

INTRODUCTION

The state of affairs for international religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations. The blatant assaults have become so frightening—attempted genocide, the slaughter of innocents, and wholesale destruction of places of worship—that less egregious abuses go unnoticed or at least unappreciated. Many observers have become numb to violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines this right to include freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom—either alone or in community with others and in public or private—to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

A year ago, then Secretary of State John Kerry declared that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was committing genocide. This declaration marked the first time since Darfur in 2004 when a U.S. administration proclaimed an ongoing campaign as genocide. ISIS seeks to bring its barbaric worldview to reality through violence and genocide cloaked in a distortion of Islam. While the world has come to know ISIS and expects no better, there are members of the United Nations Security Council whose assaults on religious freedom are less violent, but no less insidious. On April 20, the Russian Supreme Court issued a ruling banning the existence of the Jehovah's Witnesses in that country. Their right to religious freedom is being eliminated thoroughly—and yet “legally” under Russian law. Russia's continued use of its “anti-extremism” law as a tool to curtail religious freedoms is one of the reasons USCIRF has recommended for the first time that Russia be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The right to the freedom of religion or belief is an encompassing right that can be taken away directly or indirectly, and thus:

You cannot have religious freedom without:

- ... the freedom of worship;
- ... the freedom of association;
- ... the freedom of expression and opinion;
- ... the freedom of assembly;
- ... protection from arbitrary arrest and detention;
- ... protection from interference in home and family; and
- ... You cannot have religious freedom without equal protection under the law.

And on it goes.

Many violations of religious freedom do not appear to be aimed at religion. Violations can seem mundane, such as requirements for building permits (to establish/repair places of worship) or less mundane, such as restrictions on association (constraining the right to worship). Nonetheless, they are violations of international religious freedoms and they are

increasing in numbers and frequency.

USCIRF also finds that many restrictions on religious freedoms are done under the guise of protecting national security. However, this “securitization” of religion is a double-edged sword.

The challenge of supporting religious freedom and enhancing security can be seen in both Bahrain and Egypt. During the year, the Bahraini government has increasingly cracked down on the religious freedom of its majority-Shi'a Muslim population, yet the U.S. Administration is lifting human rights conditions on the sale of weapons to Bahrain. Egypt, on the other hand, is working toward positive progress on certain aspects of religious freedom, yet the overall state of human rights remains dismal. Outreach by the government to religious minority groups, such as the Copts, is needed and positive, but has drawn the attention of extremists, such as ISIS, that are committing violence against such groups. Efforts by the government that erode the public's ability to associate freely and express themselves inevitably

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curtail broader religious freedoms and send mixed, if not contradictory, messages.

Blasphemy laws are yet another example of governments using laws as a tool for restricting religious freedom under the purported need to protect religions from defamation. In more than 70 countries worldwide, from Canada to Pakistan, governments employ these laws, which lead to grave human rights violations, embolden extremists, and are, in the long run, counterproductive to national security.

Religious freedom, at its core, is the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief, and is a basic human right.

State-sponsored or condoned oppression of the freedom of religion or belief is only part of the challenge. Non-state actors represent a less official yet no less virulent threat to such freedoms. The 2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act requires the president to identify non-state entities engaged in severe religious freedom abuses and deem them “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. This directive was both appropriate and overdue. Entities that control territory and have significant political control within countries can be even more oppressive than governments in their attacks on religious freedom. In this report, USCIRF recommends that ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia all be designated EPCs.

USCIRF advocates for religious freedom through its policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF also strengthens religious freedom advocacy networks abroad through education and outreach, including:

1. Collaborating with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief;
2. Highlighting the complexities and synergies between the rights of women and girls and freedom of religion or belief; and

3. Advocating on behalf of religious prisoners of conscience by raising awareness of the violations of their freedom of religion or belief.

Religious freedom, at its core, is the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief, and is a basic human right. Protecting that right falls to each and every one of us, requiring people from all countries, political views, and faiths to come together to fight religious persecution and work to protect religious freedom for all.