



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
**INTERNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM**



2019 | ANNUAL  
REPORT

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS





#### Photo Credits

**Above:** A demonstrator wearing a mask painted with the colours of the flag of East Turkestan and a hand bearing the colours of the Chinese flag attends a protest of supporters of the mostly Muslim Uighur minority and Turkish nationalists to denounce China's treatment of ethnic Uighur Muslims during a deadly riot in July 2009 in Urumqi, in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul, on July 5, 2018. - Nearly 200 people died during a series of violent riots that broke out on July 5, 2009 over several days in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in northwestern China, between Uyghurs and Han people. (Photo by OZAN KOSE / AFP) (OZAN KOSE/AFP/Getty Images)

**Left:** Ethnic Uighurs take part in a protest march asking for the European Union to call upon China to respect human rights in the Chinese Xinjiang region and asking for the closure of 're-education center[s]' where some Uighurs are detained, during a demonstration around the EU institutions in Brussels on April 27, 2018. (Photo by Emmanuel DUNAND / AFP) (EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP/Getty Images)

**Bottom Left:** People from the Uighur community living in Turkey carry flags of what ethnic Uighurs call 'East Turkestan', during a protest in Istanbul, Tuesday, Nov. 6, 2018, against what they allege is oppression by the Chinese government to Muslim Uighurs in far-western Xinjiang province. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

**Below:** A gate of what is officially known as a vocational skills education centre is photographed in Dabancheng, in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China September 4, 2018. This centre, situated between regional capital Urumqi and tourist spot Turpan, is among the largest known ones, and was still undergoing extensive construction and expansion at the time the photo was taken. Police in Dabancheng detained two Reuters journalists for more than four hours after the photos were taken. Picture taken September 4, 2018. To match Special Report MUSLIMS-CAMPS/CHINA REUTERS/Thomas Peter





# ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## COMMISSIONERS

Tenzin Dorjee

*Chair*

Kristina Arriaga

Gayle Manchin

*Vice Chairs*

Gary L. Bauer

Anurima Bhargava

Andy Khawaja

Nadine Maenza

Johnnie Moore

Tony Perkins

Ambassador Samuel D. Brownback,

*ex officio*, non-voting member (as of February 1, 2018)

Erin D. Singshinsuk

*Executive Director*

APRIL 2019

## PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Dwight Bashir, *Director of Research and Policy*

Elizabeth K. Cassidy, *Director of International Law and Policy*

Thomas Kraemer, *Director of Operations and Finance*

Tina L. Mufford, *Deputy Director of Research and Policy*

Lindsey Eilon, *Senior Congressional Relations Specialist*

Jamie Staley, *Senior Congressional Relations Specialist*

Ferdaouis Bagga, *Policy Analyst*

Keely Bakken, *Researcher*

Patrick Greenwalt, *Researcher*

Alex Iverson, *Researcher*

Kirsten Lavery, *International Legal Specialist*

Jason Morton, *Policy Analyst*

Dominic Nardi, *Policy Analyst*

Scott Weiner, *Policy Analyst*

Kurt Werthmuller, *Policy Analyst*

Zachary Udin, *Research Assistant*

Javier Peña, *Communications Specialist*

Zaronda Watson, *Travel and Administrative Specialist*

Henry Young, *Management and Program Analyst*

## U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

732 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite A714

Washington, DC 20401

202-523-3240, 202-523-5020 (fax)

[www.uscirf.gov](http://www.uscirf.gov)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>2019 Annual Report Overview</b>	5
<b>Implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act</b>	9
Key Findings	9
Recommendations to the Administration	10
Recommendations to Congress	10
Legal Provisions	10
Developments in 2018	12
<b>Country Reports: Tier 1 Countries (Recommended for CPC Designations)</b>	
Burma	20
Central African Republic	28
China	34
Eritrea	44
Iran	50
Nigeria	58
North Korea	66
Pakistan	72
Russia	80
Saudi Arabia	90
Sudan	98
Syria	104
Tajikistan	110
Turkmenistan	116
Uzbekistan	124
Vietnam	132
<b>Country Reports: Tier 2 Countries</b>	
Afghanistan	140
Azerbaijan	146
Bahrain	152
Cuba	160

Egypt .....	166
India .....	174
Indonesia .....	182
Iraq .....	188
Kazakhstan .....	196
Laos .....	204
Malaysia .....	210
Turkey .....	216
<b>Appendix 1: Commissioner Biographies .....</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project .....</b>	<b>225</b>

# INTRODUCTION

On October 27, 2018, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), reached its 20th anniversary. In the two decades since, a greater and more diverse number of actors across the globe are working to protect the fundamental freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as prescribed in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). In fact, the U.S. Department of State's 2018 [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) became a fulcrum for change in these efforts—more foreign governments than ever before are taking action to uphold these rights in their own countries and around the world.

But the enduring story of the last 20 years is not about IRFA or USCIRF. Rather, it is the story of people who wish to live their lives as their conscience leads, who dream of raising their children so that they can make their own choice about what to believe or not believe freely and openly. Yet for some, the last 20 years have been a chronicle of a different kind, spanning a generation of cruel and unrelenting treatment because of their beliefs.

One such saga is currently unfolding in China where the government has been particularly pernicious toward religion and religious believers during the last 20 years—and increasingly so in recent years, including in 2018.

As a Tibetan, you may be forced to study Buddhism in a language that is not Tibetan, your native tongue, or detained for possessing a photo of your spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. As a Christian, your Bible may have been rewritten by the Chinese government, your church shuttered or demolished, and your pastor imprisoned. As a Falun Gong practitioner, you may end up at a detention center where you are attacked with electric batons and forced to undergo medical and psychological experimentation. As a human rights defender who works to protect people targeted for their faith, you may be arrested, or worse, disappeared. And as a Muslim—particularly an ethnic Uighur Muslim—you may be forcibly sent to a concentration camp where you are held against your will and subjected to unspeakable acts of abuse and alleged torture, all while authorities pressure you to abandon your faith.

The cover of USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report tells the story of abuses against Uighur Muslims in China, a tragedy that Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo in March 2019 [called](#) "abhorrent." Sadly, the atrocities predate both IRFA and USCIRF.

Twenty years ago—in June 1999—USCIRF selected three countries as the primary focus of the Commission's [first-ever Annual Report](#), released in 2000: Russia, Sudan, and China. In that first report, USCIRF found that Uighur Muslims: "faced heightened repression of their religious and other human rights;" were subject to arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial executions; and were "imprisoned for their religious belief, association or practice."



Ten years later, USCIRF's [2010 Annual Report](#)—which covered events in 2009 and early 2010—featured on its cover a photograph of a Uighur Muslim woman facing down armed Chinese security forces, with a

defiant fist raised in protest to Chinese government repression. She was responding to authorities' disproportionate response to peaceful demonstrations in 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region where at least 10 million Uighur Muslims reside. The ensuing violence left an estimated 200 Uighur Muslims dead and more than 1,600 injured. Moreover, Chinese authorities carried out enforced disappearances of Uighur men and teenage boys and sentenced others to death.

Nearly 20 years later, Uighur Muslims are constantly surveilled, their phones confiscated and scanned, their skin pricked for blood samples to collect their DNA, their children prohibited from attending mosque. Even worse, the Chinese government has ripped entire families apart, detaining between 800,000 and two million adults in concentration camps and relegating some of their children to orphanages. Families cannot contact one another due to fear of government monitoring; thus, countless Uighur Muslims have no idea where their loved ones are or if they are even alive.

Although a handful of foreign governments—including the United States, Britain, and Turkey—have harshly condemned the Chinese government for these egregious abuses, China has faced few, if any, consequences. Despite years of escalating abuses, the wider international community has tragically missed the opportunity to prevent what is now happening to Uighur and other Muslims in China. Policy and practice now must focus on holding the responsible parties accountable, ceasing China's myriad abuses against all faith communities, and documenting the evidence of the atrocities that have occurred.

The U.S. government—and the international community—must swiftly and resolutely sanction Chinese officials and agencies that have perpetrated or tolerated severe religious freedom violations, including Chen Quanguo, Communist Party Secretary in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and Politburo Member, among others. The U.S. and other governments must press the

Chinese government to immediately and unconditionally set Uighur and other Muslims free and also release prisoners of conscience like Uighur Muslims Gulmira Imin and Ilham Tohti, Tibetan Buddhists like the Panchen Lama and Tashi Wangchuk, Christians like Pastor Wang Yi and Hu Shigen, and human rights defenders like Gao Zhisheng. Also they must urge the Chinese government to cease detaining, arresting, and imprisoning believers and human rights defenders for their peaceful activities and stop interfering in the practice, instruction, and observance of their beliefs.

Unfortunately, China is only one of several countries where freedom of religion or belief remained in peril throughout 2018, as documented in USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report. Although some foreign governments have joined the fight to promote freedom of religion or belief, others brazenly suppress it. Some—like Sudan, Vietnam, and Tajikistan—do so under the guise of protecting “public order” or “national security,” frequently invoking real or perceived threats of public discontent or even terrorism to justify not just the restriction of rights, but the outright persecution of their own people. Some—like Russia, China, Eritrea, and Turkmenistan—expose their own insecurities by branding religious and ethnic minorities as “extremists,” in part because these governments believe these groups are under “foreign influence.”

In several countries where USCIRF found deteriorating religious freedom conditions it also found increased securitization and politicization of religion: for example, in countries like India, it is increasingly difficult to separate religion and politics, a tactic that is sometimes intentional by those who seek to discriminate against and restrict the rights of certain religious

communities. And the very governments perpetrating or tolerating these abuses often decry “interference in internal affairs” when they are rightfully admonished for their deplorable religious freedom and human rights records.

In 2018, both state and nonstate actors increasingly used religion as a

---

*The U.S. government—and the international community—must swiftly and resolutely sanction Chinese officials and agencies that have perpetrated or tolerated severe religious freedom violations, including Chen Quanguo.*

---



tool of exclusion to isolate, marginalize, and punish the “other” through discrimination and violence. For example, blasphemy and related laws in countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—and also in countries with comparatively lesser challenges such as Indonesia and Egypt—were typically enforced against individuals belonging to a minority faith, following a faith not recognized by the state, or holding no faith at all. At times, when a government or nonstate actor deems actions and expressions blasphemous or insulting to religion, it is that declaration—and not the underlying alleged defamation—that incites hatred and violence. Nationalistic and ideological sentiment underpins some of these accusations, and can motivate state and nonstate actors to manipulate religion in a way that is detrimental to other, often minority, religious and ethnic groups, such as in Burma and Iran.

As USCIRF’s 2019 Annual Report concludes, despite two decades of tireless work to bring an end to religious-based discrimination, violence, and persecution,

---

*... despite two decades of tireless work to bring an end to religious-based discrimination, violence, and persecution, innumerable believers and nonbelievers across the globe continued in 2018 to experience manifold suffering due to their beliefs.*

---

innumerable believers and nonbelievers across the globe continued in 2018 to experience manifold suffering due to their beliefs.

On the one hand, it is the responsibility of governments to protect and uphold freedom of religion

or belief and the related freedoms of expression, assembly, association, and press. No nonstate or state actor—not the Chinese government nor any other government—has the authority to command a person’s soul and beliefs. On the other, the international community is increasingly respon-

sible for allowing the Chinese government and other governments to get away with systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom without consequence or accountability.

Across the globe, the collective voices of those fighting for freedom of religion or belief must consistently sound the alarm against state and nonstate actors who perpetrate and tolerate such abuses. These violators must be held accountable. The impunity must end now.



# 2019 ANNUAL REPORT OVERVIEW

Created by the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA), the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the U.S. Department of State, 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](#) and other international documents.

The 2019 Annual Report documents religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2018 in 28 countries and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter reflected in

this report—and each country’s Tier status—are based on a year’s work by USCIRF, including travel, meetings, briefings, and research, 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 2018 and early 2019, Commissioners and/or staff visited 10 countries to assess conditions: Bahrain (March 2018, March 2019), Bangladesh (January/February 2018), Egypt (March 2018, January 2019), Indonesia (October 2018), Iraq (March 2018), Kazakhstan (April 2018), Nigeria (May 2018, November 2018), Saudi Arabia (September 2018), Sudan (April/May 2018), and Thailand (August 2018). In the coming year, USCIRF also intends to hold hearings, pursuant to its statutory authority under IRFA.

USCIRF’s annual reports—and USCIRF’s mandate more broadly—are different from, and complementary

to, the State Department’s Annual Reports on International Religious Freedom. First, USCIRF’s annual reports have a refined focus on fewer than 30 countries, typically those that experience the most problematic religious freedom violations. The State Department’s reports cover every country in the world except the United States. Second, USCIRF’s annual reports unflinchingly describe violations of international religious freedom. Whereas the State Department must account for overall bilateral relationships in its reporting, USCIRF has the independence and objectivity to call out violations wherever and whenever they may occur. Third, USCIRF’s annual reports, unlike the State Department, analyze U.S. policy with respect to international religious freedom and make extensive policy

recommendations, both to the Executive Branch and Congress. Fourth, USCIRF’s annual reports are timely: in its 20-year history, USCIRF has each year submitted its Annual Report to the White House, State Department, and Congress by its

---

*USCIRF’s annual reports—and USCIRF’s mandate more broadly—are different from, and complementary to, the State Department’s Annual Reports on International Religious Freedom.*

---

statutory May 1 deadline, conveying up-to-date analysis of current country conditions from the preceding calendar year. Finally, in addition to featuring select prisoners of conscience in individual country chapters, USCIRF’s annual reports also feature prisoners in the report appendices, putting a human face to the myriad religious freedom violations perpetrated and tolerated by state and nonstate actors.

The 2019 report is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the U.S. government’s implementation of IRFA and provides recommendations to bolster U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief<sup>1</sup> abroad.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, USCIRF uses the terms “religious freedom,” “freedom of religion,” and “freedom of religion or belief” interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, including the right to nonbelief, protected under international human rights law.

The second section highlights 16 countries USCIRF concludes meet IRFA's standard for "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, for the period covered by this report, which USCIRF refers to as Tier 1 countries. IRFA requires the U.S. government to designate as a CPC any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations, meaning those that are systematic, ongoing, and egregious.

**In 2019, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate the following 10 countries as CPCs:** Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. **USCIRF also finds that six other countries meet the CPC standard and should be so designated:** Central African Republic, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

The State Department most recently made [CPC designations](#) in November 2018, naming 10 countries: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. At the same time, the State Department named three countries—Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan—to its Special Watch List, a category created by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#) (Frank Wolf Act) for governments that engaged in or tolerated severe violations but were deemed to not meet all the criteria of the CPC test. In the State Department's [previous designations](#), in December 2017, Pakistan had been on the Special Watch List and Uzbekistan had been designated as a CPC.

The third section of the Annual Report highlights 12 countries USCIRF categorizes as Tier 2, defined by the Commission as nations in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government during 2018 are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" CPC standard.

**In 2019, USCIRF places the following 12 countries on Tier 2:** Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report covers a select group of countries, but during the year, USCIRF monitored and had concerns about religious freedom conditions globally, including in countries not included in this report. The fact that other countries are not included in this report does not mean religious freedom issues do not exist in those countries or that concerns discussed in previous USCIRF annual reports have improved. Information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries may be found in the State Department's annual [International Religious Freedom reports](#). USCIRF also issues publications throughout the year on a variety of countries and topics, which can be found at [www.uscifr.gov](http://www.uscifr.gov).

As USCIRF's annual reports have long recognized, nonstate actors are among the most egregious violators of religious freedom. 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 "entities of particular concern," or EPCs. The law defines 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."

In 2019, USCIRF recommends five organizations for designation as EPCs based on their violations during 2018. USCIRF also continues to report, in various country chapters, on particularly severe violations of religious freedom perpetrated by nonstate actors that do not meet the Frank Wolf Act's definition because, for example, they do not exercise significant political power and territorial control.

**In 2019, USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate the following five organizations as EPCs:** the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Shabaab in Somalia, Houthis in Yemen, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

There were two sets of EPC designations in 2018. On March 5, 2018, the State Department [designated](#) eight nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe

religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.” On November 28, 2018, the State Department [designated](#) nine entities as EPCs: the eight designated in March and the Houthis. Although USCIRF’s assessment of the

statutory requirement that EPCs “exercise significant political power and territorial control” differs from the State Department’s, the Commission is similarly concerned by these entities’ particularly severe religious freedom violations as defined by the December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

CPC Recommendations (Tier 1):	Tier 2 Countries:	EPC Recommendations:
<p>Burma*</p> <p>Central African Republic</p> <p>China*</p> <p>Eritrea*</p> <p>Iran*</p> <p>Nigeria</p> <p>North Korea*</p> <p>Pakistan*</p> <p>Russia**</p> <p>Saudi Arabia*</p> <p>Sudan*</p> <p>Syria</p> <p>Tajikistan*</p> <p>Turkmenistan*</p> <p>Uzbekistan**</p> <p>Vietnam</p>	<p>Afghanistan</p> <p>Azerbaijan</p> <p>Bahrain</p> <p>Cuba</p> <p>Egypt</p> <p>India</p> <p>Indonesia</p> <p>Iraq</p> <p>Kazakhstan</p> <p>Laos</p> <p>Malaysia</p> <p>Turkey</p>	<p>The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)*</p> <p>The Taliban in Afghanistan*</p> <p>Al-Shabaab in Somalia*</p> <p>Houthis*</p> <p>Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)</p>
<p>* Designated as CPCs by the State Department on November 28, 2018</p> <p>** Designated as Special Watch List by the State Department on November 28, 2018</p>		<p>* Designated as EPCs by the State Department on November 28, 2018</p>





# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

## KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, the administration of Donald J. Trump took action on the commitments to prioritize religious freedom it made in 2017. Samuel D. Brownback, who as a U.S. Senator was a sponsor of the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA), assumed the position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in February and energetically implemented his mandate. In July, the U.S. Department of State hosted the first-ever [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#), bringing together hundreds of government officials, international organization representatives, religious leaders, civil society actors, and victims of religious persecution. Key outcomes included a declaration and plan of action, new programs to respond to persecution and promote religious freedom abroad, and a commitment to hold a second ministerial in 2019.

In November, the State Department made the first new addition since 2016 to its list of “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom: Pakistan, which USCIRF had recommended for CPC designation since 2002. It also named three countries to its “Special Watch List” for severe violations, including Uzbekistan, which had been on the State Department’s CPC list since 2006, and Russia, which USCIRF had recommended for CPC designation since 2017. The State Department also made two sets of designations during the year of “entities of particular concern,”

or EPCs, citing nine nonstate groups for particularly severe violations. The State Department and U.S. Department of the Treasury actively used the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and a related executive order to impose targeted sanctions for corruption or human rights abuses, but only a few of these sanctions related to religious freedom violations.

During the year, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) placed a new emphasis on humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. The State Department worked to develop an online training course on international religious freedom for all foreign service officers, as required by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#) (Frank Wolf Act). U.S. refugee resettlement decreased in 2018 and a special program for Iranian religious minorities stopped accepting new applicants; instead, the Trump administration focused on humanitarian assistance

for those displaced abroad and programs to help enable their return home. Longstanding flaws in the U.S. government’s processing of asylum-seekers at ports of entry and the border remained unaddressed. Throughout 2018, the Trump administration continued to prioritize

---

*In November, the State Department made the first new addition since 2016 to its list of “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, [naming] Pakistan, which USCIRF had recommended for CPC designation since 2002.*

---

the case of Dr. Andrew Brunson, an American pastor unjustly imprisoned in Turkey. After sustained high-level pressure, Pastor Brunson was released in October and allowed to return to the United States.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Appoint a Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council (NSC) staff, as outlined by IRFA;
- Develop a government-wide strategy for promoting religious freedom abroad;
- Prepare action plans for specific countries; and
- Establish an interagency working group to oversee implementation;
- Increase the use of targeted sanctions against specific officials, agencies, and military units for severe religious freedom violations, including visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA ([section 212\(a\)\(2\)\(G\) of the Immigration and Nationality Act](#)) and visa denials and asset freezes under the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and [Executive Order 13818](#);
- Ensure that the State Department and USAID sponsor programs to assist countries in developing school textbooks, curricula, and teacher training materials that accurately portray religious groups; promote tolerance, pluralism, and respect for the human rights—including religious freedom—of all individuals; and do not contain language urging hatred, discrimination, or violence; and
- Allocate funding through the State Department’s Antiterrorism Assistance Program and relevant U.S. Department of Defense programs to train and equip local officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites, especially in countries where such sites face a high risk of attack.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Hold annual oversight hearings on the implementation of IRFA and the Frank Wolf Act, as well as hearings on religious freedom issues, and raise religious freedom and cases of religious prisoners of conscience in country-specific hearings and ambassadorial confirmation hearings;
- Examine, during delegation trips abroad, conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs or none, including by meeting with religious communities, religious freedom advocates, and prisoners held for their religion or belief or their religious freedom advocacy; and
- Participate in the [Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s Defending Freedoms Project](#), through which Members of Congress advocate on behalf of prisoners of conscience abroad, and the [International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), an informal, global network of legislators working to counter persecution and promote religious freedom.

## LEGAL PROVISIONS

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:

### Government Institutions

Inside the U.S. executive branch, IRFA created the position of Ambassador-at-Large (an appointee nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate) to head a State Department office focused on religious freedom abroad: [the IRF Office](#). The law also urges the appointment of a special adviser dedicated to the issue on the White House NSC staff, although no administration since the law’s enactment has done so. The Frank Wolf Act reiterates this position’s importance. IRFA also created [USCIRF](#), an independent legislative branch agency mandated to independently assess and to accurately and unflinchingly describe threats to religious freedom

around the world, evaluate U.S. policy, and make policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

### Monitoring and Reporting

IRFA mandates that the State Department prepare an annual report on religious freedom conditions in each foreign country ([the IRF Report](#)), in addition to the department’s annual human rights report. It also requires that USCIRF issue its own [annual report](#) setting forth its findings and providing independent policy recommendations, including whether or not efforts by the United States to advance religious freedom abroad are timely, appropriate to the circumstances, prudent, and effective. IRFA further requires the State Department to maintain country-by-country lists of prisoners and issues of concern for use by executive and legislative branch officials, and the Frank Wolf Act now requires

that USCIRF, to the extent practicable, make available online lists of prisoners and other victims of governments or nonstate actors the Commission recommends for CPC or EPC designation.

## Consequences for Violators

IRFA requires the president—who has [delegated](#) this power to the secretary of state—to designate CPCs annually and take action designed to encourage improvements in those countries. CPCs are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. A menu of possible actions is available, including negotiating a bilateral agreement, imposing sanctions, taking “commensurate action,” or issuing a waiver. The Frank Wolf Act amends this provision to add a “Special Watch List” category, in which the State Department is to place countries it deems to have engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. The term “severe violations” is not defined. No specific actions are required or delineated for Special Watch List countries.

The Frank Wolf Act also creates a new presidential designation of EPCs for nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations. The law defines 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 president [delegated](#) the power to make EPC designations to the secretary of state on January 26, 2018.

IRFA also makes inadmissible to the United States foreign government officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. The Frank Wolf Act now requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

IRFA defines “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom as “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, 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.”

Laws other than IRFA also provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some of these apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act (CISADA, [P.L.111-195](#)) and the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA, [P.L. 115-44](#)). 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 viola-

tions of internationally protected human rights” against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. [Executive Order 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.

## International Standards

Under IRFA, USCIRF’s and the State Department’s reports and determinations are based on international legal standards: the law defines violations of religious freedom as “violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and religious belief and practice” as articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), and other international instruments and regional agreements.

*CPCs are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom.*

## Programs and Training

IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs. It also provides that State Department [foreign service officers](#) and U.S. [immigration officials](#) receive training on religious freedom and religious persecution. The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make international religious freedom training mandatory for all foreign service officers at certain points in their careers and to develop, in consultation with USCIRF, a specific curriculum for it.

## Refugee and Asylum Issues

In recognition that religious freedom violations can drive displacement, IRFA includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy, including requiring that the president consider information about religious persecution as part of his annual determination of refugee admissions, and that immigration officials use the IRF Report as a resource in adjudicating refugee and asylum claims. IRFA also sought assessments of whether immigration officials were implementing Expedited Removal—a summary removal procedure that was new when IRFA was enacted—in a manner consistent with the United States’ obligations to protect individuals fleeing persecution, including by [authorizing](#) USCIRF to examine the issue.

---

*In recognition that religious freedom violations can drive displacement, IRFA includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy . . .*

---

## Additional Resources

For a more detailed discussion of IRFA’s legislative history, provisions, and first decade and a half of implementation, please see the 15th anniversary retrospective included in USCIRF’s [2014 Annual Report](#). For more information on the Frank Wolf Act’s provisions, please see the IRFA Implementation chapter of USCIRF’s [2017 Annual Report](#). To watch USCIRF’s April 2018 summit marking IRFA’s 20th anniversary, please click [here](#).

## DEVELOPMENTS IN 2018

### High-Level Commitment

During 2018, the Trump administration continued to emphasize its commitment to international religious

freedom through statements from high-level officials, as it had in 2017. For example, speaking at the July 2018 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Vice President Michael R. Pence [said](#) that “[t]he right to believe or not believe is the most fundamental of freedoms,” and that “America will always stand for religious freedom, and we will always speak out boldly wherever and whenever it’s threatened.” Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo made similar [comments](#) at the ministerial, and published an [op-ed](#) in *USA Today* highlighting the importance of religious freedom. USAID administrator Mark Green also spoke at the ministerial, [stating](#) that “[a]t USAID, we see freedom of worship as an essential element in our pursuit of government that is citizen-centered and citizen-responsive.” In May, at the release

of the IRF Report, Secretary Pompeo [stated](#) that “[a]dvancing liberty and religious freedom advances America’s interests,” and that “protecting and promoting global respect for religious freedom is a priority of

the Trump Administration,” citing the administration’s December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#).

## Ambassador-at-Large and Related Positions

On February 1, 2018, [Sam Brownback](#) was sworn in as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. President Trump nominated him in July 2017 and the Senate confirmed him in January 2018. Ambassador Brownback, who previously served as the governor of Kansas, is the fifth Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in IRFA’s 20-year existence. As a U.S. senator from 1996 to 2011, he was a key sponsor of IRFA and a cochair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. During 2018, Ambassador Brownback energetically implemented his mandate, including through public speeches, travel, meetings with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) [IRF Roundtable](#) and other stakeholders. Pursuant to IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large also serves ex officio as a nonvoting USCIRF Commissioner, and USCIRF welcomed Ambassador Brownback’s [nomination](#) and [confirmation](#).

Under IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large is to be a “principal adviser to the President and the Secretary



of State regarding matters affecting religious freedom abroad” and, under the Frank Wolf Act, is to report directly to the secretary of state. In previous administrations, the Ambassador-at-Large reported to the assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor, not the secretary, although some Ambassadors-at-Large were given informal access. During 2018, consistent with the Frank Wolf Act, the Ambassador-at-Large reported to the secretary. The IRF Office remained housed in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL).

Over the years, various administrations and Congress created other State Department positions with overlapping or related mandates, such as special representatives or envoys on religion and global affairs, to Muslim communities, to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, as well as a special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia. The only one of these positions that was filled during 2018 was [the special advisor on religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia](#). In February 2019, after the reporting period, Secretary Pompeo named [Elan Carr](#) to be special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, an appointment USCIRF [welcomed](#).

## Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom

On May 29, 2018, Secretary Pompeo [announced](#) at the release of the IRF Report that the United States would hold the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom. Its purpose was to bring together representatives of likeminded governments, international organizations, religious communities, and civil society to highlight the importance of freedom of religion or belief for all and identify ways to fight persecution and promote religious freedom.

The [ministerial](#) took place at the State Department on July 24–26. Attendees included officials from 84 governments; representatives of the European Union, Organization of American States, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

and United Nations; more than 400 NGO representatives and religious figures; and survivors of persecution from Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, and Vietnam, representing a range of religious groups including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Yazidis, Baha’is, Ahmadis, and Buddhists. Alongside the sessions at the State Department, USCIRF [hosted](#) an event marking the 20th anniversary of IRFA and a [training session](#) for NGOs on how to apply for U.S. government grants. Numerous NGOs also hosted separate events on a variety of countries and topics throughout the entire week.

At the ministerial, the United States released the [Potomac Declaration and Plan of Action](#) to stress the importance of promoting religious freedom for all and propose activities for the international community. Groups of country delegations signed [statements of concern](#) on Burma, China, Iran, blasphemy and apostasy laws, counterterrorism as a pretext for repression, and violations by nonstate actors. The U.S. government announced two new programs—the [International Religious Freedom Fund](#), for the United States and likeminded partners to fund efforts to protect and support religious freedom worldwide, and the Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program, for the State Department and USAID to partner with faith and community leaders to quickly deliver aid to persecuted communities, beginning with Iraq—as well as a special accelerator workshop, [Boldline](#), to support innovative public-private partnerships. Vice President Pence and Secretary Pompeo announced that a ministerial on

religious freedom would be an annual event, other governments offered to host regional conferences, and civil society organizations expressed interest in creating NGO religious freedom roundtables in a variety of countries. Just before or after the ministerial, several governments, including the United

Kingdom, Germany, Mongolia, Bahrain, and Taiwan, created new ambassador-level positions on religious

---

*[The Ministerial’s] purpose was to bring together representatives of likeminded governments, international organizations, religious communities, and civil society to highlight the importance of freedom of religion or belief for all and identify ways to fight persecution and promote religious freedom.*

---

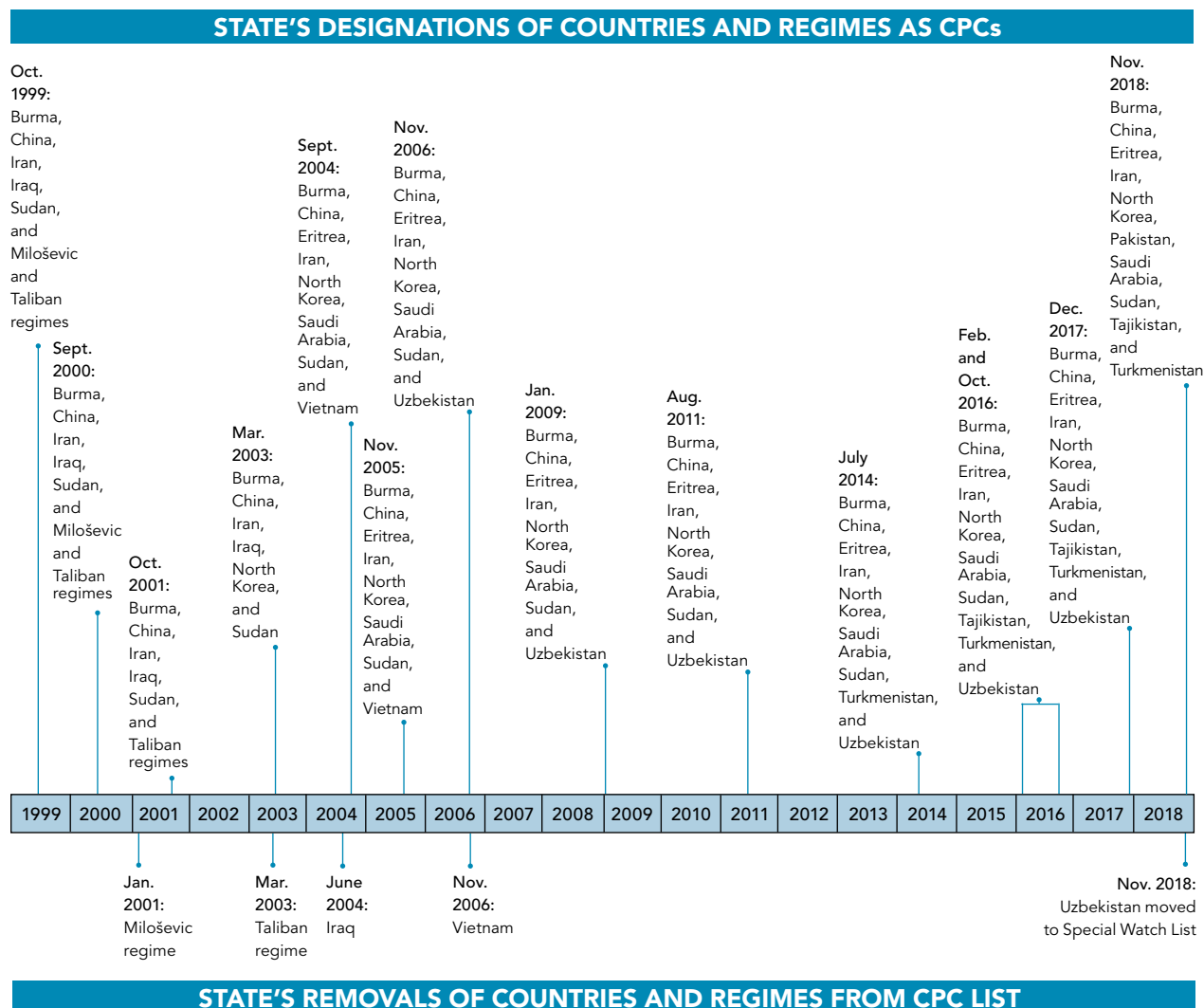
freedom, joining the existing ones from the United States, Norway, Denmark, and the European Union.

On January 26, 2019, after the reporting period, Secretary Pompeo [announced](#) that the United States would host the second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom on July 16–18, 2019, in Washington, DC.

## CPC and Special Watch List Designations

On November 28, 2018, Secretary Pompeo [designated](#) 10 countries as CPCs for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This was the State Department’s 14th set of CPC designations over IRFA’s 20-year existence. Pakistan was a new designee, the first addition to the State Department’s CPC list since Tajikistan in February 2016.

On the same date, Secretary Pompeo named Comoros, Russia, and Uzbekistan to the State Department’s Special Watch List, the Frank Wolf Act’s category for countries that engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. The Special Watch List is a level below the CPC threshold, but neither IRFA nor the Frank Wolf Act more explicitly define “severe violations.” Uzbekistan had been on the State Department’s CPC list since 2006, but made some improvements in response to U.S. concerns. This was the first time the State Department removed a country from its CPC list due to diplomatic activity since its lifting of Vietnam’s CPC designation in 2006. USCIRF [welcomed](#) the November 28 designations, particularly regarding Pakistan and Russia, but questioned whether Uzbekistan had improved enough to be moved from the CPC list to the Special Watch List.



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information, updated by USCIRF

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make its CPC and Special Watch List designations annually, not later than 90 days after the issuance of the IRF Report. The IRF Report covering 2017, on which these designations were based, was issued on May 29, 2018, meaning that the CPC and Special Watch List designations made on November 28 should have been issued by August 27.

For the nine countries that were redesignated as CPCs on November 28, the same presidential actions that had been imposed in December 2017 were continued. For Pakistan, the new designee, a waiver was put in place “in the important national interest of the United States.” The 2018 presidential actions are shown in the table below. Of the 10 CPC designees, six are subject to preexisting or “double-hatted” sanctions, and four have waivers. Successive administrations have relied on such an approach, and while the statute permits it, USCIRF has long expressed concern that using preexisting sanctions or indefinite waivers provides little or no incentive for CPC-designated governments to reduce or halt egregious religious freedom violations.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to notify Congress of CPC designations not later than 90 days after they are made and to provide justifications for any waivers. This notification was due on February 26, 2019, but as of March 7 did not appear to have been made. Under the Frank Wolf Act, waivers are permitted to continue for 180 days; after that period, the law gives the president waiver authority if the president determines and reports to Congress that the foreign government has ceased violations or that the waiver is required in the important national interest of the United States.

## Individual Violators

Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, a provision added by IRFA, makes inadmissible to the United States foreign officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. To date, the provision’s only publicly known use was in 2005, when then Chief Minister Narendra Modi of Gujarat State in India was excluded due to his complicity in 2002 riots in his state that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,100 to 2,000 Muslims. Because of

## PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS FOR 2018 CPC DESIGNATIONS (AS DESCRIBED IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER)

**For Burma**, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For China**, the existing ongoing restriction on exports to China of crime control and detection instruments and equipment, under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (Pub. L. 101-246), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For Eritrea**, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For Iran**, the existing ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1) (C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights

abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea**, the existing ongoing restrictions to which the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For Pakistan**, a waiver as required in the “important national interest of the United States,” pursuant to section 407 of the Act;

**For Saudi Arabia**, a waiver as required in the “important national interest of the United States,” pursuant to section 407 of the Act;

**For Sudan**, the restriction in the annual Department of State, Foreign

Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the Government of Sudan, currently set forth in section 7042(i) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2018 (Div. K, Pub. L. 115-141), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of the Act;

**For Tajikistan**, a waiver as required in the “important national interest of the United States,” pursuant to section 407 of the Act; and

**For Turkmenistan**, a waiver as required in the “important national interest of the United States,” pursuant to section 407 of the Act.

the confidentiality of visa decisions, there may be other, unknown uses. In recent years, the IRF Office has worked to identify noncitizens who would be inadmissible on this basis should they apply for U.S. visas.

Two newer accountability tools—the 2016 [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and a related 2017 executive order, [E.O. 13818](#)—allow the secretaries of state and treasury to deny U.S. visas to or block the U.S.-based assets of foreigners involved in corruption or human rights abuses. As of December 2018, the U.S. government had sanctioned [101 foreign individuals and entities](#) under these authorities, including a few for religious freedom violations. The initial set of these sanctions, announced by the [State](#) and [Treasury Departments](#) in December 2017, included General Maung Maung Soe, who as then head of the Burmese Army’s Western Command oversaw atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. In addition, in August 2018, four Burmese military and border guard police officials and two Burmese military units were [sanctioned](#) for abuses against Rohingya Muslims. The same month, the U.S. government [sanctioned](#) the Turkish ministers of justice and interior over the detention of Pastor Brunson. Those sanctions were [lifted](#) in November, after Pastor Brunson’s October release.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. No designated persons lists were made public in 2018.

## EPC Designations

The State Department made two sets of EPC designations during 2018. On March 5, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [designated](#) the following eight nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.” On November 28, Secretary Pompeo [designated](#) nine entities as EPCs: the eight designated in March and the Houthis.

---

*The State Department made two sets of EPC designations during 2018.*

---

## 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 FY2018, USCIRF was funded at \$3.5 million for its operations, while the IRF Office was appropriated \$8.5 million for operating costs and \$25 million for programs on international religious freedom and on protecting, investigating abuses against, and providing justice to vulnerable and persecuted religious minorities.

During 2018, as part of the Trump administration’s prioritization of religious freedom, USAID placed a new emphasis on humanitarian aid for religious groups targeted for persecution or genocide and on programs to promote religious freedom, tolerance, and pluralism. Iraq was a particular focus, with the agency allocating [nearly \\$300 million](#) in assistance for northern Iraq and posting a special representative for minority assistance in Erbil, Iraq. USAID also sought to expand its partnerships with civil society and religious groups, including by signing a [memorandum of understanding](#) with the Knights of Columbus to work together to respond to genocide and persecution in the Middle East. More broadly, in his [remarks](#) at the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Administrator Green stated that USAID was supporting programs to address religious hate speech and interfaith conflict, strengthen laws protecting religious freedom, increase civil society capacity to advocate for freedom of religion or belief, and reinforce pluralism.

## Training

The Frank Wolf Act added a [provision](#) to the Foreign Service Act requiring the State Department to provide training on international religious freedom for all foreign service officers, including by covering the topic

in courses required for entry-level officers, for officers prior to postings outside the United States, and for ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission (DCMs), as well as by

developing a specific curriculum. The State Department’s Foreign Service Institute (FSI) began including

religious freedom issues in its courses for entry-level officers and ambassadors and DCMs in 2017. During 2018, FSI and the IRF Office, with input from USCIRF, worked to develop a distance learning course on religious freedom to be required for all foreign service officers prior to assignments overseas, which they planned to roll out in early 2019.

## Refugee Resettlement

Under the United States Refugee Admissions Program (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 2001, the refugee admission ceiling has averaged 75,000 per year. After suspending the USRAP for part of FY2017 to put into place enhanced vetting procedures, the Trump administration resumed the program and set the ceilings for FY2018 and FY2019 at [45,000](#) and [30,000](#), respectively. Actual refugee admissions in FY2018 totaled [22,491](#), the lowest in the program's history. Instead of resettlement, the Trump administration [focused on](#) aiding refugees and internally displaced persons abroad through humanitarian assistance and programs to help enable their safe and voluntary return home. For example, the administration prioritized [assistance](#) to support vulnerable minority communities in Iraq.

During 2018, approximately 90 Iranians seeking refugee status in the United States under the Lautenberg Amendment—a special resettlement program for certain persecuted religious minority groups—had their applications denied or significantly delayed, an unusual situation about which [USCIRF](#) and [Members of Congress](#) expressed concern. Because of these issues, the Lautenberg program, which USCIRF has long supported as a lifeline for vulnerable Iranian minorities, stopped accepting new applicants. It had not resumed by the end of 2018.

## Asylum-Seekers in Expedited Removal

Under U.S. law, noncitizens who fear persecution or torture at home may apply for asylum if they arrive at, or are already in, the United States. As authorized by IRFA, USCIRF has examined the U.S. government's treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers to quickly deport, without immigration court hearings, noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documents, unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution or torture. USCIRF's reports on the subject, released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), and [2016](#), documented major problems that successive administrations have not addressed.

Specifically, USCIRF's monitoring over more than a decade revealed that DHS officials often fail to follow

required procedures to [identify](#) asylum-seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations, and that they [detain](#) asylum-seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions. Over the past few fiscal years, the percentage of individuals in Expedited Removal who say they fear return has been

[rising](#). As a result, the unaddressed flaws in the system placed even more asylum-seekers at risk of erroneous return. To ensure the fair and humane treatment of asylum-seekers while protecting U.S. borders, USCIRF has recommended that DHS (1) appoint a high-level official to coordinate refugee and asylum issues and oversee reforms, (2) improve quality assurance measures, (3) give officers additional training, (4) use non-prison-like detention facilities, and (5) increase funding for asylum officers and immigration courts to promptly and fairly adjudicate claims. USCIRF also has urged Congress to exercise oversight on these matters, including by requesting the Government Accountability Office to assess whether noncitizens removed to their home countries under Expedited Removal have faced persecution or torture upon return.

---

*As authorized by IRFA,  
USCIRF has examined the  
U.S. government's treatment of  
asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal,  
[and its reports on the subject have]  
documented major problems  
that successive administrations  
have not addressed.*

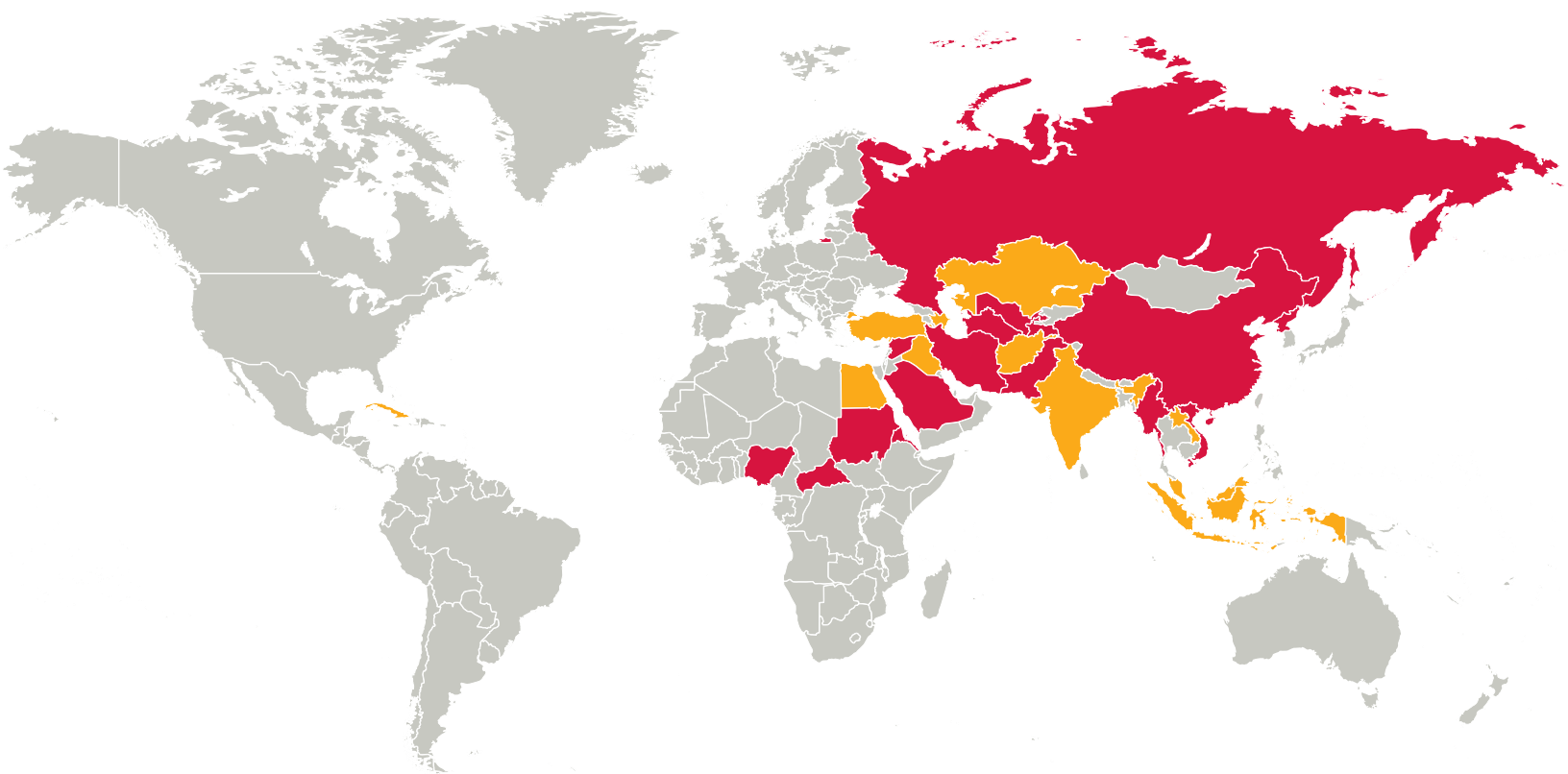
---



## Prisoners

During 2018, the Trump administration continued to prioritize seeking the release of American citizens unjustly imprisoned abroad. One of these cases, that of [Pastor Brunson](#) in Turkey, was also a high priority for USCIRF, and was part of USCIRF's [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). After significant U.S. advocacy and pressure, including the imposition of Global Magnitsky sanctions on two Turkish cabinet ministers, Pastor Brunson was [released](#) in October 2018 and allowed to return to the United States. A Turkish court convicted Pastor Brunson on the unfounded charge of aiding terrorism but ruled that his two-year detention and good conduct counted as serving the imposed sentence of imprisonment for three years and one month. USCIRF Commissioner Tony Perkins was at the final court hearing and accompanied Pastor and Mrs. Brunson home.

# 2019 COUNTRIES



## ■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Iran	Russia	Tajikistan
Central African Republic	Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Turkmenistan
China	North Korea	Sudan	Uzbekistan
Eritrea	Pakistan	Syria	Vietnam

## ■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Indonesia	Laos
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Iraq	Malaysia
Bahrain	India	Kazakhstan	Turkey

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Burma trended negatively, particularly for Rohingya Muslims. Despite the fact that Burma's government, military, and nonstate actors have denied responsibility and largely evaded accountability for widespread atrocities, the United States and its allies have imposed a handful of targeted sanctions against military actors "for their involvement in ethnic cleansing in Burma's Rakhine State and other widespread human rights abuses in Burma's Kachin and Shan States." Victims of severe human rights and religious freedom violations have little hope for justice; this includes Rohingya and other Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Hindus, as well as ethnic Kachin, Shan, Karen, Rakhine, and Chin. As of January 2019, just after the reporting period, 911,000 mostly Rohingya Muslims resided in refugee camps in Bangladesh; more than 700,000 of these refugees fled Burma (also known as Myanmar) because of massive military crackdowns in Rakhine State in October 2016 and August 2017. In January 2018, a USCIRF delegation [visited](#) Bangladesh to meet with Rohingya Muslim refugees and discuss their plight with the government of Bangladesh. For the Rohingya Muslims who remained in Burma, their deprivation of rights and ongoing humanitarian crisis has been catastrophic. In November 2017, the United States labeled the atrocities as ethnic cleansing, but only with respect to the crisis in Rakhine State. However, others—including an independent commission created by the United Nations (UN)—who have examined

the available evidence not just in Rakhine State, but also in other areas heavily targeted by Burma's military such as Kachin and northern Shan states, concluded that crimes against humanity and even genocide have occurred. Burma's military and nonstate actors continued to target with discrimination and violence other religious and ethnic minorities in addition to Rohingya Muslims, such as Christians. Moreover, decades of growing suspicion and depleted trust across religious and ethnic groups have in recent years been amplified by the proliferation of social media platforms to spread rumors, cultivate intolerance, and incite violence. In 2018, Burma's government tapped into increasing nationalist fervor by continuing to target critics—both domestically and internationally—including by vilifying both peaceful expression and the media, exemplified by seven-year prison sentences for two Reuters journalists who reported on atrocities against Rohingya Muslims.

Based on the systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom occurring in the country, in 2019 USCIRF again finds that Burma merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Burma as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- 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 multiple humanitarian crises occurring in the country, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, and refocus efforts to definitively and publicly conclude whether such atrocities meet the legal definition of crimes against humanity and/or genocide;
- Support efforts to collect, preserve, and analyze evidence of the crimes and atrocities committed in Rakhine State, Kachin State, northern Shan State, and other areas, and to hold perpetrators accountable by:
  - Continuing to impose targeted sanctions on members of Burma's military, security forces, and non-state actors for severe human rights and religious freedom violations;
  - Actively supporting and cooperating with the UN's Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar;
  - Pursuing with international partners a tribunal for both state and nonstate actors accused of serious crimes under international humanitarian and human rights law; and
- Bringing a case before the International Court of Justice based on Burma's violations of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide; and
- Work with the government of Burma, representatives from all religious communities (including leaders and laypersons), and other relevant stakeholders to combat intolerance and promote inclusivity and nondiscrimination in the spirit of the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence.

# CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in the Central African Republic (CAR) trended negatively in 2018. Armed actors continued to control an estimated 80 percent of the country, vying for resources and territory, and attacking civilians and communities based on their religious and ethnic identities, including mass attacks against places of worship. Infrastructure generally, and roads in particular are extremely poor, inhibiting the movement of security and aid actors to many towns across CAR. Government representatives also feared for their safety, lack funding, and are unable to reach many communities. In May 2018, at least 15 people were killed in an attack on the Notre Dame de Fatima church in Bangui, and in November, at least 112 civilians—including two priests—were killed when an armed group attacked a displaced persons camp near the Catholic Cathedral in Alindao. Also, in 2018, the government took no apparent action to rebuild or restore the hundreds

of mosques destroyed in the 2014 sectarian violence. Marginalization of Muslims continued, as well as limitations to Muslims' free movement and unequal representation in government. Justice and reconciliation efforts also remain stalled, and an ongoing culture of impunity for human rights and religious freedom violations threatens efforts toward long-term stability and reconciliation. The CAR government has failed to acknowledge religious freedom issues and has lacked the will to address them in areas within its capacity to reach and work.

Given the systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion, USCIRF again recommends in 2019 that CAR be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has done every year since 2015. The U.S. Department of State has not designated CAR as a CPC.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Increase engagement with CAR authorities, the United Nations (UN), and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Increase efforts to achieve accountability for human rights violations, including through:
  - Assisting the UN Security Council in sanctioning armed actors responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity; and
  - Funding programs to reestablish and professionalize CAR's judiciary and to support the Special Criminal Court (SCC);
- Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that Muslims have a future in the country by:
  - Rebuilding destroyed Muslim mosques and properties;
  - Ensuring Muslim participation in government administration, security forces, and police units;
- Safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes; and
- Expanding reconciliation programs and interfaith dialogue to rural areas; and
- Increase funding for peace and security initiatives; bolster humanitarian assistance for refugees, IDPs, and returnees, and rebuilding projects; and collaborate with humanitarian actors to collect data on religious demographics to more effectively protect religious freedom and minorities.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in China trended negative after the new Regulations on Religious Affairs—implemented on February 1, 2018—effectively banned “unauthorized” religious teachings and required religious groups to report any online activity. Moreover, the Chinese government continued to persecute all faiths in an effort to “sinicize” religious belief, a campaign that attempts not only to diminish and erase the independent practice of religion, but also the cultural and linguistic heritage of religious and ethnic communities, particularly Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims. During the summer, reports emerged that the government had detained 800,000 to possibly more than two million Uighur and other Muslims in Xinjiang. It also deployed one million party cadres to live with Uighur Muslim families and report on any signs of “extremist” religious behavior. The Chinese government continued to use advanced surveillance technology and other measures to repress Tibetan Buddhists. In September, the Vatican reached a provisional agreement with China that would allow the government a role in the appointment of new bishops; nevertheless, repression of the underground Catholic

Church increased during the latter half of the year. The government also raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches, including Zion Church, Rongguili Church, and Early Rain Covenant Church. Meanwhile, more than 900 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested during the year simply for practicing their beliefs or distributing literature about the Falun Gong. In March 2018, jurisdiction over religious affairs was transferred from the government to an organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), further eroding the barrier between religion and party.

Based on the Chinese government’s systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds that China merits designation in 2019 as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate China as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing export restrictions under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (P.L. 101-246).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Integrate religious freedom and related human rights diplomacy into ongoing trade negotiations, the U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue, and all other levels of the U.S.-China bilateral relationship, and devise messaging tailored to specific religious communities in China;
- Prioritize funding for programs that seek to preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage and identity of religious and faith communities in China and to document the experiences of refugees and asylum-seekers from China who have suffered particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Coordinate with U.S. allies and partners, especially in Asia, on targeted sanctions, visa restrictions, public diplomacy, and other actions taken in response to China’s crackdown on religious freedom;
- Direct the State Department to work with foreign governments and the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Refugees to prevent the refoulement of individuals from China seeking asylum on the basis of religious persecution; and
- Work with U.S. businesses, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions to counter Chinese government influence 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 legislation that would increase restrictions on the export to China from the United States of advanced technology—including surveillance and biometric equipment—that has enhanced the Chinese government’s capacity to monitor and harass religious and ethnic communities; and raise the profile of religious freedom in the U.S.-China relationship.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea trended the same as in previous years, in spite of hopes raised with the historic July 2018 Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal and again with the September 2018 signing of a second peace agreement in Saudi Arabia. The agreement led to the opening of border crossings in September 2018, and trade, commercial flights, and phone calls between the two countries resumed. However, with no improvement in religious freedom and other human rights conditions in Eritrea, the opening enabled a surge in Eritrean refugees freely crossing into Ethiopia. Only four religions are officially recognized in Eritrea: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. But even these official religious groups are unable to practice their faith freely because the Eritrean government regulates and interferes in their affairs. The government does not allow any other religious groups to register and treats them as illegal. It also continues to forcibly conscript Eritreans and deny their rights to practice their religion or belief while in civil or military service.

Conscientious objection to service is prohibited, ultimately denying the religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses and others. The government continues to arrest and detain individuals who disagree with its actions, including Patriarch Abune Antonios of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, who has been under house arrest since 2007. U.S. and United Nations (UN) officials estimate that hundreds of people are currently imprisoned for their religious beliefs, but in the extremely secretive and closed-off society there are no official figures.

In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Eritrea merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Eritrea as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1 of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
  - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Patriarch Antonios;
  - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities, register such groups, and grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah's Witnesses; and
  - Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the 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;
- Seek a meeting for U.S. Embassy officials with Patriarch Antonios; 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.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Contribute to the international community's information-gathering efforts about Eritrea by:
  - Requiring a report from the State Department on the United States' relationship with Eritrea and to evaluate efforts to address religious freedom and other human rights issues; and
  - Sending a congressional delegation to Eritrea to focus on religious freedom and other human rights issues.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Iran trended in a negative direction relative to 2017, with the Iranian government heightening its systematic targeting of Muslims (particularly Sunni Muslims and Sufis), Baha'is, and Christians. The government arbitrarily detained, harassed, and imprisoned Baha'is based on their religion and continued its long-term practice of egregious economic and educational persecution of the community. Hundreds of Sufis were arrested and scores were sent to solitary confinement and beaten in prison. Christians faced a dramatic uptick in arrests from previous years, and Muslim converts to Christianity continued to face severe persecution. Sunni Muslims experienced discrimination in employment and political leadership, and had difficulty obtaining permission to build mosques. A senior member of Iran's government led an anti-Semitic conference in Tehran accusing Jews of manipulating the global economy and exaggerating the Holocaust. Shi'a Muslim reformers and dissenters faced prolonged detention

and the threat of execution. While President Hassan Rouhani in 2016 signaled his intent to address some religious freedom violations, these promises have yet to be implemented; meanwhile, the number of individuals imprisoned for their beliefs continued to climb.

Based on these severe religious freedom violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Iran merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since 1999, the U.S. Department of State has designated Iran as a CPC, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Iran as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Speak out publicly and frequently at all levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and](#)

[Divestment Act](#) (CISADA), the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience, including Youcef Nadarkhani, Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee, and Mohammad Ali Taheri;
- Work with European allies to use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Iran to end religious freedom abuses, especially

leading up to Iran's 2019 Universal Periodic Review; and

- Develop and utilize new technologies to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Iran.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities seeking refugee status in the United States.

### KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria trended negatively in 2018. The Nigerian government at the national and state levels continued to tolerate violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and suppressed the freedom to manifest religion or belief. Religious sectarian violence increased during the year, with Muslims and Christians attacked based on their religious and ethnic identity. The Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetrators accountable. Boko Haram and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-West Africa (ISIS-WA) continued to perpetrate attacks against civilians and the military throughout the year, despite the government's claims of progress in defeating them. In addition, members of the military and the civilian joint task force, a local vigilante group supporting official forces, were accused of human rights violations against civilians displaced by conflict. The Nigerian military and government continued to violate the religious freedom and human rights of the Shi'a members of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Al

Zakzaky remained in detention, along with his wife and hundreds of other members; state governments continued to ban the group's activities; and in October 2018, soldiers and police reportedly killed more than 45 IMN members during religious processions and protests in Abuja. Finally, other religious freedom abuses continued at the state level, including coercive official or societal actions to enforce particular religious norms. USCIRF delegations visited Nigeria in May and November 2018 to examine religious freedom concerns.

Based on continued systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF again finds that Nigeria merits designation in 2019 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009. The U.S. Department of State has never designated Nigeria as a CPC, but in 2017 and 2018 designated Boko Haram as an Entity of Particular Concern, or EPC, for its particularly severe religious freedom violations as defined by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Enter into a binding agreement, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, with the Nigerian government, and provide associated financial and technical support to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
  - Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter-radicalization and deradicalization programs;
  - Enhance training for officials, the military, and police officers on international human rights standards, including countering hate speech based on religious identity; responding to sectarian violence; reporting on violence against Muslim and Christian communities; and ensuring security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable;
- Allocate funding through the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, or U.S. Department of Defense for programs to train and equip officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites; and
- Increase conflict resolution programming and research—in partnership with local and traditional leaders and other parts of civil society—to counter hate speech and incitement to violence based on religious identity;
- Press the Nigerian government to acknowledge the significant threats posed by Boko Haram and ISIS-WA, to prioritize greater support to both military and nonmilitary efforts to counter the insurgency, and to protect the rights of the Nigerian press to report on the continuing war;
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to discuss further actions to end sectarian violence, address land and water concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities; and
- Urge the Nigerian government to pursue justice for IMN members, allow U.S. Embassy officials to meet with detained IMN leader Sheikh Al Zakzaky, review all cases of detained IMN members and release those held wrongfully or without charge, and develop an independent judicial commission of inquiry (COI) to investigate the Nigerian security forces' killing of IMN members in October 2018.

# NORTH KOREA

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in North Korea trended the same as in 2017. North Korea (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) is one of the most isolated and repressed societies in the world. The North Korean regime has an appalling human rights record and places unjust restrictions on its people's inherent right to freedom of religion or belief. The North Korean government maintains totalitarian control over society by espousing and brutally enforcing its own state-generated ideology known as *Juche*. This ideology is inherently self-serving and exists solely to empower the North Korean regime, which treats any expression of independent assembly or thought, including religious practice, as a threat to its very existence. Although the country is officially atheist, the government allows a small handful of state-backed houses of worship to operate. Defectors interviewed after fleeing North Korea often question the legitimacy of these institutions and caution that their congregations may be preselected for the role in order to maintain the illusion of religious freedom for international audiences. Any expression of religion outside this heavily regulated sphere happens in secret, and anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment. The government has been known to arrest, torture, imprison, and

even execute religious believers and their family members, whether or not they are similarly religious. There are an estimated 80,000–120,000 political prisoners currently languishing in North Korea's notoriously harsh labor camps, as many as 50,000 of whom may be Christians. Inmates at these facilities face dire living conditions and are likely forced to provide hard labor for the advancement of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. As relations grew between the United States and North Korea during the year, so too did the opportunities to raise religious freedom and related human rights with the regime.

Throughout 2018 the North Korean government continued to carry out systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, and USCIRF again finds that North Korea merits designation in 2019 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State repeatedly has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA and maintain the existing, ongoing trade restrictions pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Pressure the North Korean government to grant international human rights monitors unfettered access to document human rights conditions, including religious freedom, inside the country;
- Make any future discussions regarding the easing or lifting of sanctions contingent upon North Korea's sincere and demonstrable efforts to improve its religious freedom and human rights record consistent with international standards;
- Fill the current vacancy and maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time, independent position at the State Department and ensure religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in official and unofficial discussions about or with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization and security, as appropriate; and
- Expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and facilitation of improved internet access so North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan generally trended negative despite the Pakistani government taking some positive steps to promote religious freedom and combat religiously motivated violence and hate speech. During the year, extremist groups and societal actors continued to discriminate against and attack religious minorities, including Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadis, and Shi'a Muslims. The government of Pakistan failed to adequately protect these groups, and it perpetrated systematic, ongoing, egregious religious freedom violations; this occurred despite some optimism about the potential for reform under the new government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. Various political parties and leading politicians promoted intolerance against religious minorities during the leadup to the 2018 national elections. For example, the entry of extremist religious parties into the political arena during the election period led to increased threats and hate speech against religious minorities. Also, abusive enforcement of the country's strict blasphemy laws

continued to result in the suppression of rights for non-Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, and Ahmadis. USCIRF is aware of at least 40 individuals currently sentenced to death or serving life sentences for blasphemy in Pakistan, including two Christians, Qaiser and Amoon Ayub, who were sentenced to death in December 2018. Forced conversions of non-Muslims continued despite the passage of the Hindu Marriage Act, which recognizes Hindu family law.

Based on these particularly severe violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Pakistan should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2002. In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State for the first time ever designated Pakistan as a CPC. Nevertheless, the State Department immediately issued a waiver against any related sanctions on Pakistan. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Encourage the government of Pakistan and the Standing Committee on Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony to create the National Commission for Minorities' Rights as mandated by the Supreme Court of Pakistan's 2014 decision;
- Enter into a binding agreement, under section 405(c) of IRFA, with the government of Pakistan, to encourage substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom with benchmarks, including but not limited to:
  - Release blasphemy prisoners and other individuals imprisoned for their religion or belief;
  - Repeal its blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws; until repeal can be accomplished, enact reforms to make blasphemy aailable offense, require evidence by accusers, and allow authorities to dismiss unfounded accusations, and also urge the enforcement of existing Penal Code articles that criminalize perjury and false accusations; and
- Assign a portion of existing State Department programs to help the government of Pakistan protect at-risk religious minority community leaders—both with physical security and personnel—and create partnerships with government bodies, such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, to ensure that extremist rhetoric that precedes attacks on minorities is addressed.

### KEY FINDINGS

During 2018, Russia accelerated the repressive behavior that led USCIRF to recommend its designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for the first time in 2017. The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Russian legislation targets “extremism” without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent, nonpolitical religious activity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom the government banned outright in 2017, faced severe persecution by the state. By the end of the reporting period, hundreds of members remained in detention, had travel restrictions imposed, or were under investigation, and church property estimated at \$90 million had been confiscated. The leadership of the St. Petersburg Church of Scientology remained under house arrest, while numerous adherents of the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat and readers of the works of Turkish theologian Said Nursi were sentenced to lengthy

prison terms for peaceful religious expression. In the North Caucasus, security forces acted with complete impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy. In Russian-occupied Crimea, the Russian authorities continued to kidnap, torture, and imprison Crimean Tatar Muslims at will. Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, often referred to as the Donbas, continued to expropriate church buildings and intimidate religious communities.

In 2019, USCIRF again finds that Russia merits designation as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State for the first time placed Russia on its “Special Watch List,” a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA. Unlike a CPC designation, the Special Watch List carries no penalties, sanctions, or other commensurate actions. USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA and impose sanctions specific to its religious freedom violations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence, and to abandon its religious registration laws, which are frequently used to harass and prosecute religious minorities;
  - Implore the Russian government to release Dennis Christensen, Ivan Matsitsky, and all other religious prisoners of conscience in Russia;
  - Urge the Russian government to permit the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea to verify compliance with international human rights and religious freedom standards;
  - Identify Russian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals’ assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Countering America’s](#)
- [Adversaries Through Sanctions Act](#) (CAATSA), the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and related executive orders, 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.



# SAUDI ARABIA

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, while Saudi Arabia remained a country of particular concern, religious freedom conditions trended positive in certain areas, including: Saudi senior officials no longer stated that Islam can be the only religion on the Arabian Peninsula; senior leadership met with several Christian leaders, including the head of the Anglican Church and a group of American evangelical leaders, pledging to promote interfaith dialogue and the flourishing of different faith traditions as part of the kingdom's domestic reforms; Egyptian Bishop Ava Markos led the first known publicized Coptic Church Mass in Saudi Arabia's history; USCIRF was granted the first-ever meeting between the head of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) and a U.S. government delegation; religiously motivated restrictions on women driving were lifted, and provisions of the guardianship laws treating women as legal minors were less strictly enforced in the kingdom's capital, Riyadh; the Ministry of Justice announced greater protection of due process rights for Saudis who are arrested; and the government continued to aggressively combat extremist ideology. Notwithstanding these positive developments, religious freedom concerns in Saudi Arabia remain. While the government continued to implement some economic and social reforms related to Saudi Vision 2030, it remains unclear if religious freedom conditions will improve as part of these reforms. During 2018, it maintained a ban on non-Muslim public religious observance and continued to arrest, detain, and

harass individuals for dissent, blasphemy, and apostasy. The Saudi government continued to violate the rights of Shi'a Muslims and non-Muslim minorities, and to advocate a doctrine of religious intolerance. While it began new construction in the Shi'a town of Awamiya, the Saudi government restricted the observance of religious holidays by the Shi'a Muslim minority. After more than 15 years of incremental progress, the Saudi government showed backsliding on improvements to its textbooks that continued to propagate intolerance and advocate violence against religious minorities, women, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. Despite the fact that in 2018 women were given the right to drive, the religiously justified guardianship system remained in place, adversely affecting the religious freedom of women in the kingdom.

Based on these particularly severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Saudi Arabia merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the U.S. State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, most recently in November 2018, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006. The waiver releases the administration from taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Saudi Shura Council to pass and fully implement an antidiscrimination law protecting the equal rights of all Saudi citizens and expatriate residents, take measures to end the harassment of Shi'a Muslims, particularly in the Eastern Province, and end prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Implore the Saudi government to release Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other religious prisoners of conscience in Saudi Arabia;
- Press the Saudi government to devise and implement a plan to end the guardianship system that treats women as legal minors and, in the meantime, codify any informal easing of this system in the kingdom; and
- Continue to press the Saudi Ministry of Education to remove inflammatory and intolerant content in government-issued textbooks, cease the exportation of these textbooks to Saudi-supported schools abroad, and make every effort to retrieve previously distributed materials that contain intolerance.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Sudan trended the same as in 2017. Throughout the year, the government of Sudan continued to restrict the religious expression of Muslims and non-Muslims. The government actively promoted and enforced a strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and imposed religious-based constraints on Muslims and non-Muslims. Security forces continued to harass, arrest, detain, and use excessive force against Muslim religious minorities, Christians and church leaders, protestors, journalists, and human rights defenders for challenging the state's control of religion or for manifesting their religion or beliefs. In February 2018, state actors demolished an evangelical church in Khartoum in spite of a pending court battle over the property rights to the land on which the church was built. In October, authorities arrested 13 Christians—reportedly for practicing their faith—and charged one with apostasy. Women's rights continued to be hindered by restrictions on religious freedom, including through the

enforcement of public order laws. USCIRF visited Sudan in May 2018 to review religious freedom conditions and met with religious communities, displaced persons, civil society organizations, government officials, and others. At the end of the reporting period, historic nationwide protests prompted citizens to call for President Omar al-Bashir to step down. During the protests, security forces used excessive force on civilians and shot tear gas into and around mosques in attempts to suppress demonstrations and free speech.

In 2019, USCIRF again finds that Sudan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Sudan as a CPC since 1999, most recently in November 2018. USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Sudan as a CPC under IRFA and extend the existing presidential action restricting U.S. assistance to the government of Sudan.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Identify Sudanese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Appoint a Special Envoy to Sudan and South Sudan and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Press the government of Sudan to implement reforms in the Action Plan presented by the State Department since 2015 and to undertake the following actions:
  - Repeal apostasy, blasphemy, and other laws—including all relevant

articles in the 1991 Criminal Code and state public order laws—that violate Sudan's international commitments to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights;

- Lift government prohibitions on church construction, issue permits for the building of new churches, create a legal mechanism to provide compensation for destroyed churches and address future destructions if necessary, and cease interference in churches' internal affairs;
- Revive and strengthen the Commission on the Rights of Non-Muslims to protect religious freedom for non-Muslims in Sudan; and
- Hold accountable any person who engages in violations of freedom of

religion or belief, including attacking houses of worship, attacking or discriminating against any person because of his or her religious affiliation, and prohibiting any person from fully exercising his or her religious freedom.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Draft and pass a resolution to condemn religious freedom and related human rights violations committed by the Sudanese government, to commit U.S. government resources to investigating such violations, and to support Sudanese human rights actors advocating for religious freedom in Sudan.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions remained dismal in Syria, generally trending the same as the previous year. As a consequence of the complex sectarian dynamics of the country's ongoing civil war, more than 500,000 people have died and more than 12 million people have been displaced. Although the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ostensibly faced near-complete defeat in its control of territory in Syria and Iraq in 2017, the group maintained a visible but diminishing presence in several parts of Syria throughout 2018. It continued to threaten and perpetrate violence against religious minorities and Muslim communities who did not share its radical Islamist ideology. At the same time, an al-Qaeda affiliate, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), significantly bolstered its presence in the country's northwest, particularly Idlib Province, where it had almost overtaken rival armed opposition groups by the end of the reporting period. In addition to perpetrating wider human rights abuses, HTS repressed religious minorities in the growing expanse of territory under its control, reportedly including the forcible confiscation of property from Christian families and other forms of sectarian violence. Syrian government forces continued to consolidate their hold over a significant portion of the country that was once held by various opposition forces, with significant support from their Russian, Iranian, and Lebanese allies. In so doing, armed forces loyal to or allied with the regime persisted in a clear wartime agenda of marginalizing and punishing Sunni Muslim communities for their real or perceived support of the

opposition. Turkish-backed rebel forces exploited a United Nations (UN)-brokered ceasefire in the northern district of Afrin to persecute and displace religious and ethnic minorities in that area. Religious and ethnic minorities in Kurdish-controlled areas of the country's northeast, where they have generally experienced a relatively high degree of religious freedom, also faced mounting concerns at the close of 2018 regarding potential ramifications of the pending withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria. Those concerns included the possibility of a large-scale Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces in that area and the threat of an ISIS resurgence.

Due to the collective systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom perpetrated by radical Islamist elements of the Syrian opposition, including U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as ISIS and HTS, and the Assad regime and its allies, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Syria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2018 that included its ongoing—albeit shrinking—control of territory as well as its potential for rapid resurgence, ISIS merits renewed designation as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to IRFA. USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2018 that included its expanding control of territory, HTS merits designation as an EPC for religious freedom violations.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Provide immediate and effective assistance to 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), and utilize the resources enacted under the [Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018](#) (P.L. 115-441) to avert further disaster for those communities, particularly in northern Syria;
- Ensure that the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from northeastern Syria is conducted in such a manner that will not negatively impact the rights and survival of vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities;
- Advocate for the inclusion of representatives from the autonomous administration of Kurdish-majority northeast Syria, which has supported the promotion of religious freedom in its territory, in the UN-led committee charged with rewriting the Syrian constitution;
- Support efforts through relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to fund and develop programs in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria that bolster intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights; and
- Continue and prioritize the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting—with priority being given to victims of ISIS and vulnerable religious minority communities.

# TAJIKISTAN

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan trended the same as in recent years, as President Emomali Rahmon and the Tajikistani government continued their repressive policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity and persecuting minority communities, especially actual and alleged Salafists. Authorities pursued a crackdown on various attributes of faith, including restrictions on wedding and funerary banquets, and pursued extralegal bans on beards and hijabs. Higher Islamic religious education was all but decimated, and updates to the country's 2009 religion law resulted in the closing of more than 2,000 mosques in the last two years. 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; the party's legal existence was part of the country's post-civil war peace treaty.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again finds—as it has since 2012—that Tajikistan merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State designated Tajikistan as a CPC for the first time in February 2016 and did so again most recently in November 2018. Nevertheless, the State Department immediately issued a waiver against any related sanctions on Tajikistan “as required in the ‘important national interest of the United States.’” USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Condition U.S. assistance to the Tajikistani government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, on the government reforming the 2009 religion law and improving conditions of freedom of religion or belief;
- Work with the international community, particularly during Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) events on countering terrorism, to include private and public criticism of Tajikistan's approach to regulating religion and countering extremism—including its classification of the IRPT as a terrorist group;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Tajikistani government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Ozodi, contingent on its compliance with international standards of journalistic objectivity, so that uncensored information about events inside Tajikistan, including those related to religious freedom, will be disseminated.

# TURKMENISTAN

## TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained largely unchanged. Turkmenistan is widely considered the most closed of the former Soviet states, and this was reflected in the range and severity of the government's religious freedom violations in 2018. For the first time in four years, the government resumed its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to military service. The government continued to be suspicious of all independent religious activity and maintained a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmenistan 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 in which the sentences remain secret. Many of those convicted are disappeared in the state's prison system and are presumed to be held without any contact with the outside

world; some are held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison where prisoners routinely die from torture and starvation. However, the full extent of religious persecution is unknown due to the nearly complete absence of independent news media and the threat of retaliation by the government against communities, family members, and individuals who publicize human rights and religious freedom violations.

In light of these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations, in 2019 USCIRF again finds that Turkmenistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC since 2014, most recently in November 2018. At the same time, the State Department used a waiver against any related sanctions on Turkmenistan "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'" USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Lift the waiver on taking action as a consequence of Turkmenistan's CPC designation to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its continuing violations of religious freedom;
- Identify Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and urge the government of Turkmenistan to desist immediately from the practice of "disappearing" prisoners and account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), so that uncensored information about events inside Turkmenistan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan trended positive in certain areas, though serious concerns remain. During the year, Uzbekistan continued on a path of reform to expand religious freedom in the country. Notably, in May 2018, Uzbekistan's parliament adopted a road map to improve religious freedom conditions, incorporating the recommendations made by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and pledged to rewrite the oppressive 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations. Despite the positive developments originating at the highest levels of the government, severe violations of religious freedom persisted. Thousands of Muslim religious prisoners remained behind bars on allegations of religious extremism. Of the prisoners who have been released under the administration of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, none of them have been rehabilitated for full reintegration into society, and the government has yet to provide a means for former prisoners to seek justice and exonerate their names. The government continued to restrict certain manifestations of Muslim piety in settings such as schools, where it has prohibited women and girls from wearing the hijab, and punished those who criticized such policies with short-term detentions, fines, or—in the case of at least one public figure—dismissal from employment. At the same time, local authorities continued to target Christian

communities for failing or being unable to register, possessing and distributing religious literature, and engaging in missionary activities, despite government assurances that efforts were underway to decriminalize acts that posed no threat to public safety. This inability to rein in local authorities and police forces throughout the country demonstrates the government's ongoing lack of capacity to fully implement and enforce top-down changes. On the contrary, during the year, police forces and members of Uzbekistan's State Security Service (SSS) continued to harass, intimidate, raid, fine, and detain members of Christian communities, particularly Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Based on these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2019 that Uzbekistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In November 2018, the U.S. Department of State moved Uzbekistan from its list of designated CPCs and placed the country on its "Special Watch List," a new category created by December 2016 amendments to IRFA. Unlike a CPC designation, the Special Watch List carries no penalties, sanctions, or other commensurate actions. USCIRF acknowledges the government's willingness and interest to reform, but nevertheless recommends that the State Department redesignate Uzbekistan as a CPC under IRFA and use available tools to leverage sustainable improvements in religious freedom conditions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to ensure long-lasting improvements to religious freedom;
- Work with the Uzbek government to revise the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations to ensure it is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage the Uzbek government to remove registration requirements on religious communities, permit the distribution and possession of peaceful religious literature, and permit the sharing of religious beliefs;
- Urge the Uzbek government to close the notorious Jasliq Prison, where many religious prisoners of conscience are held, and allow for independent prison monitoring; and
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Uzbek government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith.



### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Vietnam trended negative. Although the new Law on Belief and Religion, which came into effect on January 1, 2018, granted recognized religious organizations status as legal persons and reduced the waiting period for applications, it also required those organizations to seek prior approval for routine religious activities. Furthermore, the law closed the gray area in which independent religious groups had previously operated by outlawing groups that do not register, effectively criminalizing many peaceful religious practices and activities. During 2018, the government continued a nationwide crackdown on religious leaders, human rights defenders, peaceful activists, and other critics across the country, particularly in response to widespread protests against the draconian new Cybersecurity Law and a draft bill on special economic zones. As of December 31, 2018, there were an estimated 244 prisoners of conscience in Vietnamese jails, as well as 20 detained activists still awaiting trial, including some who advocated for freedom of religion or belief, and others who simply professed or practiced their faith. Local authorities continued to seize property from Catholic churches, Buddhist temples, and other religious groups for economic development projects

without providing just compensation. Vietnamese police harassed Catholic, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai religious leaders for participating in religious freedom conferences overseas and for meeting with foreign diplomatic personnel. 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 stateless because local authorities have refused to issue ID cards, in many instances in retaliation for refusing to renounce their faith.

Based on these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds that Vietnam merits designation in 2019 as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has recommended every year since 2002. Although the U.S. Department of State removed Vietnam from the CPC list in 2006, the government of Vietnam has continued to persecute religious individuals and organizations—despite some modest improvements—and the overall situation for religious freedom has regressed since the short-lived progress under the CPC designation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Enter into a binding agreement with the Vietnamese government, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster reforms to improve religious freedom;
- Pursue both public and private high-level engagement with Vietnamese government officials about prisoners of conscience and religious freedom concerns, not only in the context of

the annual U.S.-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue, but also as part of discussions about security, economic, and development issues; and

- Prioritize funding for programs that build the capacity of religious leaders, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations to negotiate with local authorities, especially as pertains to disputes over property and land.

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.

# AFGHANISTAN

## TIER 2

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan trended negatively. Afghanistan's leadership struggled to maintain security in the country, especially for religious minority groups. The ongoing operation of terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), threaten the country's overall security but particularly endanger the nation's Shi'a Muslim population who have faced increased attacks in recent years. In fact, 2018 was one of the most fatal in Afghanistan for all civilians—and particularly religious minorities—due to terrorist activity, and the government often was unable to protect civilians from attacks. Also, during the reporting period, non-Muslim groups like Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs remained endangered minorities—many fled the country and many of their community leaders who remained were killed in a largescale July 2018 terrorist attack. In general, religious minorities in Afghanistan have endured severe human rights violations since the 1990s under the Taliban's rule and subsequently have suffered ongoing attacks by extremist groups. Sikhs and Hindus have been driven underground without the ability to publicly practice their religious traditions for fear of reprisal by terrorist groups or society at large. While the government has provided assurances to religious minority communities and made limited attempts to include them in the policy-making process, socioeconomic

discrimination and lack of security continued to challenge the survival of these groups, which include other vulnerable populations, such as women and girls. This trend could worsen if religious freedom is not made a focal point for talks between the U.S. government, the Afghan government, and the Taliban.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Afghanistan on its Tier 2 in 2019, as it has since 2006, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF is concerned about the degree to which the Afghan government has control, both in general and with respect to religious freedom violations. As such, USCIRF will monitor religious freedom conditions to determine whether developments worsen and warrant a change in Afghanistan's status during the year ahead. USCIRF also finds that the Taliban continued to commit particularly severe religious freedom violations in 2018 while controlling parts of Afghanistan's territory, and therefore again recommends in 2019 that the group be designated as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, under December 2016 amendments to IRFA. The U.S. Department of State designated the Taliban in Afghanistan as an EPC, most recently in November 2018.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Afghan government to acknowledge the significant threat to freedom of religion or belief posed by the Taliban and raise these concerns during peace negotiations between the U.S. government, the Afghan government, and the Taliban by:
  - Emphasizing the need to protect vulnerable groups—including women and girls—whose religious freedoms and related rights have been endangered in the past due to the Taliban's actions and policies; and
  - Highlighting the interconnected role of government officials, security forces, and former affiliates of the Taliban in ensuring religious freedom rights throughout the country;
- Ensure the integration of religious freedom concerns with related issues such as countering religious extremism and resolving sectarian conflict into U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Millennium Challenge Corporation, and U.S. Department of Defense strategies and policies concerning Afghanistan;
- Urge the Afghan government to revoke the 2004 media law prohibiting "un-Islamic" writings and overturn through appropriate legislation the 2007 decision by the Supreme Court that the Baha'i faith is blasphemous and converts to it are apostates through cooperation between the embassy, leading parliamentarians, the Ministry of Law, and the Directorate on Fatwa and Accounts in the Supreme Court;
- Encourage the Afghan Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information and Culture to:
  - Ensure—and, if possible, in coordination with USAID's [Textbook Printing and Distribution Project](#)—that inflammatory and intolerant textbook and curricula content is discontinued and removed from usage; and
  - Create a civic space for the open discussion of diverse opinions on matters of religion and society in the country; and
- Advocate for the Ministries of Interior, Defense, and Hajj and Religious Affairs to work collectively to provide security for and facilitate cooperative meetings between faith leaders and scholars from various religions and from the various Muslim communities that exist in Afghanistan.

# AZERBAIJAN

## TIER 2

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, although the Azerbaijani government made a number of positive overtures to engage in and discuss matters of freedom of religion or belief with the United States and the international community, religious freedom conditions did not measurably improve. The government continued to control religious activities through the 2009 Law on Freedom of Religion and related amendments of the administrative and criminal codes, which require religious communities to register with the government and criminalize all unregistered religious activity. In a positive development, four non-Muslim religious communities received registration from the government. However, throughout the year, local police forces continued to harass, raid, detain, and fine religious communities that did not comply with registration requirements and various restrictions on the production, possession, and dissemination of religious literature, although one community did report a lessening in police harassment. During the year, Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and some Muslim groups were targeted, with some members of the Muslim community being forced to endure an additional layer of scrutiny by authorities who suspect and seek

to limit Iranian-government influence or subversive activity in the country. In July 2018, the government held "religious radicals" responsible for an assassination attempt that month on the mayor of Ganja and the deaths of two police officers. While it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of what transpired in Ganja, human rights activists accused the government of using the events as a pretext to clamp down on political dissent and inflame fears of Islamist terrorism. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) contended that approximately 68 prisoners of conscience—many of whom are members of the Muslim Unity Movement (MUM)—remained imprisoned in Azerbaijan on religious grounds. Throughout 2018, claims of "systemic and endemic" torture persisted, particularly against members of the MUM.

Based on these conditions, in 2019 USCIRF again places Azerbaijan on Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Azerbaijani government to:
  - Reform the 2009 law on religious organizations to bring it into conformity with recommendations by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2012;
  - Permit all religious communities—particularly those located outside of Baku and those belonging to non-traditional communities—to operate freely regardless of their registration status; and
  - Release prisoners of conscience—particularly those imprisoned for their faith—and ensure detainee access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, legal counsel, and religious accommodations;
  - Specify freedom of religion or belief as a grant category and area of activity for the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, and encourage the National Endowment for Democracy to make grants for civil society programs on tolerance and freedom of religion or belief; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azadliq, the Azerbaijani Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and the Azerbaijani Service of the Voice of America, so that uncensored information about events inside Azerbaijan, including incidents related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Bahrain trended positive in some areas but remained the same in others. Bahrain continued its significant efforts to promote international religious freedom and interreligious understanding through the announcement of an Ambassador-at-Large for Peaceful Coexistence and Religious Freedom and the opening of the King Hamad Global Center for Interfaith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence. Non-Muslim religious communities continued to be able to practice their faith freely, both publicly and privately. In addition, the Shi'a Muslim community generally enjoyed freedom of worship throughout the country. At the same time, a USCIRF visit to Bahrain in March 2019 found that the government continued its discrimination and repression of the Shi'a Muslim community on the basis of their religious identity in certain areas. In 2018, the government arrested

some Shi'a Muslim clerics during Ashura religious observances, allegedly for "inciting hatred." In the November 2018 local and parliamentary elections, some Shi'a Bahraini candidates were prevented from participating, and several party leaders were arrested or remained in jail. Some human rights defenders who advocated for greater religious freedom remained in prison. Furthermore, discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in government employment and some public and social services also continued, even though Bahrain's laws affirm principles of nondiscrimination.

In 2019, USCIRF places Bahrain on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Bahraini government to clarify the terms and enforcement of the 2016 amendment to article 5 of the 2005 Political Society Law, which prohibits religious figures from "inciting hatred," and repeal articles 309 and 310 of Bahrain's Penal Code that impose fines and jail time for blasphemy;
- Work with the Bahraini government to continue to implement reforms consistent with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report—specifically recommendation 1724a relating to censorship of beliefs and recommendation 1722d relating to holding prisoners incognito—and urge it to conduct and make public an annual progress report;
- Press the Bahraini government to enforce existing laws, including Royal Decree 36 of 2012 and Royal Decree 95 of 2018, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sectarian affiliation;
- Continue to train security officials, prosecutors, and judges to better address sectarian violence and incitement by enhancing programs that promote sectarian reconciliation, support the rule of law, and counter violent extremism—such as ongoing community policing initiatives; and
- Press Bahrain's government to ensure freedom of religion and reduce sectarian incitement by passing the bill pending in the Ministerial Committee for Social Services, Communication and Media, providing accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a Muslim community, and unconditionally releasing prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates.

## KEY FINDINGS

During 2018, religious freedom conditions in Cuba trended the same, although some of the tactics employed by the Cuban government to repress religious freedom changed. Cuba continues to be a one-party system with no independent judicial bodies and where the state tightly controls religious institutions. After Fidel Castro's death and Raúl Castro's resignation as president, the Cuban Communist Party in April 2018 appointed Miguel Díaz-Canel to the presidency without an election. The change in leadership did not result in increased religious freedom. A new constitution, which was ratified after the reporting period, weakened protections for freedom of religion or belief. The Cuban government engaged in harassment campaigns targeting religious leaders and activists who advocated for stronger religious freedom protections. Gathering detailed information on religious freedom conditions in Cuba remains a challenge, but open and flagrant attacks on religious leaders and property appear to have decreased since 2017. Because the Cuban government is concerned about international public opinion, it has changed some of its tactics, including by subtly increasing its harassment of religious leaders and activists countrywide in ways that are difficult to track. The new forms of harassment include the issuance, as a scare tactic, of pre-arrest warrants to religious leaders and believers and charging them with criminal and civil code

violations to disguise religious repression. The government continued to use a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment to control religious groups. The Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), an entity within the Cuban Communist Party, arbitrarily controls all religious activity. The ORA requires religious organizations to register, which, in theory, allows communities to receive foreign visitors, import religious materials, meet in approved houses of worship, and apply to travel abroad. However, the ORA can still arbitrarily interfere in any church matters—whether the church is registered or not. The Cuban government publicized the building of a Catholic Church in Sandino, which is the first new religious building that the government has allowed to be constructed in six decades. While this is overall a positive step, other religious groups have not been allowed to construct new religious buildings. Almost every Sunday in 2018, the government violently prevented members of the Ladies in White and other activists from attending Mass.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places Cuba on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Highlight religious freedom violations in specific prisoner of conscience initiatives, such as the U.S. Mission to the United Nations' [“Jailed for What?”](#) campaign and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#);
- Prioritize adequate coverage of religious freedom issues as well as access to consular services for religious leaders in Cuba to obtain visas given gaps in personnel at the U.S. Embassy;
- Press the Cuban government to include in the new constitution legal protections for religious associations and institutions;
- Facilitate multi-entry visas for both registered and unregistered Cuban religious leaders to travel to and interact with coreligionists in the United States; 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 Cuba.

## KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Egypt generally trended in a more positive direction related to high-level official discourse and actions. However, persistent challenges at the community level and a poor, broader human rights situation remained consistent with recent years. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi heightened the inclusion of religious tolerance in public discourse, including continuing his now-annual tradition of attending Coptic Christmas Eve Mass. He also personally oversaw the opening of a Coptic Orthodox cathedral and a mosque in the new administrative capital in January 2019—after the reporting period—encouraging the inclusion of churches in plans for new urban developments and calling for wider freedom of belief and worship. By March 2019, shortly after the reporting period, the cabinet-level committee tasked with approving the registration of churches and church-related buildings under Law 80/2016 approved 783 of the between 5,515 and 5,540 properties slated for registration. The Ministry of Education began issuing a new primary school curriculum for religious instruction. Officials shared its new curriculum with USCIRF during its January 2019 country visit in order to demonstrate the removal of intolerant concepts and language from the state-mandated curriculum. During USCIRF's visit, Grand

Sheikh of al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb stated that non-Muslims, including Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses, should be permitted public places of worship in Egypt, representing a notable shift in rhetoric. Nevertheless, despite these prominent gestures, systematic and ongoing challenges to religious freedom remained widespread at the community level, particularly in rural areas. Anti-Christian mob violence occurred with impunity and regularity in Upper Egypt; on several occasions, these incidents came in direct response to efforts by local Christians to legally register their churches. Meanwhile, Egyptian affiliates of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and domestic terror groups continued to target local Christians in addition to government officials and security forces. Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses remained unrecognized, and blasphemy laws, which have not been repealed, continued to be used in targeting Muslims, Christians, and nonreligious persons.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Egypt on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations, thereby meeting at least one of the three elements of the standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Egyptian government to accelerate approvals for churches and church-related buildings that have applied for renovation, construction, or registration under Law 80/2016; enforce the law's provision that churches awaiting approval can continue to operate; and initiate a national discussion into supplanting that law with one that would uniformly apply to all houses of worship, regardless of religious affiliation;
- Allocate a portion of U.S. assistance—including through Foreign Military Funding (FMF) and Economic Support Fund sources, as appropriate—to programs through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to train and equip Egyptian security forces to protect the places of worship and other holy sites of religious minority communities;
- Press the Egyptian government and security services to immediately end the practice of ceding legal authority to customary reconciliation councils to resolve incidents of anti-Christian mob violence;
- Encourage the Egyptian government to 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, such as creating an independent antidiscrimination body that includes non-Sunni Muslim representatives; and
- Urge the Egyptian government to repeal or revise article 98(f) of the Penal Code, which criminalizes contempt of religion, or blasphemy, and in the interim provide the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating article 98(f).

The U.S. Congress should:

- Require the U.S. Department of State to provide justification for the release of any foreign military financing withheld to Egypt, including public disclosure of its assessment and certification of Egypt's progress toward improving human rights and religious freedom conditions.



## KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in India continued a downward trend. India has a long history as a secular democracy where religious communities of every faith have thrived. The constitution guarantees the right to religious freedom, and the nation's independent judiciary has often provided essential protections to religious minority communities through its jurisprudence. Yet, this history of religious freedom has come under attack in recent years with the growth of exclusionary extremist narratives—including, at times, the government's allowance and encouragement of mob violence against religious minorities—that have facilitated an egregious and ongoing campaign of violence, intimidation, and harassment against non-Hindu and lower-caste Hindu minorities. Both public and private actors have engaged in this campaign. In 2018, approximately one-third of state governments increasingly enforced anti-conversion and/or anti-cow slaughter laws discriminatorily against non-Hindus and Dalits alike. Further, cow protection mobs engaged in violence predominantly targeting Muslims and Dalits, some of whom have been legally involved in the dairy, leather, or beef trades for generations. Mob violence was also carried out against Christians under accusations of forced or induced religious conversion. In cases involving mobs killing an individual based on false accusations of cow slaughter or forced conversion, police investigations and prosecutions often were not adequately pursued. Rules on the registration of foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were discriminatorily implemented against religious minority groups. Religious freedom conditions varied dramatically from state to state, with some states continuing to be relatively open

and free for religious minorities, while others—if taken on their own—had “systematic, ongoing, egregious” violations of religious freedom. In 2018, the Supreme Court of India highlighted the deteriorating conditions for religious freedom in some states, concluding that certain state governments were not doing enough to stop violence against religious minorities and, in some extreme instances, impunity was being granted to criminals engaged in communal violence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi seldom made statements decrying mob violence, and certain members of his political party have affiliations with Hindu extremist groups and used inflammatory language about religious minorities publicly. Victims of large-scale attacks in recent years have not been granted justice, and reports of new crimes committed against religious minorities were not adequately accounted for or prosecuted. India's substantial population both complicates and limits the ability of national and state institutions to address these issues.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places India on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the Indian government repeatedly has denied USCIRF access to India, the Commission welcomes the opportunity to openly and candidly engage with the government—including the chance for a USCIRF delegation to visit India—to discuss shared values and interests, including international standards of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Indian government to allow a USCIRF delegation to visit the country and meet with stakeholders to evaluate conditions for freedom of religion or belief in India;
- Work with the Indian government to create a multiyear strategy to ebb the flow of hate crimes targeting religious minorities, including by:
  - Pressing state governments to prosecute religious leaders, government officials, and media personalities who incite violence against religious minority groups through public speeches or articles, as was recommended by the National Minorities Ministry in July 2014;
  - Strengthening the training and capacity of state and central police to prevent and punish cases of religious violence, while also protecting victims, witnesses, and houses of worship and other holy sites;
  - Encouraging passage of the Protection of Human Rights (Amendment) Bill, 2018 to establish national and state human rights commissions and human rights courts; and
  - Assisting the Ministry of Law and Justice to work with state prosecutors to increase the rate of prosecutions for hate crimes and online hate speech targeting religious minorities;
- Increase the U.S. Embassy's focus on religious freedom and related human rights through continued visits to regions impacted by religiously motivated violence and dialogue with religious communities, local governmental leaders, and police; and
- Advocate for the Indian central government to ensure that the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act is not used discriminatorily to target international missionary and human rights groups, and to press states with anti-conversion and anti-cow slaughter laws to do the same.

## KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, the overall religious freedom conditions in Indonesia trended negative. Although the number of religious freedom violations committed by state actors decreased in 2018, the Indonesian government continued to enforce several laws and policies that imposed significant obstacles to religious freedom, such as draconian blasphemy laws and an arduous approval process for the construction of new houses of worship. The national government frequently does not intervene when provincial and local governments enact unconstitutional regulations or policies that exacerbate religious divisions. For example, in late 2018, the government released a mobile phone application that provides citizens the ability to report on “deviant” religious practices, creating panic among Indonesia’s religious minorities and underscoring the risks of acceding to pressure from hardliners and other intolerant groups. Moreover, there has been little effort to rein in hardliners and other intolerant groups that commit acts

of discrimination and violence against members of certain faiths. There were increased signs of radicalization in 2018, particularly in Indonesia’s education system. Candidates in the 2018 regional elections appealed to religious sectarianism, raising fears about the politicization of religion ahead of the April 2019 general elections. Violations of religious freedom tended to have the greatest impact on Ahmadiyya and Shi’a Muslims, Christians, believers outside the six officially recognized faiths, and nonbelievers. In October 2018, a USCIRF delegation visited Indonesia to assess religious freedom conditions.

In 2019, USCIRF again places Indonesia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2004, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Direct the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta and the U.S. Consulates in Indonesia to urge the Indonesian government at the central, provincial, and local levels to repeal or amend laws that violate religious freedom, including but not limited to: the blasphemy law and related measures; a regulation on houses of worship; a decree banning Ahmadiyya members from spreading their faith; and requirements to name religious affiliation on ID cards;
- Prioritize funding for programs that improve the capacity of civil society and the media to collect, investigate, and clarify provocative information relating to religion that appears online or in text messages;
- Focus U.S. government funding for deradicalization efforts in Indonesia on teachers, students, and school administrators, particularly in Islamic boarding schools; and
- Ensure that U.S.-funded programs for Indonesian police and counterterrorism officials incorporate training on addressing sectarian conflict, religion-related vigilantism, hate speech, and terrorism through practices consistent with international human rights standards.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, there continued to be significant challenges to religious freedom conditions in Iraq, trending toward modest but fragile improvement. The Iraqi government continued to show a lack of willingness or ability to provide proper security for vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities. It also eschewed due process for Sunni Muslims and family members accused of supporting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), while it maintained and enforced restrictions on religious freedom, such as anti-blasphemy laws and official intolerance of some religious communities. Meanwhile, although domestic and international leaders have touted the defeat of ISIS since late 2017, the group continues to operate throughout the country as a diffuse, cell-based insurgency, rather than as a territory-controlling state with a centrally organized military. Its transformation has allowed it to increase its rate of small-scale operations and to maintain an estimated membership of up to 15,000 fighters in Iraq alone. In addition, religious and ethnic minorities whom ISIS had particularly singled out for genocide, such as Yazidis and Christians, continued to face dire uncertainty as to whether conditions would allow them to return to their communities of origin. This uncertainty was especially pronounced in areas that had been liberated from ISIS control and/or that fall within certain sections of northern Iraq whose control has long remained in dispute between the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government (IFG), such as Sinjar, the Nineveh Plains, and

Kirkuk. As a result, displaced religious minorities' rate of return was far less than that of Sunni and Shi'a Muslim communities who had fled their homes following the rise of ISIS in 2014. For some communities, such as the more than 200,000 Yazidis who were displaced from the vicinity of Sinjar, few of their internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned in 2018 as most remained in camps awaiting reconstruction and the restoration of security in their places of origin. In March 2018, a USCIRF delegation visited both IFG- and KRG-administered territories to assess religious freedom conditions.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places the government of Iraq on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of political concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Also, USCIRF finds that because ISIS no longer "exercise[d] significant political power and territorial control" within Iraq during the reporting period, it does not meet the statutory requirement that would merit its designation as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, for particularly severe religious freedom violations as defined by December 2016 amendments to IRFA. However, USCIRF still finds that ISIS meets the statutory definition with respect to its territorial control and activities in Syria and therefore recommends its designation as an EPC.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Expedite the dispersal of U.S. assistance for the rehabilitation and stabilization of areas liberated from ISIS control, in order to facilitate the return of displaced and vulnerable communities and others whose religious and ethnic divisions ISIS exploited, in part pursuant to the Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act of 2018 ([P.L. 115-300](#));
- Encourage both the IFG and the KRG to peacefully resolve outstanding budget, oil, and territorial disputes, such as longstanding delays over implementation of article 140 of the Iraqi constitution, which have impeded their ability to fully address

the ISIS threat and allow displaced communities—including religious and ethnic minorities—to return to their places of origin;

- Encourage both the IFG and the KRG to prevent the expropriation of homes and properties of religious and ethnic minorities by dominant communities, while supporting legal and other forms of assistance to both governments to establish a viable framework for resolving longstanding, intercommunal property disputes; and
- Stipulate in all military or security assistance to the IFG and the KRG the full integration of security forces to better reflect the country's

religious and ethnic diversity, and provide training for recipient units on international human rights standards and how to treat civilians, particularly religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Support legislation that would specifically target for sanctions Iranian-controlled factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), particularly Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba, which have carried out sectarian violence in both Iraq and Syria and have complicated efforts to restore government-led security and stability throughout Iraq.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, despite some positive developments, the government of Kazakhstan continued to commit religious freedom violations. During the year, there was a substantial decrease in the number of administrative prosecutions for religious activity: from 279 cases in 2017 to 165 in 2018. Offenses ranged from attending worship meetings and engaging in missionary activity to minor administrative infractions. Of these cases, 139 resulted in punishments—including fines, prison terms, and various restrictions on freedom—as opposed to 259 in 2017. In October 2018, for the sixth time since 2003, Kazakhstan hosted its Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which promoted Kazakhstan’s image as a beacon of religious pluralism and a historical center of religious diversity. On January 29, 2019, after the reporting period, the government unexpectedly abandoned a series of proposed amendments to the country’s already restrictive 2011 religion law. Many observers had feared these amendments would initiate an even harsher crackdown on religious freedom in Kazakhstan. The decision to abandon the amendments came after nearly a year and a half of parliamentary debate. These

positive trends coincided with the continuation of repressive government policies toward religious belief and practice: for example, the government continued to routinely subject the general population to official scrutiny of their religious belief and practice. Dozens of individuals have been arrested and/or fined, or received sentences that restricted their freedoms and—in at least five cases—led to lengthy prison terms for the peaceful expression of religious beliefs. The Kazakhstani government also continued to politicize religion; it frequently charged its opponents with religious extremism and, in some cases, fabricated elaborate terrorism cases against them. The government continued to be particularly suspicious of proselytism, connections to religious movements or institutions abroad, and criticism of or dissent from official policy.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places Kazakhstan on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Prioritize religious freedom and related human rights into the U.S.-Kazakhstan Strategic Partnership Dialogue and other bilateral interactions, and specifically urge the government of Kazakhstan to:
  - Repeal or amend its religious registration laws, which are frequently used to harass and prosecute religious minorities;
  - Cease the detention and sentencing of individuals for their peaceful religious expression and practice; and
  - Provide an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors;
- Encourage the Kazakhstani government to open the Congress of the Leaders of the World and Traditional Religions to representatives of all faiths; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azattyq, the Kazakh service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), so that uncensored information about events inside Kazakhstan, including those related to religious freedom, can be disseminated widely.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Laos trended the same as in 2017. It continued to be difficult to obtain and confirm details about religious freedom violations due to heavy government censorship and restrictions on freedom of information. Lao officials seek to control all perceived challenges to state authority and often characterize religious and ethnic minorities as potential agitators. The Lao constitution ostensibly protects its peoples' inherent right to religious freedom. However, as exemplified by Decree 315, corresponding rules and regulations pertaining to religious observance are excessively cumbersome, vaguely worded, and open to interpretation. This emboldened some local authorities to implement the spirit of the decree as they understand it rather than according to the decree. In 2018, communication between national and provincial government institutions remained limited, and local-level officials were often unaware of or unwilling to implement or enforce national laws and policies pertaining to religious freedom. As such, religious freedom conditions throughout the country varied widely by district, village, and province. In some parts of the country, religious freedom conditions were generally good, while in others—typically more rural and isolated areas—they remained quite poor. Some Lao authorities

remained deeply suspicious of Christians, sometimes resulting in social exclusion, harassment, and arbitrary detention by law enforcement officials. Throughout 2018, USCIRF continued to receive reports of harassment and persecution of Christians in Savannakhet, a province known for its religious intolerance. The Lao government has a long history of sentencing individuals to indefinite prison terms for expressing open criticism of the government or shedding light on its human rights abuses, including religious freedom violations, and the possibility of government retaliation prompted many people to self-censor. Furthermore, the Lao government maintained its policy of promoting Buddhism through various state institutions, including public school curricula, and at times incorporated Buddhist rituals or ceremonies in official state functions. Religious tensions were also manifest at the village level, indicating a degree of generalized social prejudice toward religious minorities.

In 2019, USCIRF again places Laos on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2009, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Lao government to:
  - Amend Decree 315 in order to clarify administrative procedures and enforcement mechanisms, and, in the meantime, hold accountable central, provincial, and local government and law enforcement officials acting in contravention of Laos' laws, the Lao constitution, and international standards; and
  - Permit all religious communities—particularly those located in rural and isolated areas—to operate freely regardless of their recognition status; and
  - Support programs that increase understanding and awareness of Lao government policies and practices relating to religious freedom—including government restrictions and social hostilities—among national and local-level officials, law enforcement, and religious leaders representing all beliefs.
- The U.S. Congress should:
  - Send regular congressional delegations to Laos and hold hearings focused on religious freedom and related human rights to collect and disseminate information about overall conditions and specific violations.

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Malaysia trended the same as in 2017, despite some optimism about the potential for overall human rights improvements following a historic change of government in the 2018 general elections. Malaysia has a highly pluralistic society, but some public attitudes and government policies on race, ethnicity, and religion have at times contributed to societal intolerance. In general, the Sunni Muslim majority must adhere to a strict, state-approved interpretation of Islam and have little freedom to practice according to their conscience. Federal and state-level government authorities continued to forbid so-called “deviant” religious minority groups—including Shi’a Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha’is, and the Al-Arqam sect—from assembling or worshiping in public. In addition, deeper, institutionalized barriers to religious freedom remained firmly intact. Ethnic Malays—who are constitutionally defined as Muslim—comprise more than half the country’s population and have benefitted from affirmative action policies. These special privileges are allocated strictly on the basis of ethnicity, and by extension, adherence to Islam. Furthermore, Malaysia’s dual-track legal system includes both civil and Shari’ah courts. When their respective jurisdictions intersect, civil courts usually ceded to religious courts, which means

non-Muslims were sometimes subjected to Shari’ah court rulings. In 2018, Sunni Muslims remained free to proselytize, and the proselytization of Islam to non-Muslims was reportedly widespread in Malaysia’s public school system. Individuals who identify with minority faiths were barred from proselytizing Sunni Muslims and faced possible criminal charges such as caning or imprisonment for attempting to do so. Throughout 2018, non-Sunni Muslims continued to suffer from varying degrees of discrimination, including baseless accusations of extremism and unprovoked acts of vandalism directed at their places of worship. While non-Muslims had little difficulty converting to Islam, Muslims who wished to convert to another religion continued to face persistent legal and administrative difficulties and generally struggled to secure official government recognition of their faith.

Based on these concerns, in 2019 USCIRF again places Malaysia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2014, for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Request that the Malaysian government clarify administrative procedures and develop tangible mechanisms for individuals to leave Islam when they choose to convert to another faith;
- Press the Malaysian government to remove the religion field from national ID cards and allow for marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims without conversion;
- Urge the Malaysian government to facilitate independent institutions, including the judiciary, in order to guarantee that everyone residing in Malaysia, regardless of religion or ethnicity, enjoys equal representation before the law and freedom of religion or belief; and
- Urge the Malaysian government to acknowledge all peaceful religious activity as legitimate and cease the arrest, detention, or forced “rehabilitation” of religious minorities, particularly members of Shi’a Muslim, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Baha’i, and Al-Arqam groups, among others, and to release unconditionally those detained or imprisoned for related charges.



## KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, the state of religious freedom in Turkey remained deeply troubling, raising serious concerns that the country's current trajectory will lead to the further deterioration of conditions in the year ahead. The lack of any meaningful progress on the part of the Turkish government to address longstanding religious freedom issues was continued cause for concern. Many serious limitations on the freedom of religion or belief continued, threatening the continued vitality and survival of minority religious communities in the country; in addition, increased demonization and a smear campaign by government entities and progovernment media contributed to a growing climate of fear among religious minority communities. The Turkish government continued to interfere in the internal affairs of religious communities, disallowing patriarchal elections for the Armenian Apostolic Church and maintaining its requirement that Greek Orthodox metropolitans obtain Turkish citizenship in order to participate in the church's Holy Synod. Followers of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen continued to be dismissed from public service, detained, and arrested in the tens of thousands for alleged complicity in the July 2016 failed coup attempt, or involvement in terrorist activity. The Turkish government has indiscriminately designated those affiliated with Gülen as part of a terrorist organization. Government officials also continued to engage in anti-Semitism in the form of public statements and comments made on social media platforms, while progovernment newspapers and media outlets propagated hate speech directed against

both Christians and Jews. While the state proposed a budget increase of 36 percent for the government body charged with overseeing the exercise of Sunni Islam, other religious groups, including Alevis—whom the government views as a culture rather than a religion—do not receive equal funding. However, due to Turkey's strict interpretation of secularism, no religious community—including Sunni Muslims—can obtain full legal status. Other longstanding religious freedom concerns remain, such as the return of expropriated religious properties and state-mandated religious education for primary and secondary students. Finally, the unjust detainment and trial of Protestant pastor Andrew Brunson, an ordeal that lasted for more than two years and gave way to a rise in hate speech against Christians, concluded in October 2018 with his conviction and immediate release, after significant pressure from the U.S. government. A USCIRF delegation attended Pastor Brunson's hearings in Aliağa, Turkey, in May, July, and October 2018.

Based on these conditions, in 2019 USCIRF again places Turkey on Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). However, USCIRF will continue to monitor religious freedom conditions to determine whether developments worsen and warrant a change in the country's status during the year ahead.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Turkish government to fully comply with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevleri* as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedeleri* as religious leaders;
- Press the Turkish government to streamline measures that would permit non-Sunni Muslim faith communities to apply for government funding to support the construction, maintenance, and upkeep of their houses of worship;
- Urge the Turkish government to ensure the education curriculum remains inclusive of all of Turkey's religious groups, and allow students to be exempted from religious courses without disclosing their religious and philosophical convictions, as mandated by the ECtHR;
- Press the Turkish government to fulfill private and public commitments that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary be reopened, and to permit the Armenian Apostolic Church to hold elections for the position of patriarch without state interference; and
- Press the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic statements or other derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey.



# APPENDIX 1 USCIRF COMMISSIONERS



**TENZIN DORJEE,**  
**CHAIR**

**Reappointed by:** Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), then House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020. Associate Professor at the Department of Human Communication Studies, California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).



**KRISTINA ARRIAGA,**  
**VICE CHAIR**

**Reappointed by:** Hon. Paul Ryan (R), then Speaker of the House, for a term expiring in May 2020. Former advisor to the United States delegation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission and an appointee to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission.



**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.



**ANURIMA BHARGAVA,**  
**COMMISSIONER**

**Appointed by:** Hon. Nancy Pelosi (D), then House Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020. Civil rights lawyer and founder and president of Anthem of Us.



**NADINE MAENZA,**  
**COMMISSIONER**

**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**

**Appointed by:** President Donald J. Trump, for a term expiring in May 2019. President of American Values, a public policy think tank, and Washington Director of Christians United for Israel Action Fund.



**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.



**ANDY KHAWAJA,**  
**COMMISSIONER**

**Appointed by:** Hon. Charles Schumer (D), Senate Minority Leader, for a term expiring in May 2020. Founder and CEO of Allied Wallet, an online payment service provider headquartered in Los Angeles.



**TONY PERKINS,**  
**COMMISSIONER**

**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.



# APPENDIX 2

## RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

THROUGH THE RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE 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.



**PANCHEN LAMA**

CHINA

**USCIRF Advocates:**  
Chair Tenzin Dorjee and  
Commissioner Nadine Maenza



**GULMIRA IMIN**

CHINA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Chair Tenzin Dorjee



**DENNIS CHRISTENSEN**

RUSSIA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga



**IVAN MATSITSKY**

RUSSIA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga



**HAMID BIN HAYDARA**

YEMEN

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Andy Khawaja



**ROBERT LEVINSON**

IRAN

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Andy Khawaja



**DAVID LIN**

CHINA

**USCIRF Advocates:**  
Vice Chair Kristina Arriaga and  
Commissioner Tony Perkins



**GOLROKH IRAEE**

IRAN

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Vice Chair Gayle Manchin



**MOHAMMAD TAHERI**

IRAN

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Vice Chair Gayle Manchin



**RAIF BADAWI**

SAUDI ARABIA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Nadine Maenza



**YOUCEF NADARKHANI**

IRAN

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Nadine Maenza



**HU SHIGEN**

CHINA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Gary Bauer



**PATRIARCH ANTONIOS**

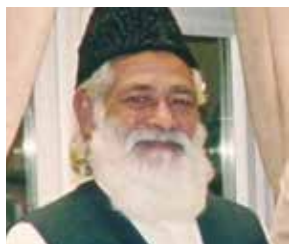
ERITREA

**USCIRF Advocate:**  
Commissioner Johnnie Moore

# APPENDIX 2

## RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

### RELEASED



**ABDUL SHAKOOR**

PAKISTAN

(Released March 2019)

**USCIRF Advocates:**

Commissioner Johnnie Moore; then Commissioner Daniel Mark



**THICH QUANG DO**

VIETNAM

(Released October 2018,  
Currently Under Surveillance)

**USCIRF Advocate:**

Commissioner Kristina Arriaga



**ANDREW BRUNSON**

TURKEY

(Released October 2018)

**USCIRF Advocates:**

Commissioner Kristina Arriaga  
and then Commissioner  
Sandra Jolley



**FARIBA KAMALABADI**

IRAN

(Released November 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:**

Commissioner Kristina Arriaga



**BAGIR KAZIKHANOV**

RUSSIA

(Released October 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Then

Commissioner John Ruskey



**MAHVASH SABET**

IRAN

(Released September 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:**

Commissioner Kristina Arriaga



**MARYAM NAGHASH  
ZARGARAN**

IRAN

(Released August 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:**

Then Commissioner Clifford D. May



**PASTOR NGUYEN CONG CHINH AND  
TRAN THI HONG**

VIETNAM

(Released July 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Then Commissioner Jackie Wolcott



**ZAW ZAW LATT AND PWINT PHYU LATT**

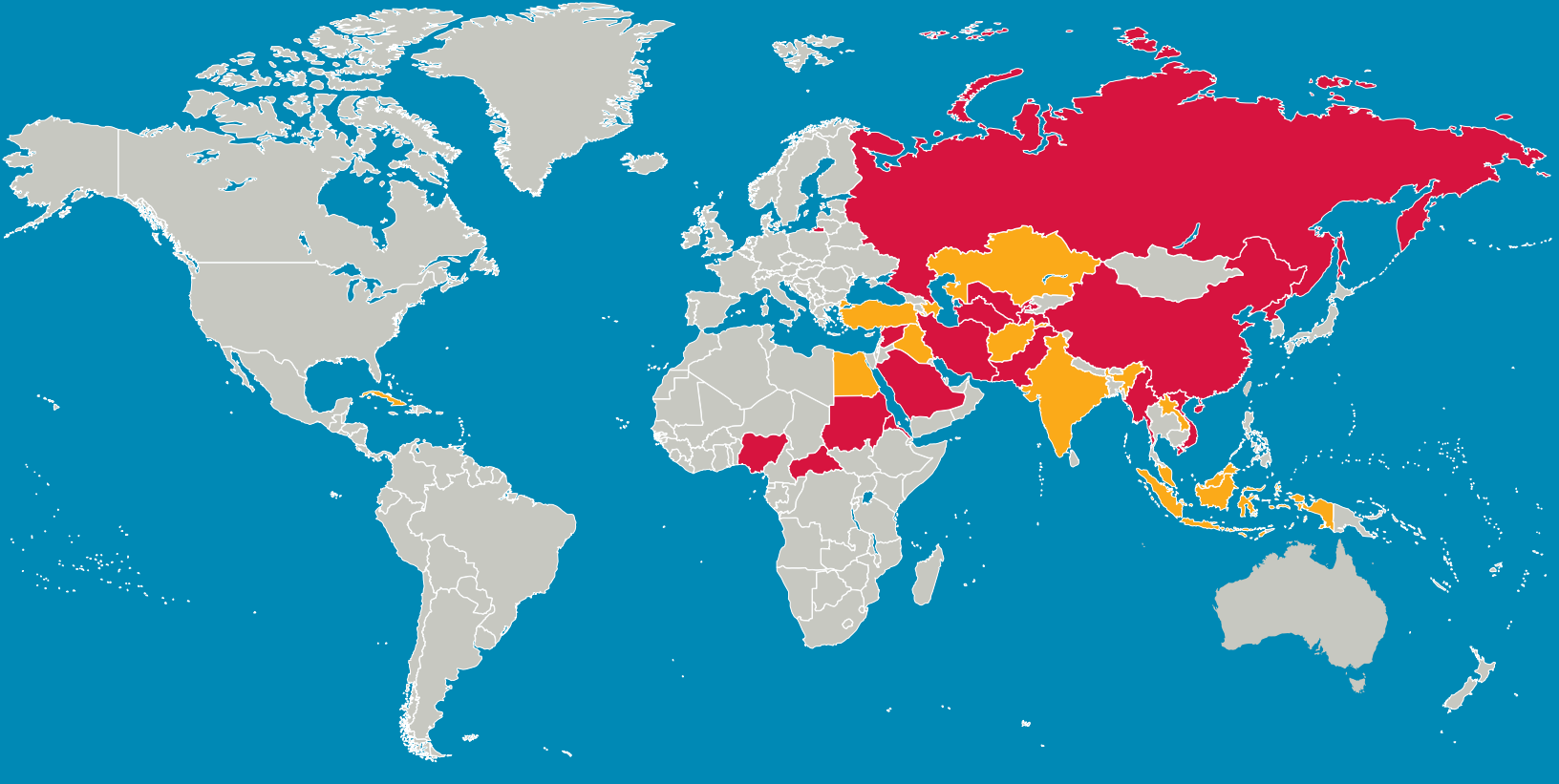
BURMA

(Released May 2017)

**USCIRF Advocate:** Then Commissioner Daniel Mark







## 2 0 1 9 C O U N T R I E S

### ■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Iran	Russia	Tajikistan
Central African Republic	Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Turkmenistan
China	North Korea	Sudan	Uzbekistan
Eritrea	Pakistan	Syria	Vietnam

### ■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Indonesia	Laos
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Iraq	Malaysia
Bahrain	India	Kazakhstan	Turkey



### UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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

Telephone: (202) 523-3240 Fax: (202) 523-5020  
[www.uscifr.gov](http://www.uscifr.gov)