoai Trung during the UN General Assembly in New York, where they reaffirmed the importance of the bilateral relationship. Religious freedom was not publicly mentioned in either of Secretary Rubio's engagements with Vietnam. In November, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth traveled to Hanoi to discuss potential U.S. arms sales to Vietnam.

In April, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ), along with three democratic representatives, introduced the Vietnam Human Rights Act (H.R. 3122). The bill prioritizes human rights for U.S.-Vietnam relations and grants the secretary of state the authority to sanction Vietnamese officials who are complicit in torture and the systematic suppression of religious freedom. In July, Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Steve Daines (R-MT) introduced S. Res. 321, commemorating 30 years of diplomatic relations between the United States and Vietnam, with a mention of the promotion and protection of human rights in Vietnam.

The U.S. Department of State last placed Vietnam on its Special Watch List (SWL) under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023.

ALGERIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor and unchanged from the prior year. The government continued its systematic campaign against minority religious communities, enforcing the anti-blasphemy provisions in Article 144 of the Penal Code and the proselytization ban under Ordinance 06-03, which penalizes anyone who "incites, constrains or utilizes means of seduction intending to convert a Muslim." While this ordinance formally permits non-Muslim worship, it also imposes severe restrictions on such activities: gatherings must obtain state permission to operate, and the law criminalizes any printed or audiovisual materials that authorities deem as aiming to "shake the faith of a Muslim." Non-Sunni Muslim Algerians or foreign nationals suspected of engaging in proselytism remain subject to prosecution or deportation, respectively. Furthermore, the government has continued to use Ordinance 06-03 to repress religious expression. In March, for example, the administrator of the Facebook page "Ramadan Breakers" received a two-year prison sentence and a fine for allegedly promoting atheism. In the same month, social media activist Moh El Washam was sentenced to five years in prison for posting TikTok videos that authorities deemed critical of Islam.

The Protestant Church of Algeria (EPA) churches that the government had forcibly closed between 2018 and 2024 remained closed throughout 2025, with only one remaining open under tight restrictions in Algiers. The government continues to deny these churches legal registration despite EPA leaders having repeatedly attempted to certify compliance with all registration requirements. In June, authorities detained 10 Protestants in Béjaïa for "continuing church activities without authorization." In December, a court convicted and sentenced them each to six months' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 dinars ($385), for which all 10 have filed appeals. Since 2018, authorities have reportedly targeted the Protestant community in 59 related cases, all of which were still pending at the end of the reporting period.

Other religious minorities continue to face similarly challenging circumstances. The Ahmadiyya Muslim population has likely dwindled to around 200 according to the most recent estimates from 2024, largely due to ongoing government pressure; the community has remained unable to register in any official capacity, as the government has long accused them of "denigrating Islam and threatening national security." The small Jewish community, now numbering fewer than 200 people, reported no direct action from Algerian authorities, yet antisemitic public discourse perpetuated an environment of fear and inhibited their ability to openly exercise their religious traditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Algeria on the Special Watch List, or SWL, for engaging in systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to discrete improvements of religious freedom in Algeria and work with Government of Algeria ministries to permit registration of EPA churches and Ahmadiyya Muslim congregations as well as to release religious materials presently impounded at Port Algiers.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight religious freedom conditions in Algeria through public hearings, briefings, legislation, and high-level congressional delegation visits focusing on religious freedom conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Approximately 99 percent of Algeria's nearly 47 million people are Sunni Muslims following the Maliki school of jurisprudence, and Islam is the official state religion. The remaining one percent includes Ahmadiyya, Shi'a, and Ibadi Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Although the constitution ostensibly guarantees freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), the government maintains laws that favor Sunni Islam and severely limits all other religious practices.

Restrictions on Religious Minorities

The Algerian government's repression of religious freedom affects all non-Sunni Muslim groups, including the Protestant, Ahmadiyya Muslim, and other communities; however, in 2025, its actions most directly targeted the EPA community. EPA leadership reported repeated raids on their homes and places of worship, during which authorities confiscated religious literature and accused them of proselytization. These raids resulted in several investigations, arrests, and prosecutions—most recently concentrated in Tizi Ouzou, where community members said the government aimed to "make an example" of them by instilling fear to deter the activities of religious minorities. In May, authorities reportedly claimed "customs restrictions" to prevent 14 members of the EPA from traveling to Egypt to attend a religious conference.

The government has also increasingly used bureaucratic tools to prevent the ability of religious minority communities to obtain religious materials. According to the Bible Society of Algeria, the only organization in the country through which all churches can obtain religious literature, all of their materials remained impounded at the Port of Algiers under the pretext of "administrative issues." Although Algerian authorities ostensibly approved the Roman Catholic Church's license to receive such materials, officials have reportedly released only a severely limited quantity of Bibles, crosses, and other items. Meanwhile, authorities have outright denied the EPA's application for a license to import Bibles.

The Jewish community in Algeria continues to decline, with no synagogues open for worship in 2025. In October, authorities demolished the remains of the historic Chaloum Lebar Synagogue in Algiers as part of an "urban renewal process" to remove deteriorated structures in historic districts. The Great Synagogue of Algiers had previously been converted into a mosque.

Algerian Government Crackdown on Civic Space

In 2025, the government of Algeria markedly intensified its efforts to shut down civic space, using legal reforms and enforcement tactics to stifle dissent and restrict fundamental freedoms such as FoRB. According to multiple human rights organizations, authorities have engaged in arbitrary arrests and detentions of activists, journalists, and human rights defenders, worsening the country's already chilling environment for freedoms of religion or belief, expression, assembly, and association. In addition, updated legislation—such as the July adoption of the General Mobilization Act and reforms to the Criminal Procedure Code—empowers security services with broad powers, raising alarm that authorities would deem even nonviolent protest and organization as threats to national security.

Taken together, these developments signal the government's intention to escalate its repression of civic activity and institutionalize it into the country's legal and institutional framework. Crucially, minority religious groups—especially Protestant Christian, Ahmadiyya Muslim, and others—function through civil associations and rely on legal recognition to worship and conduct community work. The tightening of laws governing associations and assembly therefore not only silences political dissent but also threatens to enable the government's restriction of all religious expression and organization by these disfavored communities.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, deepening security and economic cooperation marked the bilateral relationship between Algeria and the United States, even as both sides navigated underlying divergences in policy priorities. Early in the year, U.S. Africa Command signed a landmark defense-cooperation memorandum of understanding with Algeria, committing to expand collaboration in counterterrorism, search-and-rescue, maritime intelligence, and military training. In July, the Donald J. Trump administration's senior advisor on African and Middle East affairs, Massad Boulos, visited Algeria to engage in discussions around the two countries strengthening their relationship, particularly their economic relationship. U.S. government officials also continued to engage in dialogue about religious freedom with various religious groups in the country, including U.S. Ambassador Elizabeth Aubin's hosting of a roundtable discussion on FoRB with community members in September.

The U.S. Department of State last placed Algeria on its SWL under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023.

AZERBAIJAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Azerbaijan's government committed severe violations of religious freedom. Authorities enforced the country's highly restrictive religion law, which criminalizes unregistered religious activities and grants the government full control over registered religious organizations. The religion law furthermore mandates the official review and approval of religious materials, restricts who can engage in missionary activities, and requires state approval of religious leaders, among other limitations.

In April, law enforcement in Nakhichevan reportedly raided a Protestant worship service for gathering without state permission. Courts later reportedly fined five Azerbaijani citizens 1,500 manats ($882) each and fined and deported a family of foreign citizens over the incident. Also in April, police in Baku reportedly detained members of the unregistered religious group Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light for unfurling banners with religious slogans and imagery in a public space. In June, the State Security Service and State Migration Service announced the deportation of three foreign citizens for organizing religious meetings and engaging in missionary activities for "non-traditional religious movements." In July, Shi'a Muslim activists claimed that the government had placed restrictions on Ashura-related religious activities that did not occur on the day the state-controlled Caucasus Muslim Board recognized as the holiday. The government continued not to process the registration applications of several nondenominational Protestant groups and still has not granted Jehovah's Witnesses registration outside of Baku.

Azerbaijan has yet to implement an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Dozens of military-age male Jehovah's Witnesses who reject military service on religious grounds have received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, and in July, a court sentenced Jehovah's Witness Elgiz Ibrahimov to one year in prison for refusing to serve in the military in accordance with his religious beliefs. An appeals court later released him on probation.

Azerbaijan continued to unjustly imprison more than 200 Shi'a Muslims who practice their religion outside the government's preferred interpretation of Islam. Most Shi'a detainees face dubious drug-related charges, which authorities have a history of using to target political dissent. Many Shi'a detainees have accused law enforcement of torture and other abuse during their arrests and imprisonment. In June, law enforcement detained and allegedly abused Elgiz Mammadov, a member of the unregistered Shi'a group the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM), which the government has targeted for years. Authorities had previously arrested and allegedly sexually assaulted Mammadov in 2022 after he protested the trial of one of his fellow MUM colleagues. In July, a court sentenced MUM member Tarlan Sayyadov to three years in prison on drug-related charges. In August, police arrested six women reportedly while distributing alms and protesting in commemoration of the Shi'a holiday of Arba'in. Officers allegedly threatened the women with sexual assault and forcibly removed one woman's hijab.

Historic Armenian religious sites in Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories remain at risk following Azerbaijan's retaking of the territories in 2020 and 2023. As of July, satellite imagery identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts. Additionally, family members have reported that Armenian prisoners are prevented from receiving religious items, such as the Bible; however, the Azerbaijani government has claimed prisoners have access to religious materials.

In February, a USCIRF delegation traveled to Azerbaijan to survey religious freedom conditions and meet with government officials. While the Azerbaijani government has been willing to engage with USCIRF, it has not made any significant progress since then to address USCIRF's recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Azerbaijan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Azerbaijani government agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Main Department for Combating Organized Crime (also known as Bandotdel), and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Enter into a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. Department of State and the Azerbaijani government to develop and implement strategies to improve religious freedom and other human rights within the country; and
- Allocate funds to programs that document and/or report on religious freedom and related human rights violations in Azerbaijan, such as Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Set conditions on foreign military financing and other security assistance to Azerbaijan, requiring specified improvements in religious freedom and related human rights;
- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, and other actions; and
- Advocate for freedom of religion or belief prisoners of conscience, including supporting individuals in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission Delegation Visit:** Baku in February 2025
- **Hearing:** Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan
- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Azerbaijan has an estimated population of 10.6 million. Azerbaijan has no official state religion. Approximately 96 percent of the population identify as Muslim, composed of around 65 percent Shi'a and 35 percent Sunni. The remaining four percent of the population consists of atheists, Armenian Apostolic, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

Civil Society Crackdown

Azerbaijan's ongoing repression of independent civil society, especially journalists and human rights defenders, has resulted in less reporting and credible information on religious freedom and related human rights within the country. In March, authorities arrested Bashir Suleymanli, head of the Civil Rights Institute, one of Azerbaijan's remaining human rights organizations. In May, authorities arrested VOA journalist Ulviyya Guliyeva (known as Ulviyya Ali) on spurious smuggling charges in retaliation for her work. Guliyeva had consistently reported on the human rights issues in Azerbaijan, including the detention of Shi'a Muslim activists. During Guliyeva's interrogation, police allegedly physically assaulted her and threatened her with sexual violence. In June, a court sentenced seven journalists to between seven and nine and a half years in prison on fabricated charges tied to their alleged work for Abzas Media, a local independent Azerbaijani news outlet that reports on human rights issues. As of the end of the reporting period, Azerbaijan was imprisoning around 25 journalists.

International Bodies and Mechanisms

European bodies regularly highlighted Azerbaijan's human rights record, including on cases related to religious freedom. In July, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ordered Azerbaijan to compensate Vugar Rafiyev for violating his freedom of religion or belief after authorities fined him and others for gathering to study the writings of Muslim theologian Said Nursi in 2017. In September, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visited Azerbaijan to examine detainee conditions. The CPT had criticized Azerbaijan in 2024 for failing to cooperate with the organization and implement its recommendations. In October, the ECHR ruled that Azerbaijan had wrongfully disbarred human rights lawyer Yalchin Imanov for publicly commenting in 2017 on torture allegations made by his client, MUM leader Abbas Huseynov.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Azerbaijani bilateral relations primarily focused on securing a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with the U.S. government playing a mediating role. In August, President Donald J. Trump hosted Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan at the White House for peace talks. There, both countries entered into memoranda of understanding with the United States meant to facilitate peace through economic development, trade, and defense cooperation.

The Trump administration's cuts to broader human rights programming and U.S.-funded international media impacted organizations that documented or reported on religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan. A funding freeze for the U.S. Agency for Global Media resulted in the shutdown of VOA and a major reduction in reporting from RFE/RL. Organizations receiving funding from NED reported major disruptions to their operations as NED's funding was temporarily paused amid the administration's review of foreign aid.

Congress elevated human rights concerns in Azerbaijan throughout the year, including related to religious freedom. In March, 60 bipartisan members of Congress urged U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio to enforce prohibitions on U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan under Section 907 of the FREEDOM Support Act in part due to Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious heritage in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. In April, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) led a Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on human rights in Azerbaijan following its hosting of the United Nations' annual climate conference. In July, more than 80 bipartisan members of Congress urged Secretary Rubio to ensure the safe return of Armenians displaced during Azerbaijan's 2023 military campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh. The letter mentioned Azerbaijan's destruction of Armenian religious sites in the region.

In September, Representatives Dina Titus (D-NV) and Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) reintroduced the Azerbaijan Sanctions Review Act (H.R. 5369), which, if passed, would require the Trump administration to determine whether Azerbaijani officials mentioned in the bill participated in human rights abuses and qualified for sanctions under relevant U.S. law. Some of the Azerbaijani judges mentioned in the bill have been involved in sentencing Shi'a Muslim activists. Members of both the House and Senate introduced bipartisan resolutions condemning Azerbaijan's crackdown on civil society and mistreatment of academic and political activist Gubad Ibadoghlu, who faces charges in relation to his alleged possession of religious materials.

The U.S. Department of State last placed Azerbaijan on its Special Watch List under IRFA for severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023.

Chair Vicky Hartzler Dissent on Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan should be designated a Country of Particular Concern rather than Special Watch List due to its ongoing, egregious, and severe violations of religious freedom. The country outwardly claims to support religious freedom, yet inwardly does the opposite. It tortures its citizens, controls religious activity, expels independent media and the Red Cross, and destroys religious heritage sites.

Control of religion involves government approval for the publication and distribution of religious materials, requirements on the registration of churches, appointments by the government of imams to mosques, and government writing of sermons for Muslim services.

Shi'a religious actors imprisoned for their faith have been subjected to beatings, threats of rape, and detention in horrid conditions. The nearly two dozen Armenian Christian prisoners from Nagorno-Karabakh, who were tried behind closed doors without adequate legal counsel, have received beatings, psychological abuse, lack of access to medical care and proper food, denials of Bibles, and the erasure of cross tattoos through burning. Police are not held accountable for these actions.

In addition, Azerbaijan continues to destroy religious monuments and churches in Nagorno-Karabakh, erasing over 2,000 years of Christian presence in that area. Satellite imagery has identified eight destroyed and another 10 damaged religious sites as of July, including churches, cemeteries, and other artifacts.

Azerbaijan's treatment of religion and its people needs to change. If Azerbaijan wants to be a full partner with the United States and advance shared economic and strategic goals, it needs to take meaningful steps to truly embrace religious freedom.

EGYPT

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Egypt remained poor. The government continued to systematically restrict freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for religious minority communities and individuals who express ideas that differ from the state's interpretation of Islam.

Egyptian authorities subjected to prolonged pretrial detention those suspected of violating Law 98(f), which punishes "ridiculing or insulting a heavenly religion or a sect." After the January release of Christian convert Nour Fayez Ibrahim Gerges, imprisoned in 2021 on blasphemy and terrorism charges, state security summoned him for interrogations in March. In July, judicial authorities charged Said Abdelrazek, a Christian convert, with "contempt for Islam" and joining a banned terrorist organization. In October, authorities arrested Dr. Augustin Samaan, a researcher specializing in Christian apologetics, for allegedly promoting "contempt of Islam" online. The government also continued targeting nonbelievers. In September, authorities arrested Maged Zakaria Abdel Rahman, known as the "Mufti of Humanity." Authorities later arrested individuals who appeared on his YouTube program or posted video clips of themselves on the "Arab Atheists Network and Forum" Facebook page. Throughout the year, state security arbitrarily arrested 14 individuals, including atheists who deviated from the state's religious views for religious expression online. Although the government reportedly lifted its travel ban on Qur'anist Muslim Reda Abdel Rahman in 2024, authorities continued to bar him from obtaining a passport and traveling outside Egypt.

Although President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's administration previously solicited draft personal status laws from Christian denominations, the government took no further action in 2025. In October, a Cabinet-appointed committee approved 160 church building permits pursuant to the Church Construction Law, bringing the total number of permits to 3,613 since the law's 2016 adoption. However, the government has yet to act on roughly 2,000 legalization requests for churches and Christian facilities. In contrast, the Ministry of Endowments announced plans in February to reopen 115 mosques, part of a 2024 plan announced to invest 18.6 billion pounds ($366,000) into the renovation, maintenance, and development of more than 12,000 mosques.

In May, a judicial ruling on a property dispute regarding St. Catherine's Monastery raised concerns that the government was undermining the monastery's autonomy. While authorities have limited researchers' access to its manuscript collection and undermined the religious monastic community that has preserved the site for centuries, it continues to allow worship at the monastery and has stated its commitment to protecting religious and cultural identity.

In rural Upper Egypt, local authorities have failed to protect communities from violent attacks, and hostile attitudes towards Christians are more pronounced than in urban areas. While security services sometimes moved expeditiously to quell violent incidents against churches in Upper Egypt, authorities often failed to sufficiently investigate such incidents and hold perpetrators to account. In February, authorities neglected to pursue a full investigation into a fire that broke out in the Church of Archangel Michael in Qena Governorate. In May, after security forces extinguished a fire at St. George Church in Qift, local authorities attributed the event to a candle placed in an incense holder, even though this defies Coptic ritual practice. Anti-Coptic harassment—including the disappearances of young Coptic women—persisted, with reports that authorities were reluctant or unwilling to investigate potential cases of religiously motivated abduction or coercion.

Amid these concerns, Egypt's government maintained some initiatives to encourage religious inclusivity. In January, President el-Sisi delivered a message of interfaith tolerance and respect at the Coptic Orthodox Nativity Cathedral. In March, Al-Azhar Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayyeb emphasized the need for interreligious dialogue. In October, President el-Sisi expressed Egypt's commitment to religious freedom while meeting with the World Council of Churches after the group concluded its Sixth Assembly, hosted by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Multiple state agencies continued efforts to revive the Holy Family Trail, which includes landmarks sacred to the Coptic community.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Egypt on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise with the Egyptian government during bilateral engagements the need under international law to repeal Article 98(f) of the Criminal Code and phase out its enforcement in the interim;
- Integrate religious freedom improvements into broader U.S.-Egypt security cooperation efforts and foreign assistance, such as releasing prisoners of conscience and lifting travel bans on religious dissidents; and
- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to engage in roundtables in Upper Egypt, including with local religious leaders, civil society organizations, and government officials, to discuss approvals of houses of worship, religious heritage preservation, and interreligious tolerance.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold a hearing on religious freedom in Egypt prior to the next designation of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) with topics addressing attacks on and forced disappearances of Copts; and
- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Egypt in 2026 to raise key FoRB issues, including implementation of the 2016 Church Building Law, anti-Christian targeting in Upper Egypt, and FoRB prisoners.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** State Restrictions on Religious Freedom in Egypt
- **Spotlight Podcast:** Egypt's Continued Repression of Religious Minorities
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Egypt's population is approximately 111.2 million, an estimated 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a, Qur'anist, and other non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than one percent. Egypt's Christians account for about 10 percent of the population, constituting the largest Christian minority in the Middle East and North Africa region. Over 90 percent of Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, while a minority belong to Evangelical, Catholic, and some smaller denominations. Baha'is number between 1,000 and 2,000; Jehovah's Witnesses account for up to 1,500; and the Jewish population has reportedly declined to fewer than 10 people. Article 2 of Egypt's constitution names Islam as the state religion, with the "principles of Shari'a" constituting the primary source of legislation. Although Article 64 ostensibly provides for freedom of belief, only followers of the three "heavenly religions" (Islam, Christianity, and Judaism) have a legal basis to publicly practice religion and build places of worship. Since the 1960s, the government has banned Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is.

Legal and Administrative Challenges

Egypt has several laws that coerce compliance with the government's interpretation of Islam. The government continued to detain and charge individuals under religiously grounded provisions of the Cybercrime Law (175/2018), which the government uses to censor the expression of religious beliefs and other ideas considered threatening to the state's interpretation of Islam. In June, authorities arrested at least seven social media creators for purportedly violating "values in Egyptian society" under Article 25 of the Cybercrime Law. In May, Egypt's Parliament passed a new Fatwa Regulation Law, further entrenching state control over religious affairs. The law gives exclusive authority to state-backed Islamic institutions, including Al-Azhar and Dar al-Iftaa, to issue religious edicts over public and private affairs. In June, lawmakers submitted draft amendments to the education law that would mandate state schools to increase the amount of religious education. Even though Muslim and Christian students take separate religious courses, the new law would systematically disadvantage Christian students, given a shortage of Christian religious education instructors and resources.

In March, authorities carried out arrests of more than 12 Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light members for hanging a banner advertising a religious TV channel on a pedestrian bridge. Throughout the year, prosecutors repeatedly extended their pretrial detention on charges related to blasphemy and membership in a banned group. Detainees have reportedly been subject to torture and cruel treatment in detention, including denial of food and access to medical care.

National identity cards present challenges to those who do not identify as Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, as those documents allow only for those affiliations. Baha'i religious identity is marked with a dash, denying equal protection of FoRB under the law. Baha'is' exclusion from the existing personal status law results in their inability to legally marry, obtain residency permits and birth certificates, pursue formal education, or gather for worship. Because of these legal obstacles to obtain official status, a Baha'i woman in Egypt continued to face imminent deportation and separation from her children in 2025. In September, authorities closed a Cairo facility where community members planned to teach Baha'i educational materials. Authorities also continued denying Baha'is burial land while prohibiting them from using Muslim cemeteries. In April, United Nations experts called on the Egyptian government to address systematic discrimination against Baha'is.

State Antisemitism

Despite the government's investment in restoration projects for historic synagogues, authorities continue to tolerate and promote antisemitic ideas. State-backed media continued to invoke antisemitic tropes and Holocaust distortion, fostering an environment in which Egypt's dwindling Jewish community feels increasingly threatened. A 2025 study found that of 180 opinion and commentary articles referencing Jews from the state-funded *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Gomhuria* newspapers published between January 2024 and March 2025, nearly 30 percent included explicitly antisemitic ideas. These included stereotypes of Jewish greed, depictions of Jews as disloyal and traitorous, and Holocaust denial. A February 2025 article in *Al-Gomhuria* claimed that Jews control global powers through financial influence and will be responsible for a third world war in their quest for wealth. In June, a television host for state-run Al-Hadath Al-Youm TV used the antisemitic Protocols of the Elders of Zion hoax to blame Jews for the purported destruction of Arab and Islamic societies.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Culture continued to deny community leaders' request to access and digitize the historical Jacques Mosseri Geniza documents, which have remained in the government's possession since 2016.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Egypt continued strong bilateral ties on a range of issues, including a defense partnership, economic cooperation, and regional security. Congressional leaders introduced legislation highlighting religious freedom conditions in Egypt. In July, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) introduced the Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act of 2025 co-sponsored by Senator John Fetterman (D-PA), among others. The bill seeks to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and impose sanctions on the group. The House also introduced a companion bill. President Donald J. Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke or met several times throughout the year with President el-Sisi and other high-ranking Egyptian officials in efforts to broker an end to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

INDONESIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, Indonesia's freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) conditions remained poor despite some government initiatives to improve them. The government continued to apply multiple legal instruments—including a presidential decree, the Criminal Code, and the Information and Electronic Transactions (ITE) Law—to regulate religious expression, criminalize blasphemy, and impose broad restrictions on FoRB. The government also struggled to curb FoRB violations by nonstate actors as intolerance in society persisted.

The government, as well as several religiously intolerant groups, leveraged the *Izin Mendirikan Bangunan* (IMB)—the permit required for constructing religious buildings—and the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship to obstruct minority religious communities from establishing their own places of worship. Throughout 2025, Christian churches across the country struggled to obtain IMB or gather peacefully, as intolerant individuals pressured authorities to stop their activities. Oftentimes, authorities failed to prevent recurring offenses and prosecute assailants. In January, Muslim residents in Bandung, West Java, stated they would sue leaders of Sang Hyang Hurip St. Anthony Catholic Church to prevent its building construction despite the church having received the necessary IMB. In March, the St. Odilia Catholic Church in Bandung faced protests from local Muslim residents while holding Lenten Mass. The demonstrators opposed the church's use of a multipurpose building for religious services, arguing that the activity required IMB. In June, a mob of approximately 200 people in Sukabumi, Surabaya, stormed a private residence used for a Christian youth retreat, accusing the attendees of gathering at an unlicensed prayer hall. The group vandalized the premises before forcing 36 children in attendance to flee. Police arrested only seven of the 200 perpetrators. Similarly, in July, a group of intolerant residents disrupted worship and religious education activities at a Christian prayer house in Padang, West Sumatra, damaging the facilities and injuring two children. In August, authorities in East Java halted the construction of a church in Kediri City, citing the lack of IMB. In West Java, authorities in Purbayani Village shut down a prayer house before evicting its evangelist.

Ahmadiyya Muslims also continued to endure discrimination and experience difficulties conducting religious activities. In June, authorities in Banjar City prevented Ahmadiyya Muslims from carrying out worship activities in buildings that authorities had previously sealed. Also in June, the Manado State Islamic Institute canceled an Ahmadiyya book event after the Indonesian Ulema Council lodged complaints citing its 2005 fatwa against Ahmadiyya Muslims. Other religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus reported similar experiences, with over 400 local laws and regulations discriminating against them across the country.

Other incidents of religious intolerance included job discrimination and state favoritism for Islamic institutions. In October, the government announced its plan to finance the rebuilding of a collapsed Muslim boarding school despite its lack of IMB. In North Kalimantan, a local religious affairs office issued job postings for custodial and office security positions, requiring the applicants to be Muslim and able to recite the Qur'an. Only following public outcry, the local agency removed the religious qualification requirement.

The government's notable efforts to improve FoRB in 2025 included the Ministry of Religious Affairs' (MoRA) new program, "Curriculum of Love," for religion teachers in schools to promote tolerance and respect for different religions. In March, Minister of Human Rights Natalius Pigai proposed drafting a religious freedom bill to end discrimination against minority groups. In December, MoRA hosted its first Christmas celebration within the ministry to enhance religious inclusivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Indonesia on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the Indonesian government through the U.S. Department of State to repeal or amend existing laws—including Chapter VII of the Criminal Code, blasphemy laws, and the ITE law—to comply with international human rights standards specific to FoRB, such as eliminating the 2006 Joint Decree on Houses of Worship requirement that religious groups obtain approval from other religious communities to construct worship facilities; and
- Encourage the Indonesian government to allow citizens to select either nonbelief or religions beyond the six currently recognized in the religion column of the national identification card.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Indonesia's religious freedom conditions and advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners through delegation visits, meetings, and hearings, including through the Congressional Friends of Indonesia Caucus.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution — Examples from South and Southeast Asia
- **Country Update:** Indonesia
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. With a population of over 280 million, the Southeast Asian country has approximately 87 percent of the population identifying as Muslim, with the vast majority adhering to Sunni Islam. Other minority Muslim communities include Shi'a and Ahmadiyya. Protestant Christians account for 7.5 percent of the population, while Roman Catholics make up 3.1 percent. Hindus represent 1.7 percent. The remaining 0.8 percent includes followers of Buddhism, Confucianism, and other traditional beliefs.

Pancasila, a philosophical theory that undergirds Indonesia's governance and identity, is deeply embedded in Indonesia's constitution and guides the country's political, social, and cultural spheres. While the Indonesian government promotes interreligious harmony and tolerance based on *Pancasila*, the ideology's monotheistic interpretation of religion excludes minority groups like Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims as well as Baha'is, atheists, and nontheists.

Although the government added a seventh category—*kepercayaan* (belief)—as a recognized religion on national identification cards in 2024, allowing followers of indigenous beliefs who do not adhere to the six recognized religions (Islam, Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Protestantism) to note their affiliation, the Constitutional Court denied nonbelievers the right to leave the religion field blank on official documents in a 2025 ruling. Additionally, Indonesia does not legally recognize interfaith marriage, resulting in couples' inability to register their union or requiring one party to convert to the religion of their spouse; if one spouse is Muslim, it is often the non-Muslim spouse that is legally required to convert to Islam for the marriage to be recognized.

New Criminal Code and Accompanying Procedure

Indonesia's new Criminal Code (RUU KUHP), scheduled to take effect in 2026, will replace the colonial-era Dutch Penal Code. The RUU KUHP broadens the existing blasphemy provisions by introducing penalties for "hostility based on religion" in addition to the current prohibitions against "insulting" or "defaming" religion. Other concerning additions include articles outlawing leaving a religion or belief as "apostasy," enforcing Islamic morality interpretations on individuals regardless of their religion or belief, and permitting blasphemy allegations stemming from a person's social media and online presence.

In November, the Indonesian Parliament unanimously passed the revision of the Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) into law to align with RUU KUHP. Critics argued that the passage signifies a regression in the country's commitment to human rights, as it would expand police authority, legitimize arbitrary detention, and provide unchecked investigative powers.

Blasphemy and Hate Speech

The government and members of Indonesian society continued to wield existing blasphemy laws to target those accused of insulting others' religion. In January, a Catholic youth forum in East Nusa Tenggara Province accused a Catholic beautician of blasphemy after she criticized a diocese for evicting indigenous people from their land, although police later dropped the charge after the two parties reconciled. In March, the district court in Medan found Ratu Thalisa, a Muslim influencer who had commented on Jesus's hair in a video, guilty of spreading hate speech against Christianity and sentenced her to two years and 10 months and a 100,000,000 rupiah ($6,200) fine.

A positive development took place in November, when MoRA officials acknowledged the widespread influence of religious hate speech on social media, saying it reflects the intolerance of those who adopt a rigid interpretation of religious texts and exclude others in society. Accordingly, they called for the government, media, and the public to place tolerance as the foundation of the nation.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Indonesia continued to guide their relations through both the U.S.-Indonesia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the U.S.-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which support a shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. In 2025, the two countries collaborated across a wide range of issues, such as trade, maritime security, military exchange, and counterterrorism efforts.

In January, Indonesia's MoRA signed a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Embassy in Indonesia to promote educational exchange between the two countries through the Fulbright scholarship program. In April, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono to discuss defense and security cooperation and trade. In September, the State Department's East Asian and Pacific Affairs Senior Bureau Official Kevin Kim visited Indonesia to advance U.S.-Indonesia and regional cooperation on "trade, business, energy, and emerging technology."

The Donald J. Trump administration paused or eliminated critical preventative programs that were intended to strengthen Indonesia's capacity to combat terrorism and extremism. Additionally, other U.S. initiatives uplifting Indonesia, such as its Strategic Religious Engagement policy, were no longer supported. Furthermore, support for hundreds of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia was scaled back due to reduced U.S. funding.

In April, bipartisan co-chairs of the House Abraham Accords Caucus introduced H.Res.320 to encourage the State Department and civil society to further the Abraham Accords by encouraging peace and tolerance in education, citing potential progress "in particular to Saudi Arabia and Indonesia." In July, Representative Riley Moore (R-WV) and Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) introduced H.Res.594 and S.Res.327, respectively, to condemn the persecution of Christians in Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia; Representative Mario Diaz-Balart (R-FL) and Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) also introduced H.R. 4397 and S. 2293, respectively, to require President Trump to designate the Muslim Brotherhood—a transnational organization with notable influence in Indonesia—as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, to which President Trump granted and designated certain chapters of the organization as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in a November executive order. In September, Representative French Hill (R-AR) introduced H.Res.738 to express concerns regarding severe restrictions on religious freedom abroad, including in Indonesia.

IRAQ

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Iraq remained challenging despite some government attention to matters affecting religious minorities. Late in the year, the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) took some symbolic but insufficient public steps to curb the power of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a state-affiliated network of militias, some of which have links to Iran and abysmal records of religious freedom violations. In October, a federal order reportedly separated a Christian-majority defensive militia, the Nineveh Plains Protections Unit (NPU), from the 50th "Babylon Brigade" of the PMF, ostensibly restoring the former to the command of local Christian communities. However, in practice, the Babylon Brigade and other abusive militias continued to dominate the territories and usurp political representation of religious minorities in both federal Iraq and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Babylon Brigade leader Rayan al-Kildani, an Iran-supported and U.S.-designated abuser of religious minorities, continued to co-opt the administrative and political power of Iraqis who shared his Christian background. In the November federal parliamentary elections, Kildani's party once again leveraged votes from the Shi'a Muslim-majority electorate to win two of five seats reserved for Christians, contributing to the latter community's political marginalization. Yazidis, Christians, and other religious minorities—survivors of the 2014 genocide under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—reported that some PMF factions continued to use forced conscription, checkpoint harassment, physical abuse, and detention against their communities.

The IFG advanced additional systematic and ongoing threats to religious freedom. Officials reportedly continued to enforce Article 372 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting religion or divine entities. Early in the year, Parliament ratified controversial amendments to Personal Status Law No. 188 that require Muslim married couples to choose between separate frameworks of Islamic family law according to sect or school of jurisprudence, entrenching sectarianism between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The amended law infringes on the capacity of married Muslim women and religiously "mixed" families to make individual choices about inheritance, child custody, and divorce, and it codifies and religiously justifies the marriage of girls as young as 15. In March, the Media and Communications Commission banned broadcast of the Saudi Arabia-backed *Mu'awiya* television series, citing the historical drama's potential incitement of sectarianism.

The continued failure of the IFG and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to settle their territorial disputes and to adequately implement the 2020 Sinjar Agreement left religious minorities in these areas vulnerable to an administrative and security vacuum. In parallel to the IFG, the KRG reportedly failed to rein in the religious freedom violations of armed forces under its jurisdiction, including KRG security officers (Asayish) and Kurdish militias that harassed religious minorities in both the KRI and the disputed territories. In April, an assailant in Duhok yelled Islamic slogans while waging an axe attack that wounded three Christians taking part in an Assyrian New Year parade. Some reports indicated that Asayish forces initially dismissed community members' pleas for immediate intervention and, later, failed to adequately pursue an investigation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Iraq on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose additional targeted sanctions on, freeze the assets of, and bar the entry to the United States of PMF and other militia members or leaders responsible for severe violations of religious freedom;
- Capitalize on the U.S.-Iraq strategic relationship to (a) continue raising concerns over PMF and other militias' military, administrative, and political power across Iraq, citing their abuses of religious freedom, including usurpation of religious minorities' political representation; and (b) urge Iraq and the KRG to settle jurisdictional disputes and secure all territories for the return and reintegration of displaced religious communities; and
- Encourage Iraq to allocate adequate amounts of its federal budget for essential services and recovery projects for genocide survivors, including displacement camp residents, and authorize supplemental U.S. assistance as needed.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Commission reports or convene hearings on legislative and other systematic threats to FoRB in Iraq, including recent changes to personal status laws; and
- Conduct delegation visits in both federal Iraq and the KRI, highlighting increasing threats in each to the security, political representation, and continued presence in Iraq of religious and ethnic minority communities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Iraq
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Iraq's population is approximately 47 million. In November, officials announced the final results of the prior year's first nationwide census in decades; however, that census did not differentiate between religious sects, such as Shi'a and Sunni Islam, or collect information on ethnic and religious identity that would acknowledge the country's religious diversity. Past estimates suggested that the population is 95 to 98 percent Muslim, of which Shi'a Muslims may constitute 61 to 64 percent and Sunnis 29 to 34 percent. Christians, including members of Chaldean Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, and Protestant communities, may constitute less than one percent, and "others"—encompassing Yazidis, Kaka'is, Sabaean Mandeans, and more—may account for between one and four percent.

Iraq's constitution establishes Islam as the official religion and affirms, in Article 2, "the full religious rights to freedom of belief and religious practice." However, other laws and policies criminalize blasphemy, ban Baha'is, and restrict the sale or import of alcohol—to the detriment of religious minorities who depend on that industry.

Ongoing Challenges and Positive Steps for Religious Minority Survivors of ISIS

Eleven years since ISIS launched a genocide against religious minorities, the IFG and KRG took steps benefiting some of these communities, with mixed results. The IFG approved several reconstruction projects in Sinjar—including two much-needed hospitals—and distributed 1,338 ownership letters and approximately 100 title deeds to its Yazidi residents. Yet, some genocide survivors willing to return to the militia-dominated region remained unable to do so due to the government's reported delays in issuing return credentials. The IFG accelerated its repatriation of ISIS fighters and their families from detention camps in Syria, although some advocates doubted the effectiveness of these programs to rehabilitate returnees from their violent ideologies. While the KRG's Office of Rescuing Yazidis continued to help locate and reintegrate Yazidis from among the over 2,594 still missing since ISIS abducted them in 2014, advocates called on the KRG to improve its search and rescue collaborations with the Syrian Democratic Forces, IFG, and other state and nonstate actors. The KRG continued to tout its territory as a safe harbor of coexistence for displaced religious minorities, or "components"; however, authorities reportedly failed to stem and adequately investigate attacks on indigenous Christians, such as vandals' defacement of a church in Duhok Province and desecration of graves at a fourth-century Assyrian monastery in Erbil Province, both in December.

The federal parliamentary elections in November highlighted several disadvantages facing religious minorities in Iraq's electoral process. Advocates expressed dismay that the Muslim-majority general electorate remained eligible to cast votes for any of the nine quota seats earmarked for religious and ethnic minority candidates. In attempting to overcome such institutional obstacles, Yazidi and Christian campaigners each formed unprecedented political coalitions to support their own candidates. The Yazidi political coalition successfully propelled prominent Yazidi activist Murad Ismael to his historic win of a non-quota seat despite officials' attempts to halt his longstanding activism on behalf of genocide survivors. However, Christian communities reportedly suffered from the federal Independent High Electoral Commission's likely pretextual exclusion of several candidates as well as from the loss of all five Christian quota seats to candidates affiliated with either Shi'a-supported PMF brigades or Sunni-majority Kurdish parties.

Key U.S. Policy

The administration of President Donald J. Trump maintained the United States' Strategic Framework Agreement with Iraq, emphasizing security and other spheres with potential ramifications for religious freedom. In July, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio warned Prime Minister Mohammed Shi'a al-Sudani of the PMF Authority Law's potential to "institutionalize Iranian influence and armed terrorist groups undermining Iraq's sovereignty." Some reports suggested this and other U.S. resistance to PMF dominance—in alignment with longstanding USCIRF recommendations—contributed to Rayan al-Kildani's reported departure from the Nineveh Plains in September as well as the IFG's removal in October of NPU fighters from under his command. Also in October, President Trump named Mark Savaya, an Iraqi-American of Chaldean Christian background, as special envoy to Iraq, prompting some Iraqi religious minorities to express hope for renewed U.S. attention to religious freedom concerns. In November, senior U.S. officials visited Baghdad for technical consultations, potentially providing opportunities for the United States to offer capacity-building security sector assistance that would support religious freedom. In February, Vice President JD Vance delivered a keynote address at the civil society-sponsored IRF Summit in Washington, DC, in which he invoked the first Trump administration's decisive action advancing religious freedom for Iraqi Yazidis, Christians, and other survivors of the ISIS genocide. In April, several U.S. officials reportedly took part in the KRG-sponsored Kurdistan Prayer Breakfast, which brought together political figures, visiting U.S. leaders, and civil society and clergy from various religious communities. Rep. French Hill (R-AR) introduced H.Res. 738 in September, with several bipartisan co-sponsors, which highlighted FoRB restrictions in USCIRF-recommended SWL countries including PMF abuses and blasphemy laws that threaten minority and majority religious communities in Iraq.

In 2025, the administration announced a pause or cancellation on foreign assistance across U.S. government agencies that impacted Iraq's religious minorities. While the U.S. Department of State retained some streams of assistance for certain programs benefiting Yazidis and other genocide survivors, the reduction in foreign assistance created a notable decline in critical services such as healthcare and basic infrastructure which allowed them to persevere as a distinct community in the country.

KAZAKHSTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained poor. During the year, authorities abused, imprisoned, detained, and fined individuals for their peaceful religious activities under the guise of combating "extremism," largely targeting Muslims who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. Officials regularly employed the 2011 law On Religious Activities and Religious Associations (religion law) to prevent or interfere in the activities of minority religious communities, particularly Christians. The religion law bans unregistered religious activities, requires official examination of all religious materials, and places restrictions on religious education, proselytization, and religious events.

In 2025, the Kazakh government continued to use the 2005 law On Countering Extremism (extremism law) to target the peaceful religious activities of Muslims who deviate from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. The law contains a broad definition of extremism that is not limited to acts involving violence or calls to violence. This definition provided authorities with wide discretion to arbitrarily penalize peaceful religious activities. For example, USCIRF monitors the case of one freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) victim—Anatoli Zernichenko—who is imprisoned for his peaceful religious activities on unjustified "extremism"-related charges.

During the year, former FoRB victims reported restrictions on their religious activities following their release from prison. For example, one former FoRB victim reported that an official threatened him with further punishment if he attended Friday prayers or gave customary greetings. Another former FoRB victim reported that a National Security Committee (NSC) officer questioned him twice about his religious habits and threatened to return him to prison after he stayed at his local mosque following Friday prayers. Courts and probation officers can impose restrictions on prisoners, which are particularly common in "extremism" cases. Some former FoRB victims reported facing additional restrictions after serving their sentences, including bans on opening a bank account, traveling outside the former prisoner's hometown, and visiting public places. These post-prison restrictions apply to FoRB victims released this year, including Dadash Mazhenov and Abdukhalil Abduzhabbarov. Other FoRB victims released in 2025 include Beket Mynbasov and Ernar Samatov.

The government continued to regulate the distribution of religious materials as part of its work to prevent "extremism." The Ministry of Culture and Information conducted online monitoring activities, blocking access to over 3,000 "extremist" materials. In August, the NSC Border Service reported that 18 individuals illegally brought a total of 678 religious materials across the border, which officials confiscated. Additionally, the NSC periodically arrested individuals who illegally distributed literature that "promoted religious discord." However, reports of the arrests included few details, in accordance with Kazakh law, making it difficult to know if the literature incited violence. For example, in June, the Zhambyl District Court found four individuals guilty of violating Criminal Code Article 174.1, which penalizes the incitement of discord, sentencing the men to two years in prison.

During one violent incident, officials physically abused Jehovah's Witness Daniyar Tursynbayev for his peaceful religious activities. In August, police arrested Tursynbayev, an Uzbek citizen and lawful resident of Kazakhstan, where he lives with his Kazakh wife and daughter. Officials attempted to coerce him into admitting ownership of an Instagram account that contains hate speech. When Tursynbayev refused, officers beat and threatened to murder him. After six hours of detainment, officials released him. In September, Kentau officials charged Tursynbayev under Administrative Code Article 490.3, which penalizes unauthorized missionary activity. In November, a Kentau City Court judge ordered Tursynbayev's deportation from Kazakhstan, a ruling the Turkestan Regional Court annulled upon Tursynbayev's appeal.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Kazakhstan, including in any memorandums of understanding related to the critical mineral sector and raising concerns through the Minerals Security Partnership Forum.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Kazakhstan's religious freedom conditions and advocate for the release of those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and
- Condition Kazakhstan's eligibility for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status to the removal of restrictions on freedom of movement related to peaceful religious activities, according to Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** Religious Freedom in Kazakhstan Remains Poor despite Government Claims
- **Hearing:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **Country Update:** Kazakhstan
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Over 69 percent of Kazakhs adhere to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Other Muslim groups in Kazakhstan include Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Seventeen percent of the population identify as Christian, most of whom are Russian Orthodox but who also include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups in Kazakhstan include Jews, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. A small percentage of individuals identify as atheist or prefer not to share their religious affiliation. Article 22 of the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of conscience, a right that the government does not uphold in practice.

Legislative Amendments Related to FoRB

Throughout the year, the Kazakh government passed minor amendments to the religion law and related legislation. In January 2025, the government amended the religion law to state that an objective is to "ensure the right to freedom of conscience." However, the amendments maintained problematic provisions that violate FoRB, such as registration requirements, and other restrictions on religious practices. Also in January, the government approved Administrative Code amendments that decreased penalties for individuals who violate the religion law under Article 490. The amendments decrease the maximum fine by half and allow authorities the option to issue a warning rather than a penalty. While this is a positive change, the law still allows authorities to issue fines for peaceful religious activities, albeit in smaller amounts. The continuation of such penalties, even if reduced, remains in violation of Kazakhstan's international human rights commitments.

In a particularly concerning legislative development, in June, Kazakhstan amended the law On Prevention of Crimes to ban "clothing in public places that prevent the recognition of the face." While the amendment's language does not explicitly mention "religious" face coverings, this seems to be the ban's intention in practice. The secular Kazakh government views growing religiosity, partly represented by an increase in the popularity of religious head coverings, as a sign of "extremism" and a national security threat. Tension between the government's secular aspirations and the piousness of Kazakh people has led to further FoRB restrictions, such as the face covering ban. In the lead-up to the passage of the amendment, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev promoted Kazakh national clothes over "black clothes that cover the face." Further, he insisted that Islamic face coverings are foreign and incompatible with Central Asian culture. Additionally, the Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, or Muftiate, a quasi-independent organization, supported the ban, stating that face coverings are "not reflected in the traditions of our people."

In June, a USCIRF delegation visited Kazakhstan and held a productive dialogue with Kazakh officials that showed a willingness to address legal concerns related to FoRB. However, there has not yet been progress towards these reforms.

Targeting of Minority Religious Groups

Throughout the year, officials enforced the religion law to obstruct the activities of minority religious groups. While most minority religious communities, such as Buddhists and Jews, are officially registered and permitted to practice their faith within the legal framework, unregistered groups, often Christians, are particularly restricted. For example, small Christian groups struggled to obtain mandatory registration due to the burdensome 50-person membership threshold. Unregistered groups noted the government's prohibition on proselytizing, conducting missionary activities, and holding religious gatherings—activities necessary to grow membership numbers to reach the legal minimum. Such restrictions allowed authorities to reject the registration of application of small religious groups that they found "unfavorable." During 2025, authorities rejected applications from a Protestant church in Astana multiple times due to bureaucratic concerns, including membership numbers. The number of unregistered churches is unknown, as they are forced to operate underground. One leader of a Baptist church reported that he wants to obtain state registration but cannot because of membership requirements. Despite such cases, Kazakh officials informed USCIRF that the membership requirements are appropriate because there are no religious communities in Kazakhstan with fewer than 50 members. Authorities have also restricted Christian charity efforts, such as Samaritan's Purse's Operation Christmas Child program.

Kazakh officials targeted Jehovah's Witnesses during 2025, including locally registered communities. Officials allegedly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activities based on neighbors' complaints, which police seemingly fabricated at times. For example, in Shymkent, NSC officials raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a rented facility in July. Officials alleged that they interrupted the meeting due to a complaint from neighbors, but there was evidence that the officers arrived at the facility before the neighbor made a report. Following the incident, authorities charged one Witness under Administrative Code Article 490.1.1, which penalizes unauthorized religious meetings. In August, a court dismissed the case. In February, Atyrau police detained five Witnesses, including two minors, for sharing their religious beliefs. While detained, police interrogated and refused the detainees' requests for water and to contact legal representation.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, U.S. officials engaged with the Kazakh government to discuss topics of mutual interest, such as trade and national security. However, reports from the meetings did not indicate that human rights or FoRB were discussed. In June, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Kazakhstan Deputy Prime Minister-Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu to discuss Kazakhstan's sovereignty and the expansion of investment opportunities, particularly in the technology and critical minerals sectors. In November, President Donald J. Trump met with President Tokayev to discuss trade deals and Kazakhstan's decision to join the Abraham Accords.

In October 2025, the U.S. Congress confirmed Julie Stufft to be ambassador of the United States to Kazakhstan. During Stufft's nomination hearing, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) called for the repeal of Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions on Kazakhstan.

KYRGYZSTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan deteriorated as the government passed legislation that further shrank the space for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Throughout the year, Kyrgyz officials used both new and long-existing legislation to target religious minorities, including Muslims who do not adhere to the state's preferred interpretation of Islam under the Spiritual Administration of Muslims (SAMK) and Christians who do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Authorities penalized peaceful religious activities through fines, detainments, prison sentences, forced renunciations of faith, and physical abuse. In June, a USCIRF delegation visited Kyrgyzstan to assess FoRB conditions.

There were significant legislative changes that eroded FoRB protections during 2025. In January, the Kyrgyz government passed the law On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations, or the religion law. The 2025 religion law restricts FoRB, particularly hindering the rights of minority religious groups through its onerous mandatory registration requirement. The government also amended the Administrative Code to ban face coverings in public, a provision that authorities have enforced as a ban on religious face coverings and have used to harass and fine Muslim women who wear niqabs. In April, authorities issued warnings to about 300 women wearing niqabs in a raid in Osh City, creating an environment of intimidation. In July, authorities also amended the law On Countering Extremism, or the extremism law, to penalize the "storage of extremist materials" for the first time. The law preserves its broad definition of "extremism," omitting any reference to violence or incitement to violence.

In 2025, there were two known FoRB victims imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities under Criminal Code Article 330, which broadly penalizes incitement in line with the extremism law. The first individual is True and Free Reform Adventist Church congregant Pavel Shreider. In July, a judge sentenced Shreider to three years in a labor camp and subsequent deportation to Russia, his country of origin. Following Shreider's arrest in November 2024, an indictment against him claimed that his church's religious materials promoted the superiority of the Adventist Church over other faiths. While Shreider was detained, officers reportedly physically abused him and other detained Adventist Church members. In September, authorities transferred Shreider to a prison medical unit after a medical examiner found evidence of brain damage. The second FoRB victim is Asadullo Madraimov, who was initially detained in 2023. Authorities sentenced him to three years in prison in 2024 for posting a video online complaining about the inspection and potential closure of his local mosque.

During the year, authorities targeted religious groups that had not sought mandatory registration. Specifically, in March, the Alamudun District Court designated the True and Free Reform Adventist Church as an "extremist" organization. In September, State Committee on National Security (SCNS) officers raided a service of the Council of Churches Baptist Church in Bishkek. Officials seized religious literature and fined the community's pastor and deacon under Administrative Code Article 142, which penalizes violations of the religion law.

As in years past, Kyrgyz officials detained members of organizations banned for engaging in "extremist" or terrorist activities, including some religious groups with no known history of violence. For example, in February, Chui officials detained four members of Yakyn Inkar, charging them under Article 332 of the Criminal Code, which bans the preparation and distribution of extremist materials. The detained men distributed a video from Yakyn Inkar allegedly containing so-called signs of "extremism." In August, the SCNS reported that 11 individuals, whom officials had convicted of membership in Hizb ut-Tahrir, publicly renounced their beliefs in Arstanbap. SNCS officials routinely coerce accused Hizb ut-Tahrir members to renounce their beliefs under threat of more severe punishment.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kyrgyzstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Kyrgyzstan, including encouraging incorporation into any new or existing commercial agreements;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Kyrgyz officials, such as those from the State Committee on National Security, responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States; and
- Collaborate, through the U.S. Department of State, with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to encourage the Kyrgyz government to adhere to international standards when implementing the laws on religion and extremism, especially in developing regulations for the religion law.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** USCIRF Sent a Delegation to Kyrgyzstan to Assess Religious Freedom
- **Hearing:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **Country Update:** Kyrgyzstan
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Of Kyrgyzstan's approximately six million people, around 90 percent identify as Muslim. Most Kyrgyz Muslims adhere to Hanafi Sunni Islam, while one percent adhere to Shi'a Islam. The non-Muslim population largely includes Christians, who make up seven percent of the remaining population. Around 40 percent of Christians identify as Russian Orthodox. Other Christian groups include Catholics, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The remaining population includes Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, International Society for Krishna Consciousness members, and Tengrinists. While Article 34 of the Kyrgyz constitution guarantees the right to freedom of conscience and religion, the government widely restricts these rights through various legislation.

2025 Religion Law

In January, President Sadyr Japarov approved the 2025 religion law, a development officials lauded as necessary to combat "extremism." However, the law seemingly benefits majority and larger religious organizations, such as the SAMK and the ROC, while restricting the rights of minority religious groups.

Primarily, the law maintains the requirement that religious groups must register with the state to legally engage in any religious activity. It increases the bureaucratic obstacles to register, including new requirements that are particularly difficult to overcome for smaller congregations. For example, the law raises the membership threshold required for a religious group to register from 200 to 500 individuals. Those 500 individuals must reside in the same administrative-territorial unit. Religious groups applying for registration also must identify a building for their religious activities, but personal residences are explicitly prohibited from being used for this purpose. Registration certificates last for 10 years, unlike under the previous law, which did not place time limits on registration. Registration is similarly required for "religious preachers" and missionaries.

The religion law includes vague provisions that authorities can broadly interpret to arbitrarily penalize peaceful religious activities. For example, the law prohibits "the promotion of religious hatred," an activity defined as "extremist" under the extremism law. Similarly, vague provisions ban religious conversion attempts that use "psychological influence" and public events and online activities that "insult religious feelings." Additionally, the law bans "door-to-door preaching" and the involvement of minors in religious activities. Finally, the law prohibits private religious education outside of registered religious schools. Those who would like to study religion abroad must notify the state and complete general secondary education in Kyrgyzstan, a process that is unclear. As the government works to develop regulations to implement the new religion law, there is an opportunity to clarify potentially ambiguous provisions and address concerns of religious groups that the law will be used to hinder their religious practice.

The law places additional restrictions on religious literature, including banning individuals from distributing religious materials in public places. Kyrgyz citizens crossing the border into Kyrgyzstan can bring no more than one copy of a given religious book for personal use. The National Agency for Religious Affairs (NARA) conducts official examinations of religious materials that are imported or produced for inclusion in library collections.

The 2025 law allows religious organizations to form a central governing body to coordinate the activities of groups from the same faith. Such bodies ensure that religious groups are operating in line with Kyrgyz law and work with state authorities to appoint religious leaders and coordinate religious education and online religious expression. The religion law also states that the quasi-independent SAMK is the central governing body of Muslims in Kyrgyzstan.

Administrative Ban on Face Coverings

The January 2025 amendments also added Article 127.1 to the Administrative Code, which bans "the complete concealment of a person in public." While this provision does not explicitly mention religious facial coverings, authorities implemented the article to penalize Muslim women who wore niqabs in 2025. In 2025, police in Osh region fined 22 women for wearing a niqab in public and issued 140 warnings. In Jalal-Abad Province, police fined at least seven women for wearing a niqab. Mufti Abdulaziz Zakirov, head of the SAMK, supported the ban, stating that the niqab is a foreign trend not in line with local traditions in Kyrgyzstan. In an interview, President Japarov stated that the facial covering ban is not a state policy. He insisted that his government was only helping implement Mufti Zakirov's religious ruling.

Extremism Law Amendments

In July, President Japarov signed into law amendments to the extremism law and related legislation. The amendments penalize the storage of extremist materials for the first time with a fine under Administrative Code Article 142.1. However, if the actions "qualify for criminal liability," the Criminal Code also penalizes the storage of extremist materials with up to three years in prison under Article 332.1.

Additionally, the amendments created a minimum sentence of three years for creating and financing an extremist organization and preparing or distributing extremist materials under Criminal Code Articles 331 and 332. Prior to the amendments, the Administrative Code did not provide a minimum sentence for violators of these two articles. Authorities often cite the possession or distribution of "extremist" religious materials when imprisoning or detaining individuals for their peaceful religious activities.

Key U.S. Policy

While bilateral engagements between the United States and Kyrgyzstan included some discussion of FoRB, most discussions focused on expanding economic cooperation. In January, U.S. Ambassador to the Kyrgyz Republic Lesslie Viguerie met with representatives of the Evangelical Baptist Union, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Buddhist community to assess religious freedom conditions. In September, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau and Kyrgyz Republic Foreign Minister Jeenbek Kulubaev discussed economic cooperation opportunities, particularly in the critical minerals sector. In November, President Japarov met with President Donald J. Trump through the C5+1 platform along with other Central Asian leaders to discuss business opportunities between U.S. and Kyrgyz companies.

MALAYSIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia remained poor amid a troubling rise in religious polarization and restriction that threatened to deepen its longstanding challenges. The country's dual legal system of Shari'a and civil courts continued to privilege Islamic law, according to the Shaf'i school of Sunni jurisprudence, and to restrict dissenting interpretations of its principles through fatwas (religious rulings), legal action, and intrusive monitoring. The state persisted in discriminating against Muslim groups it viewed as representing "deviant" or "liberal" versions of Islam, targeting members with bans, raids, and arrests. Actions that state authorities deemed "insulting" to Islam continued to lead to blasphemy prosecutions, while efforts to elevate moral policing according to the official interpretation of Shari'a—by both police and members of the public—have increased the use of coercive tactics such as surveillance, public shaming, and prosecution. The government's persistent conflation of Malay ethnic identity with Islamic religious identity also continued to exacerbate interreligious tensions.

In March, the Muzakarah Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs Malaysia declared that the teachings of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL) deviate from accepted Islamic doctrine, upholding a total ban on possessing or distributing the group's literature and opening the door to related prosecutions. In June, the Federal Court struck down a 2014 fatwa from the Selangor Fatwa Committee, which had labeled Sisters in Islam (SIS)—a nongovernmental organization that advocates for the rights of Muslim women—as "deviant" for promoting liberalism and religious pluralism. However, the ruling upheld elements of the fatwa that apply to individuals, thus maintaining the force of law to prosecute persons who face such accusations and demand their repentance. Authorities also increased moral policing operations during Ramadan to identify and fine Muslims eating or drinking during daytime hours and to subject non-Muslims to penalties for selling food, drinks, or tobacco to Muslims. These efforts to enforce Islamic law into the public and private spheres have fostered a societal environment that emboldens bystanders to interfere in others' religious choices. For example, during Ramadan in March, a Malay Muslim man assaulted a non-Muslim individual in a convenience store for eating in public while demanding to see his identification card.

Despite these significant religious freedom challenges, there were some positive developments in 2025. In November, the Federal Court ruled on the case of Pastor Raymond Koh by holding the police and government liable for his forced disappearance in 2017. The Malaysian Parliament also continued through 2025 to defer consideration of a controversial bill that would formalize and expand the role and power of the state-appointed mufti (chief Islamic jurist) in the three federal territories. These dynamics do not diminish the country's ongoing and concerning religious challenges; instead, they demonstrate Malaysia's complex environment for religious freedom, in which the potential remained evident for either limited improvement or backsliding into further religious repression.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Malaysia on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Malaysian government to ratify core international human rights treaties that impact religious freedom of all Malaysians, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol; and
- Engage with the Malaysian government to make progress on systematic religious freedom reforms, including a repeal of laws that curtail religious expression, such as Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act, and blasphemy statutes, such as Section 298 of the Penal Code.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Encourage counterparts in the Malaysian Parliament, through the U.S. House Subcommittee on the Indo-Pacific, to amend the SUHAKAM Act of 1999 to bolster that body's functions and authority, including its work on religious freedom, to maintain its independence and bring greater transparency and impartiality to the selection and appointment of its commissioners.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Malaysia
- **Factsheet:** The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution—Examples from South and Southeast Asia
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Malaysia is home to a diverse set of religious and ethnic communities, and those identities often overlap in legally significant ways. Over 63 percent of the population is Muslim, most of whom the government classifies as Sunni Muslims; however, the constitution explicitly defines ethnic Malays as Muslims from birth, regardless of their individual religious convictions. Other groups include Buddhists (around 19 percent), Christians (9 percent), Hindus (6 percent), and mostly ethnic Chinese followers of traditional beliefs such as Confucianism and Taoism (1 percent). Despite this diversity, developments in recent years have afforded greater political influence to groups and parties that espouse a rigid interpretation of Shari'a and advocate for a more forceful application of its principles while marginalizing non-Muslim communities. That influence is readily apparent in the state apparatus; in February, a member of Parliament's warning of "the threat of Christianization" prompted Minister of Religious Affairs Na'im Mokhtar's written concurrence and pledge to bolster collaboration between Islamic institutions and all levels of government to counter the supposed "threat."

Legal and Administrative Challenges to Religious Freedom

Malaysia's dual legal system continued to generate conflict between the implementation of Shari'a and protection of constitutional rights. In May, the Court of Appeals blocked a former Christian, who had converted to Islam 14 years prior, from legally reverting to his Christian identity, citing religious law. A Supreme Court ruling in early 2024, which struck down as unconstitutional over a dozen religiously based laws in Kelantan, prompted the government to order states to align all such laws with the federal constitution by December 31 of that year. However, no states had complied with the order by that deadline or by the end of 2025; the Conference of Rulers, which is responsible for deliberation on matters of national policy, was particularly culpable in this failure. The state government of Terengganu—which the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party controls—also passed a law in August coercing all Muslim men to attend public Friday prayers, at threat of up to two years in prison and a substantial fine for failing to do so.

Furthermore, the Malaysian government continued to enforce blasphemy laws, levying fines and jail time for related convictions—particularly under Section 298 of the Penal Code, which outlaws "disharmony, disunity or feelings of enmity or hatred on religious grounds," and Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA) of 1998, which bans vaguely defined "offensive" or "annoying" speech. In January, a comedian's Facebook post joking about mislabeled halal items at a local university ignited public backlash and a police investigation, while another Facebook user who commented on his post also faced investigation under both the Penal Code and the CMA. In March, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission fined both individuals 10,000 ringgit ($2,361). That same month, the High Court dismissed a petition from two filmmakers specifically opposing Section 298 of the Penal Code, following their prosecution for a film depicting a Muslim girl exploring other beliefs. Police also responded in March to the circulation of a video showing three Malay Muslim radio hosts mocking Hindu rituals by investigating the case under the same two statutes. While the trio returned to work a month later, authorities fined their station's operator 250,000 ringgit ($59,283). While such blasphemy cases rarely lead to extended prison sentences, their frequency and steep financial burden contribute to a repressive atmosphere of religious expression across Malaysia.

Government interests also continued to override the rights of religious minority communities. Municipal authorities in Kuala Lumpur slated a legally registered Hindu temple for relocation in March to make way for a mosque, sparking backlash from Hindu advocacy groups and others. Although the temple committee eventually agreed to relocate the Hindu site, critics argued that authorities had unjustly coerced the congregation to concede to the Muslim majority. Furthermore, in April, Malaysian police reportedly arrested 76 practitioners of Falun Gong—which the government does not recognize—ahead of a state visit in May from Chinese President Xi Jinping and detained some of them throughout the visit. Critics have accused the police of acting at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party, which has violently persecuted the Falun Gong movement, although Malaysian officials have vehemently denied the accusation.

Key U.S. Policy

While the United States and Malaysia have maintained strong strategic, economic, and military ties for many years, 2025 was unusually active in terms of deepening that bilateral relationship. U.S. President Donald J. Trump visited Malaysia in October to participate in the 2025 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit, where he secured several bilateral and regional trade agreements and co-presided with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim over the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords between Thailand and Cambodia. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio also visited Malaysia on two separate occasions during the year: in July to participate in the ASEAN-United States Post-Ministerial Conference, the East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and the ASEAN Regional Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting; and again in October to join President Trump at the ASEAN Summit. U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth visited Malaysia that same month to attend a meeting of the ASEAN-Plus Defense Ministers and hold bilateral talks with Malaysian Minister of Defense Dato' Seri Haji Mohamed Khaled bin Nordin. However, neither Malaysia's religious freedom conditions nor broader human rights issues appeared to have arisen during the above high-level meetings that focused on trade and military partnerships.

QATAR

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, ongoing religious freedom restrictions in Qatar became systematic. The only registered religious groups in Qatar are Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and eight Christian denominations. The law severely limits religious freedom for unregistered groups, such as Baha'is, Hindus, and Buddhists. Additionally, in 2025, several members of the Dawoodi Bohra Shi'a community faced arbitrary arrests, interrogation, and increased surveillance for their religious identity. Unregistered entities are unable to open accounts, solicit funds, worship in private spaces legally, acquire religious texts from outside the country, publish religiously themed newsletters or pamphlets, or legally hire staff.

Qatar's 2002 Community Protection Law allows the Ministry of Interior to provisionally detain individuals without trial for up to six months for violating public morality. Article 256 of the Qatari Penal Code imposes a prison sentence of up to seven years for insulting religion.

While Qatar's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, authorities continue to deny official recognition to the Baha'i community. The government has denied residency permits to Baha'is, prosecuted community members on financial charges for unclear reasons, delayed attempts to reestablish a Baha'i cemetery, and refused to register marriage certificates issued by Baha'i institutions in Qatar. In 2025, a high-ranking Qatari religious figure told a now-deported Baha'i individual that if he announced his conversion to Sunni Islam, he could "make the deportation go away." These practices and coercive measures cultivate fear among Baha'is of family separation, job loss, and blacklisting and therefore systematically undermine their right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In August, a court sentenced Baha'i leader Remy Rowhani to five years in prison on the explicitly religious charge of casting "doubt on the foundations and teachings of Islam." An appeals court overturned Rowhani's conviction in September. The month prior, a group of United Nations (UN) special rapporteurs raised concerns over the "broader and disturbing pattern of disparate treatment of the Baha'i minority in Qatar."

Converts to Christianity from Islam experience FoRB restrictions, including harassment and surveillance. Conversion is a *hudud* crime punishable by law according to Law 11 of the Qatar Penal Code. Both Qatari and migrant converts experience discrimination, harassment, and police monitoring. Conversion from Islam is not officially recognized. Although non-Qatari Christian residents of Qatar are relatively free to practice their faith, the government monitors worship activities.

Qatar's official curriculum promotes and endorses discriminatory claims about Christians, Jews, Shi'a Muslims, and nonbelievers. Government textbooks in Qatar used during 2025 reflect little if any improvement from previous years. Textbooks call polytheism "the greatest sin" that "follows with the worst punishments." It disparages "polytheists" as people who should be grouped alongside "the ignorant." State textbooks also misstate basic factual information about Judaism to portray it in a negative light (e.g., a claim that the Talmud occupies a more important place in Judaism than the Torah). Furthermore, history textbooks discussing Adolph Hitler's ideology omit antisemitism and references to the Holocaust.

Qatar has projected an international image of economic progress, religious tolerance, and multicultural engagement. The government has hosted international conferences to promote religious tolerance, including a regular meeting hosted by the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID). Nonetheless, as part of the 2025 UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR), several UN member states recommended that Qatar make substantive improvements to its legal protections on FoRB and safeguard against discrimination on the basis of religion.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Qatar on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Request updates and offer assistance through the U.S. Department of State to Qatar's Ministry of Education to facilitate the removal of religiously intolerant material, including antisemitic portrayal of Jews and inflammatory rhetoric to describe non-Muslims and nonbelievers; and
- Direct the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the State Department to work with the National Human Rights Committee of Qatar (NHRC) to incorporate religious freedom protections into the framework of its Human Rights Strategic Plan.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold hearings, aligned with bilateral U.S.-Qatar strategic dialogues, to raise religious freedom conditions, including the detention of FoRB prisoners, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims and Baha'is, continued enforcement of blasphemy laws, and remaining religiously intolerant content in textbooks; and
- Conduct bipartisan congressional delegations to Qatar in 2026 to raise key religious freedom issues, including discrimination against Baha'is, use of blasphemy laws, and FoRB prisoners.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Calls on Trump Administration to Secure FoRB Commitments from Qatar
- **Press Statement:** Sentencing of Baha'i Leader in Qatar – A Systematic Pattern
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Of Qatar's population of more than 2.55 million people, Muslims comprise roughly 65 percent and are mostly Sunni. Other religious communities include Hindus (15.9 percent) and Buddhists (3.8 percent). Folk religions, Jews, and other minority faith communities comprise less than one percent of the population.

Qatar's constitution stipulates that Islam is the official religion and that Shari'a is "a main source" of legislation. Article 35 bans discrimination based on religion, and Article 50 guarantees freedom of worship but subjects it to the maintenance of "public order and morality." The Penal Code and press laws, both guided by Shari'a, criminalize blasphemy, specifically "insulting the Supreme Being" and "offending, misinterpreting, or violating the Holy Qur'an." Article 256 of Qatar's constitution imposes a prison sentence of up to seven years for "offending the Islamic religion" or "insulting any of the prophets." The government reviews, censors, and bans media containing or disseminating what it deems objectionable religious content.

Limitations on Non-Muslim Worship

Government authorities continued to limit freedom of worship for non-Muslim religious minorities. In early 2025, Qatar security authorities detained several members of the Dawoodi Bohra Shi'a Muslim community for peaceful religious activity, including gathering for prayer without a permit. The individuals were detained without due process and subject to irregular judicial proceedings for their religious identity.

The government allows some Christian denominations—such as Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Maronite, Anglican, and Evangelical Protestant communities—to worship publicly but only within the Mesaymeer Religious Complex in Doha. The complex is a single, government-approved compound that operates under heavy state supervision. Non-Muslim faith communities that lack state recognition, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is, face severe obstacles to worship. The government prohibits these groups from publicly displaying their faith and distributing religious materials. It also requires permits for private worship. Unregistered faith groups face severe financial restrictions that hamper their organizational ability. The government prohibits these groups from opening bank accounts, legally hiring staff, and soliciting funds. The Christian Churches Steering Committee (CCSC) reports overcrowding and limited resources to accommodate worshipers because of the restricted worship within the compound. However, using residential spaces for worship puts worshipers in a precarious situation. Because unrecognized faith groups lack legal protection, the government may punish unauthorized religious gatherings by terminating visas and work contracts, detaining worshipers, or subjecting them to fines or deportations.

Systematic Discrimination against Baha'is

In April 2025, Qatari authorities detained Baha'i community leader Remy Rowhani after having previously arrested him at Doha International Airport in January. Following that arrest, Rowhani served a one-month prison sentence before being released. A Qatari court previously tried Rowhani in 2021 when he was the chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Qatar for purported violations of finance laws. In April 2025, prosecutors charged Rowhani with "promoting an ideology or belief raising doubts about the fundamentals of Islam." In the course of his detention, prison officials repeatedly interrogated him about his involvement with the Baha'i community. Furthermore, court authorities repeatedly denied his defense team full access to the evidence or legal documents.

Baha'i groups are concerned that given the small Baha'i population in Qatar, many of whom are foreign nationals, non-renewal of visas could lead to the eradication of the Baha'i community. Between 2003 and 2025, Qatar authorities have deported at least 14 Baha'is on account of their religious identity. Government discrimination extends into employment and administrative life as well. Activists reported in 2025 that authorities terminated one Baha'i person's employment and denied a certificate of good conduct, which is a prerequisite for employment, to several others.

Legal and Administrative Challenges

Qatar's government uses the male guardianship system to coercively impose restrictions on FoRB. Individuals in Qatar are legally bound to the system even when it contradicts their religious beliefs. Sunni religious rulings and Shari'a jurisprudence govern the 2006 Family Law, which requires a wife to obey her husband, imposes legal consequences for working outside the home without his permission, and mandates that a couple divorce if one engages in apostasy. Qatari women have reported needing a male guardian's permission to work in government schools, government ministries, and some governmental or quasi-governmental institutions. Furthermore, the Ministry of Interior requires unmarried Qatari adult women under 25 to show proof of a male guardian's permission to travel abroad. Male guardians can apply to issue travel bans on their female relatives or wives.

Key U.S. Policy

Qatar is a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally of the United States. The two countries have had bilateral relations since 1972. In May, U.S. President Donald J. Trump visited Qatar, announcing $243.5 billion in economic deals between the United States and Qatar. In June 2025, then U.S. Ambassador to Qatar Timmy T. Davis concluded his tenure. A new ambassador was not appointed by the end of the reporting period. Throughout 2025, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Special Envoy to the Middle East Steven C. Witkoff met with Qatari government officials, including Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, to discuss opportunities for economic cooperation, as well as regional peace and security.

TURKEY

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, the government of Turkey (Türkiye) engaged in systematic and ongoing severe violations of religious freedom, consistent with the previous year. At the same time, the administration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continued its dialogue with certain historical religious communities, including negotiations with the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church to potentially reopen the Halki Theological School, which closed in 1971 in response to government policies. The government also continued restoring some historical houses of worship, with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism beginning renovations on Cappadocia's medieval St. George Church as part of a tourism promotion campaign. However, many religious communities did not substantially benefit from such measures, with several—including Alevis, Protestant Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses—unable to secure legal recognition as religions or approval to register, build, or restore houses of worship for day-to-day use.

Amid a large-scale government crackdown on political expression in support of opposition leaders, authorities also systematically violated religious freedom by punishing secularist sentiment in state institutions and continuing to enforce Article 216 of the Turkish Penal Code as a de facto law against blasphemy. In January, the Ministry of Defense officially dismissed five new lieutenants and their three superior officers for choosing a secularist oath for their swearing-in ceremony. The government also monitored online activity for perceived insults to Islam and prosecuted religious dissenters under Article 216(3) for "incitement of hatred toward another group based on religious differences." For example, in June, the Ministry of the Interior arrested and detained at least four employees of the satirical magazine *LeMan* for publishing a cartoon that rioters decried as an alleged caricature of the Prophet Muhammad. Ministry of Justice officials also announced their investigation of the journalists for "publicly insulting religious values." In September, the İstanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office charged YouTube interviewer Boğaç Soydemir and his guest Enes Akgündüz with "inciting hatred and enmity or insulting a segment of the public" for reading aloud a viewer-submitted joke relating to the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast to these and other state restrictions on religious expression, in March, Turkey's top appeals court overturned the conviction of a man who had publicly vowed to kill Jews, Americans, and Kurds.

The national legislature also imposed additional, systematic restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In June, the parliament enacted a legislative amendment expanding the authority of the state-controlled Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to ban the distribution of Qur'an translations it considers inconsistent with Islamic principles. Prison authorities, too, restricted access to Qur'ans, other religious literature, and daily Islamic ablutions for some defendants, such as former detainee Aysu Öztaş Bayram. Alevi advocates continued raising their own concerns over the scope of the Diyanet, pointing to its almost exclusive emphasis on Sunni Muslim institutions and communities—affording them official recognition as a religion and providing them with public funding and support for which Alevis, as part of a designated "cultural" tradition, remained ineligible.

The government reportedly intensified a multiple-year campaign invoking spurious national security concerns to cut off the legal residency status of at least 375 foreign national Christian clergy, their family members, and other religious workers, to date. Throughout 2025, authorities continued to use immigration codes N-82 and G-87 to designate these clergy and laity as "national security threats," barring them from renewing their residency status or reentering Turkey after travel abroad. These religious leaders had long resided lawfully in the country, serving Turkish Protestant Christian communities in part due to ongoing government restrictions on domestic Christian clergy training programs and educational institutions. Protestant Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses reported additional obstacles to their legal recognition and access to houses of worship, with officials thwarting both their applications for new construction and their attempts to repurpose disused historical churches for their regular worship needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the Special Watch List, or SWL, for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Turkey; and
- Capitalize on the U.S-Turkey bilateral relationship to stress the importance to FoRB in Turkey of ceasing national security bans on foreign national clergy and easing restrictions on clergy training programs and institutions, registration of religious groups, and access to houses of worship.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Hold hearings on religious freedom in Turkey and send congressional delegations to the country to raise specific issues, including the repression of FoRB in public education, the denial of U.S. clergy from re-entering the country on false security threats, and conditions for refugees in Turkey who have a credible fear of expulsion back to religious persecution in their home countries; and
- Invoke its legislative authority to conduct an investigation into Turkey's enforcement of Article 216 of the Penal Code as a de facto blasphemy law to inform future legislation addressing this issue.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Turkey's distinct legacy of political secularism is a founding principle of the 102-year-old republic, reflected in the constitution's emphasis on the secular nature of the state and its acknowledgment of freedom of religion and conscience. However, both demographic and political trends have contributed to a recent increase in state-sponsored and social marginalization of non-Sunni Muslims. Turkey classifies 99.8 percent of its almost 85 million population as Muslim, including an estimated 10–25 million Alevis—many of whom do not consider themselves Muslim. Ja'fari Shi'a Muslims constitute a tiny minority of the population, and the government regards less than one percent of the population as non-Muslim, including Greek and Syriac Orthodox Christians, Roman and Chaldean Catholic Christians, Armenian Apostolic and Protestant Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Yazidis, and others.

The government maintains formal relationships with some of these religious minorities, partly in interpretation of the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which acknowledged "[non-Muslim] minorities" with longstanding ties to the former Ottoman Empire. In 2025, such relations included President Erdoğan's condolences in January to Turkish Jewish communities upon the death of the country's Chief Rabbi Rav Isek Haleva. In November, President Erdoğan welcomed Pope Leo XIV, who visited Turkey for the global celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The pontiff met with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I of the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as other Turkish Christian communities.

Other Government Policies Restricting FoRB

Eastern Orthodox Church members continued to await the results of protracted negotiations between church leaders and the government of Turkey to set a public date for the reopening of the Halki School, 54 years after government policies induced its closure. In the meantime, Eastern Orthodox Christians, like their Protestant and other Christian counterparts, remained ineligible for domestic training, resorting to seminary programs abroad.

In other forms of education, a lack of religious choice and diversity remained a major concern for Christian, Alevi, Shi'a Muslim, and secularist parents. Even as new research revealed a significant decline in the number of Turks who describe themselves as devout and an increase in those who identify as atheists or nonbelievers, public schools continued to require the majority of pupils to take courses in religion, pursuant to the constitution. In light of other state policies blocking Alevis, atheists, Protestant Christians, and others—especially converts from Islam—from obtaining accurate and official documentation of their religious identity, many pupils from these backgrounds faced misidentification as Sunni Muslims and, consequently, compulsory coursework on the tenets of Islam.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2025, the administration of President Donald J. Trump maintained the United States' strategic bilateral relationship with Turkey. However, the administration's pause on foreign assistance in 2025 had an immediate impact on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Turkey, such as the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) that had supported people seeking protection from severe religious persecution in their home countries.

In March, the House Foreign Affairs Europe Subcommittee held a hearing on Turkey. In June, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Committee held a hearing on human rights in Turkey, citing USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report recommendation that the United States add Turkey to the Special Watch List.

In September, the administration took several measures to highlight religious freedom in Turkey. Michael J. Rigas, deputy secretary of state for Management and Resources, hosted an event in honor of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. The next day, the ecumenical patriarch and President Trump met and reportedly discussed challenging religious freedom conditions for Christians in Turkey. Later that month, President Trump received President Erdoğan, affirmatively raising the question of the Halki School's potential reopening.

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST (SWL)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan continued to deteriorate. Throughout the year, Uzbek officials imprisoned, detained, and fined independent Muslims who deviate from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam for their peaceful religious activities, particularly religious expression. Authorities continued to employ restrictive legislation to penalize freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), particularly the 1998 law On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (religion law), requiring religious groups to register following burdensome requirements, and the 2018 law On Combating Extremism (extremism law). Further suppressing FoRB, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed into law expanded penalties for unauthorized religious education in February 2025. USCIRF follows the cases of dozens of FoRB victims imprisoned due to their peaceful religious activities under this increasingly restrictive legislative framework, although the number is likely higher.

As in years past, officials detained Muslim men en masse for discussing religion without approval. At times, officials employed violence and harassment to target such individuals. In May 2025, Samarkand police arrested 10 Shi'a Muslim men for discussing religion in a group chat, detaining some for up to 20 hours and confiscating their passports. During this time, police beat four detainees: Bakhtiyor and Sherzod Rakhimov, Ibrokhim Ibrahimov, and Anvar Aliyev. Reportedly, police torture occurs during detention when officers use physical abuse to coerce confessions. Days later, Samarkand City Criminal Court judges sentenced the four men to between seven and 10 days of administrative imprisonment under Administrative Code Articles 183 and 194, which penalize petty hooliganism and failure to comply with officials' lawful demands. Uzbek officials continued to use administrative penalties throughout 2025, including administrative detentions.

In July, Samarkand police arrested Aliyev again on charges of producing, storing, distributing, or displaying materials that threaten public order under Criminal Code Article 244.1. In October, a Samarkand City Court judge issued Aliyev a suspended four-year prison sentence, which he is serving under house arrest. In September, Samarkand officials raided the homes of six Shi'a men in the morning, detaining and releasing them the same day. Three of the men included those previously placed under administrative detention.

On April 30, 2025, a Kashkadarya Regional Court judge rejected the appeal of eight Muslim men that Uzbek authorities sentenced to prison for terms between six and 10.5 years for discussing Islam in late 2024. According to a June report, prison officials reportedly restricted one of those men, Khasan Abdirakhimov, from praying the *namaz* properly by forcing him to sit and confiscating his Qur'an. Officials also harassed Abdirakhimov's family. The local Karshi *mahalla* (governing body) pressured Abdirakhimov's wife to not complain about her husband's imprisonment. Additionally, *mahalla* and local school officials insisted that Abdirakhimov's daughter not wear a hijab and his son maintain short hair.

Courts arbitrarily extended the sentences of imprisoned FoRB victims on falsified, minor infractions. In March, the Navoi City Court sentenced FoRB victim Fariduddin Abduvokhidov to an additional 10 years in prison for claiming that prison officials are "infidels." Authorities charged him under Criminal Code Article 244.1 and Article 244.2, which penalizes the creation, leadership, or participation in religious "extremist" organizations. In April, the same court extended his sentence by a year on unknown charges. In 2023, a Tashkent Region court sentenced Abduvokhidov to an additional 10 years for being late to a prison roll call. Authorities sentenced Abduvokhidov to 11 years in prison in November 2020 for discussing Islam with others. Abduvokhidov is scheduled for a 2035 release.

In May 2025, a Bukhara Region court sentenced Tulkun Astanov to an additional three years and two months in prison for allegedly disobeying morning exercise orders. Astanov, sentenced to five years in prison in 2020 for defending Muslims' right to FoRB, was scheduled to complete his sentence in November 2025; however, he is now scheduled for release in April 2028.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Uzbekistan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Uzbekistan, including in any memorandums of understanding related to the critical mineral sector and raising concerns through the Minerals Security Partnership Forum; and
- Impose targeted sanctions—including freezing FoRB violators' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities—on State Security Service officials and judges who repeatedly arrest individuals or issue administrative or criminal penalties for peaceful religious activities, citing specific religious freedom violations.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Suspend hosting the Uzbek government's "Uzbekistan Day" event on Capitol Hill until it releases all individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities; and
- Raise Uzbekistan's religious freedom conditions and FoRB victims by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **Spotlight Podcast:** The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia
- **Issue Update:** Uzbekistan's Administrative Penalties for Peaceful Religious Activities
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List and Appendix 2**

Background

Around 36 million people live in Uzbekistan, of which between 88 and 96 percent identify as Muslim. While most Muslims belong to the Hanafi Sunni community, 122,000 individuals identify as Shi'a. Other religious groups include Russian Orthodox Christians—who comprise around two percent of the population—as well as atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, International Society of Krishna Consciousness members, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Roman Catholic Christians, and Protestant Christians. While Article 35 of the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion, the government widely restricts religious freedom through various legislation, including the religion and extremism laws.

Uzbek "Secularism" to Minimize Longstanding FoRB Restrictions

In February 2025, President Mirziyoyev approved the law About Ensuring Freedom of Conscience of Citizens in the Republic of Uzbekistan and Approving the Concept of State Policy in the Religious Sphere (the Concept). The Concept aims to facilitate the right of Uzbeks "to freedom of conscience" and reaffirm the government's secular nature. However, the Concept emphasizes that individuals must practice religion in accordance with Uzbek law. Yet, the laws regulating religion violate international FoRB standards, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Uzbekistan is a signatory. Notably, the 1998 religion law criminalizes unregistered religious activities, instituting a bureaucratic and arbitrary registration process for religious communities. The religion law additionally bans missionary activity and proselytism, prohibits unregistered religious education, and mandates government examination and approval for religious materials. Relatedly, the 2018 extremism law contains a broad and vague definition of extremism that extends beyond violent acts or incitement to violence, criminalizing peaceful religious activities.

Prohibition on Private Religious Education

In February, President Mirziyoyev approved amendments to Article 23 of the law On Guarantees of the Rights of the Child that prohibit parents and guardians from "illegally involving their child in religious education." These amendments allow authorities to penalize those who send their children to unregistered religious educational institutions. Administrative Code Article 47 punishes violators with a fine and repeat offenders with up to 15 days of administrative detention. Administrative Code Article 241 already similarly penalizes those who teach religion without authorization with a fine or administrative detention.

In August 2025, the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) issued a warning to parents, urging them to monitor their children's internet activity in response to online advertisements promoting religious institutions abroad. The CRA cautioned that these institutions may "instill religious fanaticism" and emphasized that Uzbek citizens are only permitted to receive religious education through state-approved institutions under the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU).

Ramadan Restrictions

The Uzbek government increased FoRB restrictions on Muslim communities during Ramadan in 2025. For instance, police prevented children from attending *Tarawih*, night prayers at mosques associated with the month of Ramadan, including in Fergana and Tashkent. A Committee on Religious Affairs official defended police actions by stating that those under 18 were not legally allowed to participate in religious activity. Officials additionally required that national guard members sign a declaration that they would "not perform religious rituals, including fasting, during Ramadan." Officials claimed that the declaration was intended to "ensure combat readiness."

Official Suppression of Religious Expression

The Uzbek government controls religious expression, including religious literature. In January, the Supreme Court published a list of 1,400 religious materials, primarily social media pages, banned from being imported, produced, stored, or distributed because they contained signs of "extremism." Criminal Code Article 244.1 penalizes violators with up to eight years in prison.

Authorities continue to target religious expression through raids, harassment, and forced shavings. Since the beginning of the year, police in Tashkent raided mosques to identify bearded men. Tashkent mosque imams lectured bearded men to shave under threat that authorities would identify them as "extremist." Police reportedly stopped men in public to photograph and check their beard lengths. In some instances, police gathered large groups of bearded men at mosques for local imams to lecture them about their beards and being grateful to live in Uzbekistan. In August, officials at the Sergeli car market in Tashkent detained bearded vendors, photographed them, and forced them to shave. In August, Namagan officials threatened religious leaders' wives to remove their hijabs or their husbands would be fired. An official leading the meeting allegedly stated that "the Qur'an does not command the hijab" to justify the threat.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, the United States and Uzbekistan strengthened their bilateral relationship through shared security and trade interests. In April, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov to discuss U.S. support for Uzbekistan's sovereignty and efforts to collaborate on nuclear energy, trade, and critical mineral cooperation. However, reports from the meeting did not include discussions on religious freedom or human rights.

In July, the Congressional Uzbekistan Caucus co-organized "Uzbekistan Day" on Capitol Hill, which highlighted U.S.-Uzbek relations and reforms under President Mirziyoyev. In September, U.S. Special Envoy for Global Partnerships Paolo Zampolli emphasized strengthening ties between the two countries during a visit to the Center for Islamic Civilization in Tashkent. In September, President Donald J. Trump met with President Mirziyoyev to thank him for his $8 billion purchase of Boeing airplanes. In November, both presidents met again under the guise of the C5+1 to discuss the advancement of trade and investments in U.S. companies.

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

In 2025, nonstate actors posed significant threats to religious freedom abroad. Among these, USCIRF identified some groups that met the criteria of an Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998, as amended. IRFA calls for USCIRF to recommend that the U.S. Department of State designate certain nonstate actors as EPCs. That statute defines an EPC as a nonstate group that engages in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and is also "a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

2026 EPC Recommendations

USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate or redesignate a total of seven nonstate actors as EPCs based on their particularly severe violations of religious freedom in 2025. USCIRF is recommending for the first time the designation of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan as an EPC. Additionally, USCIRF is not recommending Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) for designation as an EPC in 2026, as Syria's HTS-led transitional authorities stated their intention to dissolve the organization early in the year. As such, HTS no longer controlled its former territory in the northwestern province of Idlib during the year. However, the transitional authorities controlled this and other parts of the country, tolerating and contributing to egregious religious freedom violations and meriting USCIRF's 2026 recommendation of Syria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).

Al-Shabaab

Al-Shabaab, which gained prominence in the 2000s seeking to establish an Islamic state in Somalia in accordance with its version of Shari'a, continued its violent campaign against the Somali federal government, attacking military and commercial sites. In March, fighters killed 10 clan elders from the Hiran region at a hotel in central Somalia. In May, a suicide bomber killed at least 10 at an army recruitment drive at the Damanyo military base in Mogadishu. In July, the group recaptured the towns of Sabiid and Anole southwest of Mogadishu in Somalia's Lower Shabelle region, suggesting a weakened government counterinsurgency campaign. By November, central Somalia and the capital faced serious threats due to a faltering government peace support operation, domestic political polarization, and other challenges, diminishing the state's response to the ongoing offensive al-Shabaab launched in April. Additionally, Somali al-Shabaab fighters reportedly perpetrated violent attacks on communities in northern Kenya, such as the murder in April of several Christians in Mandera. In August, the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi issued a security alert for al-Shabaab threats in the city and throughout Kenya, citing places of worship as one of the potential target areas.

Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP)

ISSP—formerly known as Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or ISGS—is a branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) active in the Sahel region of Africa. In 2025, the group continued its campaign against civilians across the Sahel, destroying schools and religious sites in the process. In March, ISSP fighters surrounded a mosque

Entity	Alternate or Former Names	Areas of Operation
Al-Shabaab*		Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya
Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP)*	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)*	The Sahel and Lake Chad regions
Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)*	ISIS – West Africa*	Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, Chad
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)*		Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger
Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS)*	Boko Haram*	Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Niger
Rapid Support Forces (RSF)		Sudan
The Houthis*	Ansar Allah*	Yemen

* The U.S. Department of State last designated as an EPC on December 29, 2023, which remained in effect for a two-year period as outlined in IRFA.

in Fambita, Niger, and killed 44 worshipers during Friday prayers in the last 10 days of Ramadan. ISSP insurgents in that same country reportedly killed 127 people in separate attacks between March and September, later gunning down 22 Christians attending a baptism ceremony in Tillabéri.

Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)

ISWAP continued violating religious freedom in scattered pockets of territory under its control in Nigeria, including holding Leah Sharibu, whom the militant group kidnapped in 2018, and abducting other Christian girls and young women, such as 12 crop harvesters in November in Borno State. The Nigeria chapter of this report provides further information on ISWAP.

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)

JNIM—which formed when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its affiliates Ansar al-Din, the Macina Liberation Front, and al-Mourabitoun merged in 2017—continued expanding its activities across the Sahel region, using taxation and ransom of kidnapped captives to extract money from all religious communities. JNIM imposed strict dress codes, banned most music and smoking, ordered men to grow beards, and prevented women from being in public spaces alone. The group continued to levy *jizya* (Islamic poll-tax) on adult Christian men in the Mopti region of Mali. In January, 200 JNIM insurgents attacked three villages in western Burkina Faso, killing at least 26 people. In Dédougou, bandits killed two catechists from a nearby Catholic diocese while they were returning from theological training. In March in Sourou Province, Burkina Faso, JNIM assailants killed at least 100 Muslim Fulani villagers, accusing them of assisting the military.

Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS)/Boko Haram

JAS remained active in Cameroon, with some reports connecting its fighters to the abduction of St. John the Baptist Madingring Parish priest Father Valentin Mbaïbarem, for whom the kidnappers demanded $42,750 in ransom as a condition for release from captivity. In August, JAS kidnapped 50 passengers from a bus in the Far North region, although it eventually released them upon the payment of ransom. The Nigeria chapter provides additional material on the group, as its violent operations persisted in that country during 2025.

Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The Rapid Support Forces—a paramilitary group formerly under the command of the Sudanese Armed Forces until the two sides launched mutual hostilities in April 2023—steadily consolidated territorial control over El Fasher and expanded its influence across Darfur and parts of Kordofan in 2025. The group carried out mass atrocities and widespread human rights violations, with harmful effects on religious freedom and the country's diverse religious and ethnic communities. Reports from survivors, aid groups, and international investigators describe summary executions of unarmed civilians, targeted killings of non-Arab communities, large-scale arbitrary detentions, kidnappings, and widespread sexual violence. RSF fighters have additionally looted and destroyed civilian infrastructure, including houses of worship such as churches and mosques as well as hospitals and markets. They also imposed sieges on civilian areas, cutting off food, medicine, and humanitarian aid while enforcing communications blackouts to isolate survivors and hamper independent reporting. The takeover of El Fasher has trapped tens of thousands of civilians under RSF control, exposing them to starvation, disease, and ongoing bombardment.

The Houthis

The Houthi movement, formally known as Ansar Allah, continued to restrict freedom of religion or belief in Yemen. Throughout the year, Houthi authorities harassed and surveilled Yemeni Christians, particularly converts from Islam, on false pretenses of espionage. Houthi forces continued to target United Nations (UN) personnel throughout 2025, partially on the assumption that they were Christians and "enemies of Islam." Baha'is living in Houthi-controlled areas continued to face significant difficulties in accessing humanitarian assistance, especially families or individuals reputed to be Baha'is. Houthi restrictions on Baha'is' freedom of movement, especially that of former detainees, continued to impede Baha'i people's access to aid distribution centers or humanitarian services. Houthi leaders continued to promote antisemitic propaganda and to deliberately conflate Israeli policy and Judaism. In May, the Houthi-owned television channel Al-Masirah broadcast a Houthi rally in Sana'a during which children chanted "curses upon the Jews," part of the Houthi slogan. Jewish prisoner of conscience Libi Marhabi remained in Houthi detention despite a court order for his release. The group also imposed a religiously grounded *mahram* (male guardian escort) requirement and enforced sex segregation in public spaces. Women from minority faith groups remained especially vulnerable to Houthi persecution. In 2025, many Christian women continued to fully veil in public in an approximation of the Islamic hijab, contradicting their personal religious beliefs for fear of exposing their non-Muslim identities.

Non-EPC Violators

Several violent nonstate actors constituted organized groups and perpetrated particularly severe religious violations but did not meet IRFA's requirements for exercising significant political power and territorial control or operating outside the control of a sovereign government. Similarly, groups of individuals responsible for persistent religious violence in other contexts—such as mob violence against religious minorities in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan—did not constitute organized "entities" and therefore also did not meet the EPC criteria outlined in IRFA.

Nigeria has been the recent locus for disparate groups of religious extremists, bandits, and others from a Fulani background to carry out abductions, killings of clergy and unarmed civilians, land seizures, destruction of houses of worship, and other acts of violence. In particular, ethnic Fulani militants—who operate across central and west Africa and are not representative of the larger Fulani ethnic group—have continued to engage in widespread violence against Christians, Muslims, and others throughout 2025. These militants did not qualify for an EPC designation as they did not constitute a single or organized entity with coordinated command and control. However, their collective actions deserve ignominious recognition as a chief source of the violent chaos that continued to plague Nigeria's Middle Belt during the year, as discussed in greater detail in the Nigeria chapter.

In Pakistan, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a political party that adhered to a violent interpretation of Shari'a but did not control

territory, continued its support in 2025 for the strict enforcement of blasphemy laws and reportedly conducted coordinated attacks against religious minorities. Reports linked TLP to several attacks on Ahmadiyya Muslim mosques and extrajudicial killings of Ahmadiyya Muslims.

ISIS Affiliates or Branches

Globally, affiliates or branches of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued to advance the terrorist group's religiously motivated ideology of violence against non-Muslims as well as Muslims who disagreed with its interpretation of Islam. However, many of these groups did not exercise significant political power and territorial control in the countries in which they operated, which are requirements for the EPC designation.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K)—a known perpetrator of atrocities against Hazara Shi'a Muslims—reportedly remained active, although it did not claim responsibility for any such attacks in 2025.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), also known as ISIS-DRC, targeted churches with violent attacks throughout 2025 but did not control territory. In February, the group carried out an estimated 70 beheadings in the Lubero region, and in March, its fighters killed nine Christians in North Kivu village. In July, it reportedly massacred over 40 Christians during an evening worship service in the eastern city of Komanda.

In Mozambique, the ISIS-affiliated Ahlu-Sunnah wal Jama'ah (ASWJ)—locally known as "al-Shabaab" (with no relation to the eponymous Somali group)—attacked the village of Napala, killing 20 Christians and destroying two churches. ISIS Mozambique (IS-M) also escalated its attacks in the northern part of the country, especially late in the year, but did not control territory. In September, the group claimed responsibility for killing 17 Christians in Cabo Delgado, and its fighters reportedly killed another 19 Christians in the same area in October. In November, the group killed four Christians—one of whom its fighters reportedly beheaded—and destroyed two places of worship in Nampula.

OTHER GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

This section highlights important developments and trends that impacted freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) around the world in 2025, particularly in countries or regions not covered elsewhere in this report. These developments are not exhaustive, and the omission of any specific countries or cases is not indicative of a lack of religious freedom challenges in those locales.

The section begins by analyzing the erosion of FoRB within conflict zones and regions marked by political instability. It then pivots to the weaponization of legal frameworks, examining how blasphemy and apostasy laws, restrictive registration requirements, and the systematic suppression of civil society resulted in the restriction of religious freedom. Next, it highlights the use of artificial intelligence and other technologies to restrict religious freedom and underscores the rising threat of cross-border religious violence. Subsequently, it documents the increasing frequency of attacks against houses of worship, religious leaders, and individuals for their deeply held convictions—highlighting targeted attacks on certain religious communities. Finally, it outlines some progress and setbacks concerning the global landscape of religious freedom.

FoRB Trends in Countries Facing Conflict or Political Upheaval

Violent conflict created religious freedom challenges in several countries and regions throughout 2025. Governments continued to perpetrate or tolerate violations of religious freedom, including attacks by nonstate actors. The Sahel region of Africa was particularly vulnerable to nonstate actor violence against religious communities or justified in the name of religion. Amid insurgent violence in Chad, the government imposed FoRB restrictions by banning several Muslim communities, surveilling religious leaders, and harassing and punishing women for wearing religious garb in public. The government of Chad also required that Christian churches obtain a six-month temporary authorization before legal recognition, leaving them vulnerable to harassment and closure. In May, Jama'tu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS)/Boko Haram reportedly abducted Garoua Archdiocese priest Father Valentin Mbaïbarem in the Far North region of Cameroon, later releasing him.

In neighboring Burkina Faso, Katiba Macina (KM), a subsidiary of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), increased its attacks in the north. The group has violently coerced communities to comply with its singular interpretation of Shari'a, including by killing local imams who disagreed with its approach. In January, around 200 of those insurgents attacked three villages in the country's west, killing 26 people of varying religious backgrounds. Bandits, reportedly masquerading as insurgents, also killed two catechists from the nearby diocese of Dédougou while they were returning from religious training. In March in Sourou Province, JNIM assailants killed at least 100 Muslim Fulani villagers—reportedly accusing them of helping the Burkinabe military.

FoRB restrictions were also evident in other parts of the world experiencing violent conflict. The Somali government, which continued efforts to establish stable governance following decades of conflict with al-Shabaab insurgents, reportedly forbade Christians from rebuilding former churches and prevented the Catholic community from opening a new church in Mogadishu.

Ongoing violence in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since 2023 has exacerbated displacement, food insecurity, and widespread insecurity, with minority religious communities facing heightened vulnerabilities amid fragmentation of state authority. In several areas under contested control, places of worship reportedly have been looted or repurposed, clerics and religious leaders have been threatened or displaced, religious minorities have been arbitrarily detained, and local authorities have failed to provide meaningful protection for places of worship. In July, the SAF demolished the Pentecostal Church in El Haj Yousif, Khartoum without notice, claiming it was an unregulated building. In September, the RSF reportedly carried out a drone strike in El Fasher that destroyed a mosque, killing over 70 civilians.

Weaponization of Legal Frameworks to Restrict FoRB

Blasphemy and Apostasy Laws

Dozens of foreign governments continued to maintain and enforce laws against blasphemy and apostasy. Despite international legal protections on speech that is critical of religion, governments persecuted, detained, and issued death sentences against those expressing such views or accused or perceived as doing so. USCIRF reported on blasphemy cases in Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Russia throughout the year. While there was no significant reporting on blasphemy cases in India, in July the Punjab state government introduced the Prevention of Offenses Against Holy Scriptures Bill, which proposes life imprisonment for acts of sacrilege against any religious scripture. In September, a court in Morocco sentenced Ibtissame Lachgar to 30 months in prison for blasphemy after she posted a photo of herself on social media wearing a tee shirt that said "Allah is lesbian."

Bangladesh was the site of several concerning blasphemy cases in 2025. In February, authorities arrested poet Sohel Hasan Galib for "hurting religious sentiment." Police arrested a Hindu man the following month for allegedly insulting the Prophet, leading to his conviction and sentencing to an indeterminate length of time in prison. Authorities arrested a university student in October on charges of desecrating a Qur'an; a mob surrounded his home after videos circulated on social media accusing him of the act. In November, police arrested a Baul singer on allegations of blasphemy and hurting religious sentiment during a musical performance. In December, a mob in Dhaka, Bangladesh lynched a Hindu man, tied his body to a tree, and set it on fire following rumors he made blasphemous comments insulting the Prophet Muhammed.

Registration Laws

Governments abroad imposed burdensome registration or re-registration requirements on religious communities. Such restrictions denied freedom of worship to religious communities and undermined confidence in the government's willingness to ensure FoRB. In September, the Hohhot Intermediate People's Court in Inner Mongolia, China confirmed a ruling against a Christian group for

distributing Bibles on the grounds they were not registered with the government-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement Church. Additionally, in Sri Lanka, new registration laws reportedly raised concerns from some religious communities that the statutes were vague, discriminatory, and inconsistently applied. Strict registration laws across Central Asia posed ongoing FoRB challenges to non-Orthodox Christian groups.

In some East African countries, increasing registration requirements, state oversight of sermons, and enhanced monitoring of faith-based activities risked granting governments broad power to limit religious expression. These restrictions disproportionately affect smaller or less politically influential communities. In March, Rwanda amended its 2018 law, Determining the Regulation and Functioning of Faith-Based Organizations, further tightening control through mandatory re-registration and fees, education requirements for religious leaders, social development action plans, bank management, and public disclosure of tithes and offerings. In Kenya, lawmakers continued to debate a bill on religious organizations that could grant the government significant authority to deregister religious groups, enact excessive registration requirements, and other action that would disproportionately burden small or nontraditional communities.

Laws Restricting FoRB-Related Civil Society Actors

New civil society laws in Latin and South American countries, including El Salvador, Paraguay, and Peru, targeted groups that receive international support for FoRB and related human rights. In October, the Evangelical Council of Venezuela filed a petition with the Supreme Court of Justice to clarify the 2024 Law on Oversight, Regulation, Action, and Financing of Non-Governmental Organizations and Non-Profit Social Organizations and its application to religious groups. The petition has not received any public comment by the Supreme Court of Justice nor additional public updates from the Council since filing.

In Hungary, the parliament considered a bill on The Transparency of Public Life. The bill creates an "anti-money laundering" body with unrestricted access to protected and private data and the internal records of any organizations it determines threaten "the sovereignty of Hungary." It allows warrantless searches of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and interrogation of those working there with virtually no legal protection. Religious communities in Hungary have raised concerns that the government will use the bill to target religious institutions it deems threatening. In February, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea expressed concern that Hungary's government has "targeted the Church of Scientology through raids, denial of occupancy certificates, and seizures of confidential religious files."

Additionally, in April, Belarus banned and labeled "extremist" NGOs that documented religious freedom abuses. One such "organization" was a single Catholic priest who posts on social media.

Legal Restriction on Religious Garb and Practices

An increasing number of governments moved to restrict FoRB in 2025 related to individual religious garb. In February, the senate of France voted to ban the hijab in sports. In June, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen announced plans to extend Denmark's niqab ban to educational institutions. In October, Portugal's parliament voted to ban religious face coverings in most public spaces. Members of government floated similar bans in Italy, Sweden, and Australia. In November, the government of Quebec, Canada, introduced Bill 9, which would ban religious garb in daycares, colleges, and universities and outlaw public prayer and prevent public institutions from serving kosher and halal meals.

Governments also restricted Muslims from using public facilities, limiting their ability to engage in protected religious observances. In August, the town of Jumilla, Spain, voted to ban Muslims from using municipal sports facilities and civic halls for religious activities "alien to our identity." Spain's ombudsman opened a probe into the ban, and the central government ordered it lifted later that month.

Technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and FoRB

Governments continued to surveil and target individuals expressing religious beliefs on social media. In April, a Russian court fined Apostolic Orthodox Church Archbishop Grigory Mikhnov-Vaitenko 30,000 rubles ($369) for a social media post using biblical references to criticize the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In July, a court in Pakistan issued a notice to the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) accusing an activist of using "inappropriate language" on a religious matter in a social media video.

Iran leveraged increasingly sophisticated tools and surveillance technologies to enforce mandatory hijab laws. These included continuing the installation of cameras on residential and commercial buildings and equipping over 50,000 police officers with body cameras. In Isfahan, authorities reportedly started using contactless payment readers and surveillance cameras to identify women who defy compulsory hijab. Authorities also sent threatening messages to women who dissent from religious hijab laws and to their families as well.

In China, the Chinese Communist Party intensified its application of AI tools in its ubiquitous surveillance technologies and infrastructure. This included enhancing applications to facial and speech recognition and to biometric tracking, to further automate censorship and to restrict religious activity, particularly among ethnic minorities. There were also reports that Chinese companies in partnership with the Chinese government worked to develop AI language learning models on Uyghur and Tibetan languages to better surveil, control, and manipulate communications written in these languages online, including on religion. In September, China's State Administration for Religious Affairs published a "Code of Conduct for Religious Clergy on the Internet" that, among other restrictive measures, banned the use of AI for religious promotion.

Cross-Border Religious Violence by Foreign Governments and Nonstate Actors

Some governments persisted in their attempts to destabilize liberal democracies, directing attacks on religious minority communities in those countries and aiming to sow political unrest by targeting houses of worship, religious leaders, and sites of religious significance.

Iran's government conducted a global campaign targeting Jews for this purpose. In January, the State Security Service of Azerbaijan arrested two men whom Iran had recruited to assassinate Rabbi Shneor Segal (the attempt was unsuccessful). In July, the UK's parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee reported that Iranian intelligence services were using third-party agents and cyberattacks to murder or kidnap "prominent Jewish individuals."

In August, Australia expelled the Iranian ambassador following the discovery Iran directed arson attacks against a kosher restaurant in Sydney and the Adass Israel Synagogue in Melbourne. Australia designated Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a state sponsor of terrorism in December. In November, Denmark arrested an Afghan man who contacted a Danish citizen on behalf of Iranian intelligence about gathering information on Jewish people and sites in Berlin, Germany.

Russia also targeted religious minority communities in an effort to sow political unrest. In February, UK-based NGOs reported to counterterrorism police and the British Home Office a network of Russian-linked Telegram channels offering cryptocurrency to individuals willing to attack mosques. In September, French security officials indicated that Russian military intelligence orchestrated a plot by several Serbian nationals to plant pig heads at nine mosques in the vicinity of Paris, France. Serbian police arrested 11 people related to these and similar attacks. In October, a French court sentenced four Bulgarian men to prison terms for desecrating the Paris Holocaust memorial in May 2024. The Paris prosecutor's office and security agencies noted Russian involvement in the attacks. Judges in the case said the attackers intended to "exploit existing divisions and further fragment French society."

Hamas continued a campaign to target Jewish and Israeli targets in Europe, particularly in Germany. In February, prosecutors in that country began a trial for four individuals suspected of seeking to establish a weapons depot for Hamas in Poland. In October, German authorities arrested three individuals on suspicion of procuring firearms and ammunition for an attack on a Jewish target on behalf of Hamas.

Attacks Based on Religious Identity

Throughout the year, authorities responded to political and economic uncertainty by targeting religious minorities. Across the Middle East, authorities targeted Baha'i communities on the basis of their faith. In Yemen, the Houthis continued to deny Baha'is their freedom of movement and access to humanitarian aid. In Qatar, authorities continued to prosecute members of the Baha'i leadership on questionable grounds, deport community members, and fail to renew residency permits after decades of approvals. In addition to constituting FoRB violations on their own, such attacks created a permissive environment for vigilante attacks on religious communities as well. In September, an assailant in Lyon, France murdered an Assyrian Christian, Ashur Sarnayya, who was livestreaming on TikTok about his Catholic faith at the time of the attack; authorities later arrested a man in Bari, Italy, in connection with Sarnayya's murder. Sikh communities also suffered persecution on religious grounds. In New Zealand in December, political activists blocked and disrupted a Sikh religious procession.

Global Rise in Antisemitism Targeting Jews and Jewish Communities

International organizations expressed alarm throughout the year over an emerging trend of violence and harassment against religious communities and individuals, particularly highlighting the continuing rise in antisemitism. On International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Turk raised concerns about "rampant" antisemitism. In March, UN special rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, sent a letter to the government of Chile expressing concern over a "possible increase in antisemitic incidents." In April, the UN Alliance of Civilizations and the Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide launched an antisemitism action plan, noting that "our efforts to respond [to] and combat antisemitism … are needed more than ever before."

Exemplifying the horrific global trend of rising antisemitism, in December, two assailants in Sydney, Australia attacked a Hannukah observance at Bondi Beach. The attack was Australia's deadliest mass shooting since 1996. Two attackers killed 15 people, including Rabbi Eli Schlanger, Rabbi Yaakov Levitan, a Holocaust survivor, and wounded 40. A Muslim bystander disarmed one of the attackers, who police said were inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Police killed the first assailant during the attack and arrested the second. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced security measures and supported a state-level inquiry in response. However, Jewish families affected by the attacks called instead for a federal level "Commonwealth Royal Commission into the rapid rise of antisemitism" in the country.

Governments abroad responded to varying degrees to antisemitic attacks. Throughout the year, the UK government investigated threats made in London against Jews at knifepoint and a spate of e-scooter ramming attacks targeting Jews for which police made an arrest. Police investigated similar assaults on Jews in Germany, Hungary, Switzerland, and Italy. In August, a 71-year-old self-professed antisemite in Ottawa, Canada stabbed an elderly Jewish woman at a grocery store. Police arrested him for a "hate motivated crime." In Montevideo, Uruguay, assailants attacked two Jewish teenagers in November.

Targeting of Muslims

Governments also investigated attacks on Muslims, which often targeted women wearing hijab. In March, a woman in Ajax, Canada, attacked a Muslim woman wearing hijab at a library, shouted profanities, poured liquid on her hijab, and attempted to set it on fire. Authorities arrested and charged her. In Australia in February, an assailant in Epping attacked two Muslim women wearing a hijab in separate incidents at a shopping center. Prime Minister Albanese condemned the attack, and police arrested a suspect days later. In May, a man in London, UK began yelling at an elderly Muslim woman before threatening to burn down her house and attempting to spit on her. In July, a man stabbed to death 26-year-old Rahma Ayat, a Muslim Algerian nursing student in Hannover, Germany, after months of harassment about her hijab.

Rise in Religiously Motivated Attacks in Africa, Particularly Targeting Christians

Christians across central Africa have become increasingly vulnerable to targeted attacks by nonstate actors. State Department-designated EPCs such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP), and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) regularly commit violence against Muslims who reject their ideology, but they typically reserve their most consistent, targeted attacks for Christian communities across the region. This alarming and rising trend is evident, for example, in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mauritania, and Mozambique, where nonstate actors regularly destroy churches, abduct Christian schoolchildren, seek out Christian converts

for execution, and carry out other horrific forms of religious violence. Those intolerable conditions forced many Christians and others to hide or curtail their religious activities, or in many cases to seek safe harbor elsewhere as internally displaced persons or refugees. Governments of those impacted countries regularly engaged in counterinsurgency operations against nonstate actors throughout the year, but operations remained a struggle in light of poorly equipped and trained security forces as well as other limitations across the region.

Attacks on and Repression of Religious Leaders

Throughout the year, police in France investigated attacks on rabbis Arie Engelberg, Elie Lemmel (in two separate attacks), Yhia Lahiani, and Yahir Elbaze. In July, a suspect graffitied an area next to the Basilica of San Domenico in Perugia, Italy, with the words: "Churches should be burned down, but with the priests inside." A city councilor condemned the incident.

In Armenia, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's statements about the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) raised concerns about potential government interference in the AAC's religious autonomy. Throughout 2025, Prime Minister Pashinyan proposed establishing and personally appointing a council to elect a new AAC leader, and elevated clergy who aligned with his agenda to oust the current catholicos. Pashinyan's attacks on Catholicos Karekin II coincided with the arrest of AAC clerics and other lay members who had criticized or expressed political opposition to Pashinyan's government. Whether these arrests are justified or religiously motivated is a topic of ongoing debate.

Attacks on Houses of Worship

Throughout the year, attacks on houses of worship continued to spread across Europe, ranging from acts of vandalism to severe desecrations and prompting an array of security and legal responses. There were arson attacks on houses of worship, including churches in Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Grenada and the UK. Police also investigated an arson attack on a mosque in East Sussex, UK and Piera, Spain. In November, police in Chernivtsi, Ukraine, arrested a man who set fire to the Sadigura synagogue. Assailants also attacked houses of worship with human waste. Their targets included churches in Germany, Italy, and the Vatican. In September, a man in London, UK, desecrated at least five Jewish sites with bodily waste, including synagogues.

European governments investigated these attacks to various degrees. The UK took some steps to prosecute those responsible for attacks on houses of worship. In January, police in the UK arrested a 16-year-old under the Terrorism Act outside Inverclyde Islamic Centre in Scotland and later arrested a second minor. In November, Greater Manchester Police arrested a suspect in the October attack on the Heaton Park Synagogue on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. Also in October, a UK court sentenced a man to 10 months in prison for making a bomb threat to a Leeds synagogue. In December, a court in Preston found two men guilty of plotting a gun attack on the Jewish community of Manchester. Police in Germany, Spain, and Sweden investigated bomb threats against mosques, synagogues, and churches as well.

Outside Europe, there were a number of significant attacks and threats to houses of worship. In March, and coinciding with Ramadan, police in Australia arrested a 16-year-old for making threats against a mosque in Sydney and investigated separate threats against mosques in Sydney and Perth. In November, police in Dhaka, Bangladesh, arrested a man who launched several homemade bombs that targeted two Catholic churches and a Catholic school.

The Impact of Global Funding Cuts on Religious Freedom

G7 countries, which contribute three-quarters of all official development assistance—often including support for efforts to advance religious freedom—collectively cut their international development budgets by 28 percent for 2026. In September, South Korea announced it would cut its 2026 development assistance by 19 percent to $3.8 billion and cut humanitarian aid by half. The cuts included media broadcasts into North Korea with information about defection, a path that persecuted Christians often use to escape government repression. In October, the UN special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association raised concerns over the implications of global aid cuts, including on association for religious purposes. Global cuts to early warning and conflict prevention programs in places like Nigeria also exacerbated FoRB concerns for many communities that are susceptible to religious violence.

Positive FoRB-Related Developments

There are numerous accounts of governments being hostile to religious freedom, documented throughout this report. At the same time, many governments attempted to protect FoRB. Several countries took meaningful steps to highlight their commitments to FoRB, such as national plans to protect FoRB or appointment of FoRB envoys. However, such policy actions often failed to sufficiently address societal conditions facilitating FoRB restrictions. As a result, individuals and communities expressed ongoing concern that their right to FoRB was not protected even in countries actively seeking to do so.

While these policy actions to protect FoRB may not be fully effective on their own, they nevertheless merit attention. In February, Italy's national coordinator on combating antisemitism unveiled a national plan to combat antisemitism, updating a strategy plan from 2011. In February, the UK government prompted robust public debate after it established a working group to define anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia while respecting freedom of expression, including criticism of religion. However, police officials raised concerns that disruptions in funding to organizations that track anti-Muslim hatred could hamper government efforts to combat it. In March, Canada's government hosted a national forum on antisemitism, and Australian Prime Minister Albanese announced in April a national antisemitism database to track incidents against Jews and announced new policy measures in the wake of an attack on a Hannukah celebration in Sydney in December. In May, Sweden adopted a national strategy to strengthen Jewish life and combat antisemitism. In December, Switzerland and Denmark both announced action plans to combat antisemitism.

In September, the government of New South Wales, Australia announced an initiative to combat anti-Muslim hatred. That same month, the Australian special envoy to combat Islamophobia released a major report outlining a national response to Islamophobia and

providing policy recommendations for the government to combat anti-Muslim hatred.

Throughout the year, the European parliament passed resolutions condemning religious freedom restrictions on Christians and Baha'is in Iran; Christians, Muslims, Druze, and Yazidis in Syria; and Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

APPENDIX 1 COMMISSIONER BIOGRAPHIES

Vicky Hartzler, *Chair*

Appointed by Speaker Mike Johnson (R) for a term expiring in May 2026. Hartzler served in the U.S. Congress from 2011 to 2023, representing the 4th Congressional District of Missouri. She served on the Armed Services Committee and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. She sponsored the Combatting the Persecution of Christians in China Act.

Asif Mahmood, *Vice Chair*

Appointed by Hon. Hakeem Jeffries (D), House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2026. Mahmood is a practicing physician, human rights activist, interracial and inter-faith community organizer, and philanthropist. He led the advocacy for many global human rights campaigns with a focus on Southeast Asia.

Mohamed Elsanousi, *Commissioner*

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

Maureen Ferguson, *Commissioner*

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

Rachel Laser, *Commissioner*

Appointed by Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2026. Laser is President and Chief Executive Officer of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. She also served as Deputy Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Culture Program Director at Third Way, and Senior Counsel at the National Women's Law Center.

Stephen Schneck, *Commissioner*

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

Meir Soloveichik, *Commissioner*

Appointed by Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), then Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2026. Soloveichik is the Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel—the oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, the Director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, and a Senior Scholar at the Tikvah Fund. He was appointed by President Donald J. Trump to the White House Religious Liberty Commission.

APPENDIX 2 FRANK R. WOLF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF VICTIMS LIST

Introduction

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, requires USCIRF to:

> . . . make publicly available, to the extent practicable . . . lists of persons it determines are imprisoned or detained, have disappeared, been placed under house arrest, been tortured, or subjected to forced renunciation of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a country of particular concern [CPC] . . . or by a nonstate actor that the Commission recommends for designation as an entity of particular concern [EPC].

USCIRF developed the Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Victims List—an online public database—to implement this provision for countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or Special Watch List (SWL) status. The database also includes such victims located in the de facto territories of nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for EPC status, according to the same criteria.

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

USCIRF invites those with credible information on victims of violations of the right to FoRB, or those who were punished for advocating for FoRB, to submit information using the Victims List Intake Form. Additional information about the Victims List can be found in USCIRF's Victims List Factsheet.

Religions or Beliefs

The FoRB Victims List is based on violations of rights to freedom of religion or belief as a human right defined by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This right exists for every individual of any religion or belief, and the Victims List includes a global cross-section of religions or beliefs, which reflects that international standard. An individual can be included on the list due to a denial of the right to FoRB or because they were punished for advocating for this right. Currently, the Victims List includes individuals representing the following religions or beliefs:

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

Overview

At the end of the 2025 reporting year, the FoRB Victims List included 2,424 individuals targeted by 29 different governments and entities. USCIRF has records that indicate more than 1,650 of those victims remained in some form of custody, while 743 had been released. The detention status of 280 cases remained unknown, and tragically, six individuals have died in state custody.

Nature of Charges

The FoRB Victims List includes Nature of Charges to showcase the various laws and often spurious legal pretenses that governments use to target FoRB prisoners. Some charges cited in the database are based on laws that directly violate international standards of religious freedom, while others are based on ostensibly justifiable laws. In either case, however, governments have frequently used, exploited, or abused such laws to unjustly deny FoRB to these individuals or to limit their FoRB advocacy. USCIRF groups similar charges to identify

how foreign governments and entities have justified the incarceration of individuals included on the FoRB Victims List. Although USCIRF excludes from the FoRB Victims List individuals credibly known to have committed or promoted violence, governments have often used vague, false, or unjust accusations of violence or terrorism as a pretext for denying individuals their FoRB rights.

Types of Violations

The most common types of abuse recorded in the FoRB Victims List are imprisonment and detainment. Governments also subjected those listed to house arrest, enforced disappearance, and forced renunciation of faith. USCIRF has documented many cases in which torture was reported. The top four countries accused of torture with the most documented cases are Uzbekistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. USCIRF has also documented 154 cases in which medical neglect was reported. The countries with the top five most reported cases of medical neglect include Iran, Russia, China, India, and Saudi Arabia.

APPENDIX 3 HIGHLIGHTS OF USCIRF'S PUBLIC ACTIVITIES IN 2025

In addition to releasing an Annual Report by May 1 of each year, USCIRF produces research and additional information related to international religious freedom throughout the year. This Appendix highlights USCIRF's events and other materials from calendar year 2025. USCIRF's 2025 press releases and statements are available on USCIRF's website at www.uscirf.gov. USCIRF's 2025 social media posts can be found here.

Hearings

- **February 2025:** Burma in Transition: Next Steps to Advance Religious Freedom and Improve Conditions for Religious Victims
- **March 2025:** Religious Freedom Conditions in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan
- **May 2025:** Governance in Nigeria: Foundation for Securing Freedom of Religion or Belief
- **June 2025:** Religious Freedom Conditions in Azerbaijan
- **July 2025:** Freedom of Religion or Belief in Russia
- **August 2025:** Freedom of Religion or Belief in Turkey
- **September 2025:** Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia
- **October 2025:** State-Controlled Religion in China
- **November 2025:** Religious Freedom in Syria's Post-Assad Transition

Events

- **February 2025:** Standing with the Silenced – Leveraging the Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List
- **March 2025:** 2025 Annual Report: Key Findings and Recommendations

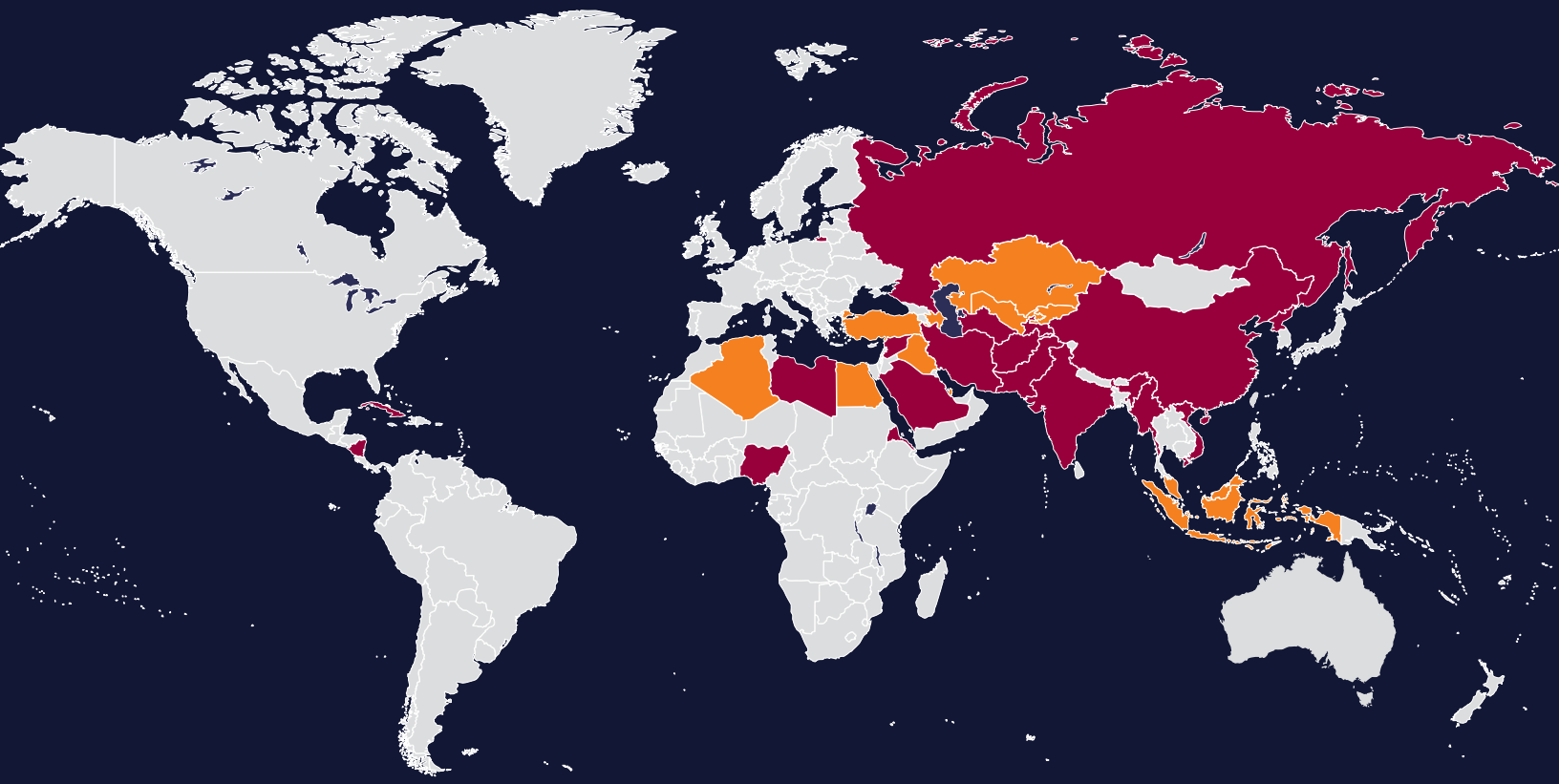
Publications

- **February 2025:** State Restrictions on Religious Freedom in Egypt (Country Update)
- **February 2025:** Barriers to Protection: Updated Recommendations on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal (Contracted Report)
- **March 2025:** 2025 Annual Report
- **April 2025:** Prosecuting Blasphemy in Russia (Issue Update)
- **April 2025:** Burma Hearing Summary
- **April 2025:** Afghanistan Hearing Summary
- **June 2025:** Nigeria Hearing Summary
- **June 2025:** Russia Country Update
- **July 2025:** Religious Freedom and U.S. Policy in Post-Assad Syria (Policy Update)
- **July 2025:** Bangladesh Factsheet
- **July 2025:** Nigeria Country Update
- **July 2025:** Azerbaijan Hearing Summary
- **July 2025:** Iran Country Update
- **August 2025:** Houthi Factsheet
- **August 2025:** Sudan Issue Update
- **August 2025:** Russia Hearing Summary
- **August 2025:** Afghanistan - Assessing the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (Issue Update)
- **August 2025:** Turkmenistan Country Update
- **August 2025:** Azerbaijan Country Update
- **September 2025:** Indonesia Country Update
- **September 2025:** Preventing Mass Atrocities Targeting Religious Communities (Policy Update)
- **September 2025:** Kazakhstan Country Update
- **September 2025:** Pakistan Country Update
- **September 2025:** Uzbekistan's Administrative Penalties for Peaceful Religious Activity (Issue Update)
- **September 2025:** Turkey Hearing Summary
- **September 2025:** China's Persecution of Religious Leaders (Factsheet)
- **October 2025:** The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution — Examples from South and Southeast Asia (Factsheet)
- **October 2025:** Central Asia Hearing Summary
- **October 2025:** Religious Freedom and the Prohibition of Torture and Ill Treatment (Factsheet)
- **October 2025:** Kyrgyzstan Country Update
- **October 2025:** Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Sahelian Countries of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Chad (Issue Update)
- **November 2025:** Repression of Religious Freedom in Latin America's Authoritarian Triad – Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (Issue Update)
- **November 2025:** Systematic Religious Persecution in India (Issue Update)
- **November 2025:** Malaysia Country Update
- **December 2025:** Prison Mistreatment and FoRB (Factsheet)
- **December 2025:** North Korea Country Update

- **December 2025:** Syria Hearing Summary
- **December 2025:** China Hearing Summary
- **December 2025:** Vietnam Country Update
- **December 2025:** Iraq Country Update
- **December 2025:** Evolving Legal Threats to Religious Protections in East Africa (Issue Update)

Spotlight Podcast Episodes

- **May 2025:** The State of Religious Freedom in India
- **May 2025:** Reflections on USCIRF's 2025 Trip to Azerbaijan
- **May 2025:** Religious Freedom as Syria Transitions After Assad
- **May 2025:** The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia
- **July 2025:** The Extensive Reach of Chinese Transnational Repression
- **July 2025:** The Status and Significance of CPC, SWL, and EPC Designations: A Conversation with Former USCIRF Chair Stephen Schneck
- **August 2025:** Blasphemy and FoRB in Nigeria: A Conversation with Mubarak Bala
- **August 2025:** Religious Freedom in Sudan: Navigating Instability and Civil War
- **September 2025:** China's Religious Freedom Violations on the Basis of Article 300
- **October 2025:** The IRF Ambassador: A Key Component of U.S. Leadership on Religious Freedom
- **October 2025:** A Former Prisoner's Story and the Path to Religious Freedom in Eritrea
- **November 2025:** Cuba and Nicaragua's Escalating Crackdown on Religious Communities
- **December 2025:** Criminalizing Faith: The Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan
- **December 2025:** Religious Prisoners and State Repression in Tajikistan
- **December 2025:** Egypt's Continued Repression of Religious Minorities
- **December 2025:** Findings from USCIRF's Delegation to Central Asia
- **December 2025:** Youth Voices Advancing Religious Freedom in East Africa



2026 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

Algeria
Azerbaijan
Egypt
Indonesia
Iraq
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Malaysia
Qatar
Turkey
Uzbekistan

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Al-Shabaab
Boko Haram
Islamic State – Sahel Province
Islamic State in West Africa Province
Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
Rapid Support Forces
The Houthis

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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

Telephone: (202) 523–3240
www.uscirf.gov
Media@USCIRF.gov