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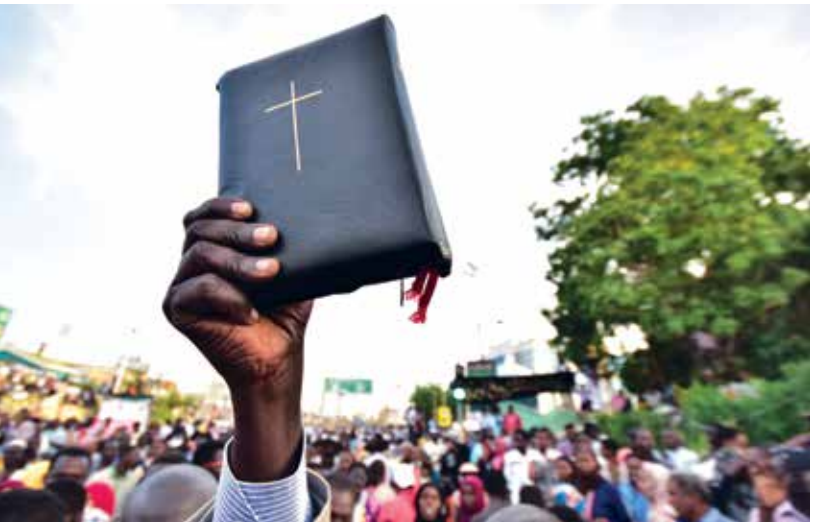
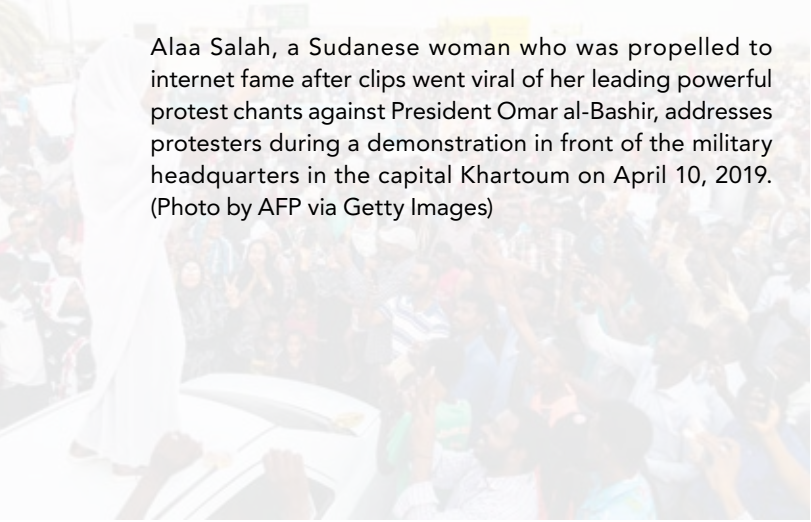
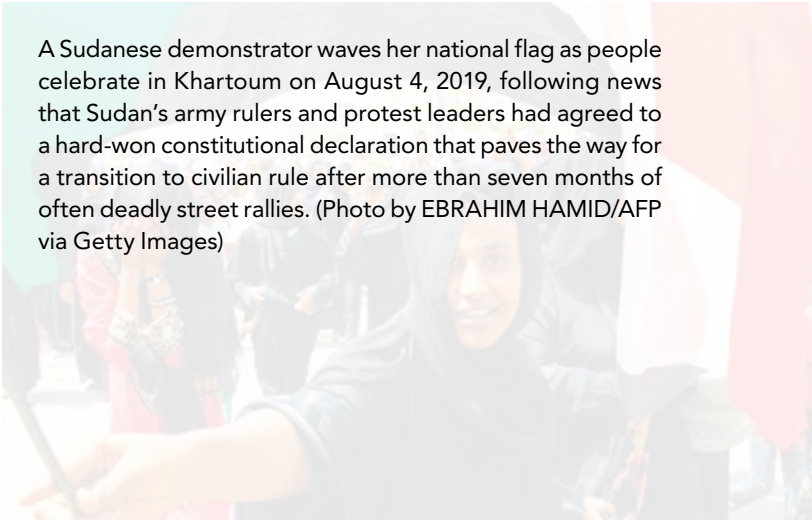


ANNUAL REPORT

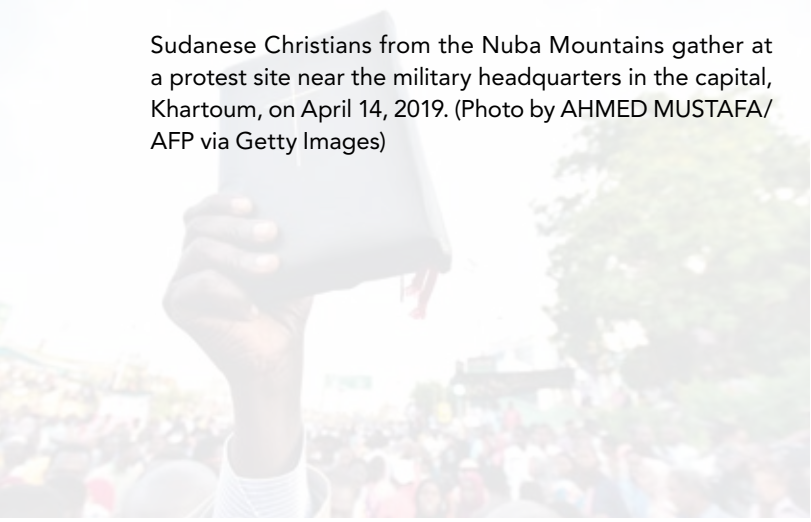
2020



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)

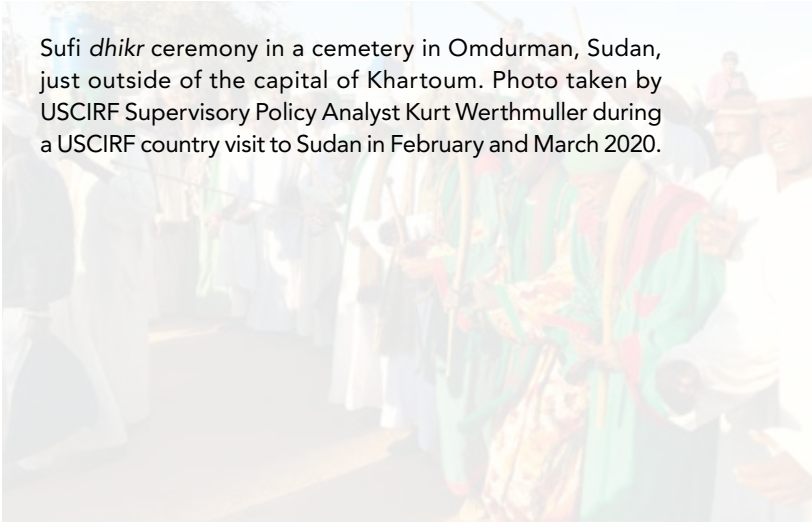


A Sudanese demonstrator waves her national flag as people celebrate in Khartoum on August 4, 2019, following news that Sudan's army rulers and protest leaders had agreed to a hard-won constitutional declaration that paves the way for a transition to civilian rule after more than seven months of often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



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)

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)



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

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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[1] 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.

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 Jasliq 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.

[1]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.

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.

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

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.

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 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.uscirf.gov. In addition, information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries can be found in the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom reports.

USCIRF'S 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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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.

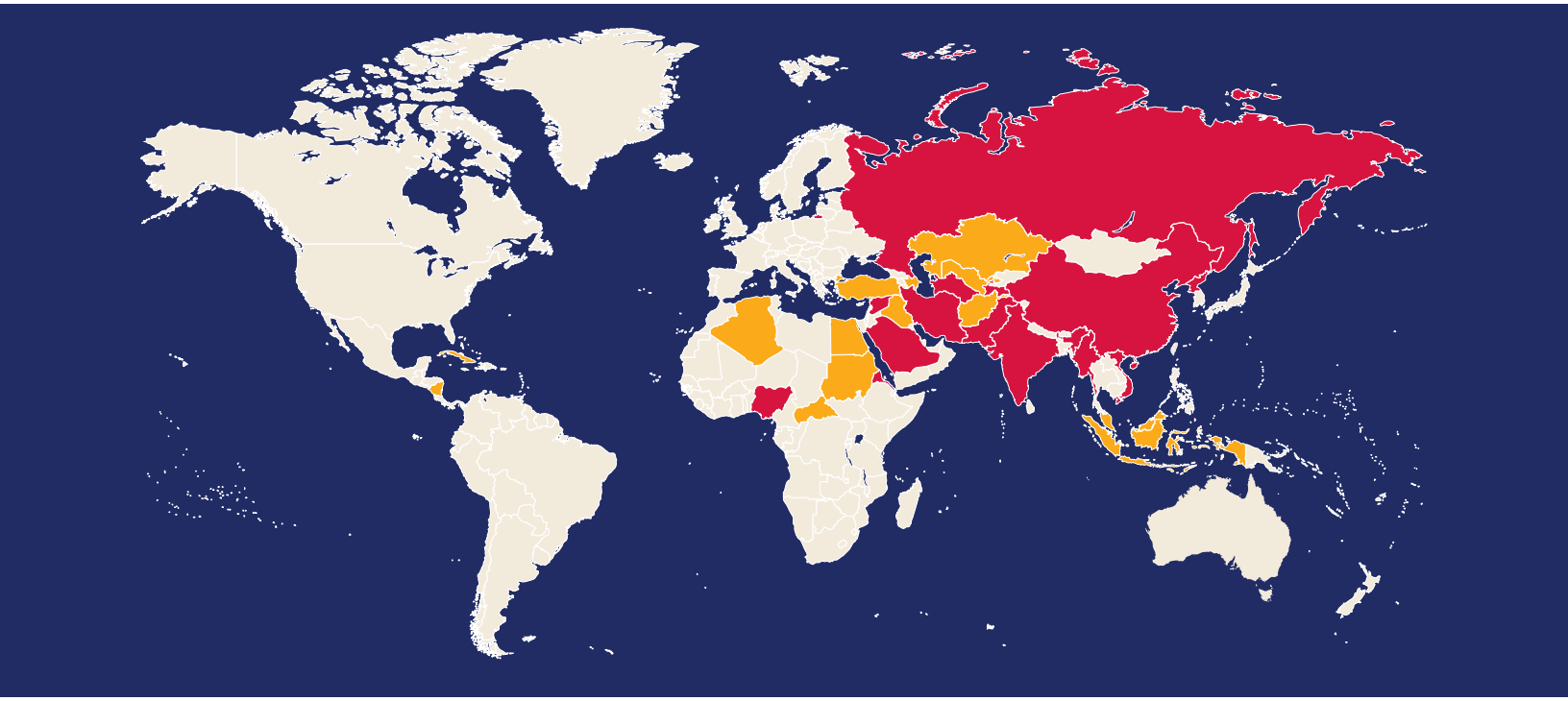
In September, USCIRF expressed alarm following reports that the [refugee resettlement] ceiling would be significantly reduced for FY 2020 and called for a ceiling of 95,000 or, at the very least, the FY 2019 amount of 30,000.

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 refugees 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.

2020 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS



COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

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

BURMA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, the Burmese government continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations, particularly against Rohingya Muslims. Ethnic-driven conflict and degradation of other civil rights often coincide with religious differences, thereby severely restricting freedom of religion or belief.

During 2019, the Burmese military continued operations in Rakhine State that have led to the large-scale displacement of Rohingya. As of July 2019, approximately 910,000 civilians reside in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, including Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. In October 2019, United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Myanmar Yanghee Lee found that Rohingya remaining in Rakhine are unable to leave their villages or earn a living with increasingly limited access to aid. Approximately 120,000 internally displaced Rohingya are confined to camps with severe limitations on their movement, little access to education or healthcare, lack of work, and inability to obtain ID cards, as USCIRF learned during a visit to Burma in June 2019. In July, the government cut the Internet in areas of Rakhine and Chin states, with human rights groups expressing concern this would restrict humanitarian aid from reaching vulnerable populations and limit the ability to monitor military abuses. The Internet restrictions were lifted in September, but reimposed in February 2020. Reports continued of the military indiscriminately killing civilians and destroying homes, mosques, and food stores. As a result, Special Rapporteur Lee concluded that "it is not safe or sustainable for refugees to return." An August 2019 UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission report concluded that the military's actions, including the use of sexual violence, indicated its "genocidal intent." These abuses also impacted other groups in Rakhine, including Kaman Muslims and Buddhists. Violence between the Arakan Army (an ethnic Rakhine Buddhist group) and the military spilled over into Chin State, displacing many ethnic Chin. In addition to authorities, armed ethnic groups have been responsible for religious freedom violations. There were reports in 2019 of the Arakan Army abducting civilians, including Christian pastors.

On January 23, 2020, after the reporting period, the International Court of Justice in The Hague announced a provisional ruling in a case brought by The Gambia that Burma must "take all measures within its power" to ensure that the military and any irregular armed units "do not commit acts of genocide" against the Rohingya. In 2019, a universal jurisdiction case was also filed in Argentina against Burma for abuses against Rohingya, and the International Criminal Court launched an investigation into the military's actions in Rakhine.

The ongoing violence has been fueled by hate speech, misinformation, and incitement to violence spread on social media, in particular Facebook, which nonstate actors and government officials have used to threaten minorities. The behavior and threats of Buddhist nationalist groups continued to play a role in restrictions on religious freedom. More than 40 mosques—shuttered after the 2012 anti-Muslim violence—remained closed, with Muslim leaders continuing to advocate for their reopening. During Ramadan, the government temporarily closed Islamic places of worship following threats from Buddhist nationalists, despite the Muslim community having permits to conduct prayer services. In early 2019, USCIRF also received reports that officials closed madrassas and a mosque in Ayeyarwady Region. Non-Buddhist religious communities routinely faced difficulties in getting permission to construct or repair houses of worship and continued to face harassment from local authorities and nonstate actors.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Burma as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Burmese 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;
- Reinstate the designation of a National Emergency with respect to Burma—terminated by executive order in October 2016—pursuant to the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, 50 U.S.C. 1701-1706, in response to the ongoing and severe atrocities, and refocus efforts to conclude definitively and publicly whether such atrocities meet the legal definition of crimes against humanity and/or genocide; and
- Actively support efforts to hold Burmese officials accountable through the international legal system, including assisting and strengthening the documentation of mass atrocities and facilitating information sharing.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Provide increased funds for assistance programs to support atrocity prevention and response efforts in Burma.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** Rangoon and Nay Pyi Taw in June 2019
- **Hearing:** Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom
- **Factsheet:** The Path toward Justice: Accountability for International Crimes against the Rohingya of Burma
- **Webinar Series:** Webinar #2: Burma

Background

Burma has a Buddhist majority (87.9 percent) with Christian (6.2 percent), Muslim (4.3 percent), Animist (0.8 percent), and Hindu (0.5 percent) populations. The 2008 constitution recognizes Buddhism as the de facto state religion, but also recognizes Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Animism. Despite this, religious and ethnic minorities not belonging to the majority Bamar ethnicity and Buddhist faith have faced longstanding persecution. In 2015, Burma passed race and religion laws supported by Buddhist nationalists such as the Ma Ba Tha. These laws regulate religious conversion, marriage, and births, and also restrict the religious freedom of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims.

In November 2015, the country transitioned to democracy with the election of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD). However, the military still exercises significant political control with responsibility for home affairs, border affairs, and defense ministries, and with 25 percent of parliamentary seats reserved for military officers. In recent years, the NLD has come under increasing criticism for inaction on humanitarian crises involving ethnic and religious minorities, most notably military operations in Rakhine.

The Rakhine State Crisis and Attacks against Muslims

Using the pretext of insurgent activity, Burma's military dramatically escalated operations in Rakhine in August 2017, sparking a mass migration. Within a matter of weeks, nearly 700,000 civilians sought refuge from the violence in refugee camps in Bangladesh. During these operations, the military has been accused of indiscriminate killings of civilians; mass rape and other sexual violence; disappearances; forced starvation; arbitrary detentions and arrests; and looting, burning, and property destruction. Both government authorities and nonstate actors also have shuttered and destroyed mosques; prevented Rohingya from worshipping or attending religious schools; interfered with Islamic funeral rites; desecrated and burned Qur'ans; and targeted imams for detention, torture, and killings.

Prior to these military operations, Rohingya Muslims have long been targeted for their ethnicity and religion, including being denied citizenship since 1982. While persecution against the Rohingya and broader Muslim community is not always religious in nature, it has impacted their ability to practice their faith. As anti-Muslim sentiment and Buddhist nationalism blossomed alongside the democratization process that began in 2011, the Rohingya continued to face discrimination. In 2012, anti-Muslim violence in Rakhine State left 200 dead and over 140,000 forcibly displaced, including 75,000 fleeing to Bangladesh. The following year in Meiktila, mobs—including Buddhist monks—burned over 1,500 Muslim homes; damaged or destroyed three Islamic schools and more than a dozen mosques; displaced thousands; and killed at least 100 people over three days.

Abuses against Christians

While some Christians are able to practice their faith, others are targeted for their beliefs. In Kachin and Northern Shan states, renewed violence in August 2019 between the military and ethnic armed organizations displaced thousands, including many Christians. These displacements were in addition to more than 100,000 already displaced since a collapsed 2011 ceasefire between the military and the Kachin Independence Army. The longstanding conflicts, while not religious in nature, have deeply impacted Christian communities, with the military reportedly damaging or destroying over 300 churches. Blockades on humanitarian assistance also restricted access to basic necessities.

Beginning in 2018, the Chinese-backed United Wa State Army (UWSA) has targeted Christians in territory under its control. Under the guise of confronting "religious extremism," UWSA soldiers interrogated and detained almost 100 pastors; ordered others to leave the region; closed religious schools and churches; destroyed unauthorized churches; banned new church construction; and forcibly recruited Christian students. In late 2018, the UWSA released those detained after signing a pledge to pray only at home. In December 2019, the UWSA reopened 51 of the more than 100 churches closed with the rest remaining closed.

Hate Speech and Social Media

Over the last decade, international observers have noted the rapid rise of Internet penetration, mobile phone usage, and social media as key contributors to the spread of hate speech and misinformation as precursors to mass violence. To counter this trend, Facebook blocked the pages of Buddhist nationalists, such as Ma Ba Tha and the monk U Wirathu, known for incitement to violence against Muslims. However, authorities continue to use Facebook regularly to disseminate information that is discriminatory and even factually incorrect, especially against minorities. Despite Facebook banning several military officials in 2018 for spreading "hate and misinformation," the company reported in August 2019 that individuals associated with the military continue to engage in this behavior. In May 2019, a court issued an arrest warrant for U Wirathu under charges of sedition for criticism of the government.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, the U.S. government imposed punitive actions for the Burmese government's human rights and religious freedom violations, including travel bans against military leaders for "gross human rights violations." In December, the U.S. Department of State redesignated Burma as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1. That same month, the U.S Department of the Treasury announced Global Magnitsky sanctions against four military leaders, including the military's Commander-in-Chief and Deputy Commander-in-Chief, for "serious human rights abuses" in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states. In a May 2019 visit to Burma, Under Secretary of State David Hale stated it is Burma's responsibility to allow Rohingya refugees safe return, pursue credible and independent investigations, and improve access for humanitarian aid. The U.S. government also announced $72 million in U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funding to support Burma's democratic transition, focusing on civil society and media and a community-strengthening project for conflict-affected states, as well as a $127 million aid package for refugees in Bangladesh.

CHINA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in China continued to deteriorate. The Chinese government has created a high-tech surveillance state, utilizing facial recognition and artificial intelligence to monitor religious minorities. On April 1, a new regulation requiring religious venues to have legal representatives and professional accountants went into effect. Some smaller religious venues, especially in rural areas, found these requirements impossible to fulfill.

Independent experts estimate that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang—an estimate revised upward since the previous reporting period. Individuals have been sent to the camps for wearing long beards, refusing alcohol, or other behaviors authorities deem to be signs of "religious extremism." Former detainees report that they suffered torture, rape, sterilization, and other abuses. In addition, nearly half a million Muslim children have been separated from their families and placed in boarding schools. During 2019, the camps increasingly transitioned from reeducation to forced labor as detainees were forced to work in cotton and textile factories. Outside the camps, the government continued to deploy officials to live with Muslim families and to report on any signs of "extremist" religious behavior. Meanwhile, authorities in Xinjiang and other parts of China have destroyed or damaged thousands of mosques and removed Arabic-language signs from Muslim businesses.

The Chinese government continued to pursue a strategy of forced assimilation and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, as demonstrated by the laws designed to control the next reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and those of other Tibetan eminent lamas. Monks and nuns who refused to denounce the Dalai Lama have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured. During the summer of 2019, authorities demolished thousands of residences at the Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist center in Sichuan Province, displacing as many as 6,000 monks and nuns. In April, authorities closed the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy to new enrollment. Authorities also intensified a crackdown on possessing or displaying photos of the Dalai Lama, continued to monitor religious festivals, and, in some areas, banned students from attending festivals during their school holidays. In protest of repressive government policies, at least 156 Tibetans have self-immolated since February 2009.

Chinese authorities raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches in 2019, including Rock Church in Henan Province and Shouwang Church in Beijing. The government released some of the Early Rain Covenant Church congregants who had been arrested in December 2018, but in December 2019 a court charged Pastor Wang Yi with "subversion of state power" and sentenced him to nine years imprisonment. Local authorities continued to harass and detain bishops, including Guo Xijin and Cui Tai, who refused to join the state-affiliated Catholic association. Several local governments, including Guangzho city, offered cash bounties for individuals who informed on underground churches. In addition, authorities across the country have removed crosses from churches, banned youth under the age of 18 from participating in religious services, and replaced images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping.

According to reports, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners were arrested during 2019 for practicing the movement's meditation exercises or distributing literature about their beliefs. Human rights advocates and scientists presented evidence that the practice of harvesting organs from prisoners—many of whom are believed to be Falun Gong practitioners—continued on a significant scale. In addition, there were widespread reports that authorities across China demolished Mahayana Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian statues it claimed were "unauthorized."

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—particularly Xinjiang Communist Party Secretary Chen Quanguo and former Political and Legal Affairs Commission Chief Zhu Hailun—by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that U.S. government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government's crackdown on religious freedom continues; and
- Continue and intensify efforts to counter Chinese government influence operations in the United States that are designed to suppress information about or advocacy in response to violations of religious freedom in China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support the Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2019 (H.R.4331/S.2539) and other legislation designed to promote religious freedom in China; and
- Support the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (H.R.6210/S.3471), which would prohibit the importation to the United States of textiles, cotton, and other goods from Xinjiang.

Background

According to the CIA World Factbook, of China's estimated 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; 5 percent are Christian; and 2 percent are Muslim. Most of the country's estimated 70 million Christians refuse to join the state-run churches—the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association—and instead worship in underground house churches. Other significant religious traditions include the Falun Gong, Daoism, and traditional folk practices.

Although the Communist Party has a long history of restricting religious freedom, in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion and initiated campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of what it deems "foreign" influences. The 2018 Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs effectively ban "unauthorized" religious teaching and expand the role of local authorities in controlling religious activities. Under article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, belonging to certain religious movements, such as the Falun Gong, is punishable with three to seven years' imprisonment.

Hong Kong

In June 2019, more than one million Hong Kong residents marched in protest against a bill that would have allowed authorities to extradite criminal defendants to mainland China. Although the protests were not primarily about religious freedom issues, some church leaders joined the protests and religious freedom activists expressed concern that the bill would have undermined their ability to advocate without fear of retaliation. The city government withdrew the bill in October, but protests continued through the end of the reporting period.

International Reactions and Advocacy

Throughout 2019, China's suppression of religious freedom received widespread international attention. In July, a group of 22 European countries, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan signed a letter to the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council (HRC) condemning the persecution of Uighur and other Muslims. In October, those countries, as well as the United States, submitted a statement about Xinjiang to the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In November, a panel of UN experts warned that "disproportionate emphasis placed by the authorities on the repression of rights of minorities risks worsening any security risk" in Xinjiang. Also in November, the World Bank reduced a $50 million project for vocational training in Xinjiang due to allegations that some funds were used to purchase police batons and tear gas launchers. However, the Chinese government reportedly used its economic and diplomatic leverage to dissuade some governments from criticizing its record. It presented letters signed by nearly 50 governments to both the HRC and CERD defending its record. In March, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation issued a resolution "commending" China for taking care of its Muslim population.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2019, relations between the United States and China remained tense due to the trade war and Chinese security threats to U.S. interests. Senior U.S. government officials continued to condemn deteriorating religious freedom conditions in China. The State Department added a separate section about Xinjiang in its 2018 Report on International Religious Freedom. In May, U.S. Ambassador to China Terry Branstad visited Tibet and urged Chinese leaders to open "substantive dialogue" with the Dalai Lama. On July 17, as part of the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, President Donald J. Trump met with victims of religious persecution from China. In October, the U.S. Department of Commerce imposed restrictions on exports to 28 Chinese companies and organizations and the State Department announced visa restrictions on Chinese officials implicated in the mass internment of Uighur Muslims. In addition, U.S. Customs and Border Protection issued orders to seize garment imports produced by Hetian Taida Apparel Co. due to concerns that they were made using forced labor in Xinjiang. Throughout 2019, the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other government agencies continued to provide funding to civil society organizations that promote religious freedom in China. On December 18, the State Department redesignated China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action ongoing restrictions on exports of certain equipment to China under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act (FY 1990 and 1991).

Members of Congress continued to criticize China's crackdown on religious freedom in 2019. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China's 2019 Annual Report noted that the mass internment of Uighur and other Muslims might constitute "crimes against humanity." In December, the House of Representatives and the Senate both passed—but had not fully reconciled—different versions of the Uighur Intervention and Global Humanitarian Unified Response Act (S.178), which would require the administration to impose targeted sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for serious abuses in Xinjiang. In September, legislators in both chambers introduced the Tibetan Policy and Support Act (H.R.4331/S.2539), which would authorize the U.S. government to impose targeted sanctions on Chinese officials who interfere in the process of recognizing a successor to the Dalai Lama. In January 2020, outside the reporting period, the House passed the bill. In July, Representative Vicky Hartzler (R-MO) introduced a resolution condemning the persecution of Christians in China (H.Res.493). In addition, legislators introduced a bill directing the U.S. government to oppose World Bank loans to China (S.3018), citing its religious freedom violations. The measure did not receive a vote before the end of the reporting period.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom in China's High-Tech Surveillance State
- **Webinar Series:** Webinar #4: China
- **Op-Ed:** Fighting Religious Persecution in China One Violator at a Time (in *The Hill*)

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER TENZIN DORJEE

China is the classic example of a "country of particular concern," or CPC, when it comes to religious freedom violations. Millions of Uighurs are kept in concentration camps and according to the latest Freedom House Report, Tibet is second only to Syria in terms of religious freedom and human rights violations. The situation in Tibet is worse than in North Korea according to the report and no international media has access to Tibet. To enslave Uighurs and Tibetans, China uses state of the art surveillance technology to collect DNA and sociodemographic information to restrict religious freedom and human rights. Even children are not allowed to learn their native languages and religions. I applaud bipartisan efforts in the U.S. Congress to address religious and human rights violations in China. China's forced disappearance of the Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima for over 25 years and its most serious interference into the recognition of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's next reincarnation for a political agenda deserve stern condemnation and counter measures. Thank you to the U.S. Congress for passing the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Support Act (RATSA). I urge the administration to implement the RATSA and urgently appoint a Tibet Coordinator to advance Sino-Tibetan dialogues for resolving issues based on mutually beneficial nonviolence and the Middle Way policy proposed by the Central Tibetan Administration and supported by the United States, European Parliament, and others. The time is now for serious multilateral government and global policy actions to end "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" religious freedom and human rights violations in China, including in Tibet and Xinjiang.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

There is no question that China is the world's foremost violator of human rights and religious freedom. It cannot be compared to any other country in the world not only because of its inexcusable actions, but because of the way it aids and abets similar actions by other countries all around the world. Meanwhile, the international order, in pursuit of self-interest, continues to let China play by its own rules, and especially at the United Nations. This is absolutely inexcusable, and those nations around the world who ignore China's malevolence may eventually find themselves subservient to it. It is past time for our world bodies, and our liberal democracies, to demand more from China.

ERITREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea worsened, with increasing interference in and restrictions on religious groups. In spite of the significant regional political changes and the 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Eritrea continues to have one of the worst religious freedom records in the world, and has shown little interest in concretely improving the situation. No new religious institutions were officially registered, and thus only four religious communities remain legally permitted to operate: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination.

During 2019, there was an increase in political activism and calls for democratic reform by secular and religious Eritreans. The government responded harshly to both registered religious groups as well as unrecognized ones, such as the Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities, and accused religious actors of political interference for defending their beliefs and human rights. Christians were arbitrarily arrested and detained, including in waves of arrests in May of more than 171 adults and children gathering for worship around Asmara. In August, another 80 were reportedly arrested for practicing their faith. In April, Eritrean Catholic bishops wrote a joint letter calling for national truth and reconciliation. Throughout the year, the government forcibly took over and closed multiple faith-based schools as well as 22 additional Catholic Church-run health centers. In 2017 and 2018, security forces had conducted mass arrests of protestors of government interference into a prominent Islamic religious school—Al Diaa—including senior members of the school board. In 2019, some of those arrested died in prison, including a second member of the executive committee, Hajji Ibrahim Younes.

In addition to being denied the right to freely practice their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses were denied basic citizenship rights. Authorities explain this exclusionary policy as a result of Jehovah's Witnesses' abstention from voting in the referendum for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia in 1993, which was in adherence to their beliefs. Fifty-two Jehovah's Witnesses remained imprisoned for observing their religion, in ways such as participating in religious meetings, preaching, or conscientiously objecting to military service.

The Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Abune Antonios, remained in detention throughout 2019. In April, a secretly recorded video of Patriarch Antonios was published online. Hundreds of individuals were believed to be imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea, and USCIRF included some of those cases in its new Victims List. Some prisoners, such as leaders of the Full Gospel Church and the Orthodox Church, have been in prison for more than 15 years.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Eritrea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Eritrean government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
  - Release unconditionally detainees held on account of their religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
  - Publish the registration law for religious groups along with clear guidelines for applying for or appealing decisions;
  - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses;
  - Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross; and
  - Encourage the African Union to establish an accountability mechanism to investigate, prosecute, and try individuals accused of committing crimes against humanity in Eritrea, as recommended in 2016 by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea and the UN Human Rights Council.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Eritrea
- **Special Report:** Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** Patriarch Abune Antonios

Background

Eritrea is under the authoritarian rule of President Isaias Afwerki and his political party, the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The government views human rights and political expression by the population as threats and thus strictly represses them. Many Eritreans cite violations of political and human rights as key reasons for fleeing the country, and, according to humanitarian actors, in 2019 an average of at least 200 people arrived in Ethiopia and Sudan on a daily basis. The government continued to maintain an indefinite requirement of citizens to participate in national service, and restricted religious expression during that service. Human rights organizations reported that prayer, possession of religious books, and preaching also continue to be prohibited in prisons. Although the 1997 Constitution pledges freedom of conscience, religion, expression of opinion, movement, assembly, and organization, the constitution has not been implemented. The government uses Proclamation No. 73 of 1995 as its basis for limiting religious freedom, including the freedom of religious actors to express political views that differ from government-approved positions.

Some sources estimate Eritrea's population to be divided evenly between Muslims and Christians, while Pew Research estimates almost 63 percent to be Christian and 37 percent Muslim, with less than 1 percent comprising other faith groups. Most Eritrean Christians are members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Only four religious entities are officially recognized and permitted to operate to any extent in the country: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. The government has not permitted any other groups to register since the requirement to do so went into effect in 2002. The government has published neither the registration law nor any procedures regarding applying for or appealing decisions. Authorities closely monitor the activities of the officially recognized groups, and also appoint leaders to key religious positions.

Tightening the Grip on the Orthodox Community

In April 2019, a secretly recorded video of Patriarch Antonios was released, which allowed Eritreans around the world to hear Antonios' personal account of his removal from his position and forcible detention, and led many of them to question the government's narratives and decisions. Eritrean Orthodox Christians increasingly began to call on their church's Holy Synod to cease its compliance with government demands. The Eritrean government reportedly heightened pressure on the Holy Synod to excommunicate Patriarch Antonios from the church, which it ultimately did in July in a letter accusing the patriarch of heresy and of engaging with heretics. Nevertheless, many Eritrean Orthodox Christians still view Patriarch Antonios as the lawful leader of the church. Throughout 2019, authorities continued to detain him unlawfully, and reportedly have warned religious leaders not to mention his name in sermons. Many Orthodox Eritreans have denounced the government's actions against Patriarch Antonios and others, such as forcing monks to participate in military service against their religious beliefs. Multiple monastic fathers were also reportedly imprisoned in 2019 for expressing disagreement with the excommunication of Patriarch Antonios.

International Human Rights Reviews

In January 2019, at Eritrea's Universal Periodic Review before the UN Human Rights Council, more than a dozen states raised religious freedom issues in their statements, and specifically highlighted the need for Eritrea to allow conscientious objection and to release prisoners held on account of their beliefs. In May, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights published its Concluding Observations and Recommendations on Eritrea's implementation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which included specific attention to religious freedom issues such as the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses and the need to ensure the right to registration and appeal for religious groups that seek to register officially. Furthermore, in May, the UN Human Rights Committee released its Concluding Observations on Eritrea's adherence to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This report highlighted the detention of religious actors—including Patriarch Antonios for more than a decade—among other religious freedom violations.

Key U.S. Policy

Eritrea and the United States have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010. Diplomatic engagement improved during 2019 with several high-level U.S. official visits to Eritrea. In April, Acting Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Ambassador Donald Y. Yamamoto traveled to the country. In March, Representatives Karen Bass (D-CA), Joe Neguse (D-CO), and Ilhan Omar (D-MN) completed a congressional delegation to Ethiopia and Eritrea, and raised human rights and religious freedom concerns during their visit. Other State Department officials from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and the Office of International Religious Freedom also visited Eritrea in 2019 and raised human rights issues. The United States continued to support regional efforts for improving peace and security in the Horn of Africa. In addition to the broader diplomatic engagement, in May the United States removed Eritrea from its list of Countries Not Cooperating Fully with United States Antiterrorism Efforts. The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently redesignated it in December 2019, and as a consequence maintains an arms embargo on Eritrea under 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

INDIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in India experienced a drastic turn downward, with religious minorities under increasing assault. Following the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) re-election in May, the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims. The national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence.

Significantly, the BJP-led government enacted the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)—a fast track to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan already residing in India—and approved a National Population Register (NPR) as a first step toward a nation-wide National Register of Citizens (NRC). The border state of Assam, under mandate of the Supreme Court, implemented a statewide NRC to identify illegal migrants within Assam. When the statewide NRC was released in August, 1.9 million residents—both Muslims and Hindus—were excluded. Those excluded live in fear of the consequences: three United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs warned that exclusion from the NRC could result in "statelessness, deportation, or prolonged detention." Indeed, Home Minister Amit Shah referred to migrants as "termites" to be eradicated. Troubled that Hindus were excluded from Assam's NRC, he and other BJP officials advocated for the CAA as a corrective measure to protect Hindus. The CAA provides listed non-Muslim religious communities a path to restore their citizenship and avoid detention or deportation. In its wake, BJP leaders have continued to advocate for a nation-wide NRC; the citizenship of millions would be placed under question, but, with the CAA in place, Muslims alone would bear the indignities and consequences of potential statelessness.

The CAA's passage in December sparked nationwide protests that police and government-aligned groups met with violence; in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the BJP chief minister Yogi Adityanath pledged "revenge" against anti-CAA protestors and stated they should be fed "bullets not biryani." In December, close to 25 people died in attacks against protestors and universities in UP alone. According to reports, police action specifically targeted Muslims.

Throughout 2019, government action—including the CAA, continued enforcement of cow slaughter and anti-conversion laws, and the November Supreme Court ruling on the Babri Masjid site—created a culture of impunity for nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities. In August, the government also revoked the autonomy of Muslim-majority state Jammu and Kashmir and imposed restrictions that negatively impacted religious freedom. Mob lynchings of persons suspected of cow slaughter or consuming beef continued, with most attacks occurring within BJP-ruled states. Lynch mobs often took on overtly Hindu nationalist tones. In June, in Jharkand, a mob attacked a Muslim, Tabrez Ansari, forcing him to chant "Jai Shri Ram (Hail Lord Ram)" as they beat him to death. Police often arrest those attacked for cow slaughter or conversion activities rather than the perpetrators. Violence against Christians also increased, with at least 328 violent incidents, often under accusations of forced conversions. These attacks frequently targeted prayer services and led to the widespread shuttering or destruction of churches.

In 2018, the Supreme Court urged the central and state governments to combat lynchings with stricter laws. When, by July 2019, the central government and 10 states had failed to take appropriate action, the Supreme Court again directed them to do so. Rather than comply, Home Minister Shah called existing laws sufficient and denied lynchings had increased, while the Home Ministry instructed the National Crime Records Bureau to omit lynchings from the 2019 crime data report.

During 2019, discriminatory policies, inflammatory rhetoric, and tolerance for violence against minorities at the national, state, and local level increased the climate of fear among non-Hindu communities. After the reporting period, India continued on this negative trajectory. In February 2020, three days of violence erupted in Delhi with mobs attacking Muslim neighborhoods. There were reports of Delhi police, operating under the Home Ministry's authority, failing to halt attacks and even directly participating in the violence. At least 50 people were killed.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate India as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in and tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Indian 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;
- Strengthen the U.S. Embassy's and consulates' engagement with religious communities, local officials, and police, especially in regions impacted by religiously motivated violence; increase U.S. partnerships with Indian law enforcement to build capacity to protect religious minorities, houses of worship, and other holy sites, and confront religious-based hate crimes; and
- Allocate funding to support civil society to create a monitoring and early warning system in partnership with police to challenge hate speech and incitement to violence.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Continue to hold hearings highlighting religious freedom conditions in India and U.S. policy toward India.

Background

India's population is 79.8 percent Hindu, 14.2 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Christian, 1.7 percent Sikh, 0.7 percent Buddhist, and 0.4 percent Jain; smaller groups include Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Baha'is. India's constitution defines the nation as secular and protects freedom of religion or belief—including the right to proselytize. However, religious freedom is "subject to public order," a vague phrase allowing the suspension of rights to protect social "tranquility." This qualification was used to justify anti-conversion laws in the 1977 Supreme Court case *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh and Orissa*. The BJP has challenged the secular principles of the constitution by implementing policies reflecting Hindu nationalist ideology, or Hindutva.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens

In December 2019, parliament passed the CAA, providing a pathway to citizenship for non-Muslim migrants already in India from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan by treating them as refugees fleeing religious persecution. The CAA would be even more problematic in conjunction with a nationwide NRC, which could be modeled after the statewide NRC in Assam, and is a goal outlined in the BJP's manifesto and repeatedly promised by BJP leadership. The NRC process in Assam raised significant concerns: impoverished families could not present the necessary documents due to poor record keeping or illiteracy. Even with documentation, citizens were excluded because of minor inconsistencies; some were excluded despite using the same documents as included relatives. The Foreigners' Tribunals that adjudicate citizenship status have been critiqued for their anti-minority bias. In December, the Parliament approved an NPR to collect residents' citizenship data. According to government statements and under the Citizenship Rules, 2003, the NPR—which allows residents to be marked as "doubtful citizens" and placed under scrutiny—is the first step toward a nation-wide NRC.

Cow Slaughter Laws

In Hinduism, the cow is considered sacred. Article 48 of India's constitution directs the state to "take steps . . . prohibiting the slaughter of cows and calves," and 21 states criminalize cow slaughter in various forms. Cow protection has been promoted as a key issue by the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Lynch mobs, often organized over social media, have attacked minorities—including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits—under suspicion of eating beef, slaughtering cows, or transporting cattle for slaughter. Since the BJP came to power in 2014, there have been over 100 attacks, amounting to over 98 percent of such attacks since 2010. Lynching victims, rather than the perpetrators, are often arrested under these laws.

Anti-Conversion Laws

While the constitution protects the right to proselytize, 10 states have anti-conversion laws criminalizing conversion using force, allurement, inducement, or fraud, but many use vague language that can be interpreted as prohibiting consensual conversions. In 2019, BJP-ruled Himachal Pradesh increased the penalties for forced conversions. Authorities predominately arrest Muslims and Christians for conversion activities. To date, however, there are no known convictions for forced conversion. Hindutva groups pursue mass conversions through ceremonies known as *ghar wapsi* (homecoming), without interference from authorities. Empowered by anti-conversion laws and often with the police's complicity, Hindutva groups also conduct campaigns of harassment, social exclusion, and violence against Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities across the country. Following attacks by Hindutva groups against religious minorities for conversion activities, the police often arrest the religious minorities who have been attacked.

In September 2019, the Home Ministry introduced new rules under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act requiring all members of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to sign an affidavit affirming they have "not been prosecuted or convicted for indulging in forced religious conversion or creating communal tensions" to receive foreign funding. Faith-based NGOs, in particular Christian organizations, expressed fear that this is intended to limit their activities.

Religious Freedom in Jammu and Kashmir

In August 2019, the government stripped Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy and imposed security measures, including restricting freedom of movement and assembly, cutting Internet and phone access, and arresting Kashmiri leaders, including religious leaders. The restrictions on movement and assembly limited the ability to attend prayers and religious ceremonies. USCIRF also received several reports of mosques being closed, imams and Muslim leaders arrested and detained, and threats and violence by extremist groups.

Key U.S. Policy

During 2019, the United States and India strengthened their relationship, especially in security and defense. In December, the two governments signed an agreement for defense technology transfers during a 2+2 ministerial dialogue. President Donald J. Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi appeared together at the September "Howdy Modi" event in Houston, Texas, during which the President praised this relationship. Amid these positive developments, U.S. officials highlighted concerns with India's religious freedom violations through public statements, congressional hearings, and bilateral engagements. In October, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback traveled to India. The Indian government, however, continued to reject the State Department's and USCIRF's reporting on religious freedom violations in India.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Citizenship Laws and Religious Freedom
- **Testimony:** Jammu and Kashmir in Context (before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission)
- **Issue Brief:** The Religious Freedom Implications of the National Register of Citizens in Assam
- **Factsheet:** The Citizenship (Amendment) Act in India

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER GARY L. BAUER

I must dissent from the decision of my fellow Commissioners to recommend India, the world's largest democracy, for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, placing India in a gallery of rogue nations in which it does not belong.

The trend line on religious freedom in India is not reassuring. But India is not the equivalent of communist China, which wages war on all faiths; nor of North Korea, a prison masquerading as a country; nor of Iran, whose Islamic extremist leaders regularly threaten to unleash a second Holocaust.

India is our ally. A young democracy, it only gained its sovereign freedom in 1947. I hope and pray India's leaders will resist the impulse to punish or restrict any of their citizens based on faith. The United States should raise our concern over restrictions on religious liberty in all bilateral communications and negotiations with India, as allies do. I am deeply concerned that this public denunciation risks exactly the opposite outcome than the one we all desire.

In conclusion, a brief word about our times. Increasingly, nation states are confronting a fundamental choice between two diametrically opposed visions of governance.

One recognizes that all human beings have equal dignity, value and worth. The United States believes this is so because we are made in the image of God. Countries following this vision believe in freedom, including the most fundamental freedom of all – freedom of religion.

Communist China aggressively promotes an alternative that allows some economic liberty but demands that all other loyalties of the heart and soul be replaced by loyalty to the state.

I am confident that India will reject any authoritarian temptation and stand with the United States and other free nations in defense of liberty, including religious liberty.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER TENZIN DORJEE

I want to express my concerns about the CAA, as all persecuted religious minorities deserve the same treatment. I also dissent from the recommendation that India should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. India does not belong to the same category as authoritarian regimes like China and North Korea. India is the largest democratic nation in the world, where the CAA has been challenged openly by the opposition Congress Party and law makers, civil society, and various groups. By and large, the press freely reported both anti-and pro-CAA voices and chief ministers of states such as Kerala decided not to implement the CAA. The Supreme Court of India has been asked to adjudicate on its constitutionality. India is a free and open democratic society that allows for all possibilities; therefore, India is not a CPC country.

India is also an ancient, multifaith civilization where for the most part multiple faith groups respectfully and peacefully have co-existed for centuries. I am not oblivious to the worst interreligious conflicts and the partition of India. However, as major news sources reported, even during the violence over the CAA, Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus protected each other's homes and places of worship from mob violence and held interfaith ceremonies. As Tibetan refugees, we enjoyed complete religious freedom in India that is non-existent in Tibet and China. Recently, I was on a personal pilgrimage to major Buddhist holy sites in India and saw Hindus, Muslims, and other faiths enjoying religious freedom at their places of worship, shops, and homes. India and the United States are vital strategic partners. As I exit USCIRF as a Commissioner, I highly recommend constructive engagement among India, the U.S. government, and USCIRF to advance mutual interests including religious freedom and human rights.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

I am gravely concerned that political and inter-communal strife will be further exacerbated by religious tensions, yet I am also heartened that India remains the world's largest democracy, governed by a pristine constitution, and I am also encouraged that this great nation is a tremendous friend and ally of the United States. It is also a nation that is the very definition of diverse. My hope, and my prayer, is that India's still-young, and freewheeling, democracy will give way to an ever-brighter future through these challenges, for all of its citizens, whatever their religion or political affiliation. I am rooting for India's institutions to draw upon her rich history in order to pull her through the present time. India also happens to be a country that I have loved for all of my adult life. It is a country I love because of its pluralism and because of the transformative impact it has had on my own life through my many visits (and visits to vibrantly religious places in Varanasi, Old Delhi, Amritsar, Dharamsala, Agra, Ajmer, Hyderabad, Kolkata, throughout Kerala, and many other places).

IRAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

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.

NIGERIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor in 2019, with both state- and societally perpetrated violations. The federal government continued to detain the leader of a Shi'a minority group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), and violently cracked down on its members during religious processions and protests. In July, the government banned the group, claiming it was violent and annoying to society. IMN members continued to protest in defiance of the ban, stating they were a nonviolent organization exercising their freedoms of religion, assembly, and speech. The IMN is the largest Shi'a organization in Nigeria, with an estimated three million followers. Since the Nigerian army's 2015 massacre of more than 340 IMN members, no military officials have been publicly held accountable.

Throughout the year, the U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-West Africa continued their insurgencies in northeast Nigeria and the Lake Chad region. During the week of Christmas, ISIS-West Africa released a video showing the horrific killing of 11 captives and stated it was executing Christians in retaliation for the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. The terrorist groups targeted security forces more than in any previous year. Although military and civilian forces were able to stem some attacks, Boko Haram successfully targeted military posts and convoys, houses, farmlands, and mosques; abducted civilians; and killed hostages, including numerous humanitarian aid workers. Since 2009, Boko Haram has displaced more than two million people and killed tens of thousands.

The widespread security issues of intercommunal and militia violence, rampant kidnapping, and general criminality also negatively impacted religious freedom. There were multiple reports of criminal attacks on religious and traditional leaders and houses of worship. In the surge of hundreds of kidnappings in 2019, media reported numerous incidents of kidnappings for ransom and the killing of Protestant and Catholic priests, including in Enugu, Ondo, and Kaduna states. There was less reporting of religious-based targeting in intercommunal violence in the Middle Belt region as compared to 2018; however, there continued to be reports of communal or ethnic militia attacks on entire communities, such as in Kaduna between Christian Adara and Muslim Fulani groups, in Zamfara, and in Taraba. The Nigerian government failed to effectively improve justice and security for its citizens, and was unsuccessful in addressing the immense need for accountability and reconciliation around past conflict.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in or tolerating systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and continue to designate Boko Haram as an "entity of particular concern" for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support, to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address religious freedom violations, including but not limited to:
  - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on countering hate speech based on religious identity, responding to sectarian violence, reporting on violence against religious communities, and holding accountable security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses;
  - Increase conflict resolution programming and research to reduce violence and discrimination based on religious identity;
  - Increase funding for security sector reform and rule of law programming, and include religious institutional actors in security and justice programs;
  - Establish an independent judicial commission of inquiry (COI) to investigate the Nigerian security forces' ineffective efforts to protect vulnerable religious communities, including Christians and Muslims, in the north and central regions of the country as well as the killing of IMN members in 2018 and 2019, then publicly releasing any relevant findings including evidence taken from police reports; and
- Allocate funding for programs that engage civil society, security, and official actors in inclusive efforts to protect places of worship and other holy sites.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** Central Nigeria: Overcoming Dangerous Speech and Endemic Religious Divides
- **Special Report:** Shari'ah Law in Northern Nigeria
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** Leah Sharibu

Background

Nigeria is a highly religious country, with religion playing a prominent role in politics, governance, security, and justice. The CIA World Factbook estimates the population to be more than 203 million people, with 53.5 percent identified as Muslim, 45.9 percent as Christian, and 0.6 percent as holding other beliefs. Other groups include atheists, Baha'is, Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. Indigenous traditions and syncretic practices are also found throughout the country. The 1999 constitution protects the freedom of religion or belief, prohibits discrimination, and does not assert a state religion. Twelve Muslim-majority northern states use Islamic Shari'a criminal and family laws alongside civil and customary laws. Blasphemy is prohibited in the Shari'a Penal Codes, and the Nigerian Criminal Code also includes a penalty of up to two years imprisonment for insulting a person's religion. USCIRF's contracted report on Shari'a criminal law in northern Nigeria discussed the mixed public perceptions of Shari'a institutions and hisbah police, and found that flogging remains a common form of punishment. This report and others revealed ongoing social and institutional bias against religious minorities such as Shi'a and societal taboos against atheism and humanism.

Intercommunal conflict continues to affect many states, in particular rural areas, and is related to competition over land and water resources, the expansion of farming, growth in population, the spread of small arms, religious and historical grievances, and citizenship policies. As ethnic and religious identity are closely intertwined, conflict between two ethnic groups can sometimes be framed as being between religious groups or can lead to reprisals that target individuals based on their religion.

The 2019 general elections did not see incidents of interreligious conflict. However, some campaigns did seek to appeal to voters along religious lines, and the elections were marred by disinformation, incitement to violence, vote buying, and other corrupt practices.

Systematic Repression of the Islamic Movement

In 2019, the Nigerian federal government continued to detain the leader of the IMN, Sheikh Ibrahim El Zakzaky, despite a 2016 court order demanding his release. In July, the government officially banned the IMN, but the group continued to organize religious occasions and protests around the country calling for Zakzaky's release. As a result of clashes with police in July, the IMN and media reported that more than nine people were killed. During the religious Ashura processions in September, the IMN stated that Nigerian police killed more than one dozen followers. In August, the government allowed Zakzaky and his wife to travel to India for medical care; however, once there, Zakzaky declined treatment. In October, at least nine IMN members were reportedly acquitted of charges including of being members of the IMN and unlawful assembly; an unknown number of others remain in prison. Originally inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution and maintaining photos of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Ali Khamemei on its website, the group has become the target of violence by the Nigerian government, which uses excessive force to repress IMN members and activities.

Boko Haram & ISIS-West Africa

In 2019, Boko Haram and the ISIS-affiliated faction (ISIS-West Africa) continued to wage an insurgency seeking to create an Islamic state that conforms to their Salafi-jihadi ideology. They were responsible for attacks against houses of worship, civilians, and military targets. The group again targeted members of the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, Church of the Brethren in Nigeria), abducting EYN members and destroying an EYN church in March. Media reported incidents of suspected Boko Haram members attacking mosques in Maiduguri, including in February and June. In July, Boko Haram militants attacked a funeral in Borno State and killed at least 65 people. The Nigerian army was repeatedly accused of human rights abuses against displaced persons and former or suspected Boko Haram members—including thousands of children. At the same time, the military engaged in efforts to prevent violent extremism and improve community relations, such as by holding interreligious seminars to promote counternarratives and attending prayer services to reassure worshippers fearing attacks.

Attacks in Houses of Worship

Civil society actors continued to conduct community programs to improve the protection of houses of worship and other holy sites, yet they remain particularly vulnerable. In addition to the attacks by Boko Haram, in 2019 armed groups and mobs also attacked churches and mosques throughout the country. In June, officials arrested three suspects for attempting to burn the St. Augustine Catholic Church in Kaduna. In September, a group of Christian youths reportedly attacked a mosque in Delta State out of anger over its construction. In October, a gang was accused of attacking a mosque and injuring some members. In Anambra State in May, media reported that members of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB)—a group seeking Biafran independence—attacked five Christians, including a priest, for holding a mass in defiance of IPOB orders to stay at home.

Key U.S. Policy

In August, U.S. Ambassador W. Stuart Symington left post, and on October 4, Mary Beth Leonard was sworn in as the new U.S. Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Throughout the year, the United States supported projects in Nigeria aimed at reducing conflict and improving justice and security, including programming funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) focused on managing conflict between farmers and herders. U.S. officials consistently engaged with the Nigerian government and civil society on religious freedom issues. On December 18, the U.S. Department of State for the first time placed Nigeria on its Special Watch List for countries that have engaged in or tolerated "severe violations of religious freedom," and again designated Boko Haram as an "entity of particular concern," as it had in 2018. The majority of the United States' fiscal year 2019 assistance was dedicated to emergency response and healthcare, and a smaller amount toward peace and security efforts. In May, Members of Congress introduced resolutions (H.Res.375/S.Res.170) recognizing the fifth anniversary of the Boko Haram kidnapping of hundreds of girls from Chibok and calling upon Nigeria to increase efforts to end the conflict and assist victims. In October, Members of Congress introduced a resolution (H.Res.640) "condemning the global persecution of Christians" and cited mass attacks on Christians in Nigeria in 2014 and 2018.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONERS GARY L. BAUER AND JOHNNIE MOORE

This chapter under-emphasizes the systematic, ongoing and egregious attacks against the Christian communities in the north and central parts of Nigeria, and over-simplifies the Nigerian government's challenges related to the Islamic Movement of Nigeria [IMN].

While the Nigerian government has most certainly overreached, sometimes targeting innocent Shi'a, the government is justified in its suspicion of the IMN, a group which has sometimes been referred to as the "Nigerian Hezbollah." Such a characterization is unsurprising given that group's website prominently includes photos of the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor and Iran's present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamemei—their inspiration. Moreover, their marches have included portraits of Khomeini as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah chief, Hassan Nasrallah. The IMN's leader, Sheikh Ibrahim El ZakZaky, is an avowed anti-Semite who has a well documented relationship with Iran, including prominent visits to Qom in the Islamic Republic and there have been credible allegations about his receiving training and funding directly from the Iranian regime.

Finally, it is our conviction that Boko Haram, and those tribesmen inspired by them, intend on ethnically cleansing Nigeria of any Christian it cannot subjugate while threatening everyone that stands in their way, whatever their religion or ethnicity.

NORTH KOREA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in North Korea—also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK—remained among the worst in the world. The North Korean constitution nominally grants freedom of religious belief, but it also prohibits the use of religion for "drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State." The government treats religion as a threat to the state-propagated ideology known as *Juche*, which preaches "self-reliance and self-development." Christians are especially vulnerable because the government views them as susceptible to foreign influence. Any expression of religion outside the limited number of state-sponsored houses of worship happens in secret. Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. The possession and distribution of religious texts remains a criminal offense under North Korean law. Due to fear of arrest or persecution, most North Korean underground Christians do not engage in proselytization. The *songbun* system classifies citizens based on their perceived loyalty to the state; religious practitioners belong to the "hostile" class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as other state benefits. In 2019, there were also reports that the Falun Gong movement, which originated in China, was spreading to North Korea, prompting authorities to initiate a crackdown against Falun Gong practitioners. North Korea has a network of prison camps (*kyohwaso*) and labor training camps (*rodongdanryondae*) to house an estimated 80,000–120,000 prisoners of conscience and other declared "enemies of the state." Inmates are forced to provide hard labor and suffer poor living conditions, malnutrition, and other abuses. Some experts estimate that the camps hold tens of thousands of Christians. According to defectors, the majority of Christians detained in prison camps were arrested by the Ministry of State Security because they possessed a Bible—which is treated as proof of a political crime. These prison camps do not provide access to religious services; detained Christians must pray silently inside washrooms in order to avoid surveillance.

Meanwhile, authorities on both sides of the Sino-Korean border have increased monitoring for North Korean refugees, in part to prevent "religious infiltration" from abroad. After the Hong Kong protests in June 2019, the Chinese government started scanning visitor identity cards and making it more difficult for South Korean missionaries and North Korean defectors to move around the border region. In addition, North Korean authorities monitor refugees and defectors deported from China for fear they were exposed to religion or foreign missionaries while outside the country.

There are no formally registered, independent houses of worship in North Korea. The government has established several state-sponsored religious organizations and permits five churches to operate in Pyongyang. However, human rights groups and defectors from the country allege that these institutions exist merely to provide the illusion of religious freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Fill the current vacancy and maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues as a fulltime, independent position at the U.S. Department of State and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Urge the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country; and
- Instruct the U.S. Agency for Global Media's Open Technology Fund to prioritize projects related to the dissemination of information in North Korea, including projects that utilize legacy broadcast and nonnetworked digital technologies, which are more difficult for authorities to monitor.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Disappointed UN Security Council Did Not Discuss Religious Freedom in North Korea
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Urges President Trump to Address Religious Freedom Abuses in North Korea

Background

Information about religious demographics and religious freedom conditions in North Korea is difficult to confirm and often outdated. North Koreans had traditionally followed Buddhism and an indigenous syncretic religious movement known as Chondoism (Religion of the Heavenly Way), which currently are thought to account for an estimated 4 percent and 14 percent of the population, respectively. The country had a sizeable Christian community before the Korean War, with Pyongyang known as the "Jerusalem of the East." Because of successive crackdowns, the Christian population has shrunk to an estimated less than 1 percent of the total population. Most remaining Christians in North Korea learned about the religion when they fled to China after a devastating famine during the mid-1990s. Although technically illegal, traditional superstitions, such as fortune telling, are widespread.

Defectors and Refugees

Defectors and refugees from North Korea are one of the primary sources of information about religious freedom conditions in the country. However, in recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of North Koreans arriving in South Korea. According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, 1,047 North Koreans defected to South Korea in 2019—the lowest number in 18 years. In addition, some human rights advocates have questioned the South Korean government's commitment to protecting all North Korean defectors. In November, two North Korean fishermen suspected of killing their fellow crew members fled to South Korea. Although South Korean law recognizes North Korean defectors as South Korean citizens, the South Korean government deported them because they had committed "serious non-political crimes," which some human rights groups argued set a dangerous precedent.

The Chinese government views all North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and deports them if discovered, without regard to whether or not they are at risk of persecution on return. This is in direct violation of China's obligations under the 1951 United Nations (UN) Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. In early 2019, Chinese raids rounded up dozens of North Korean refugees and disrupted parts of the informal network of brokers, charities, and middlemen who have been dubbed the "Underground Railroad." In addition, since 2017, Chinese authorities have expelled hundreds of South Korean missionaries, some of who have helped North Korean refugees escape.

United Nations Activity

In March 2019, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution calling on the Office of the High Commissioner to collect information and to develop strategies to be used in any future prosecution of North Korean officials responsible for crimes against humanity. In May, at North Korea's third Universal Periodic Review before the Council, several country delegations, including the United States, condemned the country's suppression of religion and belief. The North Korean government said it accepted recommendations urging it to allow religious believers to exercise their faith independently, but dismissed others as "severely distorting" the human rights situation. In October, UN Special Rapporteur for human rights issues in the DPRK Tomás Ojea Quintana issued a report about the general human rights situation and recommended integrating human rights into the ongoing negotiations about denuclearization. The North Korean government continued to deny the Special Rapporteur's requests to visit the country throughout 2019. In December, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the "ongoing systematic, widespread and gross violations" of religious freedom and human rights in North Korea.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, U.S. President Donald J. Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un met in Hanoi, Vietnam, but the summit was cut short due to disagreements about sanctions relief. In June, the two leaders met—along with South Korean President Moon Jae-in—at the Korean Demilitarized Zone at Panmunjom. President Trump stepped across the border, marking the first time a sitting U.S. president had set foot on North Korean territory. However, by the end of the reporting period, relations between the United States and North Korea deteriorated due to a lack of progress on security-related negotiations. In December, Congress passed and the president signed the Otto Warmbier Banking Restrictions Involving North Korea Act (S.667), as incorporated into the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (P.L. 116-92). The act imposes secondary sanctions on financial entities doing business with North Korea.

Throughout 2019, U.S. government officials continued to express concern about the human rights situation in North Korea. In July, as part of the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the State Department, President Trump met with Illyong Ju, a North Korean Christian whose family defected to South Korea in 2012. In November, the U.S. Agency for Global Media launched the Open Technology Fund (OTF) to support the development and distribution of technologies to counter censorship in countries like North Korea. In December, Congress passed and the president signed a spending bill (P.L. 116-94) that included $4 million in funding for organizations promoting human rights in North Korea. However, in December the Trump administration reportedly blocked efforts to put North Korea's human rights record on the agenda of the UN Security Council after North Korea's ambassador to the UN warned that such a discussion would constitute a "serious provocation." On December 18, the State Department redesignated North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed as the relevant presidential action ongoing sanctions to which the country is already subject under Sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974.

PAKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions across Pakistan continued to trend negatively. The systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and authorities' failure to address forced conversions of religious minorities—including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs—to Islam, severely restricted freedom of religion or belief.

While there were high-profile acquittals, the blasphemy law remained in effect. USCIRF is aware of nearly 80 individuals who remained imprisoned for blasphemy, with at least half facing a life sentence or death. After spending five years in solitary confinement for allegedly posting blasphemous content online, Junaid Hafeez was given the death sentence in December 2019. Many ongoing trials related to blasphemy experienced lengthy delays as cases were moved between judges. Moreover, these laws create a culture of impunity for violent attacks following accusations. In March 2019, a student murdered Professor Khalid Hameed over perceived "anti-Islamic" remarks. Protestors in Sindh attacked and burned Hindu shops and houses of worship following two incidents: in the first, a cleric accused a Hindu veterinarian of wrapping medicine with paper printed with Qur'anic verses; in the second, a student leveled blasphemy charges against a Hindu principal. A mob also attacked a Christian community in Punjab after a mosque claimed over its loudspeaker that the community had insulted Islam. In another incident, nearly 200 Christian families in Karachi were forced to flee their homes due to mob attacks after false blasphemy accusations against four Christian women.

Ahmadi Muslims, with their faith essentially criminalized, continued to face severe persecution from authorities as well as societal harassment due to their beliefs, with both the authorities and mobs targeting their houses of worship. In October, for example, police partially demolished a 70-year-old Ahmadiyya mosque in Punjab. In Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities, young women, often underage, continued to be kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam. Several independent institutions estimated that 1,000 women are forcibly converted to Islam each year; many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and subjected to rape. Local police, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, are often accused of complicity in these cases by failing to investigate them properly. If such cases are investigated or adjudicated, the women are reportedly questioned in front of the men they were forced to marry, creating pressure to deny coercion. In October 2019, the Sindh Government rejected a bill seeking to criminalize forced conversion. Religious minorities also faced broader social discrimination, with reports of economic boycotts.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Pakistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Enter into a binding agreement, under Section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Pakistani government to encourage substantial steps to address religious freedom violations with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
  - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
  - Repeal blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal is accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy a bailable offense, require evidence by accusers, ensure proper investigation by senior police officials, allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and enforce existing Penal Code articles criminalizing perjury and false accusations;
  - Address extremist rhetoric often preceding attacks on minorities, while protecting freedom of expression, and remove from education curricula any content discriminatory to religious minorities;
  - Create the National Commission for Minorities' Rights as mandated by the Supreme Court's 2014 decision; and
  - Remove requirements for self-identification of religion on identity documents;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Pakistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Assign a portion of existing U.S. Department of State programs to help increase security for at-risk religious communities and houses of worship.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** Pakistan's Blasphemy Law
- **Hearing:** Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Welcomes Release of Religious Prisoner of Conscience Abdul Shakoor

Background

Pakistan's population is 96.28 percent Muslim (85–90 percent Sunni, 10–15 percent Shi'a, and 0.22 percent Ahmadi), with smaller populations of Hindus (1.60 percent); Christians (1.59 percent); and Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians/Parsis (<1 percent). Pakistan was established as an Islamic Republic in 1956 with special status for Islam (for example, only Muslims can serve as president and prime minister). In October 2019, Pakistan's National Assembly blocked a bill allowing non-Muslims to hold these positions. Pakistan's constitution nominally protects religious freedom by prohibiting faith-based discrimination and guaranteeing the right to religious practices and access religious education. The constitution also reserves for religious minorities 10 seats in the National Assembly, four seats in the Senate, and 23 seats in four provincial assemblies. However, the constitution's second amendment, added in 1974, declares Ahmadis non-Muslims.

Blasphemy Law

Sections 295 and 298 of Pakistan's Penal Code criminalize acts and speech insulting a religion or belief or defiling the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, a place of worship, or religious symbols. These vague provisions are frequently abused to target religious minorities through false accusations, with cases often violating legal procedures. Accusers are typically not required to present evidence, and judges are often under extreme pressure from religious groups to convict. The law sets severe punishments, including the death penalty. To date, Pakistan has not executed anyone for blasphemy. While Muslims represent the greatest number of individuals charged or sentenced, religious minorities face a disproportionately higher rate of allegations and arrests. Frequently, blasphemy charges occur in an atmosphere of societal harassment or mob violence. Many accused individuals never reach the courtroom; vigilante violence has killed 62 people since 1990, with few prosecutions. Even lawyers defending those charged with blasphemy, presiding judges, and individuals speaking against the law are targeted, as with the 2011 murder of Punjabi Governor Salman Taseer.

Anti-Ahmadiyya Laws

Ahmadi Muslims face severe restrictions. Besides the constitution's second amendment, articles 298(b) and 298(c) of the Penal Code prohibit Ahmadis from self-identifying as Muslims, propagating or disseminating materials about their faith, or calling their houses of worship mosques. Ahmadis have been imprisoned simply for sharing Ahmadiyya literature. They are prohibited from voting as Muslims and were previously denied registration under joint electoral lists, relegating them to separate electoral lists with less political power. In 2018, the Islamabad High Court ruled that individuals must disclose their faith to receive identity documents, with civil society arguing this was meant to target Ahmadis.

Violence by Extremist Groups

While terrorism decreased in recent years, Pakistan remains a base for extremist groups, such as the Pakistani Taliban and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. These groups often target Shi'a and Sufi Muslims in addition to non-Muslims. In May 2019, a Sufi shrine in Lahore was bombed, killing 10 people and wounding 20. The previous month, a bombing claimed by the Pakistani Taliban and the Islamic State targeted a Hazara Shi'a neighborhood in Quetta, killing 24. Provincial and local authorities increased security for Shi'a during Muharram. In July, as part of a crackdown on extremism after the Financial Action Task Force placed Pakistan on its "grey" list, authorities arrested Hafiz Saeed for supporting Lashkar-e-Taiba. In February 2020, an anti-terrorism court convicted him of terrorist financing.

Positive Developments

There were positive developments in 2019, such as the opening of the Kartarpur Corridor with India, allowing Sikh pilgrims to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan's Punjab Province; Prime Minister Imran Khan laying the foundation stone of Pakistan's first Sikh university; and the reopening and renovation of a Hindu temple in Sialkot. In January 2019, the Supreme Court upheld Asia Bibi's acquittal from blasphemy charges, and she departed for Canada later in the year. Abdul Shakoor, an Ahmadi who was part of USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, was released from prison in March after being sentenced to eight years in 2015 on terrorism charges for sharing Ahmadiyya literature. In September, the Supreme Court acquitted Wajih-ul Hassan, who spent 18 years imprisoned with a death sentence under false blasphemy charges. The government has taken steps to address educational material with discriminatory content against religious minorities, including announcing in April that it would bring 30,000 madrassas under government control to combat religious extremism, despite earlier provincial governments' failures to register madrassas comprehensively under the 2015 National Action Plan. In 2019, the government also announced it would implement a common national curriculum beginning in 2021.

Key U.S. Policy

During 2019, Pakistan continued to be a key partner for U.S. security interests, particularly with the Afghanistan peace process. After President Donald J. Trump suspended military assistance to Pakistan in 2018 due to its unwillingness to confront certain terrorist groups, in particular the Haqqani network, this bilateral relationship saw improvement in 2019, especially with Prime Minister Khan making his first visit to the United States in July and the U.S. government seeking Pakistani support for talks with the Taliban. Despite this progress, U.S. officials continued to raise concerns about religious freedom violations. In February, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback visited Islamabad to meet with Pakistani officials to push for positive change on religious freedom. A number of senior U.S. officials also highlighted Pakistan's religious freedom violations during the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom and President Trump met with Abdul Shakoor in the White House. then Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells further elaborated on these issues during an October hearing before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation. On December 18, the State Department redesignated Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA, but again issued a waiver on any related sanctions "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

RUSSIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

During 2019, religious freedom conditions in Russia deteriorated. The government continued to target "nontraditional" religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Russian legislation criminalizes "extremism" without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. The Jehovah's Witnesses, whom the government banned outright as "extremist" in 2017, faced intensified persecution in 2019. By the end of the year, hundreds of members remained in detention, had travel restrictions imposed upon them, or were under investigation. The Jehovah's Witnesses report that as of the end of 2019, 313 members had been charged, put on trial, or convicted for involvement in the group, and that Russian authorities conducted 489 raids on the private homes of their members during the year. According to Human Rights Watch, as of January 2020, 32 Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia were imprisoned for their faith. In 2019, the Russian government also continued to use its anti-extremism law to prosecute Muslims—particularly adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat and readers of the Turkish theologian Said Nursi—and Scientologists for peaceful religious activity.

In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy, and harassing Muslims at prayer services. In September, for example, suspected members of the Chechen Security Services allegedly abducted Ramzan Shaikhayev. Shaikhayev previously had been detained for what authorities described to his wife as "a check on his religious beliefs." In December, police in the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala set up checkpoints outside a mosque and demanded the personal information of those leaving the prayer service. Local Muslims described such operations as typical and designed to intimidate them. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov oversaw or condoned egregious abuses based on his religious views, including against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community and women.

In Russian-occupied Crimea, the occupation authorities continued to enforce Russia's repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law. In 2019, authorities conducted mass arrests of politically active Crimean Tatars, whom they accused of membership in the banned Islamic Party Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Many face lengthy prison sentences. On June 28, 2019, occupation authorities seized and closed the Cathedral of Vladimir and Olga in Simferopol, the main cathedral of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in Crimea. Members report that, since the occupation, the OCU has faced systematic persecution for its perceived ties to Ukrainian nationalism, including the confiscation of church property and the harassment of clergy and congregants. On November 6, 2019, a court in the western Crimean city of Yevpatoriya ordered the destruction of an OCU chapel.

Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine pursue an exclusionary religious policy that privileges the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. In the so-called Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) in eastern Ukraine, rebel authorities supported by Russia have effectively banned all religious groups that failed to obtain legal registration by October 15, 2018, which includes all Protestant communities, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the OCU. On November 26, 2019, the LPR banned 12 Baptist books as "extremist," including a Russian translation of the Gospel of John.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Russia to end religious freedom abuses, release religious prisoners of conscience, and permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass legislation condemning the deteriorating religious freedom environment in Russia, and highlight—in briefings and hearings—the Russian government's failure to bring its religion and extremism laws in line with international human rights standards; and
- Pass the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act (H.R.5408), which calls on the President to take into account Russia's religious freedom violations in Russian-occupied Crimea and Russian-controlled Donbas when determining CPC designations under IRFA.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** Dennis Christensen
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** Ivan Matsitsky
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Statement on Travel Ban for Russian Religious Freedom Violators

Background

The Russian government views independent religious activity as threatening social and political stability and its own control, while simultaneously cultivating relationships with the country's so-called "traditional" religions. The population is religiously diverse, with around 68 percent identifying as Russian Orthodox Christian, 7 percent identifying as Muslim, and 25 percent comprising an array of religious minorities including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'is.

The government enforces laws that restrict religious freedom, including a 1996 religion law; a 2002 law on combating extremism; and more recent laws on blasphemy, "stirring up religious hatred," and "missionary activity." These vague laws give Russian authorities broad powers to define and prosecute any religious speech or activity or ban any religious literature that they deem harmful. The anti-extremism law, for example, lacks a clear definition of extremism, and the use or advocacy of violence is not a prerequisite for such a designation. Because virtually any speech can be prosecuted, the law is a powerful way to intimidate religious communities; they can be financially blacklisted or liquidated, and individuals can be subjected to criminal prosecutions. At the end of the reporting period, the Federal List of Extremist Materials (maintained by the Ministry of Justice) contained 5,003 items, the possession of which is criminalized.

The religion law sets strict registration requirements and empowers state officials to impede religious groups' activities. It also broadly defines and prohibits "missionary activities," including preaching, praying, disseminating religious materials, and even answering questions about religion outside of officially designated sites.

Administrative Harassment

For many minority religious communities, acquiring an officially designated place of worship is virtually impossible, forcing them to meet in residential or commercial buildings. Although the 1996 Religion Law allows religious meetings on private property, such communities remain vulnerable to local officials, who can seize, shutter, or destroy property for alleged usage violations. In a particularly severe case of government harassment, Yevgeny Kim was stripped of his Russian citizenship after serving out his sentence for studying the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi. As a stateless person without papers, he was incarcerated in a detention center for foreigners.

Jehovah's Witnesses

In 2019, the Russian government accelerated its persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. In February 2019, a court in Oryol sentenced Dennis Christensen to six years in prison for leading a Jehovah's Witness group. During the same month, local law enforcement in Surgut detained and tortured a group of 19 Jehovah's Witnesses. In September 2019, five Jehovah's Witnesses from Saratov were given sentences ranging from two to three and a half years. On November 5, 2019, a court in the Siberian city of Tomsk sentenced another man, Sergei Klimov, to six years in prison for his leadership of a Jehovah's Witness group. On December 13, 2019, a court in Penza sentenced Vladimir Alushkin to six years in prison for participating in Jehovah's Witness worship services and sharing his beliefs. In October 2019 alone, there were reportedly 83 house raids against Jehovah's Witnesses across Russia and in Russian-occupied Crimea. On March 20, 2019, in perhaps the biggest raid against Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea to date, armed members of the Russian security service (FSB) raided at least eight homes and detained six members for interrogation. Russian authorities subsequently charged one of them with "extremism," while another remains under investigation.

Occupied Ukraine

On March 27, 2019, authorities conducted massive raids across the Crimean capital city of Simferopol, arresting 24 Crimean Tatars for alleged membership in HT, as well as terrorism. Authorities allegedly tortured at least four of the men and planted evidence, including Islamic literature banned in Russia. All were active in, or affiliated with, Crimean Solidarity, a secular human rights group opposed to the Russian occupation. On June 10, another eight men were arrested and charged with membership in HT. On November 12, 2019, six Crimean Tatars were given between seven and 19 years in prison for alleged membership in HT. No evidence of involvement in terrorism or acts of violence is necessary for such convictions.

Since the 2014 invasion, the larger Muslim community in occupied Crimea has faced persistent harassment. USCIRF has heard reports of electricity to mosques being shut off right before Ramadan and only restored by bribing local authorities. Communities cannot celebrate holidays like Ramadan without official permits, which are often denied or withheld unless a bribe is paid. Video cameras have been installed in mosques throughout the region, and many communities report constant surveillance and frequent raids.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S.-Russia relations remain at a low point amid tensions over Russian military involvement in Syria, the illegal occupation of Ukrainian territory, and allegations of Russian tampering in U.S. elections. On March 15, 2019, the United States, Canada, and the European Union announced sanctions against Russian individuals and companies for their involvement in the occupation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine. On December 23, 2019, John J. Sullivan was sworn in as the U.S. Ambassador to Russia, having previously served as the deputy secretary of state. The U.S. government has implemented numerous sanctions over the occupation of Crimea, most recently in January 2020. In September, the State Department banned two high-ranking regional officers in Russia's Investigative Committee from entering the country for allegedly torturing seven Jehovah's Witnesses in Surgut. The department noted Russia's declining religious freedom environment and called on the government to end its campaign against the Jehovah's Witnesses. On December 18, 2019, the U.S. Department of State again placed Russia on its "Special Watch List" for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to IRFA, as it had in 2018.

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 *husseiniyas* (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.

SYRIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

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.

TAJIKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, the Tajikistani government's already dismal record on religious freedom deteriorated. The regime of President Emomali Rahmon maintained its repressive policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and persecuting minority communities—especially actual and alleged Salafists, a term that is broadly applied. Authorities pursued a crackdown on various attributes of faith, including restrictions on wedding and funerary banquets, and pursued extralegal bans on beards and hijabs. Under the guise of a struggle against religious extremism, the government continued to torment former members of the banned Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), sentencing rank-and-file former party members to extensive jail time and extraditing former party elites from abroad. Tajikistani authorities harassed family members of imprisoned IRPT members for speaking at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw in September, earning Tajikistan a rebuke from the U.S. delegation in its closing remarks.

On July 29, 2019, President Rahmon signed an order prohibiting the import and sale of clothing representing a "foreign national culture." The ban is widely perceived as a further assault on female Islamic dress. Women are already forbidden from wearing hijabs in numerous public places, including hospitals and schools. Locals report that officials stop women in hijabs, record their personal information, and force them to wear their headscarves in the "Tajik fashion" (shortened and pulled back to reveal hair). In December, Nilufar Rajabova reported that she had been detained with more than 20 other women by the police in Dushanbe, who told them to go back to Iran or Afghanistan if they wanted to wear the hijab. Rajabova was eventually fined for "hooliganism."

Many religious minorities hide their affiliations for fear of government scrutiny and social backlash, and expressed concern over government plans to document individual religious affiliation in the upcoming census. As reported in the Russian-language press, one Member of Parliament explained that the government already believes that around 90 percent of the population is Muslim, so the goal of the census is to get an accurate breakdown of the remaining 10 percent. The Jehovah's Witness community has been deemed illegal since 2007, and on September 10, 2019, Shamil Hakimov was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison—followed by three years prohibition from working in a religious organization—for sharing his beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. In early 2019, government officials burned 5,000 Baptist calendars that had been seized at Dushanbe International Airport after being deemed "propaganda of an alien religion." Social tolerance for religious minority communities continued to decline. Members of less traditional faiths in Tajikistan, like Seventh-Day Adventists and Presbyterians, as well members of communities with ancient ties to the region, like Zoroastrians and Shi'a Muslims, all report a rise in pressure and hostility from family and community.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** OSCE HDIM in Warsaw in September 2019
- **Briefing:** Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE
- **Legislation Factsheet:** Anti-Extremism Laws

Background

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and has been ruled since 1992 by President Rahmon, who has concentrated power in the hands of his family. Tajikistan experienced a five-year civil war (1992–1997) following his ascension to power, resulting in more than 100,000 deaths; the post-war amnesty included many Tajikistani officials responsible for torture. The government is weak and highly corrupt, and 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product is from labor remittances, mostly from Russia. The population is predominantly Sunni Muslim—around 86 percent Sunni—while Shi'a Muslims, mostly located in the mountainous east, comprise roughly 4 percent. The remaining 10 percent includes Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

Tajikistan's legal environment for freedom of religion or belief sharply declined after the adoption of several highly restrictive laws in 2009. In particular, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions set onerous registration requirements; criminalized unregistered religious activity, private religious education, and proselytism; set strict limits on the number and size of mosques; allowed state interference with the appointment of imams and the content of sermons; required official permission for religious organizations to provide religious instruction and communicate with foreign coreligionists; and imposed state controls on the content, publication, and import of religious materials. Small Protestant and other groups cannot obtain legal status under these burdensome registration requirements. In 2011 and 2012, administrative and Penal Code amendments set new penalties—including large fines and prison terms—for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in "unapproved" religious meetings. A 2011 law on parental responsibility banned minors from any organized religious activity except funerals.

Tajikistan's anti-extremism law fails to define extremism clearly and often leads to arbitrary detention. Extremist, terrorist, or revolutionary activities are punishable without requiring acts that involve violence or incitement of imminent violence, while trials under these charges lack due process and procedural safeguards. The Tajikistani government continued to use concerns over Islamist extremism to justify actions against participants in certain religious or political activities. Although the existence of the IRPT—the former Soviet Union's only legal Islamic political party—was a condition of the post-civil war peace treaty, the Tajikistani government banned the IRPT as an extremist group in September 2015. The government's suppression of the IRPT is intertwined with its broader repression of Muslim religious practices; the group had called for respecting Tajikistan's secular constitution as well as its international religious freedom commitments, and it opposed restrictions on beards, headscarves, religious education, and children attending mosques. "Salafism" has been banned as extremist since 2009; as a result, the mere performance of Muslim rituals in ways the government deems "foreign" or inconsistent with the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is tantamount to criminal activity.

Prisoners

An unknown number of individuals are imprisoned under dubious charges of religious extremism and terrorism, and there are worrying signs that the country's prison system is straining to accommodate them. On May 20, 2019, a massive prison riot in Vakhdat resulted in the deaths of at least 29 prisoners, including several senior members of the IRPT. This was the second prison riot in six months, and in both instances the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility. Observers fear that Tajikistan's overburdened prison system is becoming fertile ground for ISIS recruiters. Torture and corruption are commonplace, with bribery alleged as a common means for escaping harsh treatment. The International Committee for the Red Cross has been denied access to Tajikistani prisons since 2004. On October 25, 2019, Tajikistani officials approved an amnesty legislation that would release around 20,000 people to mark the 25th anniversary of the country's constitution; that figure exceeded some estimates placing the entire prison population at around 10,000 inmates.

Government Control of Islam

Despite constitutional guarantees of separation between religion and state, the government maintained strict control over both the Muslim clergy and Islamic practice. Imams are often salaried by the government and act as agents of the state. Clergy are required to visit important historical sites and state museums, and they can be fired for insufficient knowledge of national culture and official symbolism. In September 2019, imams in the district of Mastchoh were reportedly using money raised through offerings and payments for clerical services to fund the construction of a local branch of the president's political party.

In 2019, the building that once housed the only madrassa in the region of Khovalinsk was turned into a music school. Most madrassas were closed after passage of the 2009 religion law. Students can only receive a Muslim education at the Islamic Institute of Tajikistan and the government does not appoint or recognize any imams who were educated abroad. Children brought back to Tajikistan from foreign madrassas are forced to stay for an indefinite period in special boarding schools for "readjustment," and parents report not even being allowed to bring their children home on weekends.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. policy toward Tajikistan has emphasized the importance of security and regional connectivity. Securing Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan and reducing the flow of narcotics and illicit goods that finance terrorist groups in that country remains a priority. On January 6–7, 2020, just after the reporting period, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells visited Tajikistan and announced that the United States was "deepening our security cooperation in the areas of border security, counterterrorism, law enforcement, and joint military exercises and training." She referred several times to the "more than $200 million" in aid that the U.S. government had provided Tajikistan to secure its border and expressed concern about restrictions on fundamental freedoms.

The State Department has designated Tajikistan as a CPC repeatedly since 2016, most recently in December 2019, but has maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'"

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational "black hole" with an abysmal record on freedom of the press. This landscape makes it difficult to chronicle the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. Nevertheless, the available information presents a bleak picture.

The government continued to be suspicious of all independent religious activity and maintained a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmenistani law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. Persons accused of criminal religious offenses may be tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Convicts often are disappeared in the state's prison system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. Many religious prisoners are believed to be held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and starvation. In 2019, Akmyrat Soyunov and Eziz Hudayberdiyev, two alleged followers of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, reportedly died in this prison. The closed informational environment of Turkmenistan makes it impossible to determine how many other religious prisoners the government is holding under similar conditions, or how many have likewise died in its custody in 2019.

The government also continued its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to military service, and it intensified punishment for them in 2019, arresting seven conscientious objectors during the year and imposing the harshest prison sentence known to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation, and take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under IRFA Section 405(a)(22);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistani government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Press at the highest levels to secure the identification and immediate release of individuals imprisoned in Turkmenistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and urge the government of Turkmenistan to desist immediately from the practice of "disappearing" prisoners; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and close the prison at Ovadan-Depe.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation:** OSCE HDIM in Warsaw in September 2019
- **Legislation Factsheet:** Registration Laws
- **Briefing:** Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who enforces a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage, and who demands that the population conform to his personal whims. Since taking power in 2007, President Berdymukhamedov has steadily consolidated his grip on power and the ostentation of his cultic image. A new 2016 constitution removed the presidential age limit and Berdymukhamedov was reelected in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote in an election widely regarded as unfair. Turkmenistan's primary security concerns relate to its long border with Afghanistan and the government's fears about extremist infiltration and influence on the domestic Turkmen population. The government effectively leverages this perceived threat to maintain its iron grip over every aspect of Turkmenistani society, including religion. The majority of the population—around 89 percent—is Sunni Muslim, with Orthodox Christians as the second-largest group, comprising around 9 percent of the population. These statistics are more a reflection of ethnicity than of actual religious practice; Turkmen ethnic identity includes cultural Islam, but the secular government's Soviet-type approach to religion strictly regulates and often discourages active religious practice.

The 2016 Religion Law asserts that Turkmenistan is a secular state with religious freedom. However, it requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice under intrusive criteria (including having 50 adult citizen founders), prohibits any activity by unregistered groups, requires that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans worship in private homes and private religious education, and prohibits the wearing of religious garb in public except by clerics. All religious activity is overseen by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), which approves the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, the import and publication of religious literature, and the registration of all religious organizations. The law does not specify the criteria for gaining SCROEERIR approval, which enables arbitrary enforcement. The registration process requires religious organizations to provide the government with detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Registered communities must reregister every three years, and religious activity is not permitted in prisons or the military.

Conscientious Objectors

In 2018, after a four-year moratorium, Turkmenistan resumed its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to compulsory military service. This practice has not only continued in 2019, but penalties have also become more severe. Seven of the 10 conscientious objectors currently known to be in prison were arrested in 2019 and charged under article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. In July 2019, authorities sentenced 19-year-old Bahtiyar Atahanov to four years in prison, the harshest sentence to date for conscientious objection. Most sentences are between one and two years; however, the military forcibly conscripted Atahanov before he was charged, which allowed the courts to treat him as an active-duty soldier in dereliction of his duty. In November 2019, a court sentenced Serdar Dovletov to three years for "fraudulently" attempting to evade service. All those charged for conscientious objection are Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to comply with compulsory military service on religious grounds. There is no civilian alternative to military service available to conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan. David Petrosov and Selim Taganov, two Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in September and October 2019, respectively, attempted to obtain alternative service, but the military refused their requests.

Government Control and Suppression of Islam

All religious activity is under tight government control in Turkmenistan, but Islam faces particular scrutiny. Unlike its approach to other faiths, the government directly controls the practice of Islam by appointing religious leaders and dictating the content of sermons and prayers. The state-mandated content for imams regularly includes prayers for President Berdymukhamedov, asking not only for his health and long life, but also for God to punish his enemies. Sermons include tributes to the president, reminding the congregation that all that is good in their lives derives from Berdymukhamedov's "wise policies." Unlike in previous years, there was no public announcement from the state-controlled Muslim Board marking the start of Ramadan in 2019 and no guidelines published for the traditional tithe. In fact, the state-controlled media made no mention of the observance. Citizens reported being afraid to celebrate the holiday, concerned they would be labelled as extremists. In early 2019, there were scattered reports of police summoning and questioning individuals about whether their ultimate loyalty was to God or the president. In January and February, authorities in the capital city of Ashgabat forcibly detained and shaved an unknown number of young men under 40. Police in Lebap Region reportedly detained a young man with a beard for several days and forced him to drink alcohol.

Key U.S. Policy

The government of Turkmenistan engages in a number of border and regional security programs with the U.S. government, as well as educational and cultural exchanges. Turkmenistan enjoys most-favored-nation trading status with the United States and receives U.S. foreign aid to strengthen the security of its border with Afghanistan. Although cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, the U.S. government has prioritized security concerns related to the ongoing war in Afghanistan in its policy with the country. The State Department has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014, and redesignated it in December 2019, but has repeatedly used a waiver against any related sanctions "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'" This waiver effectively neutralizes the consequences of Turkmenistan's CPC designation, removes any incentive for the government to reform its brutal policies, and lends credence to the regime's claims that these policies are warranted by security concerns. In 2019, the Turkmenistani government facilitated the largest Taliban capture of Afghan National Army soldiers along its southern border. This incident raises further questions about the effectiveness of maintaining a waiver intended to benefit the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan, where the United States is engaged in a conflict with the Taliban in coordination with the Afghan National Army.

VIETNAM

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam generally trended the same as the previous year. The government continued to enforce the Law on Belief and Religion, which requires religious organizations to register with the state, and to harass unregistered religious groups. During USCIRF's September 2019 visit, multiple religious groups applying for registration reported that local officials regularly exceeded their authority by demanding information—such as congregants' names—not explicitly required by the law. Applications were often pending with no formal decision for months or even years. Throughout the year, authorities interrogated, harassed, or physically assaulted individuals affiliated with unregistered religious groups—including the independent Cao Dai, Khmer Krom Buddhists, and Duong Van Minh—when they attempted to attend religious ceremonies.

Ethnic minority communities faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, including physical assault, detention, or banishment. An estimated 10,000 Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands remain effectively stateless because local authorities have refused to issue identity cards, in many instances in retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith. During USCIRF's 2019 visit, multiple pastors reported that authorities in the Central Highlands regularly raided or closed down house churches. In October, authorities initiated a campaign to limit the length and scale of traditional funerals, effectively prohibiting Hmong funeral practices, which typically last several days to a week. In addition, USCIRF received reports during the year that police interrogated and detained Montagnard Christians for participating in religious freedom conferences overseas and for meeting with U.S. government officials.

Local authorities continued to expropriate or destroy property belonging to religious communities. For example, in January, authorities in Kontum Province demolished Son Linh Tu Pagoda, which had been affiliated with the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. In October, plainclothes police beat up six independent Hoa Hao Buddhists protesting plans by the state-recognized Hoa Hao Buddhist Church to demolish and rebuild An Hoa Tu temple in An Giang Province. In several northeastern provinces, authorities burned at least 35 funeral sheds central to the Duong Van Minh's core practices. Local authorities also expropriated land claimed by the Catholic Church in Loc Hung Garden in Ho Chi Minh City and Con Dau parish in Danang. In some instances, the national government encouraged local officials to reach a settlement with victims of expropriation, but it generally failed to hold local authorities accountable for such abuses.

In 2019, the Vietnamese government continued to arrest and imprison peaceful religious leaders and religious freedom advocates. Nguyen Bac Truyen—a Hoa Hao Buddhist advocate sentenced to 11 years in April 2018—remained imprisoned at the end of the reporting period and is reportedly in poor health. In some cases, authorities physically assaulted prisoners of conscience who protested prison conditions. During its visit, USCIRF learned that authorities at Ba Sao prison, Nam Ha Province, refused to provide a Bible or a priest to Le Dinh Luong, a Catholic environmental activist and prisoner of conscience since 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and enter into a binding agreement with the government, as authorized under Section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth commitments to improve religious freedom;
- Prioritize funding for programs that build the capacity of local authorities to respect and protect religious freedom and related human rights, focusing on programs that help officials manage interreligious disputes; and
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City to track applications to register religious organizations and religious activities to monitor authorities' compliance with the Law on Belief and Religion, and to develop a list of houses of worship or religious sites of unique spiritual, cultural, or historical importance and work with Vietnamese authorities to ensure that they receive special protection from land grabbing or development projects.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Send regular delegations focused on religious freedom and related human rights to Vietnam and request to visit areas impacted by restrictions on religious freedom, such as the Central Highlands, Northern Highlands, and Mekong Delta, as well as request to visit prisoners of conscience, such as Nguyen Bac Truyen.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi in September 2019
- **Country Update:** An Assessment of Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion
- **Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project adoption:** Nguyen Bac Truyen

Background

Vietnam's constitution permits citizens to "follow any religion or follow none" and requires the government to respect and protect freedom of religion. However, the constitution also authorizes authorities to override human rights, including religious freedom, for reasons of "national security, social order and security, social morality, and community well-being." Vietnam's Law on Belief and Religion, which went into effect on January 1, 2018, requires religious communities to register their organizations, activities, and places of worship with the government. The law requires religious organizations to have operated for at least five years before applying for registration. It also grants registered religious organizations status as legal entities.

According to the CIA World Factbook, a quarter of Vietnam's estimated 97 million citizens identify with a formal religion, while many more partake in traditional folk practices. Approximately 15 percent of the population follow Buddhism, while 7 percent belong to the Catholic Church. Other religious traditions with a significant presence include Hoa Hao Buddhism, Cao Dai, Evangelical Protestantism, and Islam. By the end of 2019, the government officially recognized 16 religions. However, many religious groups refused to register due to fear of persecution or concern for their independence, leading to both government-sponsored and independent organizations competing to represent the religion.

Positive Developments

Religious followers in urban, economically developed areas usually are able to exercise their religion or belief freely, openly, and without fear. For example, in September 2019, members of the recognized Cao Dai church held an outdoor festival with more than 250,000 people. In August, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc attended a conference of religious dignitaries in Danang and praised the contributions of religious groups to Vietnam's social welfare. In May, the government released the Venerable Thach Thuol, a Khmer Krom Buddhist monk imprisoned in 2013 for teaching the Khmer language in his temple. In December, authorities in Ho Chi Minh City listed the historic Thu Thiem church and convent as a "heritage site," which protects it from anticipated urban development. There were no reports of Red Flag Associations—state-affiliated militant groups—engaging in open attacks against religious groups in 2019. Finally, the Government Committee for Religious Affairs has taken proactive steps to investigate complaints against local authorities who allegedly abuse their authority under the Law on Belief and Religion.

United Nations Human Rights Reviews

In January 2019, at Vietnam's third Universal Periodic Review before the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, several country delegations, including the United States, advised the government of Vietnam to remove the mandatory registration requirements from the Law on Belief and Religion to comply with international human rights standards. In March, the UN Human Rights Committee's concluding observations in its review of Vietnam's record under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) expressed concern that unregistered and unrecognized religious groups face harassment, surveillance, pressure to renounce their faith, and seizure or destruction of property and houses of worship. The Committee also recommended that the government prosecute members of the Red Flag Associations involved in attacks against Catholics and other religious minorities. In September, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc announced that his government would study the Committee's recommendations and take steps to improve implementation of the ICCPR. In addition, the UN Secretary General's report about intimidation and reprisals highlighted incidents from Vietnam, including the imposition of a travel ban on Bui Thi Kim Phuong, wife of Nguyen Bac Truyen, before her planned departure to Germany and the United States to advocate on her husband's behalf.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Vietnam have close economic and defense relationships and regularly cooperate on maritime security and humanitarian aid. In May 2019, during the 23rd U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue in Hanoi, U.S. diplomats raised concerns with Vietnamese officials about religious freedom conditions and individual prisoners of conscience. Vietnamese authorities prevented Hua Phi—subdignitary of the independent Cao Dai—from meeting with the U.S. delegation. In July, as part of the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the State Department, President Donald J. Trump met with two victims of religious persecution from Vietnam: Luong Xuan Duong, a Cao Dai practitioner, and A Ga, a Montagnard Evangelical pastor. Also in July, the U.S. Trademark Trial and Appeal Board cancelled the state-affiliated Cao Dai Overseas Missionary's trademark registration for the official name of the Cao Dai religion, which had undermined temples affiliated with the independent Cao Dai.

USCIRF has recommended that Vietnam be designated as a CPC every year since 2002. The U.S. Department of State had designated Vietnam as a CPC in 2004 and entered into a binding agreement with the government under IRFA. When the State Department lifted the CPC designation in 2006, USCIRF concluded it was too soon to determine if progress on religious freedom would endure.

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to trend negatively amid the country's ongoing political instability and civil war. Lack of security remains the primary challenge to protecting the freedom of religion or belief in the country. Despite peace talks between the U.S. government and the Taliban, ongoing attacks by extremist groups, most notably the Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), not only threatened Afghanistan's overall stability but also endangered Shi'a Muslims in particular. Terrorist attacks against the Shi'a community, targeting its leadership, neighborhoods, festivals, and houses of worship, have intensified in recent years, with this trend continuing in 2019. These terrorist attacks against religious minority communities mirror broader concerns with the ongoing problem of terrorism directed against Afghan civilian, government, and military targets. In October 2019, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported comparable levels of civilian casualties in 2019 as in the previous year (8,239), the majority of which were a result of attacks by nonstate actors. Throughout the year, terrorist attacks in Afghanistan intensified due to opposition to the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations and violence linked to the September 2019 presidential election, a flashpoint for conflict within Afghan society.

In recent years, Afghanistan has made efforts to address inequalities facing religious minority communities. Since the fall of the Taliban government, Shi'a Muslims' sociopolitical standing has improved, with members of the community holding key positions in government, media, and private industry. Hindus and Sikhs have been represented in parliament since 2016 with a reserved seat and some have been employed in government service. In November 2019, the Afghan government also instituted visa-free travel for Afghan-origin Sikhs and Hindus currently residing in India. Despite such efforts, the small communities of religious minorities—including Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and Baha'is, who experienced egregious human rights violations under Taliban rule—remained endangered, without the ability to observe their faith publicly for fear of violent reprisal by terrorist groups or society at large.

The Afghan government has taken some steps to improve security for religious minorities in recent years, such as increasing the presence of security forces in Shi'a neighborhoods and authorizing the arming of Shi'a civilians under police authority during festivals such as Ashura. In part due to these efforts, there has been a decline in terrorist attacks against Shi'a religious festivals. However, the government's lack of control over the entirety of the country's territory, ongoing problems with corruption, and security forces' lack of capacity in the areas the government does control hampered the overall effectiveness of these efforts. According to a January 2019 special report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the government had direct control over territory representing only 63.5 percent of the total Afghan population.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Afghanistan on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and continue to designate the Taliban and ISKP as "entities of particular concern" for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA;
- Ensure that protections for freedom of religion or belief are integrated into any future negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan government, emphasizing to Afghan political leadership the close relationship between religious freedom and overall security;
- Integrate religious freedom concerns, including the protection of houses of worship, into assistance and training programs focused on countering terrorism, resolving sectarian conflict, and bolstering law and order funded by the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and the U.S. Department of Defense; and
- Encourage the Afghan Ministries of Education, Information and Culture, and Hajj and Religious Affairs to ensure that textbooks and curricula do not propagate intolerant teachings that denigrate religious minorities and work to facilitate cooperation between faith leaders and scholars of all religions in Afghanistan to foster societal religious tolerance.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Protecting Houses of Worship and Holy Sites
- **Country Update:** Promoting Religious Freedom in Afghanistan

Background

Afghanistan has a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns (42 percent), Tajiks (27 percent), Hazaras (9 percent), Uzbeks (9 percent), Turkmen (3 percent), and Baloch (2 percent). Historically, the nation also had a religiously diverse population; however, the vast majority of non-Muslims fled the country after the Taliban consolidated control of the government in 1996. The Hindu and Sikh population, for example, dropped from 220,000 in the early 1990s to just around 1,000 today. Afghanistan's current population is approximately 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a, including Ismailis), with non-Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and others) comprising the remaining 0.3 percent.

Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognizes Islam as the official state religion and requires all parliamentary laws to respect Islamic principles and educational curricula to be based on the Islamic faith. Moreover, the constitution requires the courts to rely on Hanafi Shari'a jurisprudence in the absence of governing constitutional or legal provisions, which has the effect of criminalizing blasphemy (subject to the death penalty), apostasy, and proselytizing by non-Muslims. A vaguely worded media law also criminalizes "anti-Islamic content" with its enforcement delegated to a commission of government officials and journalists. The constitution does provide that non-Muslims are free to perform their "religious rituals" but "within the bounds of law," which allows for laws limiting their religious practices in violation of international human rights standards.

Violence by Nonstate Actors

Terrorist groups continued to operate in the country following the 2001 U.S. military invasion, launching attacks against a wide range of U.S., Afghan government, and civilian targets, including religious minorities. In 2019, amid the ongoing antigovernment insurgency, the Taliban and ISKP, which emerged in 2015, continued attacks against religious minority communities, in particular Shi'a Hazara who were denounced as infidels and violently persecuted under Taliban rule. Recent attacks included an August 17, 2019, suicide bombing of a wedding reception of a Shi'a Hazara couple in Kabul, killing 63 people and wounding 182; the July 6, 2019, bombing of a Shi'a mosque in Ghazni, killing two people and wounding 20; a March 31, 2019, attack against a Shi'a shrine and cemetery in Kabul during Nowruz celebrations, killing six people and wounding 20; and a March 7, 2019, attack on a memorial service—held for a Hazara leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was killed by the Taliban in 1995—in a Shi'a Hazara neighborhood in Kabul, killing 11 people and wounding 95.

The Afghan government's ability to provide security for its citizens has been hampered by its limited control over the entirety of its sovereign territory. The government also possesses limited capacity within the territory it does control. This includes lack of government oversight over religious educational institutions, with nearly 100,000 of 160,000 madrassas across the country remaining unregistered, according to the State Department's 2018 Country Reports on Terrorism. The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs reports that this lack of oversight has resulted in these institutions being used to propagate teachings in line with the Taliban's extremist ideology and to serve as a key recruiting ground for extremist groups among vulnerable populations.

Other Concerns for Religious Minorities

Despite an expressed commitment to their homeland, many members of the dwindling non-Muslim communities have felt pressured to leave Afghanistan due to social, political, and economic discrimination, ongoing attacks by extremist groups, and the government's perceived unwillingness to provide adequate security. A number of Sikh families have resorted to living in gurdwaras due to lack of available housing and faced restrictions on practicing Sikh funeral rites requiring cremation, an act opposed by local Muslim communities. Despite the government not restricting religious minorities from constructing houses of worship, Hindus—as well as Christians—have also abandoned visually distinctive houses of worship in favor of plain, nondescript buildings to avoid potential reprisals from extremist groups. In 2007, the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts of the Supreme Court declared the Baha'i faith to be blasphemous. The Baha'i community has lived in secret since this ruling.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government has been heavily engaged with Afghanistan since 2001 through varying military, counterterrorism, economic, and humanitarian assistance programs. While Afghanistan has remained a central focus of U.S. policy in South Asia, the Trump administration has expressed its desire to withdraw the remaining 14,000 U.S. troops in the country. In pursuit of this goal, the United States' priority in 2019 was the difficult peace negotiations with Taliban leadership in Doha, Qatar, resulting in a peace agreement signed in late February 2020. The Afghan government, however, was not invited to any of the numerous rounds of talks during 2019 as the Taliban refused to negotiate with Afghan political leadership until a U.S. withdrawal deal has been reached. During the talks between U.S. and Taliban representatives, U.S. negotiators, led by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, focused their efforts on U.S. counterterrorism interests. They sought to ensure that the Taliban severs ties with al Qaeda and that Afghanistan does not again become a base of operations for international terrorist groups. Little had been said publicly about any discussion of guarantees for the protection of religious freedom in these negotiations. In December 2019, the State Department designated both the Taliban and ISKP as "entities of particular concern" for engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations.

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 Béjaia 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.

AZERBAIJAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Azerbaijan trended positively, as the government largely ceased conducting raids on religious communities and similarly reduced its longstanding practice of detaining and fining individuals in connection with the unauthorized, peaceful practice of their religion or beliefs. In March 2019, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev issued a presidential pardon that resulted in the release of 51 political and religious prisoners. In another positive development, the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) granted registration to 31 Muslim communities and three Christian communities over the course of the year. Throughout the year, the Azerbaijani Embassy to the United States and other government officials continued to engage closely with USCIRF on religious freedom concerns.

Despite these improvements, the government continued to exert undue control and oversight over all religious communities and their activities. Government officials continued to manage and limit religious practices through the 2009 Law on Freedom of Religion and related articles of the administrative and criminal codes. Among other restrictions, the law requires religious communities to register with the government; criminalizes all unregistered religious activity; restricts religious activity to each community's registered legal address; and requires state approval for the content, production, import, export, distribution, and sale of all religious literature. As a result, Christian communities and individuals reported limiting or conducting some of their religious activities in secret out of fear of a possible government crackdown. Although Azerbaijan's constitution guarantees the right to alternative civilian service when mandatory military service conflicts with an individual's convictions, the government has not provided an alternative service option and has prosecuted Jehovah's Witnesses in the past for exercising their right to conscientious objection, charging them with "evading military service." Additionally, the government has reportedly applied travel bans to some Jehovah's Witness members, preventing them from leaving the country and leaving them no clear means to contest or appeal the bans.

Azerbaijan continued to imprison individuals in connection with their religious activities. According to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tracking political prisoners in the country, as many as 45 religious activists remained incarcerated at the end of the year. Sardar Babayev, a Shi'a Muslim imam sentenced in 2017 for illegally leading Islamic ceremonies after having received a foreign religious education, remained imprisoned through the end of 2019. The majority of prisoners of conscience in Azerbaijan comprise members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM). A 2019 report by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) highlighted the continued imprisonment of MUM leaders Taleh Bagirzade and Abbas Huseynov and noted that they and others associated with MUM had reported being tortured. In response to "unprecedented pressure" in early 2019, Bagirzade and Huseynov went on a hunger strike and were reportedly denied access to their lawyers and families. Local human rights activists maintained that the government had targeted and detained tens of individuals in connection with violence in the city of Ganja in 2018 as part of its effort to "start repressions against believers," and they expressed concern that those detainees were also at risk for torture.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Azerbaijan on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Azerbaijan to revise the 2009 religion law to comply with international human rights standards, and bring it into conformity with recommendations made in 2012 by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); and
- Assist the government of Azerbaijan, in collaboration with international partners, to develop an alternative civilian service and permit conscientious objection pursuant to Azerbaijan's commitment to the Council of Europe, obligations under international human rights law, and the Azerbaijani constitution.

The U.S. Congress should:

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

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commissioner delegation visit:** Baku and Quba in February 2020
- **Press Release:** USCIRF Delegation Travels to Azerbaijan to Assess Religious Freedom Conditions
- **Interview:** Azerbaijani Government Continues to Restrict Freedom of Religion or Belief (in *Turan*)

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 Vicarate 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.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in the Central African Republic (CAR) did not significantly improve in 2019, despite the government and 14 nonstate armed groups signing a new Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation (also referred to as the "Khartoum Agreement") on February 6. The agreement, which was a momentous effort with international support, includes a commitment to respect human rights, human dignity, and fundamental and religious freedoms. Nevertheless, armed groups continued to conduct violent attacks during the year, primarily in pursuit of control over pockets of CAR's rich natural resources. At year's end, armed groups maintained control over a majority of the territory of CAR. The government relied on United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in many areas, through the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR (MINUSCA), to defend vulnerable civilians and attempt to prevent further violence.

Thousands of Central Africans remained displaced due to the conflict over the past eight years, which involved militias organized in part along religious lines targeting entire communities for violence and persecution based on their religious beliefs. At the height of the conflict in 2013-14, militias committed abuses that a UN panel later deemed ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity against Muslims; 95 percent of the mosques were destroyed and 80 percent of the Muslim community fled CAR. Between June and August 2019, CAR, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and neighboring countries signed agreements on the facilitation of voluntary returns of refugees displaced in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Congo. While some returns did begin, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported returns of displaced Muslim communities in southern parts of CAR, vast numbers of refugees opted to stay abroad due to security risks.

Although some positive steps were reported during the year following the peace agreement, including security sector reforms and the disarmament of some armed actors, violence and violations of the peace agreement continued. NGOs and the UN Panel of Experts on CAR reported new incidents of discrimination, mistreatment, and violence against civilians by armed groups and security actors based on perceived religious affiliation, although at lesser levels than in previous years. In a cycle of attacks in the Carnot area in January, fighters associated with the anti-balaka targeted a Muslim community. Militias also reportedly continued attempts to manipulate community sentiments about MINUSCA by promoting the narrative that the UN peacekeepers were anti-Muslim. Multiple attacks against civilians were reported in April, resulting in the death, injury, and abduction of civilians. In a major series of attacks in May, the 3R armed group killed more than 50 people in the Ouham-Pendé region. In September, violent clashes between militias reportedly caused the further displacement of 13,000 people. The continued tensions, attacks, and the government's reliance on MINUSCA to manage the conflict underscored the tenuous nature of the initial progress pursuant to the peace agreement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include CAR 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);
- Establish a high-level panel on human rights protection with international stakeholders and CAR authorities to:
  - monitor religious freedom violations and the proliferation of hate speech, in particular ahead of elections;
  - support peace and reconciliation efforts such as expanding interfaith dialogues; and
  - contribute to improving the human rights training of official security actors;
- Fund programs that support both official and traditional justice processes, including CAR's judiciary and Special Criminal Court (SCC);
- Provide assistance to CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country, including by rebuilding destroyed mosques; ensuring Muslim participation in the upcoming 2020 elections and in government administration, security forces, and police units; and safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes; and
- Increase funding for humanitarian assistance for refugees, IDPs, and returnees, and for rebuilding projects; and collaborate with humanitarian actors to collect data on religious demographics to protect religious freedom and minorities more effectively.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa
- **Congressional Briefing:** Silencing Religious Freedom in Africa: The Impact of Speech Restrictions

Background

The population of CAR is estimated to be more than 5.9 million. Pew Research estimates that 89 percent of the population is Christian, and a minority of 9 percent is Muslim. Religious practice in CAR is syncretic, with many Christians and Muslims also incorporating traditional and other beliefs into their lives.

Historic ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic tensions in the country were significantly amplified in 2013 with the overthrow of then President Francois Bozizé, a Christian, by predominantly Muslim Séléka militias. In the process, the militias perpetrated mass violence against non-Muslim populations, including Christian actors and churches, prompting the formation of mainly Christian armed groups known as anti-balaka. Anti-balaka conducted reprisal attacks on Muslim civilians, killing and displacing thousands. Some militias claimed to be representing the interests of a particular religious or ethnic group, and fomented division and violence among civilians. The U.S. Ambassador to the UN stated in 2015 that 417 of the country's 435 mosques were destroyed in the violence. A UN Commission of Inquiry report that investigated violence between 2013 and 2014 concluded that "although the Commission cannot conclude that there was genocide, ethnic cleansing of the Muslim population by the anti-balaka constitutes a crime against humanity." Religious-based targeting and cycles of violence continued in subsequent years, although militias were largely focused on maintaining power through territorial and resource control, and blurred lines of religious affiliation.

Due to the torrent of violence, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced, and by the end of the reporting period more than 600,000 remained displaced within CAR. The peacekeeping force, MINUSCA, was deployed in 2014 and given a broad mandate that includes protecting civilians, reforming the security sector, improving rule of law, supporting the peace process and 2020 electoral process, and other efforts. It reported more than 14,000 personnel in 2019 and continues to be an essential provider of security.

In December 2019, Bozizé, who was accused of incitement to genocide and supporting the anti-balaka militias, returned to CAR from exile and declared his desire to run for president in 2020. It remains unclear if the many Muslim refugees still living outside CAR will be able to vote in the elections.

The Khartoum Agreement

Signatories to the Khartoum Agreement committed to actions that would minimize separatism or the manipulation of religious and ethnic differences, and agreed to refrain immediately from "any form of propaganda, hate speech, and divisive discourse that makes reference to ethnic, regional, religious, or sectarian identity or that incites violence." Although the agreement is the latest in a long list of attempts at peace deals over the past decade, it led to notable optimism and a reduction in violence. Nevertheless, NGOs continue to report a range of challenges with its implementation, and believe that the context remains extremely fragile. They note that Christians and Muslims continue to feel uncomfortable living next to each other in many areas, and much work remains to provide a path for the return of displaced Muslims and the rebuilding of properties and houses of worship destroyed during the height of the conflict.

While some religious actors were hopeful about the peace agreement, others were skeptical. Religious actors and communities continued to be active in interfaith and peacebuilding efforts, despite also being impacted negatively by violent events and limited in activity by security risks. In May, a Spanish missionary was brutally murdered in southwest CAR. Militias also continued attacking civilians, including an incident in May reportedly in retaliation for an attack on an ethnic Peuhl. This attack tested citizens' confidence in the new peace agreement and resulted in swift condemnation from the international community. The UN reported weekly violations of the agreement.

Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

The SCC, a tribunal set up in CAR to help hold accountable human rights violators of the ongoing conflict, continued to face challenges in funding and staffing for most of the year. It also appeared to be stalled significantly in conducting its investigations. The SCC announced that it might conclude the examination of some of its first cases, and potentially begin trials, by the end of 2020. In December, the International Criminal Court (ICC) confirmed it was charging two anti-balaka militia leaders—Alfred Yekatom and Patrice-Edouard Ngaissona—with crimes against humanity that took place between 2013 and 2014. Crimes referenced included the displacement of Muslim populations from towns and neighborhoods, as well as the destruction and looting of Muslim houses and places of worship.

In tandem with achieving justice through formal and informal means, citizens also desire a broader truth and reconciliation process. The Khartoum Agreement committed parties to establish within 90 days a national Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Reconciliation (TJRRC), initially prescribed by the 2015 Bangui National Forum. The agreement also ordered a second interim commission to examine the conflict and begin community consultations. Consultations were launched in June and faced mixed reviews.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. Ambassador to CAR Lucy Tamlyn was sworn in on January 11, 2019. Throughout the year, the United States provided a range of technical and financial assistance for humanitarian, peace, and security goals. More than $6 million was requested in FY 2020. The State Department continued to support MINUSCA, whose mandate was again extended until November 15, 2020. The United States provided $80,000 in support of the creation of the CAR Justice Sector Policy, which includes among its priorities transitional justice and human rights. In September, the UN eased the arms embargo on CAR in order to support the government's stabilization efforts through the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2488 (2019). U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft restated the United States' commitment to bilateral support of CAR to achieve the implementation of the Khartoum Agreement. In May, U.S. Representative David Cicilline (D-RI) introduced H.Res.387 condemning the continued violence against civilians in CAR and recognizing the commission of atrocities based on perceived or actual ethnic or religious identities.

CUBA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Cuba trended negatively. The new constitution adopted in April changed religious freedom protections, and the government aggressively targeted religious leaders who opposed these changes. While gathering information on religious freedom conditions in Cuba remains a challenge, a nongovernmental organization documented 260 cases of violations of freedom of religion or belief in Cuba in 2019, including harassments, arrests, and travel bans, up from 151 in 2018. Religious leaders who raised concern that the new constitution weakened religious freedom protections faced severe hostility and pressure leading up to the constitutional referendum in February. Tactics used to pressure religious leaders included repeated police summons and interrogations, threats of detention, and labeling religious leaders as "counterrevolutionaries." Yoruba Priest Alexei Mora Montalvo went on a 15-day hunger strike to protest the harassment he and his family were experiencing leading up to the constitutional referendum.

The Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an entity within the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) operating out of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), continued to control religious activity tightly. The ORA requires religious organizations to apply to the MOJ for official registration. Membership or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime. The ORA exercises direct and arbitrary control over the affairs of religious organizations, requiring permission for virtually any activity other than regular worship services. High-level CCP officials utilize the permit system to meddle in the affairs of religious groups and coerce cooperation with government officials.

Beyond the constitutional process, the Cuban government employed persistent harassment and intimidation campaigns against religious leaders throughout 2019. Common tactics included threats, short-term detentions, travel restrictions, and violence against some religious leaders. Cuban authorities manipulated the laws to charge or threaten religious leaders with criminal and civil violations for peaceful religious activity and social work. During the reporting period, Pastor Alain Toledano Valiente of the Apostolic Movement was consistently summoned to the police station, accused of the crime of "disobedience," and threatened with detention and confiscation of church property. The harassment was connected to his religious activities, including hosting events on the role of women and youth in society. After homeschooling their children based on a concern regarding Cuban schools' promotion of socialism and atheism, Pastor Ramón Rigal and his wife Adya Expósito Leyva were convicted in April for "illicit association"—as their church is unregistered—and other charges, including acts against the normal development of their children. Expósito was released after the reporting period in March 2020. In December, the authorities threatened similar legal charges against parents Olainis Tejeda Beltrán and Lescaille Prebal, members of the Sephardic Bnei Anusim community, following harassment and physical assaults of their children at school that led to a ban on kippahs. There are an estimated 1,200 Jews in Cuba. As of November 2019, roughly 20 religious leaders had been arbitrarily prevented from leaving Cuba during the year. The ORA is effectively cutting off religious communities by increasingly blocking foreign visitors from visiting their coreligionists, while at the same time stopping religious leaders from leaving the island. Seven denominations broke off from the Cuban Council of Churches to form the Cuban Evangelical Alliance (CEA). CEA members were aggressively targeted during the constitutional process and continued to experience sustained harassment in reprisal for their constitutional advocacy and organization, including the denial of foreign visitors. Notably, Cuban authorities stopped four members of the CEA, along with another religious leader, from traveling to the United States for the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the U.S. Department of State in July.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Cuba on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Cuban government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom—including Caridad Diego, head of the ORA—by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Ensure that programs that support independent journalism in Cuba are responsive in aiding journalists who face increased harassment as a result of reporting on religious freedom conditions; and
- Enable the processing of visas in Havana for religious leaders, along with activists and journalists who advocate for religious freedom protections, to facilitate their travel to the United States without requiring travel to a third country.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** Religious Freedom in Cuba in 2019
- **Press Statement:** Cuba Preventing Religious Leaders from Attending International Religious Freedom Meeting
- **Press Statement:** Condemning Cuban Authorities' Crackdown on Homeschooling Pastor and Wife

Background

While there are no independent sources on religious demographics in Cuba, a reported 60–70 percent of Cuba's population of an estimated 11.1 million self-identify as Catholic, while Protestants account for 5 percent. Approximately 25–30 percent identify as unaffiliated or another religion including syncretic religions (as well as Santería, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Seventh-day Adventists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Moravians, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Cuba is a one-party system with no independent judiciary and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. A new constitution was adopted in April 2019 following so-called "public consultations" and a referendum. The new constitution maintains the one-party Communist system and changes protections for the freedom of religion or belief by removing the prior specific references to freedom of conscience and to changing religious beliefs. USCIRF will closely monitor the implementation of these new constitutional provisions to assess their impact on religious freedom.

Alongside the constitution, the government uses a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control religious groups and suppress the freedom of religion or belief. The ORA and other government authorities repressively enforce these restrictions to ensure tight control over religious leaders, members of religious communities, and others deemed threats to the Communist agenda due to their advocacy or support for religious freedom.

Denial of Religious Freedom for Activists and Independent Journalists

The Cuban government frequently violated the religious freedom of prodemocracy and human rights activists during 2019. Independent journalists were targeted for documenting and reporting on religious freedom conditions. In the most severe cases, journalists, such as Roberto Jesus Quinones Haces and Ricardo Fernandez Izaguirre, were arrested. Additional tactics employed to intimidate journalists and other religious freedom activists include interrogations, legal harassment, and travel restrictions. Cuban authorities also denied human rights activists and journalists their right to freedom of religion or belief, often by blocking their access to religious services, including special religious events. Religious leaders faced pressure by government officials to expel members of their congregations involved in political activity or human rights advocacy, or labeled as "counterrevolutionaries."

The most consistent and severe attempts to block activists from religious services were against the Ladies in White, the wives and relatives of dissidents imprisoned in 2003. Every Sunday during the reporting period, Cuban authorities detained Ladies in White on their way to Mass and other religious services. According to reports, members of the Ladies in White were often informed that they were being detained because they were not allowed to attend religious services.

Restrictions on Religious Buildings

In Cuba, it is illegal to hold religious activities in buildings not dedicated for religious use. Religious organizations must receive permission from the ORA—which is rarely granted—for any renovation or construction of religious buildings. These restrictions, coupled with the growth in faith communities, have severely limited the right of many Cubans to worship in a community.

The Cuban government also used a 2005 law regulating house churches to impose complicated and repressive requirements on the estimated 2,000–10,000 private residences used as Protestant places of worship in Cuba. This law includes mandating registration according to strict procedures, such as the requirement that there cannot be two house churches of the same registered religious group within two kilometers of each other. The law also empowers authorities to supervise and control the religious activities of these groups. There were reports of frequent visits by state security agents to house churches. Unregistered religious groups could not apply to legalize the buildings used for religious services, and risked penalties for congregating in unauthorized buildings.

In positive developments, in January the Catholic Church opened the first of three new churches to be built since the 1959 socialist revolution. After the ORA arbitrarily revoked the Maranatha Baptist Church's permit to build a new church in April, the highest administrative and governing body of the CCP reversed the ORA's decision in October. While this case demonstrates the high-level control the CCP exerts on the affairs of religious communities, it is positive that construction of the church is allowed to proceed.

Key U.S. Policy

The Trump administration's policy toward Cuba is guided by the National Security Presidential Memorandum entitled "Strengthening the Policy of the United States toward Cuba," issued in November 2017. This policy focuses on the need for human rights, democracy, and free enterprise in Cuba. In 2019, the Trump administration imposed a series of sanctions against Cuba for its poor human rights record and its support of the Maduro government in Venezuela, including placing visa restrictions on former president and first secretary of the CCP Raúl Castro in September. Also, in September, the State Department issued a statement condemning violations of religious freedom in Cuba. Following unexplained health issues for U.S. diplomats and their families between 2016 and 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Havana began to operate with a permanently reduced staff and limited embassy operations, including the processing of visas. The State Department announced in March 2019 that it was eliminating the five-year multi-entry visa for Cubans and replacing it with a three-month single-entry visa. Most nonimmigrant visa applicants, including religious leaders traveling to the United States to meet with coreligionists or attend meetings on freedom of religion or belief, must now travel to a third country to obtain a visa, which is often prohibitively expensive, and in some cases particularly burdensome due to travel restrictions. On December 18, the State Department for the first time placed Cuba on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

INDIVIDUAL VIEWS OF COMMISSIONER JOHNNIE MOORE

In my estimation, Cuba should not be recommended by USCIRF for the State Department's Special Watch List. It should be recommended for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Its actions continue to be ongoing, systematic, and egregious.

EGYPT

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

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.

INDONESIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Indonesia generally trended negatively compared to the previous year. Reports from local nongovernmental organizations indicated that the provinces of West Java, Jakarta, and East Java had the highest number of incidents of religious intolerance—including discrimination, hate speech, acts of violence, and rejections of permits to build houses of worship for minority religious communities. The government continued to prosecute blasphemy allegations and to impose disproportionate prison sentences. Three women were put on trial for blasphemy, two with diagnosed mental health challenges and one for comments posted on social media. Suzethe Margaret, a Roman Catholic who has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, was detained on June 30, 2019, for entering a mosque with her dog. In September, after months of pressure from Muslim hardliners, authorities announced that she would face trial for blasphemy. On February 5, 2020, after the reporting period, the Cibinong District Court in West Java acquitted Suzethe of blasphemy charges due to her mental incapacity. In April, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Meliana, a Buddhist woman who had been convicted of blasphemy in 2018 for asking a local mosque to lower the volume of the call to prayer. However, in May, Meliana was released on parole. Islamic preacher Abdul Somad was also investigated for blasphemy after giving a speech in which he insulted the Christian cross, although he was not officially charged.

Hardliners and other intolerant groups continued to threaten houses of worship associated with minority faiths, including by exploiting the 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship, which requires religious communities to obtain signatures from 90 congregation members and from at least 60 local households of a different faith, as well as receive approval from the local government before building a house of worship. In May 2019, hardliner groups protested—and reportedly threatened jihad—against proposed plans to build a Hindu temple in Bekasi. In July, after hardliner groups demonstrated and issued threats of violence, authorities in Bantul district, Yogyakarta, cited the 2006 decree in rescinding the permit of a Pentecostal church. In an ongoing dispute that started in 2008, the GKI Yasmin church still had not received permits for its house of worship in Bogor, despite promises by local officials and a ruling from the Supreme Court in its favor.

There were reports that political opportunists attempted to exploit religious tensions for electoral gain ahead of the general elections on April 17, 2019. Prabowo Subianto, the primary challenger to incumbent President Joko Widodo, attempted to mobilize supporters of the 212 movement, which played a key role in pressuring the government to charge then Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama—a Chinese Christian—with blasphemy in early 2017. Following President Widodo's reelection, there were reports that the government planned to introduce stricter background checks to identify religious extremists in the bureaucracy and remove them. In November, the government launched a website that allowed members of the public to report on alleged "radical content" shared by public servants online. The Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform banned employees from wearing the niqab headdress. In October, Indonesia's chief security minister was stabbed by a man suspected to be an Islamist influenced by the Islamic State.

In September 2019, the Indonesian legislature considered a bill to replace the existing Criminal Code, which dates back to the Dutch colonial era. This new code would have expanded the criminalization of blasphemy to include insulting a religious leader during a religious service, persuading someone to become an atheist, and defiling or unlawfully destroying houses of worship or religious artifacts. Civil society groups led massive protests in response to these and other proposed restrictions, leading the government to delay the bill indefinitely.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Indonesia on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Urge the Indonesian government to revise the draft Criminal Code bill to remove criminal sanctions for blasphemy, as well as to repeal or amend the existing blasphemy laws and release any individuals currently held on blasphemy charges;
- Incorporate training on international human rights standards related to freedom of religion or belief—including concerns related to enforcement of blasphemy laws—into U.S.-funded programs, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) Harmoni and MAJu projects; and
- Urge the Indonesian government to take the lead on human rights and religious freedom regionally in its capacity as party to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, including by publicly advocating on behalf of Uighurs and other persecuted Muslims in China.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support measures such as H.Res.512 and S.Res.458, which urge the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws.

Background

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. Muslims comprise 87.2 percent of Indonesia's 267 million citizens, while Protestant Christians comprise 7 percent, Roman Catholics 2.9 percent, and Hindus 1.7 percent; 0.9 percent identify as another minority faith, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Indonesia has a long tradition of religious pluralism. Article 29 of its constitution "guarantees the independence of each resident to embrace religion and worship according to their respective religions and beliefs." The Indonesian government has promoted an ideology known as Pancasila, which comprises five principles: monotheism, civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice ("monotheism" is broadly defined as any religion with a supreme deity, a holy figure, a scripture, and established rituals). However, the government officially recognizes only six religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Violations of religious freedom tend to have the greatest impact on Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, and nonbelievers.

The government also requires all citizens to list their religious affiliation on their ID cards, which has historically forced members of unrecognized minority faith communities, and those belonging to no faith community, to misrepresent their faith or leave the field blank. This can impact their access to licenses and permits, education, and government jobs. In February 2019, Bandung in West Java became the first area in Indonesia to grant a designation "Faith in One God" for members of indigenous faith communities.

Shari'a Law in Aceh

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia with the legal authority to enact Shari'a law. Religious police enforce a strict form of Shari'a that includes corporal punishment. In January 2019, two 18-year-olds were flogged 17 times for hugging each other in public and a second man was flogged for being intimate with a woman in a grocery store. In December, in two separate cases, a man and a woman convicted of committing adultery were beaten unconscious while being publicly caned. The provincial government prohibits women from straddling motorbikes and forces them to wear hijabs. Muslims living in Aceh do not have the option of opting out of the Shari'a legal system.

Extremism in Education Institutions

Some local human rights groups claim that Indonesian university students are becoming more radicalized. A Ministry of Defense study released in 2017 reported that 23.3 percent of high school and university students do not believe in Pancasila, while approximately 23.4 percent supported jihad to establish an Islamic state. Some Muslim schools forbid their students from interacting with non-Muslims. In recent years, anti-pluralist Salafist religious groups have grown in universities across Indonesia. The government has pledged to revise the religious studies curriculum and to ban textbooks that propagate intolerance. Some universities have restricted the type of religious clothing female students can wear by banning the niqab; although the universities claim these measures are necessary to combat extremism, they potentially violate the right of individuals to choose how they express their faith.

"Deviant" Groups

Minority Muslim sects—such as the Milah Abraham faith community (also known as Gafatar), Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadiyya Muslims—continued to face social hostility and state harassment throughout 2019. The quasi-governmental Indonesian Council of Ulema (MUI) has issued *fatwas* (religious edicts) declaring these groups "deviant" and heretical to Islam. In 2005, MUI issued a fatwa declaring Ahmadiyya Muslims as apostates. In 2008, the Indonesian government banned the Ahmadiyya community from proselytizing, a step that former Indonesia President Abdurrahman Wahid publicly condemned. In January 2019, hardliners in Bandung protested a discussion of Ahmadiyya teachings at a mosque. Although the event was allowed to occur, the pressure did lead organizers to shorten it. In addition, in certain parts of the country, such as East Lombok, local authorities could not guarantee the safety of members of the Ahmadiyya community.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. and Indonesian governments have worked closely on counterterrorism and maritime security issues, including with regard to the Chinese government's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia in 1949, following its independence from the Netherlands, and November 2019 marked the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations. In August, a congressional delegation visited Jakarta to discuss trade and investment opportunities. In June, U.S. Ambassador Joseph E. Donovan and Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan welcomed the return of 88 Indonesian students who participated in the State Department's Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program to study in the United States, where they learned about tolerance and diversity. Throughout 2019, the USAID-funded Harmoni program continued to support Indonesian institutions and communities working to resist the rise of violent extremism and religious intolerance and to promote tolerant democratic values. USAID's MAJu program continued to work with the Indonesian government as well as local civil society actors to widen access to justice and human rights for religious and ethnic minorities. USAID increased its overall budget for development projects in Indonesia by $3 million, for a total of $93 million. In addition, U.S. diplomats met with Indonesian government officials and key civil society stakeholders to urge them to publicly condemn the Chinese government's detention of more than one million Uighur and other Muslims.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** Blasphemy Allegations in a Polarized Indonesia
- **Op-Ed:** Indonesia Should Prevent Religious Conflict, but its Blasphemy Law Does More Harm than Good (in *The Globe Post*)
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Welcomes Release of Jailed Jakarta Governor; Denounces Indonesia's Blasphemy Law

IRAQ

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

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 Sabean-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 Hizbullah militia.

KAZAKHSTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan moved in a positive direction. The government made a concerted effort to improve its record on religious freedom, working to design and implement reforms in conversation with U.S. counterparts. In May, Kazakhstan hosted the first U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group, with the participation of both the U.S. Department of State and USCIRF, at which Kazakhstani officials openly discussed deficiencies in their regulation of religion and expressed their desire to address them. The government subsequently committed to a road map for religious legislation and oversight reform. This sustained shift in policy began in January 2019, when the government abandoned adding amendments to the country's restrictive 2011 religion law that it had proposed a year and a half earlier. If enacted, the amendments would have further restricted who may legally proselytize and under what circumstances; required both parents' approval for children to participate in religious activities; and limited worship to designated locations. Between October 2019 and early 2020, four Religious Freedom Roundtables were held in cities across Kazakhstan, at which government officials participated alongside representatives of various faith communities, including historically persecuted minority groups. Meanwhile, the number of administrative prosecutions for religious offenses continued to decline, reaching 160 in 2019—down from 171 in 2018 and 284 in 2017.

Nevertheless, significant problems persisted. The 2011 religion law maintains elements that systematically restrict religious freedom—especially onerous registration requirements and the mandatory "expert" review of founding documents and religious literature. During 2019, members of the Hare Krishna community, Protestant Christians, and observant Muslims reported harassment by government authorities, including questioning about their religious beliefs. The government keeps a database of "founding members" of religious organizations in the country; some on the list complain of persecution with late-night visits, mandatory trips to the Religious Affairs Department, and pressure to remove their signatures from registration applications.

As of the end of 2019, 24 Sunni Muslims remained imprisoned for their religious beliefs, mostly members or alleged members of the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat. Between August and December, Kazakhstani courts gave nine men sentences of between five and eight years for participating in a private discussion about Islam on the messaging service WhatsApp, which officials determined to constitute "propagation of terrorism" and "inciting hatred." Outside analysts found no evidence of such intent and questioned the proficiency of the government's experts. In July, a criminal court in Almaty sentenced three pastors of the Protestant New Life Church, in absentia, to between four and five years in prison and ordered the confiscation of their and the church's property. The court deemed the church's founding a criminal act designed to cause bodily harm and commit theft, and considered all sermons, music, and meetings at the church part of a criminal plot.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Continue engaging with the Kazakhstani government through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group to press the government of Kazakhstan to:
  - Repeal or amend its religious registration laws, in part by setting the required number of founding members at no more than 10 individuals;
  - End mandatory expert review of founding documents and religious literature, or significantly reform the process to make it more transparent;
  - Cease the detention and sentencing of individuals for their peaceful religious expression and practice;
  - Provide an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors; and
  - Open the Congress of the Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions to representatives of all faiths in cooperation with the recently founded Religious Freedom Roundtables; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azattyq, the Kazakh service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, to allow for the dissemination of uncensored information about events inside Kazakhstan, including those related to religious freedom.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Staff visit:** Nur-Sultan in May 2019, including participation in the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group
- **Country Update:** Kazakhstan
- **Legislation Factsheet:** Registration Laws

Background

Kazakhstan is territorially the largest state in Central Asia and has the region's second-largest population, with around 19 million citizens. The population is around 70 percent Sunni Muslim, 26 percent Christian (including Orthodox, Protestants, Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses), three percent other (including Jews, Buddhists, Baha'is, and Hare Krishnas), and one percent Shi'a and Sufi Muslim. Approximately two-thirds of the population are ethnic Kazakhs, a Turkic people, while the rest are ethnic Slavs and other Turkic peoples, including Uzbeks and Uighurs. Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country with a large ethnic Russian population, mostly in the north.

The Soviet Union deported many ethnic and religious minorities to Kazakhstan, establishing a number of faith communities that endure today. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's first independent president, sought to cultivate Kazakhstan's image as a model of religious pluralism, which the government considers one of the country's distinctive historical legacies. President Kassym Tokayev, who succeeded Nazarbayev in 2019, has expressed his eagerness to improve Kazakhstan's record on international religious freedom.

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

2011 Religion Law

Before it enacted the 2011 religion law, Kazakhstan was one of the least repressive post-Soviet Central Asian states with regard to freedom of religion or belief. That law, however, set stringent registration requirements with high membership thresholds, and it banned or restricted unregistered religious activities, including those relating to offering education, distributing literature, and training clergy. Other vague criminal and administrative statutes enable the state to punish most unauthorized religious or political activities. Religious groups have since been subject to state surveillance. The total number of registered religious groups plummeted after 2011 as a result of that law, especially the number of "nontraditional" groups, which declined from 48 to 16.

Treatment of Prisoners

Kuanysh Bashpayev has been jailed since 2016 for a series of lectures in which he criticized the state-controlled Muslim Board. Sources close to his case told USCIRF that prison authorities have since kept him in solitary confinement, following a closed court hearing in which the prosecution refused to detail which elements of his lectures it had deemed incriminating. Meanwhile, relatives of Muslim prisoner Dadash Mazhenov, who is serving more than seven years for posting lectures critical of the Muslim Board, reported that he was tortured while held at a labor camp in Shymkent in 2019. Prisoners at the camp who observed the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr were allegedly served rotten food, and many became ill. In June, prison authorities forbade Muslim inmates from praying during daytime hours, threatening them with additional jail time.

Restrictions on Religious Dress

Muslim parents and students continued to resist the Kazakh Education Ministry's ban on wearing the hijab in school. Education officials in Aqtobe claimed that due to the ban, at least 11 girls in the province enrolled in an Internet school rather than attend public school. At an August 29 meeting with concerned parents, the regional governor told them that hijabs were not "part of Kazakh culture."

Ethnic Kazakh Refugees from Xinjiang

In late 2019 and early 2020, Kazakhstan shifted its policy toward refugees from the Chinese province of Xinjiang by passing legal judgments that prohibited the deportation of ethnic Kazakhs who fled across the border from China. For much of the year, the government had resisted efforts to counter China and actively prosecuted activists who drew attention to the issue. In March, Kazakhstan publicly declared its support for Chinese efforts to fight "terrorism, separatism, and extremism." On March 10, 2019, Serikzhan Bilash, the leader of a human rights group dedicated to the cause of ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang, was arrested for "inciting national discord or hatred." Bilash was released in August after extensive international pressure, promising to end his advocacy against China. In June, Aiman Omarova—a human rights lawyer who represented Bilash and former prisoners from Xinjiang, and a 2018 recipient of the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage Award—found her pet dog dead from an apparent poisoning, which she accused the government of perpetrating in order to scare her.

KEY U.S. POLICY

The United States and Kazakhstan enjoyed a close and deepening partnership in 2019, including the establishment in May of the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group. In October, Ambassador Nathan A. Sales, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism, met with government officials in Kazakhstan to discuss their "groundbreaking work" rehabilitating and reintegrating returnees from Syria, as well as regional efforts to counter violent extremism. In December, the two countries met for the annual U.S.-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue (ESPD), and engaged on a range of issues, including regional stability, human rights, labor, and religious freedom. The same month, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo met with Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi in Washington, DC, and discussed improving bilateral relations. Secretary Pompeo encouraged the government of Kazakhstan to implement reforms and to strengthen the protection of fundamental freedoms for the people of Kazakhstan. He also raised the ongoing human rights crisis in Xinjiang and praised Kazakhstan for ensuring the safety of those who have fled China seeking refuge.

MALAYSIA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia again trended negatively as they did in 2018. Conditions for minority faith believers as well as for majority Sunni Muslims stagnated or, in some cases, worsened. Members of the Sunni majority must adhere to a strict, state-approved interpretation of Islam, which leaves little freedom to practice according to their conscience. For example, in December 2019, six men in the state of Terengganu were handed one-month jail terms and fines ranging from $575 to $600 for missing Friday prayers. In April 2019, authorities linked with the Islamic religious authority in Selangor, Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor (JAIS), opened an investigation into three Sunni women who held a discussion about their decision to stop wearing the hijab. In addition, all Muslim students are mandated to take religious classes. In Form 5 (for ages 16–17), religious textbooks condemn non-Sunni sects of Islam. The state-issued sermons each Friday often warn Muslims against these "deviant" sects and the so-called threats they present to Islam.

The pairing of Malay ethnicity with the Islamic religion continues to infringe on the human rights of individual Malays. Historically, the religious Shari'a courts have declared several minority Muslim groups as non-Muslim, which persistently creates a grey area for those Malays who adhere to officially "deviant" sects of Islam. In 2019, Shi'a Muslims continued to face state hostility and detentions, sparking fears of an escalating crackdown. At least 50 members of the Milah Abraham community faced ongoing Shari'a court trials for their faith activities. In May, there were reports that religious authorities forced entry into an Ahmadiyya religious building. Religious authorities justified their intimidation of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community on the basis that these members are registered as Muslims on their national identification cards.

In August 2019, the Sabah state legislative assembly passed a bill amending Section 52 of the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment 1995, which officially defines Islam as Sunni Islam and criminalizes alternative interpretations. This bill adds Section 52A, which prohibits sharing with Muslims any religious doctrines or beliefs that are not in accordance with the state-sponsored version of the faith, with penalties of up two years in prison and/or a maximum fine of 3,000 Malaysian ringgit. This bill went into effect on September 9. Authorities have claimed the bill is not aimed toward non-Muslims such as Buddhists or Christians, who have sounded the alarm about the bill, but rather toward "deviant" Islamic practices, which include all non-Sunni Muslim faith groups.

Throughout 2019, non-Muslim communities, such as Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, reported feeling increasing strain and social hostility. A September directive issued by the Federal Islamic Affairs Department, an agency under the Prime Minister's Department, barred interfaith prayers for Muslims at events involving both Muslims and non-Muslims. In a positive development, in June 2019 the government established a special task force to investigate the enforced disappearances of two prominent religious minority leaders. Nevertheless, the whereabouts of Christian pastor Raymond Koh and social activist and Shi'a convert Amri Che Mat, as well as of Pastor Joshua Hilmy and his wife, remained unknown at the end of the reporting period.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Malaysia on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- As part of U.S. support to build capacity for Malaysian law enforcement, fund and implement training on community-based policing between the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security and their Malaysian counterparts to promote better shared practices on interacting with faith communities and protecting houses of worship and other religious sites; and
- Expand the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) to include bringing Malaysian lawyers and human rights activists to the United States.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Staff visit:** Kuala Lumpur in February 2020
- **Factsheet:** Enforced Disappearances in Malaysia

Background

Malaysia is a highly pluralistic society. Around 61.3 percent of the population identifies as Muslim, the vast majority belonging to the state-sponsored Sunni sect. Buddhists comprise 19.8 percent; 9.2 percent are Christian; Hindus are 6.3 percent; Confucianism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions are 1.3 percent; and about 0.8 percent identifies with no faith community. Though Malaysia was founded as a secular state, the 1957 constitution's article 3 places Islam—interpreted as Sunni Islam—as the official religion of the federation. Article 160 of the constitution links the ethnic identity of Malay with the religious identity of Islam.

The ruling coalition during 2019, the Pakatan Harapan (PH), which came into power in May 2018, pledged support for a number of reforms that largely failed to materialize, including the ratification of certain international human rights treaties. Then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has a history of anti-Semitic remarks. The then opposition parties United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se Malaysia (PAS) agreed in 2019 to work together, citing their shared perception that the PH was challenging the supremacy of Islam and ethnic Malays. This rhetoric encourages already divisive popular sentiment at the local and national levels. At the end of summer, a social media campaign called for Muslims to boycott non-Muslims goods. On December 3, UMNO Member of Parliament (MP) Datuk Seri Tajuddin Abdul Rahman used religiously charged insults to ridicule a fellow parliamentarian of the Hindu faith community. This caused an uproar in parliament that ultimately ended with the speaker of parliament suspending MP Rahman for two days. Christian leaders have spoken out against tactics by UMNO and PAS that portray Christianity as a threat to the Muslim majority. In December, the Malaysian government hosted a summit of Muslim countries including Iran and Turkey on issues facing the Muslim world. In February 2020, after the reporting period, then Prime Minister Mahathir resigned and was replaced by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin, who has the support of UMNO and PAS.

Government Control of Islam

The state regulates the internal affairs of Muslims, including by funding mosques and providing preapproved talking points to imams. Imams are salaried under the federal Department of Islamic Affairs (JAKIM). In 2019, the state continued to vet all foreign missionaries, restricting non-Muslims and those Muslims it deems "deviant."

In 2017, the Malaysian federal government determined atheism to be unconstitutional. Nonreligious individuals continue to face official and societal harassment. For those who are ethnically Malay and identify as nonreligious, there is the risk of criminal prosecution for apostasy. At least six states—Perak, Melaka, Sabah, Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu—criminalize apostasy with fines, imprisonment, and/or detention in a "rehabilitation center." While not enforced, the maximum penalty for apostasy in Kelantan and Terengganu is death. All Malaysian citizens over the age of 12 are required by law to carry a national ID card that identifies their faith. Muslims' cards state their faith in print, while other faiths are encrypted in the card's smart strip and only accessed electronically. While the ability to change faith is limited for any conversions outside of Islam, some individuals have won the right only after taking their cases to the High Court.

The Dual Legal System

Malaysia maintains a system of two independent but equal courts: secular and religious. Muslims are subjected to both the general laws enacted by parliament and religious laws enacted by their state legislature. The legal age of children to marry varies in each state between Muslims and non-Muslims, with a lower age and fewer protections for Muslim children. Marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims remains illegal unless the non-Muslim partner converts.

In 2014, the Selangor Islamic Religious Council (MAIS) issued a fatwa (religious edict) declaring the civil society organization Sisters in Islam (SIS) a deviant group. *Fatwas* issued by state religious institutions can be used to confiscate documents and prevent organizations' activities. In August 2019, the High Court dismissed the group's case to remove the *fatwa*, declaring the matter the exclusive domain of the Shari'a courts. In 1996, the Fatwa Committee for Religious Affairs issued a *fatwa* prohibiting the proselytism, promulgation, and professing of Shi'a Islam, which at least 11 of the 13 states have adopted. In 1975, the Selangor Fatwa Council decreed that Ahmadis were not Muslim. Malaysian authorities often accuse minority Islamic faith communities of threatening the unity of Muslims.

Pressures against Non-Muslim Minority Groups

In 2019, authorities did little to address past attacks on Hindu temples and other houses of worship of minority faith communities. Hundreds of Hindu temples have been demolished by authorities in recent years. Minority faith houses of worship are regulated. Members of faith communities reported that Buddhist temples are restricted from building higher than local mosques and that Sikh gurdwaras are prevented from building domes, since domes are associated with Islamic architecture.

As many as 31 words remained banned for non-Muslims under the pretense of protecting public order. In August, the High Court deferred an appeal on the use of the word "Allah" in Sabah and Sarawak. These language restrictions largely affect members of Christian communities, but also limit the freedom of expression of individuals who follow official "deviant" sects of Islam. Authorities and societal actors often use exaggerated fears of "Christianization" for political purposes to motivate support from Muslim communities and escalate tensions between majority and minority groups. Non-Muslim indigenous communities complained of state-sponsored forced conversion.

Key U.S. Policy

Malaysia and the United States maintain strong bilateral ties. The United States is Malaysia's third-largest trading partner, and there exist numerous educational and cultural exchange programs between the two countries, including the IVLP program, which each year since 2008 has brought Muslim educational leaders to the United States. The U.S. government supports capacity building programs for Malaysian law enforcement, as well as security cooperation and training for Malaysia's military. In October 2019, the Department of Justice concluded an agreement with the Malaysian government resolving the so-called 1MDB scandal in which the U.S. government seized over $1 billion due to corruption stemming from former Prime Minister Najib Razak. Over the course of 2019, the U.S. government continued to support anticorruption efforts and the democratic transition to the ruling PH coalition.

NICARAGUA

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, the government of Nicaragua continued a campaign targeting religious institutions, most notably the Catholic Church. When protests against the government broke out in April 2018 and authorities responded with excessive force, the Catholic Church—in keeping with its religious views—provided aid and sanctuary to protesters, condemned the excessive government force, and attempted to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. Many of the same religious freedom violations and abuses committed by the Ortega regime and its supporters against the Church and its followers in the wake of the 2018 protests continued into 2019. These abuses include the intimidation and harassment of worshippers and religious leaders and the violent targeting of churches.

Government forces and citizens sympathetic to the regime routinely harassed Catholic Church clergy, with tactics including defamatory accusations, arbitrary arrests, death threats on social media, and violent attacks. Bishop Abelardo Mata Guevara, leader of the Nicaraguan bishop's conference, reported that he and at least seven other priests in his archdiocese have received death threats, causing him to limit his pastoral work. In December, police detained Father Ramón Alcides Peña Silva for 12 hours. He was forced to sleep on the ground in his cell and was given no food or drink during his arrest. The police accused Father Alcides Peña of disturbing the peace by conducting Mass at his church. Police have twice stopped Father Edwin Román of Masaya, including in February 2019 when eight police officers surrounded his car and slapped him. Two months prior, police detained him at a checkpoint for three hours. They inspected his documents and vehicle, but told him that he was not free to go until they had an order from superiors. A mysterious van with a Sandinista flag came to the scene and the individuals inside told the officers to let him go. Afterward, the van followed his car. In a statement following the incident, authorities accused him of zigzagging while driving intoxicated, which Román denies. He has also had to contend with plainclothes officers trailing him, government spies asking him where to buy bombs, and paramilitaries surrounding his church during Mass. Additionally, in April 2019, Pope Francis called Managua's auxiliary bishop Silvio Báez to Rome for an indefinite period following sustained harassment by the Nicaraguan government and its supporters since the start of the conflict, including an assassination plot.

President Daniel Ortega has inflamed tensions by denouncing the Church as "coup mongers," "terrorists," and "pedophiles" and accusing priests of stockpiling weapons in their churches on behalf of protesters. Many religious leaders in the country contend that the government is politicizing religion during a political and social crisis. The government has utilized religious language and sought to infiltrate parishes.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Nicaragua on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Nicaraguan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Encourage key countries, particularly those in Latin America, to ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief are part of all multilateral or bilateral discussions with or about Nicaragua.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support H.Res.754—"Expressing the sense of the House of Representatives that the United States should continue to support the people of Nicaragua in their peaceful efforts to promote democracy and human rights, and use the tools under United States law to increase political and financial pressure on the government of Daniel Ortega"—and other legislation designed to condemn violations of religious freedom in Nicaragua.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** Religious Freedom Conditions in Nicaragua in 2019

Background

The Republic of Nicaragua is a presidential republic with a multiparty system. The president is both head of state and head of government with no term limits. The unicameral National Assembly is the legislative branch and the judiciary is supposed to be independent of the executive and the legislature. However, President Ortega and his party, the Sandinista National Liberation Front, exercise authoritarian control over all three branches of government and the electoral process. An estimated 46 percent of the population of Nicaragua are Catholic, compared to 33 percent Evangelical Protestants, 14 percent religiously nonaffiliated, and less than 4 percent of other religions.

The country's current social and political crisis began in April 2018 when President Ortega announced reforms to the public pension system that precipitated major peaceful protests around the country. The government responded with excessive force and repression, leading to at least 325 persons killed, 2,000 injured, hundreds illegally detained and tortured, and more than 62,000 fleeing to neighboring countries. The Catholic Church emerged as a key actor in the crisis, providing sanctuary and medical aid to protesters and accepting an invitation to mediate a National Dialogue between the protesters and the government. Talks were underway in May 2018, but with the Church's insistence on not turning away demonstrators in need of aid and some clergy's support of the protesters, the Ortega administration began to lash out at the Church and the dialogue dissolved.

Since the end of the National Dialogue, the government has continued its brutal repression of human rights. The tactics used by the government to quell the protests and keep its grip on public life include rampant corruption, arbitrary detention, torture, forced disappearances, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the hindrance of civil society organizations' operations.

Damage to Churches

With the Catholic Church opening up its doors, protesters congregated in churches because security forces typically avoided entering them. Nevertheless, in 2019, church buildings suffered significant damage from clashes between protesters and Ortega supporters. Supporters of the regime besieged, desecrated, assaulted, and threatened churches in many cities around the country. Sometimes, these offenses occurred with the police standing nearby while mobs attacked the churches and worshippers.

In November, the government shut off the electricity and water to the San Miguel Arcángel church in Masaya because a group of 14 hunger strikers had sought refuge there, protesting the detention of family members. Police cordoned off a two-block radius around the church to stop activists from delivering water to the strikers. After a priest at the nearby San Juan Bautista church planned to march in solidarity with the hunger strikers at San Miguel Arcángel, a mob of Ortega supporters formed around the San Juan Bautista church during Mass. They eventually forced their way through a barricade of pews at the front door, attacking parishioners and altar boys with clubs, machetes, and metal bars. Police were nearby but did nothing to halt the violence.

Also in November, a group of mothers conducting a hunger strike against the regime's detention of their children sought refuge in the Managua Cathedral. A mob burst into the cathedral, brandished crude weapons, stole items, broke locks around the building, and assaulted the priest and nun caring for the building until the pair had to flee in order to protect themselves. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) swiftly condemned the desecration of the cathedral and the harassment of the hunger strikers.

Intimidation and Inability to Worship

Pro-Ortega forces sought to instill fear in Catholic clergy and devotees by maintaining a threatening presence near churches. Security forces surrounded churches during Mass and filmed those entering and exiting church buildings. Father Román says that officers surrounded his church during masses held in honor of those killed during protests and to celebrate the release of political prisoners.

In some cases, the violent disruption of church services by regime supporters was done with the acquiescence of police forces. On June 15, pro-government civilians threatened, beat, and threw stones at worshippers attending a service commemorating the death of a 15-year-old boy killed in the 2018 protests. Police were outside the cathedral but did not prevent the attack. In November, Ortega supporters threw rocks toward the San Felipe de Molagüina church in the northern city of Matagalpa while police looked on, though no injuries were reported.

In one instance, the Ortega government sought to disrupt a ritual that is fundamental to the Catholic faith. Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes reported in October 2019 that the General Directorate of Customs, controlled by the regime, was withholding several containers of donated goods from abroad, including vessels of wine used in the Eucharist sacrament.

Key U.S. Policy

At the 2018 and 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Vice President Michael R. Pence highlighted the Ortega government's campaign against the Catholic Church. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback said on International Religious Freedom Day in October 2018 that he was "strongly concerned" with the situation and called on the government to protect religious freedom and the Church's right to operate freely. On December 18, 2019, the State Department placed Nicaragua on its Special Watch List for severe violators of religious freedom.

In December 2018, Congress passed the Nicaragua Human Rights and Anticorruption Act (P.L. 115-335), a bill that imposed sanctions on institutions and individuals responsible for violence against and infringement of the civil rights of protesters. It also directed the U.S. Department of the Treasury to limit the ability of international financial institutions to lend assistance to the Nicaraguan government. The U.S. government has imposed targeted sanctions on a number of Nicaraguan officials for corruption, human rights abuses, and/or undermining democracy in Nicaragua, including three in July 2018, four in June 2019, and three in November 2019. Among those targeted were members of President Ortega's immediate family, including his wife Rosario Murillo and two of his sons, Rafael and Laureano. The U.S. government also offered humanitarian assistance to Nicaraguans who have fled their country due to the ongoing conflict.

SUDAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Sudan improved significantly in 2019, although serious challenges remain. It was a historic year for the country, with the removal of President Omar al-Bashir from power in April and the installation of a joint civilian-military transitional government in August, empowering civilian leaders for the first time in three decades. Religious freedom conditions prior to the fall of the former regime were similarly poor to those in 2018; under al-Bashir, the government engaged in dialogue with international actors and domestic stakeholders on religious freedom issues, but religious minority communities and the Sunni Muslim majority continued to face egregious restrictions and abuses. Based on the former government's particularly severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF had recommended Sudan's designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) every year since 2000, including in April 2019.

However, within the first several months of assuming power in August, the transitional government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, made concrete moves to improve religious freedom. It informally allowed the Muslim-minority Republican Party to operate openly for the first time, and extended improved representation to what it deems "traditional" Christian communities, including the appointment of a Coptic Christian woman as a member of the Sovereign Council. Most notably, the government announced in December the repeal of a public order law that the former regime had used to enforce—often violently—its Islamist vision of severe constraints on Sudanese society, with the harshest restrictions directed toward women and other vulnerable segments of the population.

Transitional government officials also launched an ambitious program of outreach to domestic and international stakeholders to seek support for reforms. Senior officials from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments and the Ministry of Education, among others, visited some of Sudan's long-marginalized peripheral areas. A high-ranking delegation visited Washington, DC, in December 2019; in the group's meeting with USCIRF, Prime Minister Hamdok expressed his government's commitment to implementing substantive improvements to religious freedom, including repealing the notorious blasphemy and apostasy laws—articles 125 and 126 of the Penal Code, respectively—in the near future. Later that month, the transitional government announced the designation of December 25 as a national holiday in celebration of Christmas, out of respect for the country's sizeable Christian community. In February 2020, shortly after the reporting period, USCIRF visited Sudan to assess religious freedom conditions—meeting with Prime Minister Hamdok, other senior officials, and representatives of religious communities and civil society. Based on this visit, USCIRF determined that the transitional government has ended the former regime's most egregious forms of religious repression and reaffirmed its commitment to substantive change.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Sudan on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe religious freedom violations pursuant to IRFA;
- Provide Sudan's Ministry of Education with funding and technical support for its program of comprehensive curricular reform to replace intolerant content in textbooks issued by the former regime with new materials and accompanying teacher training that support religious freedom and inclusivity;
- Allocate funding and other forms of economic assistance to provide the transitional government with technical support on transitional justice and other legal and constitutional reforms, in order to improve Sudan's ability to achieve a stable and lasting transition that will foster a social and political environment conducive to religious freedom and other basic human rights; and
- Prioritize, through the work of the U.S. Special Envoy on Sudan, efforts to 1) create a high-level international advisory body for human rights in Sudan to hold regular dialogues on reform and progress with its international allies; and 2) encourage the transitional government to invite the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, to Sudan.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit**: Khartoum in February and March 2020
- **Special Report:** Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Applauds Sanctions on Salah Gosh for Gross Human Rights Violations
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Encouraged by Appointment of Special Envoy to Sudan, Urges Close Scrutiny of Religious Freedom during Transition

Background

The population of Sudan is estimated at more than 43 million people; Pew Research estimates that 90.7 percent of the population is Muslim; 5.4 percent is Christian; and the remaining groups include Buddhists, Hindus, Baha'is, followers of indigenous religions, and others. Although the Interim National Constitution of 2005 enshrined the freedom of religion or belief, it affixed Islam—according to a narrow, Islamist interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence—as the source of law and, in practice, the former regime consistently and egregiously violated religious freedom. It systematically oppressed religious minorities, including some Christian groups whose churches, businesses, and other properties it targeted for confiscation and demolition, and whose leadership it systematically harassed and arrested. At the same time, minority-Muslim groups, such as the Republican Party, Shi'a Muslims, and Quranists, also faced ongoing persecution. The National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) often perpetrated these violations, and its personnel closely monitored the activities of religious leaders.

In addition to such repression and persecution, the former regime also directed particular disdain, neglect, and violence to peripheral areas of the country, such as Darfur and the "Two Areas" of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The regime's antagonism toward those regions resulted in massive underdevelopment, severe repression of traditional religious communities and ethnic minorities, and a series of brutal civil conflicts that remained unresolved at the time of al-Bashir's deposition in April 2019.

In August, civilian and military leaders signed the Draft Constitutional Charter for a 39-month transitional period, including the formation of a Sovereign Council and Council of Ministers to oversee the process in lieu of elected leadership or an independent legislative branch. The new charter prioritizes transitional justice and legal reforms, and it protects freedom of religion or belief while notably excluding reference to Islam as the primary source of law, signaling a fundamental—if still ongoing—shift in the relationship between religion and state. However, it continued to reference Shari'a enforcement, and the Transitional Military Council said in May before its agreement to share power in a transitional government that it still planned to rely on Islamic law to inform legislation—suggesting that this entrenched Islamic framework is likely to still influence Sudanese governance in the short to medium term. The transitional government also moved quickly to provide justice for crimes committed by the deposed former regime; in August it indicted al-Bashir on the first round of corruption charges, and in December a court convicted and sentenced him to two years in prison.

Transitional Reforms

The transitional government signaled a series of crucial shifts in discourse and policy by the end of 2019. At a September 24 meeting of the UN Human Rights Council, Justice Minister Nasr Al Deen Abdel Bary explicitly called out the former regime's marginalization of peripheral regions—where indigenous religious communities play a significant role—as the "root cause" of their respective conflicts. The following day, Sudan signed a crucial agreement with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to open offices in several of those peripheral areas, in a sign that the concurrent peace processes in those regions represented an immediate priority. Meanwhile, the transitional government continued to take positive steps in early 2020, including deliberation on a "Miscellaneous Law" that is expected to abolish articles 125 and 126, as well as the issuance of a March 2020 decree disbanding former regime-appointed church councils. Finally, following a decade of former president al-Bashir flouting the international warrant for his arrest—which the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued in 2009 for genocide and war crimes Darfur during the conflict in the mid-2000s—in February 2020 the transitional government agreed in principle to allow al-Bashir to stand trial before the ICC.

Ongoing and Systematic Challenges

Widespread optimism surrounding Sudan's efforts to leave behind a deeply repressive system is inescapable. However, the bureaucratic, legal, and ideological burdens of the former regime's 30 years in power still weigh heavily on religious minorities and other vulnerable populations. Protestant Christian groups who bore the brunt of the former regime's persecution of Christians—including oppressive surveillance, property confiscations, church destructions, and the creation of shadow church councils to obfuscate its actions—continued to have concerns, despite some improvements. They have acknowledged that the transitional government decisively ended the most egregious forms of persecution, but they insisted that it has not yet dismantled the convoluted system of zoning restrictions, bureaucratic impasses, and other obstacles that prevent them from reclaiming property, receiving formal recognition, and otherwise trusting that their situation has irrevocably changed. Other religious minorities—including Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is, Hindus, and adherents of indigenous practices in peripheral areas—remain marginalized from formal institutions and from the emerging national discourse regarding the advancement of religious freedom.

Key U.S. Policy

Bilateral relations improved significantly in 2019. U.S. officials had repeatedly put forward over the prior four years a Religious Freedom Action Plan for the former government, which suggested reforms to align Sudan with international standards for freedom of religion or belief, including changes to its legal framework and an end to abusive practices such as the demolition of churches. The United States has continued to uphold this plan in its consultations with transitional authorities regarding their commitment to advancing religious freedom. In June, the United States appointed a new special envoy, Ambassador Donald E. Booth, to support Sudan closely during the political transition—a step that USCIRF had recommended. During Prime Minister Hamdok's visit to the United States in December, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo announced that the United States and Sudan would begin the process of exchanging ambassadors. Later that month, the State Department removed Sudan from its list of CPCs and placed it on the Special Watch List. However, Sudan remained a U.S.-designated State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST), even as U.S. officials expressed hope that it would soon meet conditions for removal and continued to engage in negotiations with the transitional government to this end.

TURKEY

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkey remained worrisome, with the perpetuation of restrictive and intrusive governmental policies on religious practice and a marked increase in incidents of vandalism and societal violence against religious minorities. As in previous years, the government continued to unduly interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities by preventing the election of board members for non-Muslim foundations and introducing new limitations on the long-delayed election of the Armenian Apostolic Church's patriarch. The Interior Ministry curtailed the candidacies of certain individuals in the latter election despite a May 2019 Constitutional Court ruling that prior acts of such state interference had violated religious freedom. Alevis, the country's largest religious minority community, remained unable to gain official recognition for their gathering houses (*cemevleri*) as places of worship or to exempt their children from compulsory religious classes, despite European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings finding that these policies violated Alevis' rights.

Religious minorities in Turkey expressed concerns that governmental rhetoric and policies contributed to an increasingly hostile environment and implicitly encouraged acts of societal aggression and violence. Government officials and politicians continued to propagate expressions of anti-Semitism and hate speech, and no progress was made during the year to repeal Turkey's blasphemy law or to provide an alternative to mandatory military service and permit conscientious objection. Many longstanding issues concerning religious sites, such as the inability of the Greek Orthodox community to train clergy at the Halki Seminary, remained unresolved. In several instances in 2019, Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek religious and cultural sites, including numerous cemeteries, faced severe damage or destruction—in some cases because of neglect, but also due to vandalism or state-endorsed construction projects—while Alevi holy sites in the province of Sivas faced similar threats after the government issued mining permits for the surrounding area. In August 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attended the foundation-laying ceremony for a Syriac Orthodox church in Istanbul, which has been characterized as the first newly constructed church in the history of the Turkish republic. However, throughout the year, President Erdoğan called multiple times for the Hagia Sophia, a historic Greek Orthodox basilica that has held legal status as a museum since 1935, to be converted back into a mosque. In November 2019, a Turkish higher court also issued a decision permitting the Chora (Kariye) Museum, a former Greek Orthodox church, to be converted back into a mosque—thereby possibly setting a precedent for the similar conversion of the Hagia Sophia.

Throughout the year, the Turkish government continued to dismiss, detain, and arrest individuals affiliated with, or accused of affiliation with, the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, for alleged complicity in a July 2016 coup attempt or involvement in terrorist activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Turkey on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Raise in all meetings with Turkish government officials and press at the highest levels for the reopening of the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary and for the Turkish government to comply fully with ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Ankara and Consulates in Istanbul and Adana to track religious communities' efforts to open, regain, renovate, and protect places of worship and other religious sites of spiritual, cultural, or historic importance, and work with the Turkish government to ensure the protection of such sites.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass the Defending United States Citizens and Diplomatic Staff from Political Prosecutions Act of 2019 (S.1075) to defend U.S. citizens and diplomatic staff from political prosecution in Turkey, particularly when they are targeted in connection with religion or belief, and to require the imposition of sanctions on responsible Turkish officials.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Hearing:** Religious Freedom in Turkey
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Urges U.S. Policymakers to Remain Engaged on Religious Freedom in Turkey
- **Press Statement:** USCIRF Condemns Erdoğan's Threats to Change Status of Hagia Sophia

Background

According to the CIA World Factbook, the population of Turkey is approximately 82 million, of which 99.8 percent identifies as Muslim; an estimated 77.5 percent majority adheres to Sunni Islam. Between 10 million and 25 million people identify as Alevi, a community that the Turkish government largely refuses to differentiate from majority Sunni Muslims. The remaining 0.2 percent of the population comprises atheists, Armenian Apostolics, Baha'is, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, and other religious communities.

The Turkish constitution defines the country as a secular state and guarantees the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. However, the Turkish government also exercises extensive control over both majority Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities through either the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), which oversees the practice of Islam, or the General Directorate of Foundations (*Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü*), which regulates the activities of other religious communities. Some observers have characterized the Diyanet under President Erdoğan's leadership as "an instrument of [his] party's political and ideological agenda" abroad, employing a fusion of Turkish nationalism and Sunni Islam as a foreign policy tool. Within Turkey, no religious community has been permitted legal personality (recognition as a legal entity). Although discrimination on religious grounds is prohibited, non-Sunni Muslim individuals in particular have reported incidents of discrimination in the workplace.

State Interference in Religious Affairs

The Turkish government remained involved—and in certain cases directly interfered—in the selection processes for leadership positions of many religious groups. As the Directorate of Religious Affairs is responsible for the appointment of all imams throughout the country, Muslim communities lacked the means to select their own religious leaders independently. Some imams who declined or failed to adhere to the Directorate of Religious Affairs' guidelines were reportedly dismissed from their positions. The government also continued to block the election of new board members to Turkey's non-Muslim foundations by failing to provide the necessary regulations to allow for an election, as has been the case since 2013.

After the passing of Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan in March 2019, the Armenian Apostolic community undertook preparations to hold a long-sought election for the position of patriarch. Patriarch Mutafyan had been unable to fulfill his duties since 2008 due to illness, leading the community beginning in 2010 to petition the Turkish government to hold elections for his replacement. The government blocked all attempts in the intervening years to hold an election, and it interfered again in September 2019 when the Interior Ministry introduced a new regulation barring the candidacies of any otherwise eligible individuals if they were serving abroad. The community finally elected a new patriarch in December 2019.

Societal Persecution and Violence against Religious Minorities

Throughout 2019, members of Turkey's various religious and ethnic minority communities faced both threats of violence and actual violence, including at least two killings. In May, 86-year-old Zafir Pinari, a Greek man, was found murdered in his home on the island of Gökçeada. In November, Christian missionary and South Korean citizen Jinwook Kim was stabbed to death in the streets of the southeastern city of Diyarbakır. In Istanbul, an Armenian citizen was stabbed at her front door two months after a message arranged in the shape of a cross was posted on the wall of her home, containing profanity and referring to the residents as "infidels." In multiple incidents in 2019, Alevi homes were similarly vandalized with graffiti and threatening messages, and in November, burglars broke into the home of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I. In March, an unidentified individual threw a Molotov cocktail at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Izmir; according to reports, local authorities apprehended the individual and charged them with "damaging places of worship."

Blasphemy Charges

Turkey has occasionally charged individuals for blasphemy under article 216 (3) of the Penal Code, which punishes "openly insulting the religious values held by a segment of society." In May 2019, Turkish actress Berna Laçin was acquitted of blasphemy charges brought against her the previous year in connection with social media posts; however, authorities then appealed her acquittal, which was later upheld after the end of the reporting period, in January 2020. Similarly, officials detained two local staffers of the U.S. Consulate in Adana in November 2019 for "mocking Islamic values" in a video posted on social media. Although authorities launched an investigation, they reportedly released the two individuals shortly after their arrest.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Turkey maintain close relations as strategic allies and as members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, as in the previous year, the bilateral relationship remained strained in 2019. On October 6, 2019, President Donald J. Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Syria, making way for a Turkish military operation into the region. Following Turkey's unilateral invasion into Syria, and amid concerns of war crimes and a possible ISIS resurgence, President Trump issued an executive order (E.O. 13894) to sanction Turkish officials contributing to the deteriorating situation in Syria, increase tariffs on Turkish steel, and suspend trade negotiations. The U.S. Department of the Treasury subsequently designated two Turkish ministries and three ministers under the E.O. That same month, Vice President Michael R. Pence and Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo visited Ankara to negotiate a 120-hour ceasefire in Syria that expressly committed the two governments to protect religious and ethnic minorities. In November 2019, President Erdoğan visited the White House to meet with President Trump and some members of the U.S. Senate to discuss Syria, including the security of Christian minorities along the Syrian-Turkish border.

In June 2019, Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Samuel D. Brownback urged the Turkish government to reopen the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary. In January 2020, shortly after the reporting period, Ambassador Brownback traveled to Turkey to meet with Patriarch Bartholomew to discuss religious freedom issues.

UZBEKISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positively. The government took notable steps to address some of the long-standing and significant religious freedom concerns that had led USCIRF to recommend Uzbekistan's designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), every year since 2005, including in April 2019. Throughout 2019, the government by and large successfully enforced a ban on law enforcement authorities raiding and harassing religious communities, and in August announced the closure of the notorious Jasliq Prison, a course of action USCIRF had recommended. The government also continued to engage closely with the United States and other international partners to improve religious freedom. However, some issues saw little to no improvement or experienced backsliding. Thousands of religious prisoners—mostly observant Muslims—are estimated to remain behind bars on fabricated charges of "religious extremism" or membership in a banned religious group. Many religious prisoners subjected to multiple arbitrary extensions of their prison terms under the previous government continued to serve those sentences, and claimed to have experienced torture, which remains widespread and routine.

Some incidents throughout 2019 reinforced concerns that the government continued to restrict Muslim religious practice not in line with the state-prescribed interpretation of Islam. The government opposes Muslims growing beards or wearing hijabs as expressions of their religious beliefs, and both local government and law enforcement officials singled out and violated the rights of visibly religious Muslims. In separate episodes in the cities of Tashkent and Namangan, authorities rounded up and forced more than 100 men to shave their beards. Other government officials embarked on a campaign to actively discourage girls and women from wearing the hijab, with some authorities reportedly compiling lists of hijab-wearing girls and women for monitoring purposes. In a number of instances, Fergana Regional Governor Shuhrat Ganiev expressed open hostility toward Muslims, including by threatening subordinates who tolerated the hijab.

The Uzbek government also failed during 2019 to fulfill its May 2018 pledge to revise the restrictive 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations (1998 religion law), which continues to regulate and restrict all religious activity. The Ministry of Justice and other government officials continued to work on a revised draft of the law and sought some international feedback on their changes. Throughout the year, government officials stated that many of the law's most demanding and burdensome provisions would remain, including the mandatory registration of religious groups; the requirement that religious groups secure the approval of the *mahalla* (local community) to register; state review and approval of all religious literature; and bans on proselytism, missionary activity, the private teaching of religion, and any unregistered or unapproved religious activity. After the reporting period, however, government officials informed USCIRF that they intended to remove the *mahalla* from the registration process. Although eight minority communities were registered during the year, many religious minorities, such as some Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Protestants, remained unable to register because of their small numbers or local opposition.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Uzbekistan on the State Department's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Work with the government of Uzbekistan to revise the 1998 religion law to comply with international human rights standards, and encourage the government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the possession and distribution of religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs; and
- Press at the highest levels for the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and press the government of Uzbekistan to treat prisoners humanely and allow for independent prison monitoring.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation visit:** Tashkent and Fergana in September 2019
- **Staff visit:** Tashkent, Samarqand, and Bukhara in May 2019
- **Country Update:** Assessing Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan

Background

The government of Uzbekistan estimates that between 93 and 94 percent of the country's estimated population of 33 million identifies as Muslim. The majority adheres to Sunni Islam, and approximately 1 percent identifies as Shi'a Muslim. Around 3.5 percent of the population identifies as Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 3 percent comprises atheists, Baha'is, Buddhists, Catholics, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Protestants.

Under the administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev beginning in late 2016, Uzbekistan has taken some positive steps to allow for religious freedom. Uzbekistan's constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief; however, it also allows for its limitation where it encroaches on the "lawful interests, rights, and freedoms of other citizens, the state, or society." Other legislation—such as the 1998 religion law, the Administrative Code, and the Criminal Code—facilitates government control of all religious activity, such as by requiring registration of all religious groups, criminalizing unregistered religious activity, and subjecting all religious literature and other materials to state approval.

Religious Prisoners

It is impossible to definitively ascertain the number of prisoners incarcerated in Uzbekistan in connection with their peaceful religious beliefs or practices. Estimates from international and local human rights organizations generally range from 1,500 to 5,000 prisoners. According to human rights activists in Uzbekistan, many of the remaining religious prisoners were sentenced in connection with real or fabricated membership in the Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is banned in Uzbekistan. However, they contend that few were legitimately guilty of committing or inciting violence. Religious prisoners Aramais Avakian and Ruhiddin Fahrutdinov, who have been covered in previous USCIRF Annual Reports and are listed in USCIRF's Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, remained imprisoned through the end of 2019. However, Avakian was released in February 2020, after the reporting period.

In a positive development, President Mirziyoyev announced in August 2019 that the government would close the infamous Jasliq Prison, an isolated facility in the country's northwest that is notorious for torture and the incarceration of religious prisoners. Uzbekistan's Ministry of Interior Affairs stated that approximately 10 percent of Jasliq inmates were imprisoned for crimes connected with "religious extremism." By the end of the year, however, concerns remained that Jasliq Prison would not be closed completely, and would instead be transferred to the control of local authorities to be used as a pretrial detention center.

Government Control of Religious Practice and Expression

Throughout the year, high-level government officials from Uzbekistan made commitments—both in Uzbekistan and during visits to the United States—to ensure greater religious freedom for all citizens. However, the government continued to wield extensive control and influence over all aspects of religious activity throughout the country. Although the government pledged to revise the 1998 religion law with the parliament's adoption of a "road map" on freedom of religion or belief in May 2018, the restrictive law still governs the everyday practice and activities of all religious groups. According to interlocutors in Uzbekistan, many non-Muslim religious minorities, such as some Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, and Protestant communities, were unable to acquire legal registration.

The government remained primarily concerned with controlling the practice of Islam out of fear of the potential for "radical Islam" and religious extremism. This position was exemplified by the government's decisions in August and September 2019, respectively, to reassign then deputy chairman of the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) Nuriyman Abulhasan to the Department for Combating Terrorism and Extremism in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and to appoint Abdujafur Ahmedov from the State Security Service (SSS) to lead the CRA. Authorities continued to target Muslims who adhere to a more conservative interpretation of Islam or are outwardly observant. In August, law enforcement detained around 100 men in a market in Tashkent and forced them to shave their beards, ostensibly to bring their appearances in line with their biometric passports so they could be identified by smart cameras. At least one other such incident also took place in Namangan the following month. Similarly, during the year, there were reports that officials instructed school administrators to confiscate girls' hijabs at the gates of schools, and compiled lists of girls who wore the hijab to be monitored. In June, Uzbekistan's Supreme Court dismissed the case of Luiza Muminjonova, a 19-year-old student expelled from the International Islamic Academy in Tashkent the previous year for refusing to remove her hijab.

The government reportedly places its own limitations on hajj and umrah pilgrimages separate from the quotas and requirements established by Saudi Arabia. Muslims who wish to perform the hajj or umrah must secure permission from the government, which has allegedly excluded particularly religious Muslims and enforces an unofficial age limit. Moreover, pilgrims are required to use state-approved travel agencies and are barred from joining tours organized by other companies. In August, the SSS reportedly detained and interrogated a group of 35 pilgrims, who had completed the hajj through a private company based in the United Arab Emirates, in Tashkent International Airport.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States and Uzbekistan cooperate closely on issues of regional stability and security, including combatting terrorism. In April 2019, the U.S. Department of State's Antiterrorism Assistance program sponsored training for 13 Ministry of Internal Affairs participants. Uzbekistan also participates in the C5+1 forum with the other countries of Central Asia and the United States, and in May it hosted a workshop on religious tolerance and countering violent extremism sponsored in part by the United States Institute of Peace. Human rights and religious freedom remain a priority for the United States in the bilateral relationship. In February, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice G. Wells visited Uzbekistan, where she raised religious freedom issues and specifically cited the release of prisoners of conscience as a positive step. The State Department removed Uzbekistan from the CPC list and placed it on the Special Watch List for the first time in December 2018, and did so again in November 2019.

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.

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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.

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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 Castener 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—instead of specific blasphemy laws—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

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.

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

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.

APPENDIX 1: COMMISSIONERS BIOGRAPHIES

Tony Perkins, *Chair*

Appointed by: Hon. Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Majority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020.

President of the Family Research Council (FRC), a religious public policy organization.

Gayle Manchin, *Vice Chair*

Appointed by: Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Educator, former First Lady of West Virginia and past president of the State Board of Education.

Nadine Maenza, *Vice Chair*

Appointed by: President Donald J. Trump, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Executive Director of Patriot Voices and former Chairman of Hardwired Global, an organization working to stop religious oppression around the world.

Gary L. Bauer, *Commissioner*

Reappointed by: President Donald J. Trump, for a term expiring in May 2021.

President of American Values, a public policy think tank, and Washington Director of Christians United for Israel Action Fund.

Anurima Bhargava, *Commissioner*

Appointed by: Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Civil rights lawyer and founder and president of Anthem of Us.

James W. Carr, *Commissioner*

Appointed by: Hon. Kevin McCarthy (R), House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020.

President and Chairman of Highland Home Holdings investment fund, and formerly served on the National Security Education Board.

Tenzin Dorjee, *Commissioner*

Reappointed by: Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Associate Professor, California State University Fullerton.

Sharon Kleinbaum, *Commissioner*

Appointed by: Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah.

Johnnie Moore, *Commissioner*

Appointed by: President Donald J. Trump, for a term expiring in May 2020.

Founder and CEO of the KAIROS Company, a public relations consultancy, and former Chief of Staff and Vice President of Faith Content for the United Artists Media Group.

APPENDIX 2: RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT AND VICTIMS LIST

RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE PROJECT

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

Current RPOCs:

Leah Sharibu

USCIRF Advocate
Chair Tony Perkins

The Panchen Lama

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee and Vice Chair Nadine Maenza

Dennis Christensen

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner
Sharon Kleinbaum

Hu Shigen

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Gary Bauer

Golrokh Iraee

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Gayle Manchin

Gulmira Imin

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee

Nguyen Bac Truyen

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner
Anurima Bhargava

Raif Badawi

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Nadine Maenza

Youcef Nadarkhani

USCIRF Advocate
Vice Chair Nadine Maenza

Patriarch Antonios

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Hamid bin Haydara

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Robert Levinson

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore

RPOCs Released in 2019:

Abdul Shakoor
(March 2019)

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner Johnnie Moore

Dilshat Ataman
(July 2019)

USCIRF Advocate
Chair Tony Perkins

Ivan Matsitsky
(November 2019)

USCIRF Advocate
Commissioner
Sharon Kleinbaum

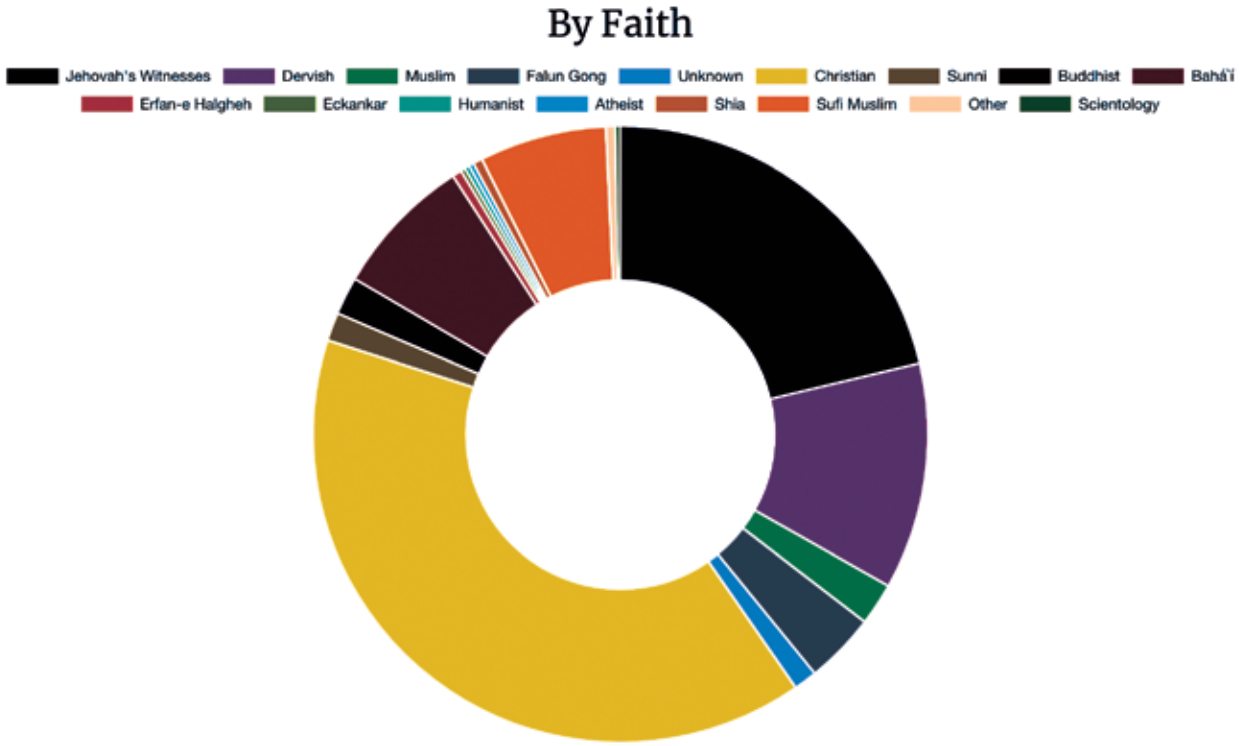
FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF VICTIMS LIST

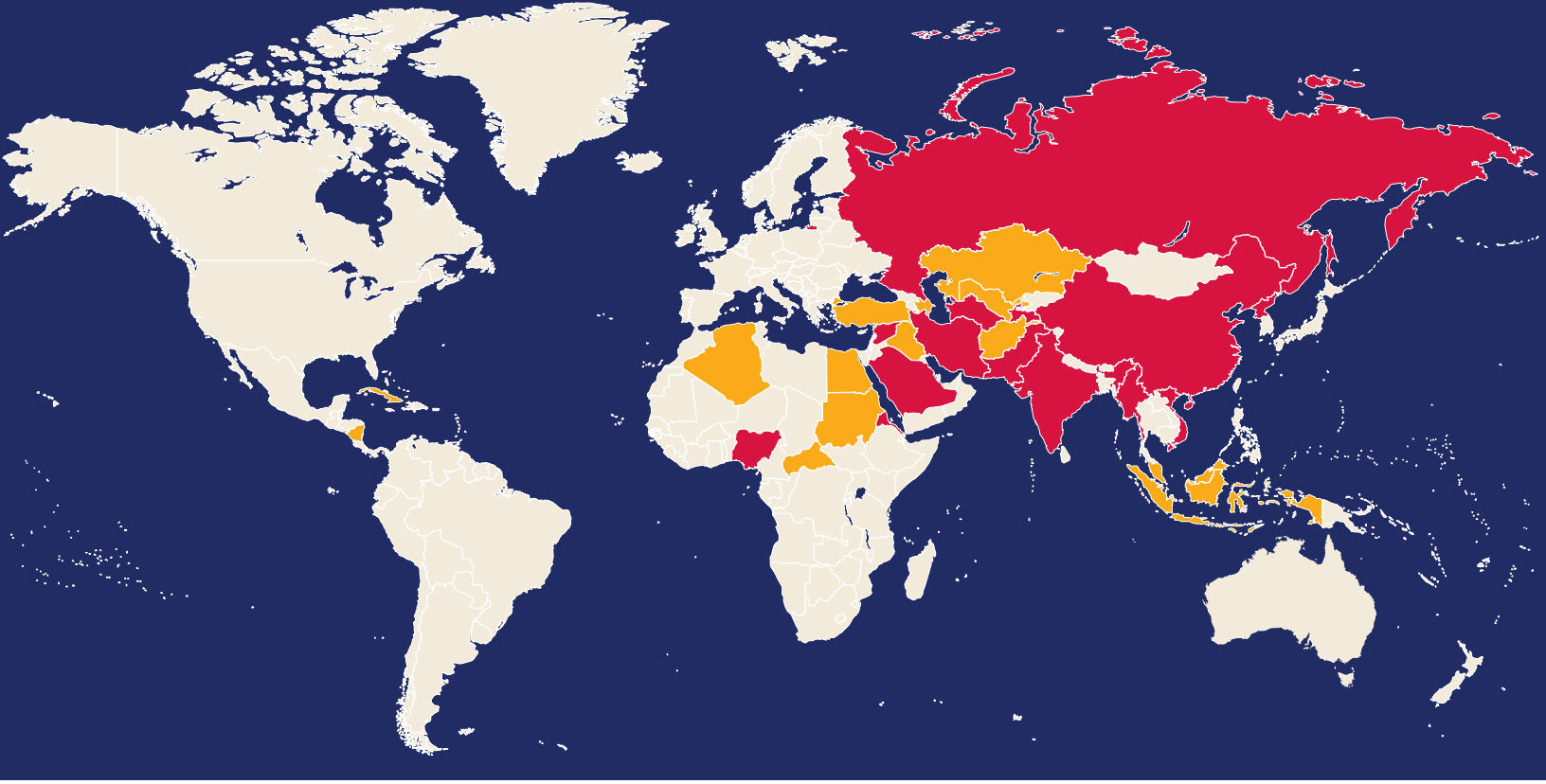
The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, requires USCIRF to:

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

In October 2019, USCIRF launched its Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Victims List, a database that catalogues select victims targeted due to their religion or belief from countries that USCIRF recommends for CPC designation. The Act further provides USCIRF with discretion on whether to include a victim based on safety and security concerns. To date, the FoRB Victims List includes over 400 victims from 11 countries representing a diverse number of faith communities, as demonstrated in the chart below. Victims included in this list may have been targeted for one of these violations due to their faith-based activity or advocacy, or by laws that conflict with religious freedom, such as blasphemy or apostasy laws.

Please refer to the USCIRF website for more information on the FoRB Victims list.





2020 USCIRF RECOMMENDATIONS

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

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

SPECIAL WATCH LIST COUNTRIES

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

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