

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions deteriorated in the Central African Republic (CAR). Following a year of progress and reduced religious freedom violations in 2020, violence on the basis of religion, especially the targeting of Muslim minorities, appears to have increased in CAR in 2021. CAR authorities in select prefectures and state-backed foreign fighters with links to the Russian government committed arbitrary detentions, extrajudicial killings, and torture and inhumane treatment against Muslims based on their assumed affiliation with rebel groups due to their religious or ethnoreligious identity.

In February, national security forces and foreign fighters [overran a mosque](#) in Bambari and shot dead at least three Muslims. In May, CAR authorities arrested a Muslim shopkeeper in Kaga Bandoro and the next day his [charred body](#) was found on the outskirts of town, cut into pieces. In June, foreign fighters reportedly stormed the home of the [Sultan of Kouï](#) and insisted he and two companions accompany them. The Russian-linked fighters returned a few hours later and told the Sultan's family that he and his companions had been killed by a landmine. A United Nations (UN) human rights investigation found that they had in fact been shot. A few months later, foreign fighters reportedly raided the home of the second most influential Muslim cleric in Kouï, the [imam of Kouï central mosque](#), and disappeared him after harassing him for weeks to stop teaching children in the Quranic School.

In [January](#), CAR security forces arrested a Muslim man accused of being an informant to rebel groups and tortured him for two days to obtain a confession. In April, CAR authorities in Bambari arbitrarily arrested [18 Muslim civilians](#) and subjected them to cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. Also in April, CAR authorities arrested a [Muslim trader](#) and beat him and confiscated his motorbike and a sum of money. In [May](#), CAR security forces in Bang arrested and tortured 20 Muslim civilians due to their perceived association with a local armed group.

The CAR government has [opened investigations](#) into some of these allegations against national security forces and foreign fighters, but it has thus far not held anyone accountable for these violations and has even obstructed some investigations. CAR authorities have also [obstructed](#) the work of the Special Criminal Court (SCC), a hybrid court mandated to investigate and try individuals responsible for grave human rights abuses during the civil war.

Muslim Central Africans also continue to face discrimination and displacement. Government authorities [charge Muslims](#) higher fees and fines than non-Muslims for the same services or penalties. Displacement increased in 2021, with [more than 100,000](#) Central Africans newly displaced. Although data is lacking, analysts familiar with the situation on the ground assess that Muslims are disproportionately represented among CAR's displaced population.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include CAR on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in and tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Provide financial, administrative, and diplomatic support to the SCC and other investigations into ethnoreligious targeting and other human rights abuses by state actors or state-backed foreign fighters in CAR, including urging the CAR government to cease all obstructions to such investigations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on CAR government agencies and officials and other relevant foreign actors responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Continue to allocate funding for humanitarian assistance, including for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and returnees, as well as funding programs to rebuild mosques destroyed during the civil conflict.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Central African Republic](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Tensions and Fulani Communities in West and Central Africa](#)
- **Podcast:** [Central African Republic: From Sectarian Violence to Progress on Religious Freedom](#)

Background

CAR's [constitution](#) provides for freedom of religion and equal protection under the law regardless of religion. It prohibits all forms of religious intolerance and "religious fundamentalism." The law also requires the head of state to take an oath of office that includes a promise to fulfill the duties of the office without any consideration of religion. Roughly [89 percent](#) of CAR's population identify as Christian, while nine percent identify as Muslim, one percent practice folk religions, and one percent are religiously unaffiliated.

In 2012, predominantly Muslim militias in CAR's north mobilized and marched on the capital in response to longstanding grievances based in the government's marginalization of and discrimination against Muslim minorities. In response, militias from predominantly Christian- and folk religion-practicing communities mobilized for self-protection and began retaliating against Muslim civilian communities. This triggered more than half a decade of political and [ethnoreligious violence](#), including attacks on individuals based on their religious identity and deliberate attacks on houses of worship and religious enclaves in cities across CAR. Muslim minorities bore the brunt of the conflict, with violence displacing an estimated [80 percent](#) of CAR's Muslim population in the first two years. In light of these violations, from 2015 to 2019 USCIRF recommended that the State Department designate CAR as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under IRFA for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations.

In 2019, the CAR government [signed a peace accord](#) with 14 armed groups. CAR authorities also began to [increase cooperation](#) with Russian nationals, including fighters affiliated with the Wagner Group, a military contractor with ties to the Russian government. In 2017, the UN Security Council [loosened an arms embargo](#) on CAR to facilitate Russian security assistance and training to the CAR government, and by 2021 there were an estimated [1,200 Russian-linked fighters](#) operating there. In 2019 and 2020, instances of religious violence decreased leading USCIRF to recommend SWL status, a lesser category, for CAR in 2020 and then to [remove CAR](#) from its SWL recommendations in its 2021 Annual Report.

However, following contested elections at the end of 2020 and the remobilization of a united rebel militia, state-sponsored abuses against Muslims have been on the rise. In June, the UN Secretary General found that targeted arrests of alleged rebel collaborators "[disproportionately affected religious and ethnic minorities](#) such as Muslims and Fulanis." A joint human rights investigation by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported a notable "increase in targeted attacks against the civilian population, [especially Muslims](#)," in several prefectures and found that CAR authorities used a state of emergency in early 2021 to [commit](#) abuses that "specifically targeted certain communities (Muslims and Peuhl)."

Executions, Abductions, and Torture

In 2021, CAR authorities and state-sanctioned foreign fighters with links to the Russian government killed or facilitated the execution of Muslims on the basis of their religious identities. These violations included [shooting three Muslims](#) as they exited a mosque in Bambari, abducting and allegedly [dismembering a Muslim shopkeeper](#) in Kaga Bandoro, and abducting and allegedly executing Muslim leaders in Kouï in [June](#) and [October](#). CAR authorities also subjected religious minorities to torture and inhumane treatment, detaining and torturing at least 39 Muslim civilians in four separate incidents detailed in the Key Findings section. .

Obstructions of Justice

The CAR government has been inconsistent in its response to the abuse and religious targeting committed by its security forces and partners. In May, the Minister of Justice and Human Rights [established](#) a Special Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of human rights abuses, among other infractions, committed by state-backed security personnel in the country between December 2020 and April 2021. However, the UN recently criticized actions the CAR government has taken to [obstruct ongoing human rights investigations](#) in the country.

National security forces have also obstructed judicial institutions from fulfilling their mandates. In November, the SCC issued a warrant for the arrest of Hassan Bouba Ali, a former armed group leader and current government official. However, national security forces [prevented](#) the SCC from accessing Mr. Bouba for his scheduled appearance and released him in contravention of the SCC's warrant.

Houses of Worship

In April, government authorities collaborated with local civil society and the UN to rehabilitate and reopen the [Petevo mosque](#) in Bangui. While this demonstrates progress, Muslims in CAR continue to struggle to access houses of worship, as the civil conflict [destroyed](#) an estimated 417 of the country's 435 mosques.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. government continued to support religious freedom efforts in CAR, including [increasing its financial support](#) for the SCC and [imposing sanctions](#) on a warlord who broke with the 2019 peace accord. The United States also [continued to restrict](#) defense assistance to the CAR government because "control mechanisms for the use of U.S.-provided equipment had not been fully implemented." In 2022, U.S. Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas Greenfield expressed [deep concern](#) over human rights abuses in CAR during a Security Council meeting, specifically calling out CAR security forces and foreign mercenaries for targeting predominantly Muslim communities.