

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ANNUAL REPORT 2021

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

**RUSSIA
SYRIA
VIETNAM**

**SAUDI ARABIA
TAJIKISTAN
TURKMENISTAN**

**GENOCIDE
REFUGEES**

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

**APOSTASY
BLASPHEMY**

**FORCED LABOR
RELIGIOUS PRISONERS**

**AFGHANISTAN
ALGERIA
AZERBAIJAN
CUBA
EGYPT
IRAQ**

**INDONESIA
KAZAKHSTAN**

**MALAYSIA
NICARAGUA
TURKEY
UZBEKISTAN**

SPECIAL WATCH LIST

**UDHR-
ARTICLE 18**

**HOUTHIS
TALIBAN
AL-SHABAAB
BOKO HARAM**

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

ENTITIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

COVID-19

**POLITICAL
UNREST**

HOUSES OF WORSHIP

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



ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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

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

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

About this Report

Created by the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended](#) (IRFA), USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the U.S. Department of State, that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on the provisions of its authorizing legislation and the standards in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#), and other international documents. USCIRF's [mandate and annual reports](#) are different from, and complementary to, the mandate and annual reports of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

USCIRF's 2021 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2020 in 26 countries and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including travel, hearings, meetings, and briefings, and are approved by a majority vote of Commissioners, with each Commissioner, under the statute, having the option to include a statement with his or her own individual views. During the first two months of 2020, Commissioners and/or staff visited Azerbaijan, Laos, Malaysia, and Sudan to assess religious freedom conditions. For the rest of the year and in early 2021, USCIRF did not travel due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its Special Watch List (SWL). The report also includes USCIRF's recommendations of violent nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as "entities of particular concern,"

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

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

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

Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

USCIRF’S 2021 CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Changes in SWL Recommendations

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

Bahrain

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

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

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

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

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

CAR

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

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

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

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

Sudan

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

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

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

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

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

Violations of Human Rights on the Basis of Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Key Findings

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STATE DEPARTMENT 2020 DESIGNATIONS

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Legal Framework

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

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

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

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

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

Key Developments in 2020 and Early 2021

Key U.S. Government IRF Positions

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

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

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

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

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

International Partnerships

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

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

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

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

Individual Violators

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

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

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

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

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

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

Programs

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

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

Refugee Resettlement

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

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

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

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

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

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

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

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

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

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

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

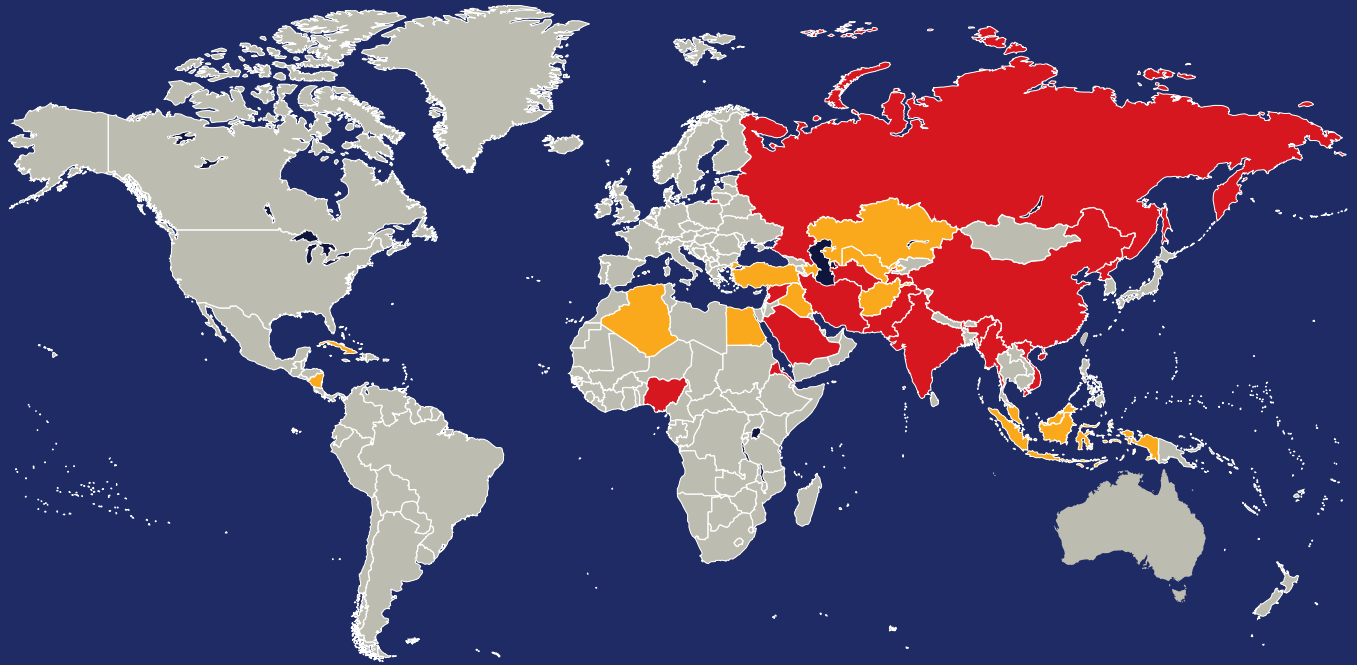
that the secretary of state inform certain House and Senate committees of the reasoning if the State Department does not follow the CPC recommendations in USCIRF’s Annual Report within 30 days of this decision.

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

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

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

2021 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

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

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

Persecution of Religious Minorities

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

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

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

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

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

SAUDI ARABIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

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

The U.S. Congress should:

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

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

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

Positive Developments

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

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

Mistreatment of Religious Minorities

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

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

Religious Incitement in Textbooks

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

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

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

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

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

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

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

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

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

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

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

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

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

Positive Conditions under the AANES

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

Religious Freedom Violations under Turkish Occupation

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

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

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

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

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

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

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

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

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

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

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

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

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

Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims

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

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

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

Oppression of Christians and Other Non-Muslims

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

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

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

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

Constitutional Referendum

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

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

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

Background

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

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

Restrictions on Religious Property

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

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

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

Conscientious Objectors

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

Targeting of Independent Journalists Who Report on Religious Freedom

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

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

Denial of Religious Freedom for Activists and Protesters

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

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

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

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

Legal and Security Repression

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

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

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

Rural Sectarianism

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

Individual Views of Commissioner Johnnie Moore

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

KEY FINDINGS

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

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

Background

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

The Struggle of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq

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

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

Security Challenges in Northern Iraq

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

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

Other Religious Freedom Issues in Iraq

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

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

Key U.S. Policy

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

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

OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENTS

COVID-19 and Religious Freedom

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

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

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

Attacks on Houses of Worship

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Political Unrest Leading to Religious Freedom Violations

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

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

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

Blasphemy Laws

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

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

Global Antisemitism

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

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

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

Throughout Europe, Jews faced threats to ban or limit ritual slaughter, physical attacks, discrimination, and rampant vandalism.

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

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

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

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

China's International Influence on Religious Freedom and Human Rights

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KEY USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS IMPLEMENTED IN 2020 AND EARLY 2021

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

Designating the Worst Violators

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

Increasing the Use of Targeted Sanctions

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

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

Increasing Prioritization of Religious Freedom

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

Filling IRF-Related Appointments

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

Increasing the Refugee Ceiling

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

Raising IRF Issues in Bilateral and Multilateral Engagement

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

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

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

Advocating for Religious Prisoners of Conscience

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

Increasing Aid to Support Religious Freedom and Religious Minorities

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

Designating Uyghur Genocide

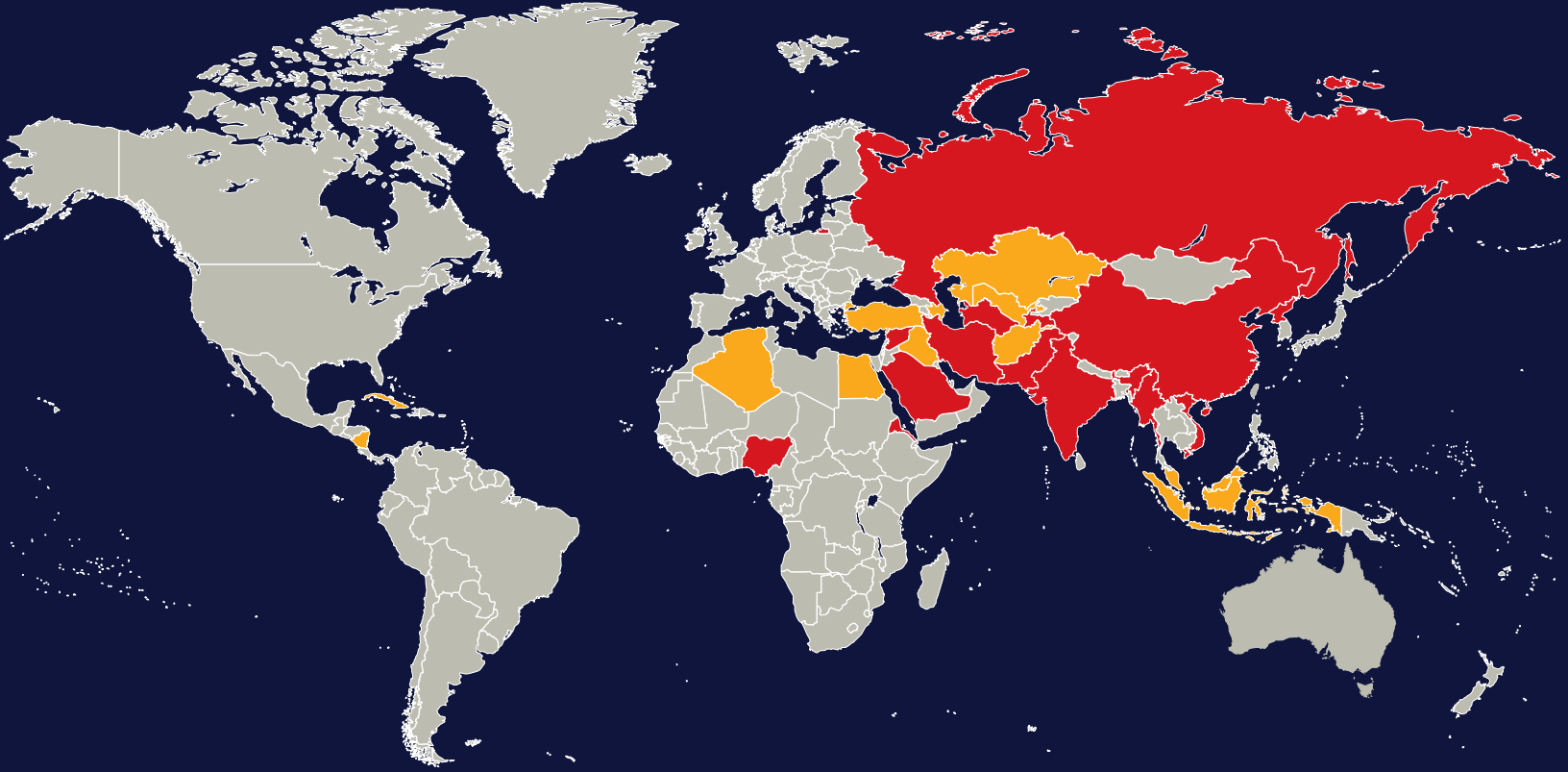
- In June, USCIRF warned that the Chinese government's repressive population control measures against Uyghurs and other Turkic

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

Adopting Laws and Passing Resolutions Related to Religious Freedom

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

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



2021 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

■ COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

■ SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

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



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