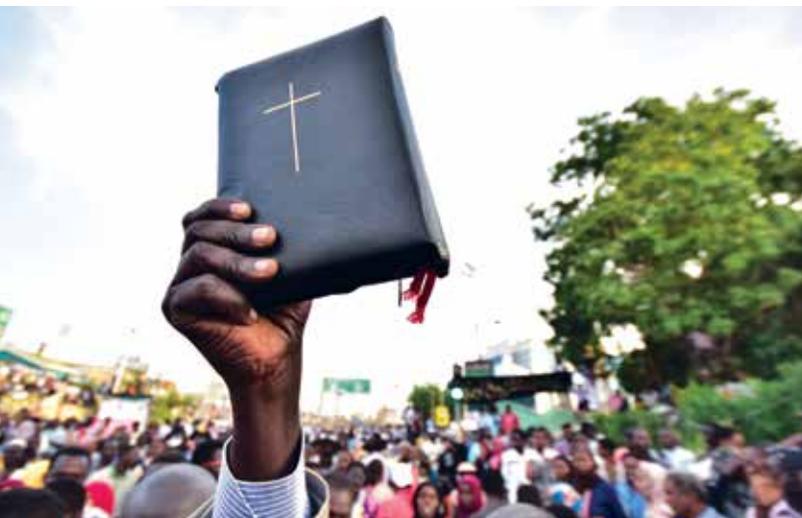
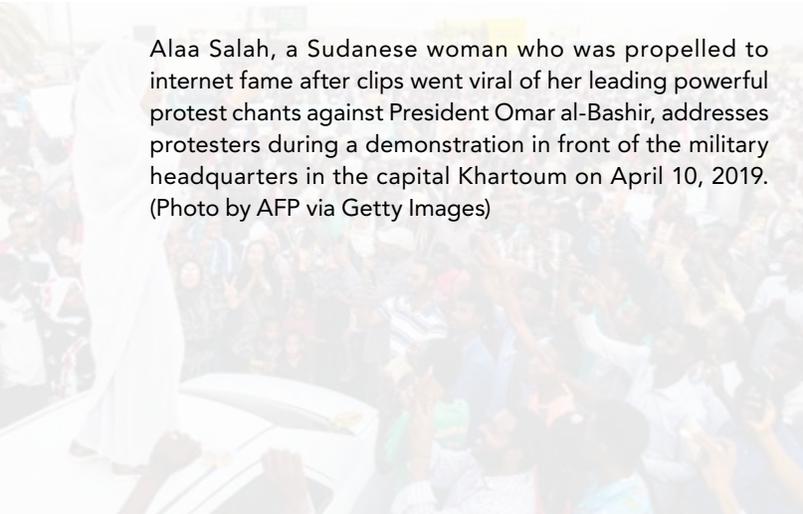


# UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

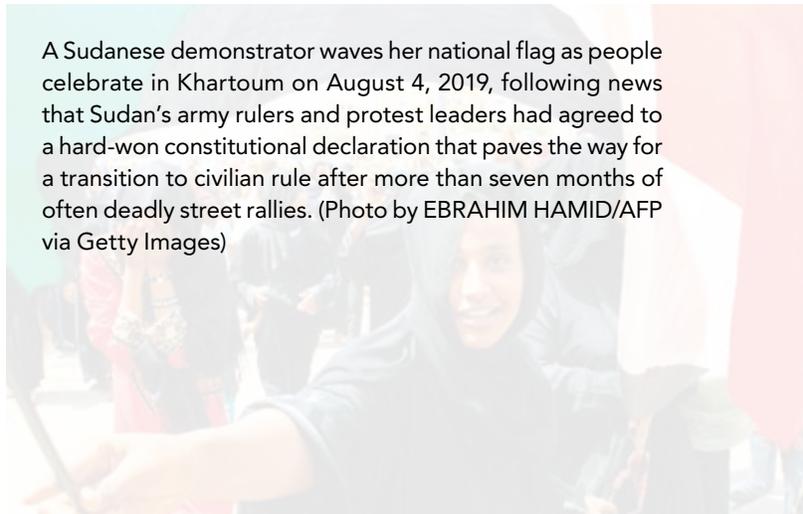


ANNUAL REPORT  
2020

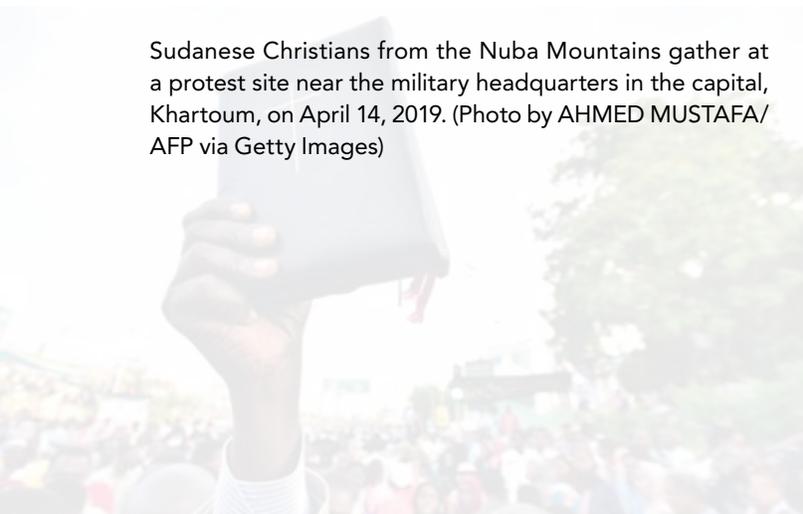


A woman in a white thobe stands on a raised platform, addressing a large crowd of people. Many in the crowd have their arms raised.

Alaa Salah, a Sudanese woman who was propelled to internet fame after clips went viral of her leading powerful protest chants against President Omar al-Bashir, addresses protesters during a demonstration in front of the military headquarters in the capital Khartoum on April 10, 2019. (Photo by AFP via Getty Images)

A woman in a dark blue hooded garment smiles and waves a Sudanese national flag. Other people and flags are visible in the background.

A Sudanese demonstrator waves her national flag as people celebrate in Khartoum on August 4, 2019, following news that Sudan's army rulers and protest leaders had agreed to a hard-won constitutional declaration that paves the way for a transition to civilian rule after more than seven months of often deadly street rallies. (Photo by EBRAHIM HAMID/AFP via Getty Images)

A close-up of a hand holding a black book or tablet high in the air. In the background, a large crowd of people is gathered outdoors.

Sudanese Christians from the Nuba Mountains gather at a protest site near the military headquarters in the capital, Khartoum, on April 14, 2019. (Photo by AHMED MUSTAFA/AFP via Getty Images)

A man in a suit and tie sits at a table with a microphone and a water bottle. He is gesturing with his hands while speaking. A nameplate in front of him reads "Abdalla Hamdok".

Transitional Prime Minister of Sudan Abdalla Hamdok gestures during a December 2019 meeting in Washington, D.C. with members of his cabinet and U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Commissioners and staff. (Photo by Aaron Sweet)

A group of people in a cemetery are performing a Sufi dhikr ceremony. They are holding and waving Sudanese national flags.

Sufi *dhikr* ceremony in a cemetery in Omdurman, Sudan, just outside of the capital of Khartoum. Photo taken by USCIRF Supervisory Policy Analyst Kurt Werthmuller during a USCIRF country visit to Sudan in February and March 2020.

# ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## **Commissioners**

Tony Perkins  
*Chair*

Gayle Manchin  
Nadine Maenza  
*Vice Chairs*

Gary L. Bauer  
Anurima Bhargava  
James W. Carr  
Tenzin Dorjee  
Sharon Kleinbaum  
Johnnie Moore

Ambassador Samuel D. Brownback,  
*ex officio*, non-voting member

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

**April 2020**

# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In 2019, the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) was gratified by important progress to improve religious freedom conditions in two countries where the governments engaged closely with USCIRF to bring positive change. The year saw remarkable changes in Sudan, a country USCIRF has recommended for “country of particular concern” (CPC) designation under the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) of 1998 (IRFA) every year since USCIRF’s first set of [CPC recommendations](#) in 2000. A brave, grassroots protest movement brought down the Islamist-led regime of former president Omar al-Bashir in April, followed by the establishment of a joint civilian-military transitional government four months later. 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, the transitional government, which has engaged closely with USCIRF on religious freedom concerns, repealed the repressive public order laws that the former regime used to punish individuals, particularly women, who did not conform to its interpretation of Sunni Islam. While much work remains to extend full religious freedom<sup>1</sup> to all Sudanese—including repealing apostasy and blasphemy laws—enough positive change has come to the country that, in this Annual Report, USCIRF is now recommending Sudan for the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List (SWL), a lesser category, rather than for CPC designation. The positive trajectory in Sudan is depicted in the photographs on this year’s cover, which show the protests that led to the Bashir regime’s removal; transitional Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in a December meeting with USCIRF in Washington, DC; and a Sufi worship ceremony that USCIRF witnessed during its February 2020 visit to Sudan.

Likewise, Uzbekistan took significant steps in 2019 to fulfill its commitments of the last few years to improve religious freedom conditions, also in close consultation with USCIRF. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the government ended its longstanding practice of raiding religious communities for unregistered activity or unauthorized distribution or possession of literature. In August, in a move recommended by

USCIRF, the government announced it would close the infamous Jaslq Prison where, in the past, two religious prisoners had been boiled alive. Although the government of Uzbekistan has yet to revise its problematic laws regulating religion, as it has pledged to do, or to address its continued imprisonment of many peaceful Muslims, based on the encouraging changes over the past year USCIRF is recommending the country for the State Department’s SWL in this Annual Report, after having recommended it for CPC designation every year since 2005.

On the other hand, India took a sharp downward turn in 2019. The national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims. Most notably, it enacted the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan already residing in India. According to government officials’ statements, this law is meant to provide protection for listed non-Muslim religious communities—but not for Muslims—against exclusion from a nationwide National Register of Citizens and the resulting detention, deportation, and potential statelessness. The national and various state governments also allowed nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities to continue with impunity, and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence against them. Based on

these developments, in this report USCIRF recommends CPC designation for India.

Created by IRFA, USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the State Department, that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on its statutory mandate and the standards in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the

[International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), 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.

---

*The positive trajectory in Sudan is depicted in the photographs on this year’s cover, which show the protests that led to the Bashir regime’s removal; transitional Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in a December meeting with USCIRF in Washington, DC; and a Sufi worship ceremony that USCIRF witnessed during its February 2020 visit to Sudan.*

---

<sup>1</sup>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.

The 2020 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2019 in 29 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. In 2019 and early 2020, Commissioners and/or staff visited 11 countries in order to assess conditions: Egypt (January 2019), Bahrain (March 2019), Kazakhstan (May 2019), Burma (June 2019), Iraq (July 2019), Uzbekistan (May and September 2019), Vietnam (September 2019), Laos (February 2020), Malaysia (February 2020), Azerbaijan (February 2020), and Sudan (February 2020).

### Changes to 2020 Annual Report

This report reflects changes in content and format from previous Annual Reports. The report's main focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as CPCs under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its SWL. The second group is different from past years, when USCIRF had its own "Tier 2"—a category USCIRF created long before Congress, in 2016 amendments to IRFA, required the State Department to have the SWL. The change to making SWL recommendations this year, and going forward, is intended to better conform with the statutory scheme and with USCIRF's oversight and advisory role.

In addition, the country chapters this year are more concise to better emphasize the key findings justifying the CPC or SWL recommendation and to make more targeted recommendations for U.S. policy. Another change to the report this year is the addition of a section highlighting key trends and developments in religious freedom globally during the reporting period, with a particular focus on countries that do not meet the statutory criteria for a CPC or SWL recommendation.

As in previous years, the report still includes a section analyzing the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA during the reporting year and providing recommendations to bolster overall U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief abroad. The report also continues to include USCIRF's recommendations of violent nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, under the 2016 amendments to IRFA.

### 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.

The statute, as amended by the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016 (Frank Wolf Act), 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 means "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 egregious, systematic and ongoing, or egregious and ongoing).

The Frank Wolf Act requires the U.S. government to identify nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and designate them as EPCs. The law defines a nonstate actor as "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 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 Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Taliban in the Afghanistan chapter, and for Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in the Syria chapter.

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

- Throughout 2019, al-Shabaab continued to hold territory in Somalia and retained the ability to conduct attacks in Kenya. In Somalia, [Christians pray in secret](#), partially out of fear al-Shabaab will attack them. In June 2019, al-Shabaab attempted to attack Christians at a hospital construction site in Madera, Kenya, but were [thwarted](#) by Muslim workers at the site who hid their Christian colleagues. In October, al-Shabaab unsuccessfully [attacked a bus](#) carrying eight Christian passengers in Madera. In December, an al-Shabaab bus attack in Wajir County [killed](#) at least nine Kenyan Christians after they refused to recite the Islamic declaration of faith (shahada).
- In 2019, 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

---

*The report's main focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as CPCs under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its SWL.*

---

Jewish community in Yemen [faces](#) discrimination by Houthi authorities. Christians, especially converts from Islam, [face](#) severe religious persecution as well. The Houthis also continued their systematic persecution of Baha'is in Yemen, including their detention of community leader and USCIRF religious prisoner of conscience [Hamid bin Haydara](#). Twenty-four other Yemeni Baha'is faced charges of [apostasy and espionage](#). A Houthi appeals court [upheld](#) a death sentence against Bin Haydara in early 2020, but a Houthi spokesperson then [announced](#) in March that he and six other detained Baha'is would be pardoned and released.

*The fact that a country is not covered in this report does not mean that religious freedom issues do not exist there, or that concerns discussed in previous annual reports have improved.*

or not mentioned in the section of the report discussing other key trends and developments. The fact that a country is not covered in this report does not mean that religious freedom issues do not exist there, or that concerns discussed in previous annual reports have improved. It indicates only that USCIRF did not conclude that the conditions in the particular reporting year meet the statutory CPC or SWL standards.

Similarly, the fact that a nonstate group is not recommended for EPC designation does not mean that it does not engage in religious freedom violations. Across the world, in countries discussed in this report and in other countries, there are numerous nonstate groups that commit particularly severe religious freedom violations but nevertheless do not meet the Frank Wolf Act's standard for designation as EPCs because, for example, they do not exercise significant political power and territorial control.

USCIRF issues publications throughout the year on a variety of countries and topics, which are available at [www.uscirtf.gov](http://www.uscirtf.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](#).

## Religious Freedom Violations in Other Countries and by Other Entities

The Annual Report's emphasis on countries that, in USCIRF's view, merit CPC or SWL designation is intended to focus the attention of U.S. policymakers on countries where the governments perpetrate or tolerate the worst violations of religious freedom globally. USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions worldwide, including in countries not recommended for CPC or SWL status

## USCIRF'S 2020 CPC, SWL, AND EPC RECOMMENDATIONS

For 2020, based on religious freedom conditions in 2019, USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- Redesignate as CPCs the following nine countries: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following five countries: India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam;
- Maintain on the SWL the following four countries: Cuba, Nicaragua, Sudan, and Uzbekistan;
- Include on the SWL the following 11 countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey;
- Redesignate as EPCs the following five nonstate actors: al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Houthis in Yemen, ISKP in Afghanistan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan; and
- Designate as an additional EPC the following nonstate actor: HTS in Syria.

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

## Key Findings

In 2019, the administration of President Donald J. Trump continued to prioritize international religious freedom. In July, the U.S. Department of State convened the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), bringing together more than 100 foreign delegations and 1,000 civil society and religious leaders. The ministerial provided a platform for [survivors](#) of religious persecution to share their stories, and included a [meeting](#) with President Trump. Nine [statements of concern](#) were issued, including on [protecting places of worship](#) and the use of [technology and religious freedom](#). Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo also [announced](#) plans to create the International Religious Freedom Alliance (IRF Alliance), a network of like-minded countries committed to opposing religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all. The IRF Alliance officially [launched](#) after the reporting period, in February 2020, with 27 countries signing onto its [Declaration of Principles](#), which is grounded in international human rights standards.

In September, President Trump [hosted](#) an event on religious freedom on the sidelines of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, where he dedicated an additional \$25 million to programs to protect religious freedom and religious sites and relics. He also announced efforts to form a coalition of U.S. businesses for the protection of religious freedom. The U.S. government's allocation of funds to protect religious sites was a key recommendation in USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report and an area of focus for USCIRF throughout the year.

During 2019, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, [Samuel D. Brownback](#), continued actively implementing the State Department's mandate, including through public speeches,

travel, and meetings with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) [IRF Roundtable](#) and other stakeholders. In February, the Trump administration appointed [Elan S. Carr](#) to the position of Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, which had been vacant since January 2017; his role is to counter rising anti-Semitism across the world, an issue of great concern to USCIRF. After the reporting period, in February 2020, the administration [appointed](#) Sarah Makin-Acciani to be the first-ever Senior Director for International Religious Freedom on the National Security Council (NSC) staff. The [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA) called for a dedicated NSC staff position on this issue, and the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#) (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.

In December 2019, the State Department [named](#) three new countries—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Nigeria—to its Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, pursuant to IRFA as amended by the Frank Wolf Act. It made no new additions to the previous year's list of "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, the category under IRFA for countries that engage in or tolerate particularly severe religious freedom violations. However, it removed

one country from its 2018 CPC list: Sudan, which it placed on the SWL instead. For the [nine countries](#) that the State Department redesignated as CPCs, it reimposed existing sanctions on six and reissued waivers on taking any action for the other three. The State Department also redesignated the same [nine nonstate actors](#) as "entities of particular concern" (EPCs) for particularly severe religious freedom violations.

*The U.S. government's allocation of funds to protect religious sites was a key recommendation in USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report and an area of focus for USCIRF throughout the year.*

## STATE DEPARTMENT 2019 DESIGNATIONS

CPC Designations	Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Russia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan
EPC Designations	Al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban

During 2019, the State Department and U.S. Department of the Treasury actively used the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, a related executive order, and other legal authorities to impose targeted sanctions on specific foreign officials, and in some cases also their immediate family members, for corruption or human rights abuses. Only a few of the human rights-based sanctions were related to religious freedom violations, however.

In November, President Trump set the annual ceiling for the resettlement of refugees to the United States for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 at 18,000, the lowest in the program's history. The administration dedicated 5,000 of those slots to refugees fleeing religious persecution, and continued to focus on humanitarian assistance for those displaced abroad and for programs to help enable their return home, as it had the previous year.

---

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Discontinue the repeated imposition of preexisting sanctions or waivers for CPC-designated countries; instead, for each such country, take a unique presidential action or commensurate action pursuant to Sections 6445(a) (9) – (15) of IRFA, or negotiate a binding agreement pursuant to Section 6441(c) (1)(C) of IRFA, in order to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change;
- Increase the use of targeted sanctions to deter religious persecution by using human rights-related financial and visa authorities to impose asset freezes and/or visa bans on individual officials, agencies, and military units for severe religious freedom violations, citing specific abuses;
- Return the annual ceiling for the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to the [previously typical 95,000](#), and fully implement the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted [Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status](#) in the United States;
- Direct U.S. diplomats abroad to engage regularly with host government officials and key stakeholders about the risk of surveillance technology facilitating religious persecution, and fund efforts to train foreign officials on how to use surveillance technology to address legitimate public policy concerns while respecting religious freedom and related rights; and
- Ensure that combating anti-Semitism is a key priority of the IRF Alliance and encourage the UN Secretary-General to create a position in his office to engage with Jewish communities worldwide and to monitor and report on anti-Semitism globally.

---

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Hold oversight hearings on the implementation of IRFA and the Frank Wolf Act;
- Highlight religious freedom 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;
- Advocate for international religious freedom by actively engaging in the IRF Caucus, as well as through advocating for religious prisoners of conscience through the [Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project](#), participating in 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;
- Evaluate the policy tools available for targeted human rights-related sanctions to ensure maximum impact in curtailing abuses, including considering the permanent codification of the State Department's authority under its annual appropriations law to impose individual visa bans for gross human rights violations and more clearly defining that authority's relationship to Global Magnitsky sanctions; and
- Require the State Department to track and report annually on foreign governments' exportation of religious intolerance to other countries in the form of media, school textbooks, religious training, and/or support for organizations or nonstate actors that perpetrate or espouse violence in the name of religion.

## KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Legislation Factsheet:** [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\)](#)
- **Hearing:** [Global Efforts to Counter Anti-Semitism](#)
- **Hearing:** [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Fighting Religious Persecution in China One Violator at a Time](#) (in *The Hill*)

## Legal Framework

IRFA, as amended by the Frank Wolf Act, seeks to make religious freedom a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. These include: governmental institutions, such as the Ambassador-at-Large and the State Department's [Office of International Religious Freedom](#) (IRF Office), USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency, and the 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, including through CPC designations and related actions and the ability to bar the entry to the United States of foreign officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations. IRFA also 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 refugee and asylum policy, including requiring that the president consider information about religious persecution as part of his annual determination of refugee admissions. IRFA is centered on promoting 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 Legislative 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 Department of State's annual appropriations law ([P.L. 116-6](#) for FY 2019, and [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 2019

### High-Level Commitment

During 2019, the Trump administration continued to emphasize its commitment to international religious freedom through statements from high-level officials, as it has since 2017. For example, speaking at the UN Event on Religious Freedom, President Trump [said](#) that "[a]s President, protecting religious freedom is one of my highest priorities" and that "America will always be a voice for victims of religious persecution everywhere." Vice President [Michael R. Pence](#) and [Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo](#) have similarly expressed their commitment to advancing religious freedom, including at the 2019 ministerial. In a [statement](#) on International Religious Freedom Day, then U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Mark Green emphasized the "importance of religious freedom in all facets of a country's development" and stated that USAID is committed to "continuing to support recovery and justice for those whose religious freedom has been violated through our humanitarian and development assistance."

### International Partnerships

The positive trajectory of the past five years toward an international movement to advance religious freedom continued, with an increasing number of entities and networks focused on international religious freedom emerging in 2019. The [IRF Roundtable](#) established 28 international religious freedom roundtables in countries including Sudan, Nigeria, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. These roundtables are modeled after meetings NGOs hold regularly with government

representatives in Washington, DC, and aim to increase the global conversation on religious freedom. Additionally, in March 2019, Taiwan [appointed](#) Pusin Tali as its first Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom. In September 2019, [Rehman Chishti](#), a Member of Parliament (MP), was appointed as the United Kingdom's Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Special Envoy Chishti's appointment was notable

as he is the first UK Special Envoy to focus exclusively on freedom of religion or belief and not share his mandate with other thematic issues. Further expanding international partnerships, there is also an increasing number of MPs participating in the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief ([IPPFoRB](#)), a global network of legislators dedicated to advancing religious freedom.

In 2019, the Trump administration leveraged this international momentum to [convene](#) regional meetings on specific religious freedom topics, including a conference on Interfaith Tolerance Education to Combat Extremism, held with the United Arab Emirates, which explored

---

*IRFA is centered on promoting 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.*

---

opportunities to counter radicalization through religious teachings and led to the [Abu Dhabi Guidelines on Teaching Interfaith Tolerance](#).

## Designations

On December 18, 2019, Secretary Pompeo [redesignated](#) nine countries as CPCs for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. There were no new additions to the CPC list. For all nine, the [presidential actions](#) taken in response to the designations were either preexisting or “double-hatted” sanctions or waivers.

On the same date, Secretary Pompeo renewed the placements of Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan on the State Department’s SWL for countries that engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, and added Cuba, Nicaragua, Nigeria, and Sudan to this list. Sudan had been designated as a CPC since the State Department issued its first CPC designations in 1999, but was moved to the SWL due to the steps taken by the civilian-led transitional government to address the previous regime’s egregious violations of religious freedom.

Secretary Pompeo also redesignated nine entities as EPCs: al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.

USCIRF [welcomed](#) the 2019 designations, particularly that the State Department recognized the severity of violations in Nigeria, for which USCIRF has recommended CPC designation since 2009, and Cuba, a longstanding USCIRF Tier 2 country, by adding them to the SWL.

## Individual Violators

During 2019, 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 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 2019, the U.S. government had sanctioned [198 foreign individuals and entities](#) under the 2016 [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and the related 2017 executive order, [E.O. 13818](#). Of these sanctions, 16 related directly to religious freedom, including eight that were issued before the reporting period. In 2019, the Treasury Department [announced](#) Global Magnitsky sanctions against two Iraqi militia figures and two former Iraqi governors for corruption and serious human rights abuses. Explicit reference to the militia figures’ role in the persecution of religious minorities was included in the justification, while the corruption of the governors facilitated the conditions that allowed this persecution. In December, the

Treasury Department [announced](#) Global Magnitsky sanctions against four Burmese military leaders for “serious human rights abuses” in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states.

The State Department also used other visa restriction authorities against human rights abusers, including violators of religious freedom. More than 100 public [designations](#) of foreign officials and their immediate family members under Section 7031(c) of the FY 2019 Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Act were announced in FY 2019, although only a small number involved religious freedom. Notable designations for gross violations of human rights connected to religious freedom included the aforementioned [four senior leaders of the Burmese military](#) for “extrajudicial killings

in Rakhine State during the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya,” the [former director of Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Service \(NISS\)](#) for alleged torture, and [two Russian officials](#) for their involvement in the arrest and torture of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Additionally, in October, the State Department [announced](#) a [new visa restrictions policy](#) applicable to Chinese government and Communist Party officials implicated in the mass internment of

Uighur and other Muslims in Xinjiang, China, in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Commerce’s [imposition](#) of export controls on 28 Chinese companies and organizations complicit in the same abuses. Under the Iran-specific authority of [E.O. 13846](#), the Treasury Department imposed sanctions in December on two Iranian “hanging judges” known for imposing unusually harsh sentences and responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

## 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 2019](#), the State Department was appropriated \$25 million for programs on international religious freedom and on protecting, investigating abuses against, and providing justice to vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities. During 2019, the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) issued several requests for proposals to advance religious freedom, including to support projects in [Nigeria](#), [Pakistan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), [the East Asia Pacific region](#), and the [Middle East and North Africa](#) region, along with thematic programs on issues including [anti-Semitism](#) and [journalists reporting on religious freedom](#).

During 2019, 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, as well as programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. Building on its existing programs, including the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program, USAID has [provided](#)

---

*USCIRF welcomed the 2019 designations, particularly that the State Department recognized the severity of violations in Nigeria, for which USCIRF has recommended CPC designation since 2009, and Cuba, a longstanding USCIRF Tier 2 country, by adding them to the SWL.*

---

more than \$400 million since 2017 in assistance to ethnic and religious minority communities in northern Iraq and continued to [expand](#) its partnerships with local partners and faith-based groups. Other notable programs that aim to support religious minorities and promote religious tolerance include a [\\$46.4-million program](#) to work with communities affected by conflict in Rakhine, Kachin, and northern Shan states in Burma, and [programs](#) to support Indonesian institutions and communities to resist the rise of violent extremism, promote religious tolerance, and increase access to justice and human rights for religious communities.

The administration has also played a role in coordinating multilateral support to international religious freedom programs. The [International Religious Freedom Fund](#) was created in 2018, at the first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, to allow governments and entities to extend final support to fund activities to protect and support religious freedom worldwide. The fund has received nearly [\\$5 million](#) in pledges and supported more than 435 rapid response grants to assist communities suffering from religious persecution, including providing support to victims of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka.

### 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. Since the program launched in 1980, the refugee admission ceiling has [averaged](#) 95,000 per year. While the Trump administration set the ceilings for FY 2018 and FY 2019 at [45,000](#) and [30,000](#), respectively, actual refugee admissions in FY 2018 totaled [22,491](#), the lowest in the program's history, and [30,000](#) in FY 2019.

In September, USCIRF expressed [alarm](#) following reports that the ceiling would be significantly reduced for FY 2020 and called

for a ceiling of 95,000 or, at the very least, the FY 2019 amount of 30,000. The refugee ceiling was ultimately set at [18,000](#), the lowest in the USRAP's history. Unlike previous years, the presidential determination for FY 2020 did not allocate the ceiling among the regions in the world. Instead, it set allocations based on groups of "special humanitarian concern to the United States," including [5,000](#) for ref-

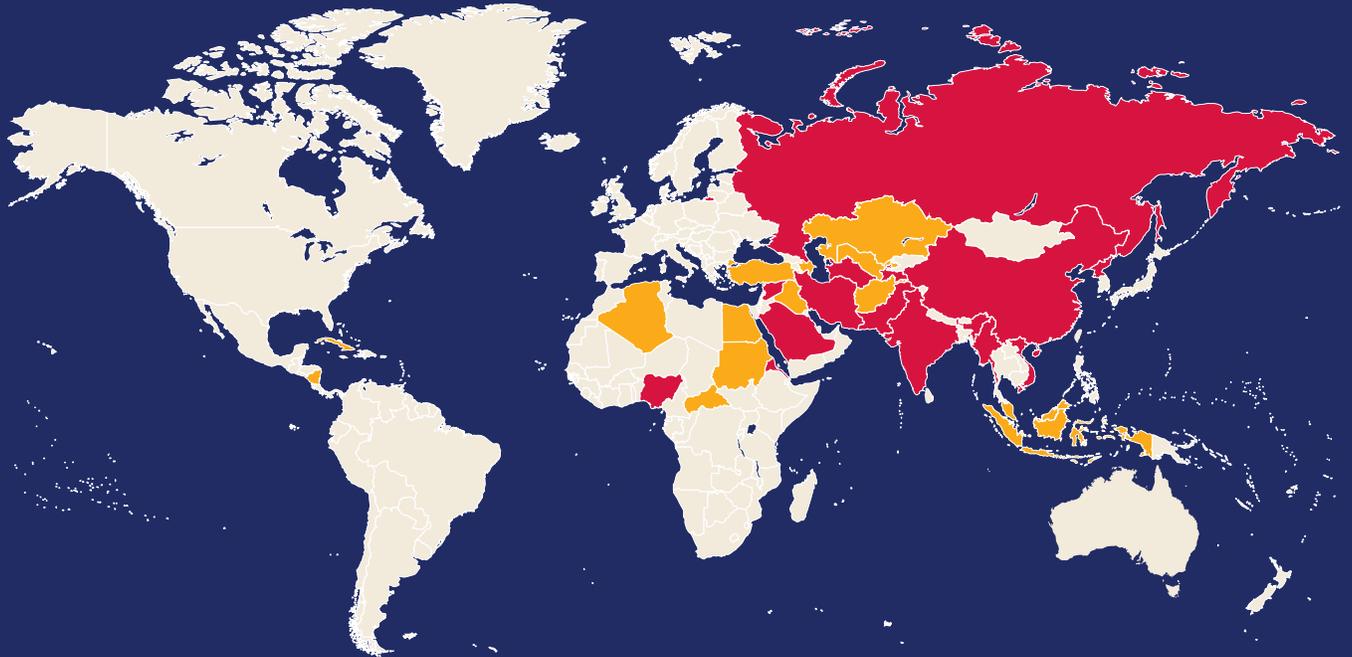
ugees who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion. This includes refugees eligible for U.S. resettlement under the Lautenberg Amendment—a special program for certain persecuted religious minority groups. While approximately 12 Iranian religious minority refugees were admitted to the United States in 2019 under the Lautenberg Amendment, nearly 80 fully vetted Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, at the end of the reporting period awaiting final approval to fly to the United States for resettlement.

---

*In September, USCIRF expressed alarm following reports that the [refugee resettlement] ceiling would be significantly reduced for FY 2020 and called for a ceiling of 95,000 or, at the very least, the FY 2019 amount of 30,000.*

---

# 2020 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	Central African Republic	Iraq	Sudan
Algeria	Cuba	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Malaysia	Uzbekistan
Bahrain	Indonesia	Nicaragua	

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Iran remained egregiously poor. As in years past, the government responded to calls for reform by systematically cracking down on religious minorities. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the country has been governed under the religious doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih* (rule of the jurist); its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is a religious scholar appointed by the 88-member Assembly of Experts. Iran harasses, fines, and arrests those who dissent from its interpretation of Ja'afri Shi'a Islam. The government uses its official religious interpretation as an ongoing basis for denying freedom of religion and belief to citizens who express dissent through peaceful protest. Under Iran's Penal Code, *moharebeh* (enmity against God) is vaguely defined and often used for political purposes; both this charge and *sabb al-nabi* (insulting the prophet) are capital crimes. Apostasy is not codified as a crime in the Iranian Penal Code, but detainees are still tried as apostates because the constitution mandates the application of Shari'a to any cases that the law does not explicitly address. In June 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif [claimed](#) Iran's [execution](#) of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community was necessary according to "moral principles."

USCIRF [documented](#) a particular uptick in the persecution of Baha'is and local government officials who supported them in 2019. Iran's government [blamed](#) Baha'is—without evidence—for widespread popular protests, accusing the community of collaboration with Israel, where the Baha'i World Centre is located. Iran's government also continued to promote hatred against Baha'is and other religious minorities on traditional and social media channels. In July,

Twitter [banned](#) several official Iranian media accounts for incitement against Baha'is in Iran.

The Iranian government also targeted adherents of Sufi orders, which emphasize and practice Islamic mysticism, for "following a deviant sect" of the religion. Sufis who protested the house arrest of their spiritual leader, Dr. Noor Ali Tabandeh, faced ongoing harassment and mistreatment. Iran's government also interfered in the selection of a successor to the leader of the Nematollahi Gonbadi Sufi community, who passed away in December 2019 following medical mistreatment and months under house arrest.

Christians, especially those who converted from Islam, also were persecuted and imprisoned for practicing their faith. In May, Iran forcibly closed an Assyrian church in Tabriz. In December in Mashhad, authorities destroyed the grave of the only Christian pastor in Iran to have been executed for apostasy. Iran also twice delayed a sentencing hearing for Assyrian pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Isavi, and three Christian converts from Islam. Pastor Bet Tamraz was charged in 2015 with "conducting evangelism" and "illegal house church activities."

Women who peacefully protested the government's mandatory religious head covering were summoned, interrogated, and arrested throughout 2019. These included three women sentenced to prison for [handing out flowers](#) on the Tehran metro to protest the religious head covering mandate. Judge Mohammed Moghiseh reportedly threatened the women during the hearing and [denied them access to a lawyer](#). In several instances, judges imposed egregious sentences—beyond those allowed under Iranian law—against these women.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Press for the release of all religious prisoners of conscience, including [Youcef Nadarkhani](#), [Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee](#), and [Robert Levinson](#); 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

- **Hearing:** [Global Efforts to Counter Anti-Semitism](#)
- **Policy Brief:** [Increased Persecution of Iran's Baha'i Community in 2019](#)
- **Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** more than 100 prisoners from Iran added

## 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 that promised recognition of all religious identities and nondiscrimination, but religious minorities have seen little change based on this document.

## Persecution of Religious Minorities

In March, several Sufis were convicted on spurious national security charges and sentenced to [prison](#), lashings, internal exile, and social media bans. At the end of 2019, scores of Sufis remained incarcerated at [Fashafuyeh](#) and [Qarchak](#) prisons. Several were [denied medical care](#). Dr. Tabandeh, spiritual leader of the Nematollahi Gonbadi Sufi community, began a [hunger strike](#) in November 2019. He was hospitalized, denied access to his doctors and advisors, and after [severe medical malpractice](#), died in December. Dr. Tabandeh had appointed Alireza Jazbi as his successor, but at year's end Tabandeh's nephew, Mohammed Tabandeh, who is linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence, was contesting Jazbi for leadership of the movement with the assistance of an anti-Sufi cleric linked closely to senior Iranian government officials.

Iran's nearly 300,000 Christians include traditional Armenian and Assyrian/Chaldean churches and newer Protestant and evangelical communities. Iran continued to target Christian converts from Islam; in July 2019, for example, the Intelligence Ministry [arrested eight Christian converts](#) in Bushehr and sent them to solitary confinement. In May, Intelligence Minister Mahmoud Alavi [announced](#) efforts to "counter the advocates of Christianity" and his ministry summoned people in Hamdan who showed interest in the faith. USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience and Christian convert [Youcef Nadarkhani](#) remained in Evin Prison at year's end and went on a [three-week hunger strike](#) in September after the government rejected his sons' refusal to study Islam.

In February, three Torah scrolls were [stolen](#) from the Ezra Yagoub synagogue in Tehran, but police did not investigate. On December 16, Ayatollah Khamenei [praised](#) a French Holocaust denier on Twitter. A follower of spiritual leader Mohammed Ali Taheri was arrested in March and put into solitary confinement in Evin Prison. Two other followers were [sentenced](#) to prison and a 100 million toman (\$3,000) fine in June following a ten-minute trial. In August, Judge Moghiseh sentenced a Taheri follower to 20 years in prison on charges including "insulting the sacred." In November, the president of the Zoroastrian Association of Yazd Province [criticized](#) hiring discrimination against Zoroastrians, restrictions on religious observance, and extralegal activity regarding Zoroastrian-held land.

## Iran and Anti-Semitism

At a USCIRF [hearing](#) on anti-Semitism on January 8, 2020, U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Elan Carr stated that Iran is the "world's chief trafficker in anti-Semitism" and that "anti-Semitism isn't ancillary to the ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is a central foundational component of the ideology of that regime, and we have to be clear about it, and we have to confront it and call it out for what it is."

## Women and Religious Freedom

In April, Iran's Guidance Patrol (*Gasht-e Ershad*) in Tehran [summoned](#) hundreds of women to its headquarters for driving or riding in cars without headscarves. The women were forced to promise to cover their heads in cars. USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience [Golrokh Iraee](#) was [released](#) on bail from Evin Prison in April 2019 but rearrested in November following a [conviction](#) by Judge Iman Afshari of Branch 26 of the Tehran Revolutionary Court for "insulting the supreme leader" and "propaganda against the state." Iraee had been jailed in 2016 for an unpublished story criticizing the practice of stoning women to death for adultery. In August 2019, Judge Afshari [sentenced](#) Saba Kord Afshari to an unenforceable 24 years in prison for protesting the mandatory head covering. Lawyer Nasrin Soutoudeh was sentenced to [38 years in prison and 148 lashes](#) after defending women who had removed their headscarves in public as a protest.

## Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, the United States escalated its "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran with the positioning of the [USS Abraham Lincoln](#) aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf and President Donald J. Trump's April 2019 [designation](#) of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization. The United States also imposed sanctions on [cyber attackers](#) and [entities that support](#) the IRGC and Basij militia. In November, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Mohammed Mohammadi Golpayegani for his role in the systematic persecution of Baha'is, one of the U.S. government's most explicit designations to date on religious freedom grounds. In December 2019, the Treasury Department also [sanctioned](#) two "Hanging Judges" for severe violations of religious freedom in Iran. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) Iran as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing ongoing travel restrictions on Iranian individuals connected with the commission of serious human rights abuses.

At the second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) in July 2019, Vice President Michael R. Pence spoke about Iran's violations of religious freedom and [called on Iran](#) to free Pastor Bet Tamraz and his wife. President Trump also [met](#) with the couple's daughter [Dabrina Bet Tamraz](#). In September, Vice President Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [chaired an event](#) at the UN highlighting the Bet Tamraz family and other religious persecution survivors.

While approximately 12 religiously persecuted Iranians were admitted to the United States in 2019 under the bipartisan Lautenberg Amendment, nearly 80 fully vetted Iranians remained in Vienna, Austria, at the end of the reporting period awaiting final approval to fly to the United States for resettlement.

# SAUDI ARABIA

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia remained poor, despite some recent improvements. At the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's 14th summit in May, Muslim clerics from 139 countries convened by the Muslim World League signed the [Mecca Declaration](#), which rejects extremism and religious intolerance. The Saudi government lifted several religious restrictions on women's rights and passed a parliamentary bill [restricting](#) child marriages. However, it continued to engage in other systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The government prohibits public practice of any religion other than Islam, and no houses of worship other than mosques are allowed in the kingdom. Non-Muslims who gather in private houses are subject to surveillance and Saudi security services may break up their private worship services. Saudi Arabia continued to advance the economic changes of [Saudi Vision 2030](#) under King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. However, the government's tolerance remained low for those who chose not to accept its state-endorsed version of Hanbali Sunni Islam. In December 2019, police [arrested 120 people](#) for offending public morals, including by wearing "inappropriate clothes." The government also arrested or persecuted several Muslim clerics from the dissident Sahwa movement in 2019. One of these sheikhs, Fahd al-Qadi, [died](#) in December following alleged [medical neglect](#) in prison. The Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) continued to operate with a limited mandate, as CPVPV President Sheikh Abdullah al-Sanad [assured](#) USCIRF it would during a September 2018 meeting. Nonetheless, comedian Yaser Baker was [detained briefly](#) by police in February after making [jokes](#) about the CPVPV during a standup comedy act.

Shi'a Muslims in Saudi Arabia continue to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and lack access to

senior government and military positions. The building of Shi'a mosques is restricted outside majority-Shi'a Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and Saudi authorities often prohibit use of the Shi'a Muslim call to prayer in these areas. Authorities arrest and imprison Shi'a Muslims for holding religious gatherings in private homes without permits and reading religious materials in *housseiniyas* (prayer halls). Saudi Arabia also restricts the establishment of Shi'a Muslim cemeteries. In 2019, government authorities conducted a mass [execution](#) of 37 Shi'a Muslim protesters, including some who were minors at the time of their alleged crimes.

The kingdom continues to impose the religious guardianship system on Saudi women, regardless of their individual beliefs. In August 2019, it amended its laws to [allow](#) women to obtain passports and travel without a guardian's permission; to register births, marriages, and divorces; to be issued official family documents; and to serve as guardians to minors. However, it continues to enforce the religious prohibitions on parental disobedience (*'uquq*) and absence from the home (*taghayyub*), significantly limiting women's autonomy on religious grounds. Saudi Arabia has used egregious violence against women like Loujain al-Hathloul for peacefully asserting their right to be free of these religious restrictions. In several instances in 2019, the government [used state resources internationally](#) to try to use force to repatriate women fleeing the guardianship system. Domestically and on social media, the Saudi government repeatedly characterized feminism as a form of radical extremism, comparing women who espouse it to members of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In one egregious [case](#), the Saudi Human Rights Commission [issued a statement](#) clarifying that "feminism is not criminalized in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" (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.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Press the administration to determine whether Saudi officials responsible for the detention and mistreatment of religious prisoners of conscience are subject to sanctions or visa bans under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Hold public hearings in order to pressure Saudi Arabia to release 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

- 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 2019](#)
- **Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** four prisoners from Saudi Arabia added

## Background

Saudi Arabia is officially an Islamic state. There are more than 33 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 Saudi population are expatriates, including at least two million non-Muslims, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, practitioners of folk religions, and the unaffiliated. Some Saudi citizens identify as non-Muslim or atheist, but hide this identity to avoid the harsh social and official consequences of leaving Islam. 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, identification with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community, and peaceful political dissent, among other activities. The ruling monarch holds the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has overseen the Saudi Vision 2030 economic reform program while also cracking down on religious and political dissent.

## Mistreatment of Religious Minorities

In April 2019, Saudi Arabia [executed](#) 37 people, [32 of whom](#) were Shi'a Muslims, on charges [including](#) "provoking sectarian strife," "spreading chaos," and "disturbing security." Those beheaded [included](#) prominent Shi'a Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohammed al-Atiya, who was charged with attempting to "spread the Shi'a confession," and Abdulkareem al-Hawaj, a Shi'a Muslim arrested after participating in a protest at the age of 16. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [condemned](#) the killings.

Christians in Saudi Arabia cannot practice their religion freely without fear. Expatriate Christian communities face government surveillance and occasional raiding of their worship services by the Saudi security apparatus. Saudi Muslim converts to Christianity cannot identify as such without facing severe repercussions from Saudi authorities, including the CPVPV. While these severe violations continued in 2019, the King Faisal Center in Riyadh [displayed](#) a first edition King James Bible, and the government allowed a group of Evangelical Christian leaders to [visit](#) several significant Christian and Jewish sites.

## Religious Incitement in Textbooks

For more than 15 years, USCIRF has [documented](#) the Saudi government's failure to address intolerant content in official textbooks sufficiently. Despite progress in recent years, [Saudi textbooks](#) have seen some backsliding regarding language inciting hatred and violence toward non-Muslims. While the 2019–2020 textbooks showed marginal improvements in the discussion of Christians, textbooks [still teach](#) that Christians and Jews "are the enemy of Islam and its people," and that members of the LGBTI community will "be struck [killed] in the same manner as those in Sodom." An unknown number of old textbooks with even stronger intolerant passages reportedly remain in circulation both within Saudi Arabia and at Saudi-funded schools abroad.

## Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Raif Badawi, a [USCIRF Religious Prisoner of Conscience](#), is among Saudi Arabia's highest-profile prisoners of conscience. Badawi, the founder and editor of the website Free Saudi Liberals, has been in prison since 2012 for "insulting Islam through electronic channels." A 2015 court ruling upheld his sentence of 10 years, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (\$266,000). In September 2019, Badawi was [denied](#) access to books and crucial medicine, and declared a hunger strike in protest. His lawyer, Waleed Abu al-Khair, is also in prison and began a [hunger strike](#) in early 2020 after being moved into solitary confinement and denied access to books. Both were hospitalized multiple times. In early 2020, al-Khair was moved out of solitary confinement.

Palestinian poet Ashraf Fayadh remains in prison for allegedly questioning religion through his poetry and for spreading atheist thought during an argument at a coffee shop in 2013. In November 2015, Fayadh was sentenced to death for apostasy, but in February 2016 the sentence was reduced to eight years, 800 lashes, and a renunciation of his poetry on Saudi state media.

Sheikh Mohammed Habib was arrested in 2016 after [delivering sermons](#) critical of the government and in support of his close associate, Shi'a Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, whom Saudi Arabia executed in 2016. Sheikh Habib was [sentenced](#) to a total of 12 years in prison with a subsequent five-year travel ban.

## Key U.S. Policy

In February, the White House declined to respond to a [request](#) from Congress under the Global Magnitsky Act to determine whether Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bore responsibility for the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Saudi Arabia has continued to support U.S. policy in the Middle East, including cooperation on counterterrorism initiatives and the administration's maximum pressure strategy toward Iran. Following a September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities likely conducted by Iran, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [visited](#) Saudi Arabia to emphasize that it had U.S. support. In October, Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper [announced](#) the deployment of two additional squadrons to Saudi Arabia. Despite this tightening of relations, in July 2019, at the State Department's second [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Vice President Michael R. Pence [called on Saudi Arabia](#) to release Badawi. In January, Representatives Joe Wilson (R-SC) and William Keating (D-MA) reintroduced the bipartisan Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act of 2019 ([H.R.554](#)) while Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ron Wyden (D-OR), and Edward Markey (D-MA) introduced a bipartisan companion bill ([S.R.357](#)). The bills would require the State Department to issue an annual report on religious intolerance in Saudi textbooks. On December 18, the State Department [redesignated](#) Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

## INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

While objectively—and, obviously—still a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, Saudi Arabia continues to reform in ways that are remarkable and transformative and the Kingdom’s progress must be measured against its past. I believe the international community should continue to positively reinforce these historic reforms. While it remains incomplete, the progress is undeniable. Therefore, I continue to support the State Department’s decision to maintain its waver for Saudi Arabia. Punitive measures will not speed the effect of change; rather it would complicate it, and likely, slow it. A strong relationship with the United States—contra malign actors—will likely accelerate change. It is now clear that change is possible and it must continue and it must accelerate.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country’s ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis. The most notable positive development was the [successful conclusion](#) in March to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (GCDI) campaign to clear Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters from their final stronghold, in the eastern town of Baghouz. While it still actively controlled territory, ISIS’ genocidal ideology and actions [represented](#) the single greatest threat to religious freedom for the country’s myriad of religious minorities as well as the Sunni Muslim majority. However, the failure to provide a durable solution to the more than 68,000 fighters and family members [placed](#) in detention camps, and the persistence of [attacks](#) by ISIS remnants on civilians as well as GCDI and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) personnel, were important reminders that the ISIS threat [remained](#).

Furthermore, although the year began with a reversal of U.S. plans to withdraw forces from the northeast, that pullout and a long-threatened Turkish [invasion took place](#) in October, precipitating the displacement of some ethnic and religious communities from a so-called “safe zone” that Turkey established with its Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies. These events also [raised fears](#) that the Turkish government had begun to move Syrian refugees

en masse—many originally from other parts of Syria—into this occupation zone in the sort of forced religious, ethnic, and cultural replacement that it oversaw in Afrin in 2018. Meanwhile, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) maintained control of the rest of the northeast and continued to uphold its commitment to providing for a relatively high degree of religious freedom and other civil rights in areas under its authority.

While there was less evidence in 2019 of explicit religious freedom violations in areas under regime control, the government continued to perpetrate massive repression of human rights, including [severe repercussions](#) for returnees and communities suspected of participation in anti-regime activism or fighting. Conditions for religious and ethnic minorities—along with all civilians—remained dire in Idlib Province where regime forces and Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Russian [allies](#) targeted armed factions and [civilian infrastructure](#) in their effort since April to retake remaining rebel-held areas. Although it remained difficult to clearly assess religious freedom conditions under such circumstances, reports emerged that the U.S.-designated terrorist group [Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#), which operates in Idlib province, persisted in religious repression, including the [assault and stoning](#) of an Armenian woman in July.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria 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);
- Designate Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA, rather than limiting the EPC designation only to its al-Nusra Front subsidiary;
- Provide assistance to support Syria’s vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities under the terms of the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-300](#)); utilize the resources enacted under the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-441](#)), and release the full amount of the additional \$50 million that the White House [announced](#) in mid-October;
- Exert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria, while ensuring that neither its military nor FSA allies expand their area of control in northeast Syria, carry out religious and ethnic cleansing of that area, or otherwise abuse the rights of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities there; and
- Expand U.S. engagement with and assistance to the AANES, including examining a potential sanctions exemption for only AANES-governed areas as well as contributing to efforts, through relevant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and like-minded international partners, to fund and develop local programs to promote intra- and inter-religious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and advance religious freedom and related rights.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- **Press Statement:** [Turkish Offensive in Northeast Syria](#)
- **Press Statement:** [International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief](#)

## Background

[Estimates](#) place Syria's population at just under 20 million, but, [as of November 2019](#), 6.7 million Syrians remained outside of the country as refugees and another 6.1 million were internally displaced persons (IDPs). That population is both ethnically and religiously diverse; around 74 percent is Sunni Muslim and 13 percent Alawite, Shi'a, and Isma'ili Muslim, while Assyrian, Maronite, Armenian and other Christians comprise 10 percent, Druze 3 percent, and a small number of Syrian Jews remain in Damascus and Aleppo. However, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of these figures amid the country's nine-year conflict, given the staggering number of refugees and IDPs.

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 all opposition.

## End of ISIS-Controlled Territory

During its time in power, ISIS perpetrated massive atrocities across the areas under its control, including kidnapping and executing thousands of Christians, Yazidis, Shi'a Muslims, and fellow Sunni Muslims who opposed its authority. The fall of its last outpost in Syria in March 2019 therefore represented an important step for the protection of religious freedom in the entire region. However, despite the loss of territory and the indefinite [imprisonment](#) of fighters and their families [under harsh conditions](#), ISIS remnants continued to attack GCDI and SDF forces as well as religious minorities and other vulnerable communities. In [July](#) and [December](#), for example, ISIS-suspected car bombs detonated near churches in Qamishli, wounding a number of civilians. On November 11, ISIS claimed responsibility for the assassination of Armenian Catholic Father Hovsep Bedoyan and his father near Deir al-Zor. Furthermore, an August report to U.S. Congress on GCDI operations, from the Lead Inspector General for oversight of overseas contingency operations, [warned](#) that ISIS likely retained 14,000-18,000 fighters between Syria and Iraq, who were already showing signs of resurgence.

## Fragile Conditions in the Northeast

Areas of northeastern Syria under AANES control—under SDF protection but with limited support from the United States and GCDI at year's end—remained a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria. As in the prior year, AANES authorities continued to allow Muslims, Christians, Yazidis, and others to openly practice their faiths and express their religious identities.

However, the AANES's hard-fought ability to foster an environment of religious and other freedoms remained at serious risk at the end of 2019, due to the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces in October and the subsequent incursion of Turkish forces. While the latter claimed to limit their attacks on civilians within the 75-mile strip of territorial control, human rights groups have [accused](#) the FSA—under Turkey's control—of serious human rights abuses. On October 12, Ahrar al-Sharqiya fighters pulled Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf from her car and [executed her](#), while just days later, members of another militia reportedly [defaced](#) an Armenian church in Tel Abyad in an attempt to make it appear that Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) had filled it with their propaganda. Over 200,000 people fled initially from the area as a result of this violence and for fear of an expansion of Turkish operations; around 75,000 [remained](#) in IDP shelters or schools in the northeast or in [refugee camps](#) in northern Iraq by late 2019, and estimated 117,000 civilians had [returned](#). According to USCIRF sources, others who stayed in place—including members of a community of Kurdish Christians from Muslim backgrounds—had not yet faced direct violence, but [remained](#) in a constant state of fear. A fragile détente developed in that border zone by the end of the year as a result of the Turkish, Russian, Syrian, and U.S. contingents who [patrolled](#) the main roads to prevent escalation. Religious minorities in other areas that Turkey seized earlier, such as Afrin, continued to experience persecution and marginalization, especially displaced Yazidis and Christians.

## Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Syria in 2019 continued to face the shifting dynamics that have confounded it since the outbreak of armed conflict. U.S. leadership of the GCDI, in partnership with the SDF and other allies, contributed to the most significant breakthrough in 2019: the collapse of ISIS territory in March. However, northeastern Syria—once the center of ISIS power and yet the area that has shown the most potential for expanded religious freedom over the last two years—once again presented a policy challenge to the administration of President Donald J. Trump. The White House [announced](#) a full U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria on October 6, [following talks](#) with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The subsequent incursion of Turkish forces [prompted](#) a flurry of negotiations among the area's major players, a White House [warning](#) to Turkey to limit operations to the border region, and an eventual ceasefire, [brokered](#) by Vice President Michael R. Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo. U.S. forces resumed limited patrols and [pledged](#) to protect vital resources in AANES-governed territory, contributing to an awkward détente among the various armed forces operating along the border. The United States continued to support humanitarian relief efforts throughout Syria, including the [distribution](#) of nearly \$1.5 million to such initiatives in 2019. In October, the White House [announced](#) its allotment of an additional \$50 million toward stabilization and relief efforts for vulnerable communities in Syria, but the actual disbursement of those funds remained unclear at the end of the reporting period.

# ALGERIA

## USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, Algeria escalated its ongoing repression of religious minorities. The government systematically cracked down on the Evangelical Protestant community in particular through a string of church closures and raids, including two of the largest Protestant churches in the country. The current crackdown mirrors the scale of past waves of church closures in 2008 and 2011, and has been ongoing since November 2017 and worsened in 2019. Officials have made arbitrary demands that churches cease all religious activities, accusing them of violating safety regulations, operating illegally, or evangelizing, or giving them other justifications for sealing off their places of worship.

The Algerian government forcibly closed three of the country's largest Protestant churches in October 2019. The Association of Protestant Churches of Algeria (L'Eglise Protestant d'Algerie, or EPA) has not been permitted to register officially since the [Law on Associations](#) came into effect in 2012 and required churches to reapply for official authorization. The EPA currently represents 45 churches in Algeria, many of which have been targeted for closure over the past two years—in particular in the Tizi Ouzou and Béjaïa provinces. In 2019, USCIRF met with EPA leadership, who reported that 12 of their member churches remained closed by authorities at the end of the reporting period.

The government of Algeria systematically restricts non-Muslims' ability to register, operate houses of worship, proselytize, and practice their faith in other ways. Passed in 2006, Algeria's

Ordinance 06-03 places unique limitations on non-Muslims' freedom of religion or belief. It requires non-Muslim religious groups to register formally with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which reportedly meets rarely and has not issued permits for any churches. Ordinance 06-03 also limits proselytization by prohibiting anyone from "shaking the faith of a Muslim." Executive Decrees 07-135 and 07-158 further elaborated on the responsibilities of the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and limitations on religious activities of non-Muslims. These laws are actively used to arrest and charge individuals for proselytism, or for transporting or possessing religious objects such as Bibles.

The Algerian government further discriminates against minority communities that do not conform to mainstream Sunni Islam, such as Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslims, often asserting that they are not Muslim. In addition to placing specific restrictions on these communities, the government also exerts control over the Sunni Muslim majority. It directly hires and trains imams and places speech restrictions on religious leaders. Under the Penal Code, authorities may fine or imprison anyone who preaches in a mosque or other public place without being appointed or authorized, or anyone who preaches "against the noble mission of the mosque" to "undermine social cohesion" or who advocates for such preaching. In 2019, the government further closed civic space by arresting and intimidating human rights defenders, restricting free assembly, and constraining journalists and the media.

### 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 Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups to clarify and assess its process for reviewing and approving registration and permits for houses of worship; and
- Condition future cultural exchange programs between the United States and Algeria on the improvement of religious freedom conditions and related human rights.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Alarmed over Systematic Church Closures in Algeria](#)

## Background

Algeria is a presidential republic and its state religion is Islam; the government often penalizes those who do not conform to the state-endorsed interpretation of Islam. The population is estimated to be 99 percent Sunni Muslim, with the remaining 1 percent of the population comprising Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, Coptic Christians, and other communities. The Christian community of Algeria includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Algeria's Jewish community mostly fled following popular riots and government persecution after the country gained independence in 1962, and the government has made little progress on its [2014 commitment](#) to reopen synagogues it seized between [1967 and 1968](#), many of which were converted to mosques or churches. Baha'i activities in Algeria have been [banned by law](#) since 1969.

Following sustained popular protests that began in February 2019, the president of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, resigned on April 2. Bouteflika had been president since 1999, when he ran as an independent candidate supported by Algeria's military. He was replaced on April 9, 2019, by Interim President Abdelkader Bensalah, the leader of Algeria's upper house of parliament. In December 2019, Algerians elected Abdelmadjid Tebboune president. Tebboune was a member of several of then President Bouteflika's former cabinets and faces ongoing pressure from protestors to rout corruption and manage the strong influence of Algeria's military.

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 and article 77 of the Information Code of 1990 prohibit blasphemy against Islam and other "heavenly religions." The punishment for blasphemy in Algeria [includes imprisonment](#) for up to five years and a [fine](#) of up to 100,000 Algerian dinars (\$829). Article 26 of the Criminal Code censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals, national values, [or] human rights, or which defends racism, fanaticism, or treason."

## Closure of Protestant Churches

On October 15, the government forcibly closed three EPA churches in Tizi Ouzou Province, including the two with the country's largest congregations: the Church of the Full Gospel of Tizi Ouzou, headed by Pastor Salah Chalah, who is also the head of the EPA; and the Source of Life Church in Makouda, led by Pastor Nourredine Benzid. Police violently beat and removed Pastor Salah and other congregants during their afternoon worship service before sealing off the church building. Other churches in Tizi Ouzou, Tigzirt, Boghni, Ighzer Amokrane, Akbou, and Boudjima have faced similar notices and closures. Congregants have tried to protest through sit-ins or appeals to authorities to stop the closures, and some have reportedly been arrested or detained for protesting.

## Blasphemy Charges and Treatment of Muslim Minorities

The government particularly restricts the Ahmadi community in Algeria—estimated to have around 2,000 followers—through Ordinance 06-03 and blasphemy provisions. In 2019, at least three Ahmadis appealed charges from 2017 for crimes such as insult to Islam, illegal association, or illegal fundraising. In November, a [European Parliament resolution](#) called for "an end to violations of the freedom of worship of Christians, Ahmadis, and other religious minorities" in the country. More than 315 Ahmadis have [stood trial](#) in Algeria between June 2016 and March 2018, often on charges of insulting Islam or collecting donations without a license. Ahmadis have reported hundreds of arrests and prosecutions over the past three years.

## Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. maintains close relations with Algeria focused on security and counterterrorism, economic ties, and cultural and educational programs. In January 2019, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel [convened](#) the fourth session of the U.S.-Algeria Strategic Dialogue to discuss these issues. Algeria is an important U.S. partner for regional stability in North Africa and the Sahel. U.S. foreign aid to Algeria is [focused on](#) supporting economic growth, counterterrorism, and educational exchange. The U.S. government also supported humanitarian efforts in Algeria in 2019, including \$2 million through the [Food for Peace](#) program for Sahrawi refugees in Algeria. During the year, multiple U.S. officials raised religious freedom concerns with the government of Algeria, including the situation of church closures. In October 2019, Representative Steven Lynch (D-MA) led a [congressional delegation](#) to the country to discuss economic issues and counterterrorism cooperation between Algeria and the United States.

## Background

Approximately 96 percent of Azerbaijan's [estimated](#) population of 10.2 million people is Muslim. Although there are no recent statistics available, the government of Azerbaijan has generally [held](#) that 65 percent of the Muslim population identifies as Shi'a Muslim and 35 percent as Sunni Muslim. The remaining 4 percent of the population consists of Armenian Apostolics, atheists, Baha'is, Catholics, Georgian Orthodox, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Molokans, Protestants, and Russian Orthodox.

Azerbaijan is a secular state that [stipulates](#) the separation of state and religion in its constitution. Although the constitution protects the freedom of conscience and provides for the right to "profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion, and to express and disseminate . . . beliefs concerning . . . religion," the government has in practice limited such rights through the 2009 Law on Freedom of Religion, the administrative code, and the criminal code. While the state formally prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, Muslim women who wear the hijab have [reported discrimination](#) when seeking employment and claimed that the government maintains an unofficial ban on the hijab in government and schools.

## Government Control of Religious Practice and Literature

In 2019, religious communities largely described improved religious freedom conditions and better relations with the government. Notwithstanding the reduction in state harassment, however, religious communities remained under both the constraints of existing laws that govern religious activity as well as the threat that government officials and law enforcement authorities could return to previous abusive practices. Some groups of Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Lutherans remained unable to register by the end of the year, and they characterized the registration process as onerous and arbitrary; in particular, a requirement that every religious community have at least 50 founding members proved exceptionally difficult for small communities outside the capital to achieve. Foreigners remained prohibited from engaging in "religious propaganda"—which has been understood to mean proselytization or missionary activity—without special permission.

A provision of the religion law confining a community's religious activities to its legal, registered address continued to expose some communities to police intimidation. For example, in June police [threatened](#) two Jehovah's Witnesses in Lənkəran, ordering them not to host guests in their home, hold religious meetings in their home, or share their beliefs. In separate incidents in Xaçmaz and Baku in February and March, respectively, police officers brought Jehovah's Witnesses to their local police stations for interrogation, threatened them, insulted their beliefs, and asked them why they did not instead speak to others about the Qur'an. In one instance, police officers reportedly told Jehovah's Witnesses that they would be "exterminated."

The government continued to require that all religious literature and related materials receive the approval of the SCWRA and be marked with a holographic sticker, and it restricted the sale of religious literature to certain preapproved points of sale. Muslim theologian Elshad Miri, whose book *Things Not Found in Islam* was

banned in 2018, sought to appeal the ban at the Supreme Court, but it [rejected his appeal](#) in June 2019. In September, a court [fined](#) Kamran Huseynzade for the unauthorized sale of religious books outside of a Baku mosque. According to the NGO Forum 18, the SCWRA stated that the books in question were "suspected of propagating religious radicalism and extremism," but it later dropped that claim. Similarly, regional courts in [Şirvan](#) and [Şəki](#) rejected appeals against fines that were related to the unapproved distribution and possession of religious books by Baptists and others. During the year, courts also [rejected appeals](#) concerning "illegal" religious meetings.

## Religious Prisoners

In November 2019, the Working Group on a [Unified List of Political Prisoners in Azerbaijan](#) released its updated list, which classified 45 prisoners as religious activists—marking a decline in the total number of religious prisoners from the previous year. The majority of such prisoners continued to consist of MUM members, whom the government has imprisoned on dubious charges and sentenced to prison terms ranging as high as 20 years. In March, Turkey [extradited](#) MUM member Anar Jabbarov to Azerbaijan in a manner that human rights defenders have [characterized](#) as illegal, and it reportedly [planned](#) to do the same with alleged MUM member Elnur Mehdiyev. According to media outlets, Jabbarov was [released](#) without charges in April.

In December, the PACE [adopted a resolution](#) on political prisoners in Azerbaijan. The [report](#) the resolution was based on specifically raised the continued imprisonment of MUM leaders Taleh Bagirzade and Abbas Huseynov and cited "the authorities' clear hostility towards and prior attempts to repress [their] political/religious activities."

Religious prisoner and Shi'a Muslim imam Sardar Babayev, who was sentenced in 2017 to three years in prison for leading Friday prayers despite having received a foreign religious education in Iran, remained imprisoned throughout 2019. He was released upon the completion of his sentence in February 2020, after the reporting period.

## Key U.S. Policy

The bilateral relationship between the United States and Azerbaijan [focuses](#) on European energy security, trade and investment, and joint efforts to combat terrorism and transnational threats. The United States is also a cochair, together with France and Russia, of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) [Minsk Group](#), which seeks the peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. While the United States continued to provide assistance to Azerbaijan for security, economic development, and civil society development, it has in recent years [increased](#) military aid with the purported intent of countering Iran.

In July 2019, Azerbaijan participated for the first time in the annual [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) hosted by the U.S. Department of State. SCWRA Chairman Mubariz Gurbanli attended and [met](#) with Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback. At the conclusion of the ministerial, Azerbaijan signed on to four of the nine [Statements of Concern](#), but [declined](#) to sign on to the statement on "[Counterterrorism as a Pretext for the Repression of Religious Freedom](#)."

## INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

Azerbaijan does not meet the threshold necessary to be included in this report. As I have said before: it is a country where Sunni and Shi'a clerics pray together, where Evangelical and Russian Orthodox Christians serve together, and where thriving Jewish communities enjoy freedom and total security in their almost entirely Islamic country. It is a Muslim-majority country that has hosted prominent Hindu leaders and it is a Shi'a majority neighbor of Iran whose commitment to peace led it long ago to forge a vibrant, public, and diplomatic relationship with the state of Israel. Azerbaijan has had the challenge of bringing religious freedom into a post-Soviet legal framework, but—even in this—it has achieved much more than any of its neighbors. The religious freedom community would also be wise to not arbitrarily disregard the government's concerns about violent, religious extremism and its national security. Finally, I also join with religious leaders throughout the world in the prayer that one day soon the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia will find a way to address the grievances and injustices between them in pursuit of true peace.

# BAHRAIN

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Bahrain remained similar to previous years, trending positive in some areas but remaining the same in others. The government generally continued to allow freedom of worship for religious minorities. In November, the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence hosted a conference on [education and tolerance](#), and in December it hosted the Arabian [International Religious Freedom Roundtable](#), which USCIRF attended. At the same time, Bahrain continued its ongoing and systematic discrimination against some Shi'a Muslims on the basis of their religious identity. While they are generally free to worship, Shi'a Bahrainis have long faced difficulties in an array of areas, including employment, political representation, freedom of expression, promotion within the military, and mosque construction. In 2019, Bahraini authorities interrogated religious leaders about their sermons and restricted Shi'a prisoners' religious practice. Some laws premised on protecting Bahraini security lack clarity to ensure they cannot be used to target Shi'a Muslims, and laws restricting speech on social media have the effect of encouraging self-censorship among Shi'a Muslims in particular.

One of Bahrain's most troubling instruments of discrimination has been collective citizenship revocations. In April 2019, Bahrain [stripped citizenship](#) en masse from 138 Shi'a Muslims in a single trial based on alleged [links to Iran](#). Since 2012, the government has applied this punitive measure to more than [990 Bahrainis](#), the vast majority of whom are Shi'a Muslims. United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet [expressed alarm](#) over the mass revocation. Bahraini authorities also have deported

some of those individuals as security threats, but have not always substantiated such claims. Following international pressure, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa [reinstated citizenship](#) to 550 Bahrainis in late April. This mass reinstatement, while undoubtedly a positive development, indicates that there were insufficient threats to justify the revocations in hundreds of cases.

Bahrain is the only Gulf country to recognize the Shi'a Muslim commemoration of Ashura as a government holiday. In 2019, the government showed some improvement in allowing Shi'a Muslims to observe Ashura publicly, including deploying social service police rather than riot police to keep order, holding [meetings](#) between government officials and the heads of matams (ritual mourning spaces), and refraining from using tear gas and other violent measures like in previous years. However, during the Ashura season, the government [summoned](#) at least 20 [religious leaders](#) regarding the content of their sermons and prayers, and it restricted Ashura ritual processions to designated areas. Government officials also warned against speech during the holiday that would harm civic peace or disturb the social fabric.

In August 2019, 600 inmates at Jaw and Dry Dock prisons began a hunger strike. Shi'a prisoners participating in the strike demanded, among other things, their right to practice religious rituals. While intervention from Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) alleviated some restrictions, others remained in place. Certain prisoners remained prohibited from commemorating Ashura altogether, including Hajer Mansoor, the mother-in-law of Bahraini dissident Sayed al-Wadaei, who also was denied access to religious materials.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Bahrain 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);
  - Publish an updated assessment of Bahrain's compliance with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report, with particular focus on recommendation 1724a, relating to censorship of beliefs, and recommendation 1722d, relating to the detention of prisoners incognito; and
  - 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.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to conduct periodic fact-finding missions and congressional delegation trips to Bahrain to assess religious freedom conditions there; and
  - Highlight in religious freedom and human rights-related hearings and other official proceedings Bahrain's treatment of Shi'a Muslims.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commissioner delegation visit:** Manama in March 2019
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Bahrain in 2019](#)

## Background

According to Bahrain's constitution, Islam is the religion of the state and Shari'a is a principal source for legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. Of the country's population of approximately 1.4 million, slightly less than half are Bahraini citizens, with a small majority comprising expatriate workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia. The majority of Bahraini citizens are Shi'a Muslims. Bahraini authorities have cited Iran's ongoing efforts to expand its influence in the country as the reason for heightened government concern about subversive activity by Iranian-backed Shi'a militants. While Iran's support for such activities has been documented widely, the Bahraini government has sometimes used this pretext to crack down on Shi'a opposition leaders, clerics, and activists, without consistently substantiating charges of subversion or terrorist activity.

In 2011, Bahraini citizens protested in public spaces, including Pearl Roundabout in Manama, calling for political reforms. While the government initially allowed these protests to take place, it eventually cracked down with the assistance of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, killing scores of protestors, demolishing dozens of Shi'a mosques, and destroying the roundabout itself. In June 2011, King Hamad established the BICI to investigate these events; the commission released its report along with a set of 26 recommendations in a live televised event in November 2011. Bahrain's government committed to implementing those reforms, and it announced full implementation in 2016. However, a June 2016 State Department assessment challenged that conclusion and noted that "more work remains to be done."

## Treatment of Non-Muslims

Bahrain's treatment of non-Muslim minorities is generally respectful of their freedom of worship. Approximately half of the expatriate workers in Bahrain are non-Muslim. The government officially recognizes 19 religious entities, including more than a dozen Christian denominations, a small Jewish community, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Baha'is. In June 2019, the first [Jewish prayer service](#) held in a synagogue in Bahrain in over 70 years took place on the sidelines of the American "Peace to Prosperity" conference hosted in Manama. Christians in Bahrain comprise 14.5 percent of the population. There are several churches representing Catholic, Anglican, Evangelical, Orthodox, and nondenominational communities, among others. Bahrain hosts the seat of the Catholic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. A third Catholic church under construction, Our Lady of Arabia, will be the largest Catholic church in the Gulf region upon its completion, scheduled for 2021.

## Ashura in Bahrain 2019

Ahead of Ashura in 2019, Interior Minister General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa [met](#) with the heads of matams before the holiday, and on September 3 said that Bahrain would respect freedom of worship. Head of General Security Major General Tariq bin Hassan al-Hassan also visited local police officials to ensure proper preparations for Ashura processions. Bahrain allowed traditional Ashura processions

in 2019 and, unlike previous years, did not use tear gas or other violent forms of crowd control. However, security forces [summoned multiple clerics](#) over the content of their religious sermons. In at least [17 cases](#), Bahraini security officials removed religious banners and signs associated with the observance of Ashura.

## Treatment of Shi'a Bahrainis in Prison

Shi'a Bahrainis who advocate for greater freedom of religion in Bahrain, including activist Nabeel Rajab, have been thrown in prison for criticizing government policy on social media. In August 2019, 600 prisoners at Jaw and Dry Dock prisons joined a hunger strike to appeal for better treatment. Among their demands was the [right to participate](#) in religious rituals and to be housed near prisoners with the same religious affiliation in order to better facilitate group prayer. Following [intervention](#) by Bahrain's National Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), prison officials doubled the allotted time for prisoners' Ashura observance. However, prisoners in [Isa Town Prison](#) and Jaw Prison were allegedly prohibited from commemorating Ashura in groups, and prison authorities—who appealed to security concerns regarding large prisoner gatherings—restricted the times in which they were allowed to conduct their commemorations. Shi'a prisoners also were [denied access](#) to religious books. USCIRF has [expressed concern](#) that Bahraini prisons have barred [dissemination](#) of many Shi'a Muslim religious texts ahead of Muharram, the month in which Ashura falls.

## Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration has prioritized a close defense relationship with Bahrain in order to counter Iran's influence in the region and its attempts to destabilize Bahrain. Following a February 2019 meeting between then U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Joseph Votel and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, the United States and Bahrain concluded several major arms agreements. Bahrain also hosted the June "Peace to Prosperity" workshop on an Israeli-Palestinian final status plan. In July, at the State Department's [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), Bahraini Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa met with Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, the first-ever public meeting between officials from those two countries. In December, Bahrain also hosted Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem Shlomo Amar at a regional meeting of the International Religious Freedom Roundtable in Manama.

Although the United States and Bahrain enjoy a close defense relationship, Congress has continued to express concerns about freedom of religion or belief in the country. A bipartisan delegation of members of the House of Representatives [visited Bahrain](#) in late December 2019. During Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad's visit to the White House in September 2019, Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL), Ronald Wyden (D-OR), and Christopher Murphy (D-CT) released a [bipartisan letter](#) to President Donald J. Trump noting that they were "concerned by the government of Bahrain's concerted efforts to silence peaceful opposition and quash free expression." This statement addressed broader human rights issues, but it also included the banning of Shi'a Muslim-majority political parties and the issuance of a life sentence against Shi'a Muslim Sheikh Ali Salman.

**INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF  
COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE**

The Kingdom of Bahrain does not meet the threshold to be included in this report. It is a country whose struggle against Iranian intervention and terrorism (often cleverly and intentionally disguised in a religious context) has been given too little regard by the international community and it is a country whose unique and historic pluralism, still unrivaled in the region, has been given too little credit. Moreover, Bahrain's commitment to social harmony has not just been an internal matter, it has also become an integral part of its foreign policy through courageous efforts—direct and indirect—to promote interfaith tolerance and to facilitate peace between the Israelis and Palestinians, especially in 2019. Sure, Bahrain remains imperfect, but these days it is far more worthy of immense praise, than of withering criticism. It should absolutely be removed from USCIRF's Annual Report, a decision that should have been made long ago.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Egypt continued to trend tentatively in a positive direction. The country saw a decrease in radical Islamist violence and anti-Christian mob attacks, some progress in implementing the registration process for unlicensed churches and related buildings, and the launch of a government program to address religious intolerance in rural areas. However, systematic and ongoing religious inequalities remain affixed in the Egyptian state and society, and 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 high-ranking government officials continued to advocate publicly for religious inclusivity, including again attending Coptic Orthodox Christmas Mass in January and remarking during an [Islamic holiday](#) in June on the need for mutual respect between Muslims and Christians. Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayeb of al-Azhar, Egypt's renowned institution of Sunni Islamic learning, joined with Pope Francis and other religious leaders in signing a landmark statement on interfaith co-existence, "[Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together](#)," in Abu Dhabi in February. Egyptian government sources reported to USCIRF on the launch of a new program by the Supreme Committee for Confronting Sectarian Incidents to promote religious tolerance in sectarianism-plagued Minya Province, including a door-to-door messaging campaign in 44 villages. The Ministry of Education continued efforts, previously reported to USCIRF, to reform public school curriculum to eliminate intolerant references and promote inclusivity and respect, although how much progress the ministry made during 2019 was unclear. Several high-profile court cases resulted in the [conviction of perpetrators](#) of religiously

motivated violence, including the April [conviction of a police officer](#) for killing two Coptic men in front of a church in Minya in late 2018. Other government initiatives sought to support efforts to revitalize several important non-Muslim religious heritage sites, including the completion of a project [to restore](#) the fourteenth-century Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria as well as [ongoing projects](#) to restore Christian monasteries in the Sinai and Naga Hammadi.

Despite those positive signs, 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 violence](#), particularly in rural areas. In June in the village of Naga al-Ghafir in Sohag governorate, for example, [Muslim rioters](#) surrounded a Coptic Orthodox church, chanted sectarian slogans, and beat congregants with sticks. The violence led local security forces to close the church in direct violation of [Law 80/2016](#), commonly known as the Church Building Law, which mandates the continuing operation of such facilities as they await approval for formal registration. Such violations have become commonplace; local government authorities [have closed](#) at least 25 churches and church-related facilities since the passage of the law in 2016, including three in 2019—one of which was reopened in January 2020—while the government has issued few permits for new churches in previously occupied residential areas. Instead, authorities have granted nearly all such permits or pledges in planned satellite cities rather than in Upper Egypt, where thousands of Christians have no local churches in which to worship, such as Copts in the Qena-area village of Faw Bahari whose de facto place of worship [police shuttered](#) in December.

### 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);
- Explicitly dedicate a portion of resources, set aside as part of the U.S. efforts to train and equip Egyptian security forces to combat terrorism, for the protection of places of worship and other holy sites;
- Urge the Egyptian government to cease the longstanding practice of ceding legal authority to customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of sectarian mob violence, repeal decrees banning Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, remove religion from official identity documents, and pass laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programs supporting efforts to reform public school curriculum and teacher training and to promote greater religious inclusivity throughout the country; and
- Require the State Department to provide explicit justification for the release to Egypt of any previously withheld Foreign Military Financing (FMF), including public disclosure of its assessment and certification of Egypt's progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.

## 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 of the constitution 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.

The Egyptian government continues to struggle with balancing domestic security, advancing [economic development](#), and protecting citizens' fundamental rights. Security forces have struggled to end Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) activity in North Sinai, and the country faces active threats from Muslim Brotherhood-related radical Islamist groups, such as Hasm. Government authorities have used these real security threats as a pretense to repress civil society, harassing and imprisoning journalists, lawyers, and activists. In the most recent such wave of harassment, [security forces raided](#) the offices of Mada Masr—one of the last remaining independent news outlets in the country—just one day after they arrested and indefinitely detained [Ramy Kamel](#), a prominent Coptic activist, and announced plans to try him on [spurious charges](#). Such activities directly contradict the government's assurances that it is working to improve conditions for civil society, including a highly touted reform of the Nongovernmental Organizations Law that was announced in August to mostly [mixed-to-critical reactions](#). Kamel's arrest illustrates that religious freedom—at the core of his activism in prior years—is an integral part of a broader context of human right and societal freedoms.

## Implementation of the Church Building Law

In 2019, the Cabinet committee charged with implementing the registration of informal churches and church-related buildings under Law 80/2016 made some limited progress in approving applications—a process for which Coptic Orthodox and Protestant leaders alike have expressed their support, including Pope Tawadros II. The committee had approved only 627 applications by the end of 2018; in 2019, it cleared an additional 725—bringing the total to [1,412 approved applications](#), or just over [25 percent of 5,515](#) currently in process. However, most of these approvals have been conditional, pending security, safety, and other forms of review; only around [200 church properties](#) have received final approvals for registration. Furthermore, this progress has only taken place for preexisting, de facto churches,

mainly for rural Christian communities that had no other access to local places of worship. The governing authorities have issued few to no permits for new churches in previously inhabited communities while shuttering around 25 churches since the passage of the law, including several in 2019. At its root, Law 80/2016 also avoids addressing the long-term, systematic disparity between religious communities. Muslim worshippers face no such registration restrictions, so even with the recent church approvals, there is approximately one mosque for every 820 Muslims and one church for every 2,430 Christians—roughly a 320 percent disparity.

## Rural Sectarianism

Anti-Christian mob attacks remain endemic in parts of rural Egypt despite a clear decline in the number of such incidents in 2019, but legal impunity for the perpetrators persisted as the systematic norm. Compared to eight mob attacks in 2018, only three were reported in 2019, although each incident resulted in the usual impunity for attackers and two resulted in illegal church closures. In January, a mob [forced the closure](#) of an informal church in Manshiyet Zaafarana, Minya; a [similar incident](#) occurred in Sohag governorate in April, as noted previously. In June, rumors circulated in the village of Eshnein al-Nasara, Minya, that a Coptic man, Fady Youssef Todari, had posted comments critical of Islam on Facebook, resulting in a group of Muslims from the village [attacking his family's home](#). Police briefly detained several members of the victimized family and arrested Todari, and it is unclear whether he remains in detention. Furthermore, local authorities stood by as community leaders convened a "calming meeting" shortly after the incident—which, given the lack of any subsequent legal proceedings, implicitly absolved the attackers of responsibility.

## Key U.S. Policy

[Bilateral relations](#) between the United States and Egypt remained steady in 2019, a crucial partnership that has weathered countless challenges since its establishment following the Camp David Accords of 1979. U.S. financial assistance, mostly in the form of FMF, remained largely consistent at \$1.4 billion in FY 2019 and an anticipated \$1.38 billion for FY 2020. The administration of President Donald J. Trump has praised President El-Sisi's efforts to counter radical Islamist violence and ideology and initiatives [to improve](#) religious freedom conditions in Egypt. The United States [also announced](#) in December \$6 million in additional support through USAID to bolster educational and economic development programs in North Sinai. However, U.S. officials harshly criticized Egypt's unfair imprisonment of Mustafa Kassem, a U.S. citizen imprisoned since 2013 who died in January 2020 following a hunger strike. During a subsequent event in Berlin, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo [reportedly "expressed outrage"](#) to President El-Sisi over Kassem's "pointless and tragic death."

## KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** [Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites](#)
- **Webinar Series:** [Webinar #1: Egypt](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Condemns Egypt's Arrest of Coptic Activist Ramy Kamel](#)

## INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi deserves enormous credit for taking the religious freedom agenda into his personal portfolio. It is he, the Egyptian President himself, who has led by example on many occasions and, despite, all the complications of running the Arab world's largest country, often in the crosshairs of terrorists, he continues to take seriously, and to work personally, to create interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence among religious communities within Egypt. His grand gestures have mattered, and his attention to detail has made a profound difference. I commend him for it all. I have also appreciated his absolute willingness to indulge in direct and brutally honest conversations with various interlocutors along the way.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Iraq improved incrementally in key areas, but remained concerning overall. Religious minorities in the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar faced major barriers to their safe return in the short term and their secure, ongoing presence in the long term. Although a coalition of Iraqi armed forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, U.S. military, and other multinational partners successfully ended the territorial threat of ISIS in late 2017, many of the areas that the terrorist group once controlled remained under- or uninhabited in 2019. Substantial humanitarian assistance from the United States and other international donors bolstered reconstruction and stabilization efforts in those areas, and yet tens of thousands of civilians from religious and ethnic minorities were still at serious risk. The majority of Iraqi Christians remained displaced and their challenges even after return have been significant, while Yazidis—500,000 of whom fled ISIS atrocities in 2014—still faced serious distress in 2019. Their collective trauma from ISIS atrocities remained largely unaddressed, typified by the fact that the fates of nearly 3,000 abducted Yazidi women and children are unknown. In a United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees survey in February, only 3 percent of Yazidi IDPs who were interviewed planned to return to Sinjar; there is little evidence that this number subsequently improved. Meanwhile, new sources of upheaval, including protests in Iraqi

cities and renewed multinational violence in neighboring northeastern Syria, highlighted the fragility of any improved stability in northwestern Iraq.

More than any other single factor, a lack of security, mainly due to the corrosive presence of largely Iranian-backed militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*, also known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)—continued to impede progress toward improved religious freedom conditions. The PMF continued to operate largely with impunity, despite nominal efforts to bring them under the oversight and accountability of the Iraqi armed forces. Some factions, such as the Iran-backed 30th (“Shabak”) and 50th (“Babylon”) brigades, have played an instrumental role in either making key towns in the area increasingly inhospitable to minority returnees, or limiting their movement to or from those areas. Some of those factions have continued to harass and threaten Christian returnees in Bartella, Qaraqosh, and elsewhere; for example, in September, the 30th Brigade placed a [curfew on Christians](#) in Bartella during the Shi’a Muslim commemoration of Ashura—an [inflammatory action](#) in a community already plagued by sectarian tensions. The behavior of those two brigades has been so destructive that in July the U.S. Department of the Treasury placed [Global Magnitsky sanctions](#) on both of their respective leaders, Waad Qado and Rayan al-Kildani.

### 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);
- As part of high-priority bilateral relations, maintain pressure on the Iraqi government 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, and other religious and ethnic components in northern Iraq; and/or intervene against the protest movement on behalf of Iranian interests;
- 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;
- Highlight religious freedom as part of U.S. engagement with Iraqi President Barham Salih and the incoming prime minister, urging them to prioritize the rehabilitation, preservation, and representation of the country’s vulnerable religious and ethnic components; and
- Assist in the empowerment of Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities—through their political and civic representatives as well as religious leaders—to initiate and advocate for their own interests, including opening a broad discussion into governance and a representational security framework for the Nineveh Plains area.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** [Baghdad in July-August 2019 to participate in commemoration of 2014 Yazidi genocide under ISIS](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Minorities’ Fight to Remain in Iraq](#)
- **Policy Update:** [Protecting Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq](#)

## Background

Iraq is a [religiously and ethnically diverse](#) country, although that diversity has diminished as a result of the country's recent history of political instability, sectarian violence, and Islamist insurgency. Most Iraqis identify as Muslim, consisting of around 64–69 percent Shi'a Muslim and 29–34 percent Sunni Muslim. The country is also home to an estimated 200,000 Christians from a variety of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations—who remain from a pre-2003 population of around 1.5 million—as well as up to 700,000 Yazidis, most of whom remain internally displaced.

Religion and ethnicity are often bound closely together in the Iraqi context. Many of the country's smaller communities—such as Sabeen-Mandaeans, Turkmen, Kak'ais, and Shabaks—have in recent years faced serious threats that cannot be easily defined as exclusively religious or ethnic. Many of these smaller communities experienced severe hardship under ISIS rule or fleeing from it—including Yazidis and Turkmen, from whom ISIS abducted thousands of women and children into sexual and domestic slavery—and they still struggle to find their place in a post-ISIS Iraq. Some of their internally displaced people (IDPs) have found stable if imperfect refuge alongside indigenous communities within Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory; others have sought to return to their traditional towns and villages that are slowly but persistently rebuilding and recovering.

## Post-ISIS Rehabilitation of Religious Minorities to Northern Iraq

Sources in Iraq told USCIRF in 2019 that only an estimated 30–50 percent of the population of Chaldeans, Assyrians, and other Christians have likely returned to their communities of origin since the fall of ISIS in late 2017, mostly from refuge in Erbil and other parts of KRG territory. Meanwhile, most Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities still languished in IDP camps in Duhok, atop Mount Sinjar, and elsewhere in exile. Their historic homeland of Sinjar remained mostly inhospitable for returnees, as PMF checkpoints made the road between there and Duhok nearly impassable at times, the crippled local economy hampered livelihood opportunities, the former lifeline of Mosul for goods and services remained inaccessible, and fear of an ISIS resurgence lingered. To make matters worse, Turkish airstrikes have repeatedly targeted positions of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its allies in and near Sinjar since 2017, including [the most recent such incidents](#) in November 2019 and January 2020. The threat of more such airstrikes has contributed to the fragile state of security and stability in that area.

The Yazidi community was also haunted throughout 2019 by the [absence of justice](#) for the atrocities of five years earlier. Since 2017, Iraqi courts have tried thousands of suspected ISIS fighters on charges of terrorism, most often in large groups of mostly Sunni Muslim defendants on the basis of forced confessions rather than evidence. In fact, a rare bright spot in Iraq's transitional justice context came in the form of [efforts by courts](#) in Nineveh Province to rely on a higher standard of evidence rather than coerced confessions, the latter of which remained alarmingly prevalent elsewhere in the country. However, the judiciary has ignored Yazidi leaders' [demands for](#)

[war crimes trials](#) of ISIS fighters and commanders. This lack of justice is also closely tied to international efforts to document the atrocities, as the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (UNITAD) began work in March [to uncover mass graves](#) in and around Sinjar that hold the remains of Yazidi victims of ISIS violence.

## Other Religious Freedom Issues across Iraq

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in KRG territory remained largely consistent relative to prior years, in that the Muslim majority and various religious minorities share reasonably free conditions relative to the rest of Iraq, despite some lingering issues such as the unresolved status of some Christian properties. Relations between the KRG and the Iraqi Federal Government continued to improve following tensions surrounding the failed 2017 independence referendum, allowing for the resumption of joint anti-ISIS operations and other areas of cooperation—which lessen the potential for the sorts of social and political instability in disputed areas that have historically represented serious threats to religious freedom in Iraq.

In Iraqi Federal Government territory, there were few signs of change from prior years in regard to reconciliation among Shi'a and Sunni Muslims or other religious groups, or specific reforms to promote religious inclusivity, such as the revision of the public school curriculum. Blasphemy and apostasy laws likewise remained unchanged, and there was no movement toward extending formal recognition or freedom of worship to smaller religious groups such as Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others.

## Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, U.S. policy with the most direct relevance to religious freedom conditions in Iraq mainly involved humanitarian aid and targeted sanctions. As of October, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) [had allocated](#) nearly \$400 million to helping ISIS victims recover and rebuild through its Iraqi and international nongovernmental partners. The U.S. government also increasingly used punitive measures to single out Iraqi PMF leaders, corrupt politicians, and other individuals who have played a particularly destructive role in abusing religious freedom and/or broader human rights. In addition to the two PMF leaders noted earlier, in July the Treasury Department listed as "Specially Designated Nationals" Nawfal Hammadi al-Sultan and Ahmed al-Jubouri, two politicians whose negligence and corruption have negatively impacted religious minorities and other constituents in Nineveh and Salah al-Din provinces, respectively. In December, the Treasury Department [extended Global Magnitsky](#) sanctions to another corrupt politician and three additional individuals who, as leaders of armed proxies for Iran, have [directly contributed to violence](#) against civilian protestors who participated in anti-Iran and antigovernment demonstrations beginning in October. On January 3, 2020, just after the reporting period, a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad [killed two figures](#) who were central to PMF operations: General Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#), deputy commander of the PMF and founder of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia.

# OTHER KEY DEVELOPMENTS

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF) Annual Report focuses on those countries that USCIRF finds meet the statutory criteria for the State Department to designate as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) or include on its Special Watch List (SWL) pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Annual Report is intended to focus the attention of U.S. government policymakers on the most severe violations of religious freedom globally. However, consistent with its mandate under IRFA, USCIRF also monitors religious freedom conditions in countries that do not meet the statutory criteria for CPC or SWL.

This section summarizes key trends and developments in religious freedom conditions around the world in 2019. It is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the reporting year, but rather to note significant events, such as the passage of national legislation pertaining to religion, a noticeable change in the number or severity of incidents of religiously motivated intolerance, or trends that have important transnational or international impacts. For details about specific incidents or trends in countries that USCIRF recommends for CPC designation or SWL placement, see the individual country chapters contained in this report.

## Chinese Influence on Religious Freedom Internationally

The Chinese government’s actions have resulted in the persecution of religious groups within China’s borders, as discussed elsewhere in this report, and also have negatively affected religious freedom conditions internationally. Chinese diplomats [continued](#) to subvert the international human rights system by opposing United Nations (UN) resolutions condemning human rights violations and by arguing that economic progress should precede respect for individual rights. For example, in February 2020, China’s permanent representative to the UN [vetoed](#) a UN Security Council declaration supporting the International Court of Justice’s ruling ordering the Burmese government to protect Rohingya refugees. Chinese diplomats also reportedly used economic and diplomatic leverage to dissuade other governments from criticizing China’s record before UN human rights mechanisms.

The Chinese government has exerted pressure on governments—particularly in Central and South Asia—to target activists criticizing the Chinese government’s religious persecution and to repatriate refugees

fleeing such persecution. In August, Kazakh authorities—reportedly under pressure from China—[prosecuted](#) Serikzhan Bilash, a prominent critic of the concentration camps in Xinjiang, and only released him after he accepted restrictions on his activism. In October 2019, the Chinese and Nepalese governments [signed](#) a secret extradition treaty requiring the handover of individuals entering illegally to each other’s country, which Tibetan advocacy groups fear could be used to extradite Tibetans attempting to flee China. In addition, in July, the Nepalese government [banned](#) Tibetan Buddhists from celebrating the Dalai Lama’s 84th birthday. In October, during a visit to Kathmandu by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Nepalese authorities reportedly [restricted](#) the return of 33 Tibetans who had attended a meeting in Dharamshala, home of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

In addition, China has [exported](#) surveillance technology and systems training to more than 100 countries. Although some recipients of this technology have used it for legitimate public policy goals, others have used it to target political opponents or oppress religious freedom. For example, in August 2019, Uzbek authorities [forced](#) approximately 100 Muslim men to shave their beards, claiming that the beards hindered Chinese facial recognition technology used by the government.

In 2019, the U.S. government increased diplomatic efforts to counter Chinese influence on religious freedom internationally. In September, the State Department [hosted](#) a side event at the UN General Assembly about Xinjiang. In January 2020, outside the reporting period, the State Department [appointed](#) Mark Lambert as a special envoy to counter the “malign influence” of China at the UN.

---

*China has exported surveillance technology and systems training to more than 100 countries.*

---

## Rising Anti-Semitism in Europe and Elsewhere

In 2019, the global Jewish community experienced a further increase in anti-Semitic incidents, including discrimination, defamation, Holocaust denial, hate speech on the Internet, and vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries, and other community institutions.

Anti-Semitism is common in countries that USCIRF recommends for designation as CPCs or placement on the SWL—such as [Iran](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#)—but is also increasingly common in other countries, including:

- **Argentina:** In February, vandals [desecrated](#) a Jewish cemetery with Nazi symbols. In addition, in June, three youths [shouted](#) anti-Semitic insults at an Argentinian rabbi before violently assaulting him.

- **France:** In 2019, France [experienced](#) a 27 percent increase in the number of anti-Semitic acts. In eastern France, more than 180 graves in Jewish cemeteries [were desecrated](#) with Nazi symbols.
- **Germany:** In one particularly alarming incident, a gunman attempted to [break into](#) a synagogue in Halle on October 9, 2019, during Yom Kippur (the holiest day in the Jewish calendar).
- **Italy:** Due to increased threats, the government assigned paramilitary officers to [guard](#) Liliana Segre, an 89-year-old woman who is both a Holocaust survivor and a senator in the Italian parliament.
- **United Kingdom:** The United Kingdom [experienced](#) a 7 percent increase in the number of anti-Semitic incidents in 2019. In February, nine Members of Parliament [left](#) the Labour Party, partly due to their dissatisfaction with party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s handling of anti-Semitism allegations within the party.
- **Sweden:** Neo-Nazis [blocked](#) the entrance to a Holocaust exhibition in southern Sweden and intimidated visitors. This follows a pattern of anti-Semitic bullying, including at the renowned [Karolinska University Hospital](#) in Solna.

Due to this increasingly dangerous situation, many Jews were fearful of expressing their religious identity; in [surveys](#), four in ten young Jewish Europeans reported that they had considered emigrating from their home country because they are concerned for their safety. Additionally, surveys find that non-Jewish Europeans have an inaccurate understanding of Jews and anti-Semitism. In a [recent poll](#), one third of Europeans indicated that they knew little or nothing at all about the Holocaust.

There were reasons for optimism during the reporting period. More [countries created](#) positions similar to the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism. Eight countries adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s [“Working Definition of Antisemitism”](#). Some governments actively sought to improve the situation for their Jewish communities. French Minister of the Interior Christophe Castaner [announced](#) the creation of a new national hate crime office charged with investigating all anti-Semitic acts. Germany [opened](#) an online reporting center for victims to report anti-Semitic attacks. Additionally, German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer and the 16 state-level interior ministers [agreed](#) to procedures meant to prevent more attacks like the incident in Halle, including measures specifically aimed at targeting violence against Jewish people and institutions.

### New or Increased Penalties for Blasphemy

As of April 2020, USCIRF was aware of at least [84 countries](#) that have laws against blasphemy. Additionally, authorities in some

countries utilize broad laws that prohibit other forms of speech—in order to target speech deemed blasphemous. Many of these laws allow courts to impose lengthy prison sentences on individuals found guilty. In 2019, Indonesia considered expanding the criminalization of blasphemy, as discussed previously in this report. Several countries not included elsewhere adopted or newly implemented legislation that increased the penalties for blasphemy:

- **Bangladesh:** In 2019, Bangladesh began enforcing article 28 of the [Digital Security Act of 2018](#), which criminalizes any “publication, broadcast, etc.” that “hurts religious sentiment or values.” The government reportedly arrested 29 individuals under this law, including a [Hindu man](#) after individuals hacked his Facebook account and posted material deemed critical of the Prophet of Islam, and a [Sufi singer](#) for comments he made during a concert.
- **Brunei:** In April, the government of Brunei implemented the Shari’a Penal Code, which had been announced in 2013. The law [introduced](#) the death penalty for any insult to or defamation of the Prophet Muhammad. After an international backlash, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah claimed his government would not enforce the death penalty sentences provided for under the law.
- **Singapore:** In October, Singapore’s parliament [amended](#) the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act to increase penalties

against acts or speech allegedly undermining religious harmony or insulting a religion. The amendments also make it easier to prosecute religious leaders for such offenses, allegedly because they have a greater ability to influence and mobilize followers. The amendments allow restraining orders against offensive material online to go

into effect immediately, in contrast to the previously required 14-day notice period.

In a positive development, the governments of New Zealand and Greece both removed blasphemy provisions from their respective criminal codes in 2019, making them the seventh and eighth countries to have repealed a blasphemy law since 2015.

### Targeting of Religious Groups for Their Political Advocacy

In certain situations, a government’s repression of a religious group or its followers for political or social advocacy has implications for religious freedom. In some countries, authorities have cracked down on or publicly attempted to stigmatize entire religious communities because members criticized—or were perceived to have criticized—government policies. In 2019, there were reports that governments

---

*. . . four in ten young Jewish Europeans reported that they had considered emigrating from their home country because they are concerned for their safety.*

---

engaged in collective retaliation against religious groups in the following countries, in addition to India, Iran, and Nicaragua, which are discussed elsewhere in this report:

- **Cameroon:** Multiple Catholic priests have been kidnapped and killed in the violence between separatists and state security forces. Some priests were targeted for trying to preach peace, while others were accused of actively supporting one side or another.
- **Philippines:** President Rodrigo Duterte publicly [denounced](#) and called for the assassination of Catholic bishops who criticized his administration's war on drugs, which human rights groups estimate has led to thousands of extrajudicial killings. In November, the Armed Forces [named](#) the National Council of Churches in the Philippines—an ecumenical fellowship representing 10 Protestant churches—as a front for “communist terror groups,” which potentially could subject members to detention without charges and restrictions on travel.

### The Rise of Ethnoreligious Nationalism

In addition to the ongoing ethnoreligious nationalism in countries like Burma, India and Russia, 2019 saw a marked rise in ethnoreligious nationalism, particularly in South Asia. Hardliners and political opportunists attempted to redefine the national identity on strict ethnoreligious grounds, excluding religious minority communities.

- **Nepal:** During 2019, a number of leading Nepalese politicians [continued](#) to push to redefine Nepal as a Hindu state, which would violate a parliamentary resolution in 2008 declaring Nepal a secular state. In 2019, the government also began implementation of a new, strict anti-conversion law, leading to the [arrests](#) of members of religious minority communities for proselytization activities, as well as inspiring Hindu extremists to [attack](#) Christian pastors accused of conversion activities.
- **Sri Lanka:** Several major political parties, as well as newly elected President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, actively promoted Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, breeding mistrust and antagonism against religious minorities. After suicide bombings killed approximately 250 Christians on Easter Sunday (April 21), hardline Buddhist mobs [launched](#) attacks and economic boycotts against Sri Lanka's Muslim community. There were also [reports](#) of an attack against a group of Muslims heading to the polls during the November 2019 presidential election.
- **Thailand:** In November 2019, a primarily Buddhist community in the northeast [voted against](#) a local Muslim cleric's proposal to register a mosque (according to a 2005 regulation, a referendum is required to approve the registration of any house of

worship). In addition, Thai police had issued an order directing universities to provide information on Muslim students, but later [canceled](#) the order after a backlash.

### Spike in Attacks on Places of Worship or Holy Sites

In 2019, attacks on places of worship occurred with greater frequency around the globe. Places of worship are often harmed more subtly through the misuse of registration procedures to prevent their construction or renovation, or the malicious surveillance of holy sites to intimidate worshippers. Different types of buildings and properties that are significant to religious communities, such as cemeteries, monasteries, or community centers, also have been targeted.

- **New Zealand:** In March 2019, shooters attacked worshippers attending Friday prayers at Masjid Al Noor in central Christchurch, the largest city on the country's southern island; 42 people were killed. A second shooting took place at Linwood Masjid in an eastern suburb of Christchurch; seven people were killed.
- **Sri Lanka:** During Easter services in 2019, suicide bombers violently attacked three churches in Colombo, Sri Lanka, as well as three luxury hotels, killing 259 people. The bombing was conducted by the local extremist group National Thowheeth Jama'ath and later claimed by the Islamic State.
- **France:** In February 2019, swastikas and other Nazi symbols and anti-Semitic slogans were spray painted on roughly 80 gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in France. The damage was discovered the day marches were planned to protest against a rise in anti-Semitic attacks in the country.

### Exportation of Religious Intolerance

Some governments in 2019 exported intolerant religious interpretations that called for violence and severe persecution of those with different religious beliefs. Governments export these interpretations in order to build a global community of like-minded people, and to

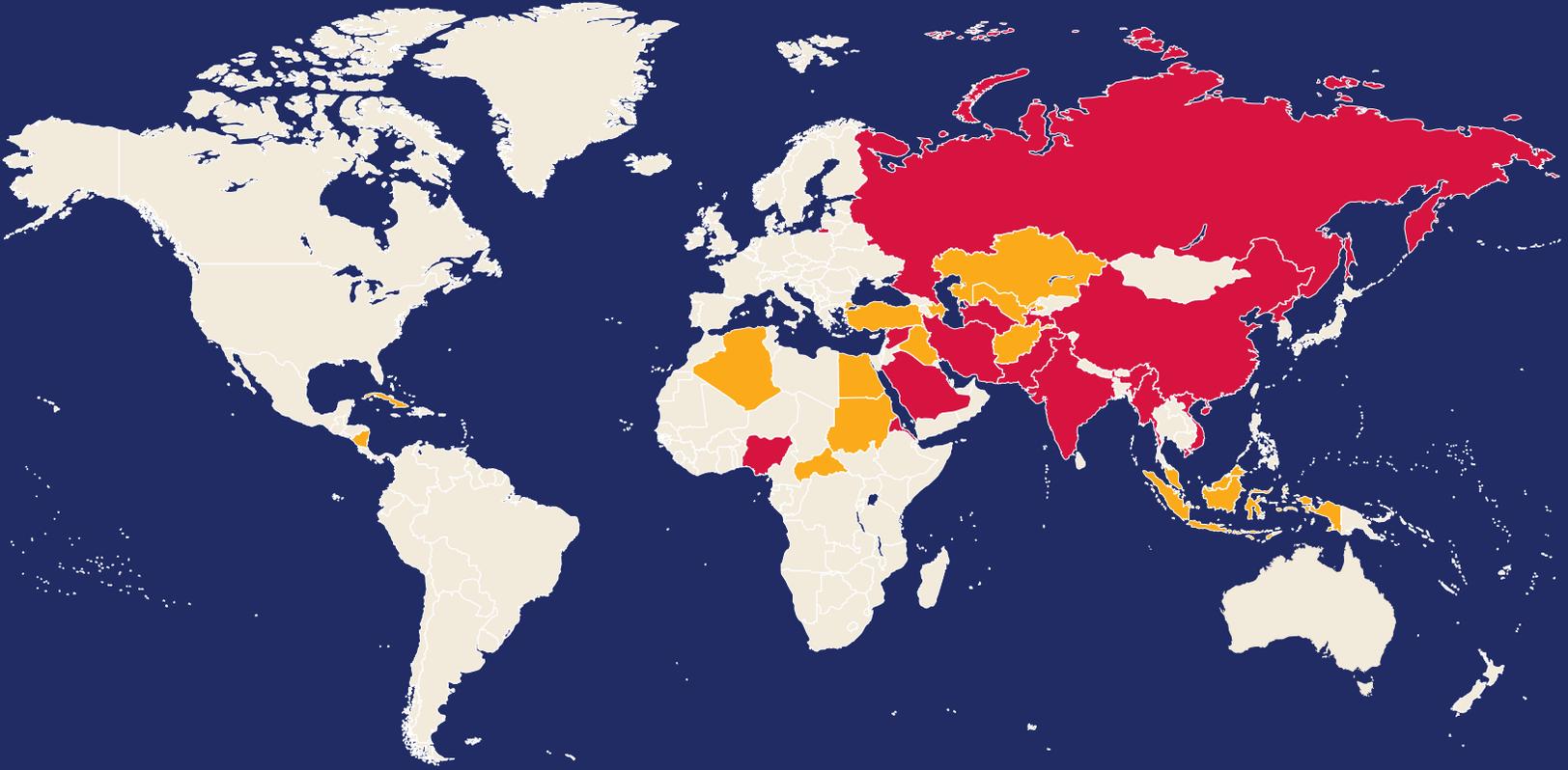
frame themselves as guardians of the religion. Among other governments, Saudi Arabia and Iran stand out as countries that actively export their religious beliefs abroad. Saudi Arabia [continues](#) to send its official textbooks promoting its government-endorsed version of Islam to schools overseas. It is unclear

whether old textbooks that promote violence against non-Muslim communities have been recalled. Iran has pursued a more [broad-based](#) approach, developing relationships with senior Shi'a clerics at Iraqi centers of Shi'a learning in Najaf and Qarbala and supporting proxy groups whose religious ideas broadly align with Iran's. Throughout 2019, Houthi authorities in Yemen [prosecuted](#) members of the Baha'i community on charges similar to those levied against Baha'is in Iran.

---

*In March 2019, shooters attacked worshippers attending Friday prayers at Masjid Al Noor in central Christchurch.*

---



## 2 0 2 0 U S C I R F R E C O M M E N D A T I O N S

### ■ 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	Central African Republic	Iraq	Sudan
Algeria	Cuba	Kazakhstan	Turkey
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Malaysia	Uzbekistan
Bahrain	Indonesia	Nicaragua	



### UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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

Telephone: (202) 523-3240  
[www.uscirtf.gov](http://www.uscirtf.gov)