

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

Key Developments

Last year brought several significant accomplishments related to the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The Trump administration made swift appointments to several key positions vital to advancing international religious freedom (IRF). In January 2025, President Donald J. Trump nominated former Senator Marco Rubio to serve as the U.S. secretary of state, who was [confirmed](#) by the Senate also in January. In April, President Trump [nominated](#) former Congressman Mark Walker as U.S. ambassador at large for IRF and Yehuda Kaploun as special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism to serve at the U.S. Department of State. Kaploun's confirmation [hearing](#) was held in November, and he was [confirmed](#) in December. As the Senate did not confirm Walker's nomination by the end of 2025, this nomination expired, requiring the administration to reappoint a new candidate.

The U.S. government also issued notable high-level statements confirming its commitment to IRF. In July, President Trump issued a [statement](#) that noted the administration's work to "expand and strengthen America's efforts to defend religious freedom around the world." In September at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), President Trump [stated](#), "Let us protect religious liberty." Along similar lines, Vice President JD Vance [spoke](#) at the civil society-led IRF Summit in February 2025, where he affirmed that the second Trump administration would continue critical steps to protect religious communities abroad. Secretary Rubio underscored the importance of IRF through press statements, including [expressing](#) concern for persecuted Christians on Easter, [commemorating](#) the National Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust, [calling](#) for the protection of ethnic and religious minorities in Syria, [condemning](#) violence targeting Rohingya in Burma, [condemning](#) the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) detention of leaders of the Zion Church, and [reaffirming](#) a commitment to championing IRF. Religious freedom was a component of certain bilateral discussions, including with [Turkmenistan](#), [Syria](#), and [the Vatican](#).

In October, President Trump announced the [designation](#) of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). In response to religious freedom violations in the country, the State Department [established](#) a new visa restriction policy under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) in December. This policy restricts visas for individuals and their immediate family members who have "directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom" in Nigeria and "any other governments or individuals engaged in violations of religious freedom." However, there were no additional CPC, Special Watch List (SWL), or Entity of Particular Concern (EPC) designations issued during 2025. Then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken did not issue these designations by the conclusion of the Biden administration in January 2025, thereby leaving December 29,

2023, [designations](#) in effect as outlined by IRFA. IRFA provides that the president—who has until the 2025 Nigeria designation delegated this power to the secretary of state—has 90 days after the release of the State Department's annual IRF Report to make each year's CPC, SWL, and EPC designations and another 90 days to notify Congress of the designations and accompanying presidential actions. As the Trump administration failed to release the IRF report and issue comprehensive designations by December 2025, any presidential action taken as a result of these designations terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.

Alongside the administration, Congress took meaningful action to advance IRF abroad. Members of Congress held various hearings on religious freedom conditions, participated in USCIRF hearings and events, and engaged with the administration to address international religious freedom concerns. Congress pursued innovative legislative strategies to advance religious freedom abroad. Additionally, Congress conducted various congressional delegations, including to Nigeria, where religious freedom was a primary focus.

Legal Framework

Key IRFA Provisions

IRFA, as amended by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016](#), seeks to make religious freedom a priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. These include [governmental institutions](#) (USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency requiring regular reauthorization, the ambassador at large and the State Department's [Office of International Religious Freedom](#), and a special adviser on the White House's National Security Council staff); ongoing monitoring and annual reports on religious freedom violations abroad; the imposition of consequences for the worst violators; and a public list of victims of certain violations of

religious freedom. The consequences set forth in IRFA consist of CPC or EPC designations and related policy actions or placement on the State Department's SWL for governmental violators, and the ability to bar entry to the United States of foreign officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations. IRFA outlines additional

policies the U.S. government may adopt in response to official religious freedom violations abroad, including public condemnation in multilateral fora; the reduction or cancelation of foreign assistance funds; the delay or cancelation of cultural exchanges; and the delay or cancelation of working, official, or state visits.

IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs and requires training on religious freedom and religious persecution for State Department foreign service officers and U.S. immigration officials. Further, it includes provisions on U.S. refugee

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and asylum policy. It also specifically cites U.S. participation in multilateral organizations as an avenue for advancing religious freedom abroad. IRFA is centered on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief as recognized in international law and as articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), and other international instruments and regional agreements.

IRFA Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Designations

IRFA defines CPCs as countries where the government engages in or tolerates “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. It defines the State Department’s SWL for countries where the government engages in or tolerates “severe” violations of religious freedom.

Under IRFA, particularly severe violations of religious freedom mean “systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious violations ..., including violations such as—(A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; (B) prolonged detention without charges; (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or (D) other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.” Although the statute does not specifically define severe violations of religious freedom, in making SWL recommendations USCIRF interprets it to mean violations that meet two of the elements of IRFA’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious standard (i.e., that the violations are systematic and ongoing, systematic and egregious, or ongoing and egregious).

To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as defined above, and must also be “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.”

Pursuant to IRFA, USCIRF’s Annual Report sets forth USCIRF’s policy recommendations to the U.S. government, which includes highlighting countries and entities that, in USCIRF’s view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. The report is intended to focus U.S. policymakers’ attention on the worst violators of religious freedom globally. The fact that this report does not specifically cover a country or nonstate group does not mean that it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year. It only means that, based on the information available to USCIRF, the conditions during that year did not in USCIRF’s view meet the high threshold—the perpetration or toleration of particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom—required to recommend the country or nonstate group for CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. In the case of a nonstate group, it also could mean that the group did not meet other statutory requirements, such as exercising significant political power and territorial control.

Targeted Sanctions beyond IRFA

Alongside IRFA, other laws provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act ([CISADA, P.L. 111-195](#)). More broadly, the [permanently reauthorized](#) 2016 [Global Magnitsky Act](#) allows the president, who has [delegated](#) these authorities to the secretaries of the treasury and state, to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for “extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights” against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity

or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. Executive Order ([E.O.](#)) [13818](#), issued in December 2017 to implement and build on the Global Magnitsky Act, authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in “serious human rights abuse,” providing an even more expansive basis for targeted sanctions.

IRFA added a provision to the INA, contained in INA Section 212(a)(2)(G), making foreign officials who perpetrated particularly severe religious freedom violations ineligible for visas to the United States. Other visa ineligibilities found in [Section 212\(a\)](#) may also apply to religious freedom violators in some cases, particularly the bars on foreigners who perpetrated genocide, torture, or extrajudicial killings (INA 212(a)(3)(E)(ii) & (iii)) or whose admission the secretary of state determines would have serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States (INA 212(a)(3)(C)). In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department’s fiscal year (FY) 2024 annual appropriations ([P.L. 118-47](#)), as carried forward by the Continuing Appropriations Act, 2025 ([Div. A, P.L. 119-4](#)), requires the secretary of state to make foreign officials and their immediate family members ineligible for U.S. entry if there is credible evidence that such individuals have been involved in “a gross violation of human rights.” Unlike the visa ineligibility provisions contained in the INA, the names of those subject to visa bans under this provision may be announced publicly.

Key USCIRF Resources & Activities

- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Urges Resumption of Lautenberg-Specter Program](#)
- **Report:** [Barriers to Protection as of 2024: Updated Recommendations on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal](#)
- **Spotlight Podcast:** [The Status and Significance of CPC, SWL, and EPC Designations](#)
- **Report:** [Preventing Mass Atrocities Targeting Religious Communities](#)
- **Press Release:** [Congress Takes Encouraging, Bipartisan Steps on International Religious Freedom](#)
- **Report:** [The Responsibility of Host Countries to Protect Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution - Examples from South and Southeast Asia](#)
- **Spotlight Podcast:** [The IRF Ambassador: A Key Component of U.S. Leadership on Religious Freedom](#)
- **Press Release:** [Naming of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern Is an Important Step to Advance Religious Freedom](#)

Multilateral Engagement

The administration underscored its commitment to religious freedom during participation in multilateral fora. At the 80th session of UNGA in September, the U.S. government delegation announced it would [prioritize](#) a number of fundamental rights, including religious freedom, as referenced in President Trump’s [speech](#) mentioned above. In November, the United States Mission to the United Nations (UN) [hosted](#) an event on religious violence targeting Christians in Nigeria and reiterated its [concerns](#) about increasing activities in West Africa and the Sahel by insurgent groups espousing a violent interpretation of Islam in a briefing at the Security Council. The administration delivered remarks

at the Security Council on religious freedom violations occurring in a number of other contexts, including [Afghanistan](#), [Burma](#), [Syria](#), and [West Africa](#), and [highlighted](#) the repression of Uyghurs in China and Rohingya in Burma. In addition, the U.S. government continued to serve as [secretariat](#) for the [Article 18 Alliance](#).

In February 2025, [E.O. 14199](#) withdrew the United States from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The UNHRC historically served as a key [avenue](#) to promote IRF on the global stage, including through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, the work of the [UN special rapporteur on the freedom of religion and belief](#), and resolutions promoting the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The State Department engaged with regional human rights institutions with a focus on combating antisemitism. For example, the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism (SEAS) briefed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on antisemitism. Alongside the U.S. Mission to the UN, SEAS held a meeting with global Jewish leaders to discuss the rise of antisemitism. SEAS engaged with the Organization of the American States (OAS), including through hosting a high-level dialogue on confronting antisemitism in the Americas.

Sanctions on Individual Violators of Religious Freedom

There were no known visa denials to foreign officials in 2025 for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the INA, the provision added by IRFA. However, in December, the State Department [established](#) a new visa restriction policy to combat religious freedom violations in Nigeria and globally, as referenced above. Also, in March, the State Department [established](#) a new visa restriction policy to promote accountability for the forced return to China of Uyghurs or members of other ethnic or religious groups with protection concerns under INA Section 212(a)(3)(C). This policy allows the State Department to impose visa restrictions on current or former foreign government officials involved in these abuses, including Thai government officials involved in the [forced return](#) of 40 Uyghurs in February.

During 2025, the administration did not utilize the [Global Magnitsky Act](#) and the related [E.O. 13818](#) to advance accountability for serious human rights abuses related to FoRB. However, the U.S. government used non-Global Magnitsky Act tools to hold religious freedom violators accountable. Pursuant to [E.O. 13902](#), the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) individuals and Iranian entities and individuals responsible for facilitating Iran's continued repression of Iranian citizens and evasion of U.S. sanctions. Pursuant to [E.O. 13581](#), the Treasury Department imposed [sanctions](#) on a transnational criminal organization connected to Iran for carrying out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe. The Treasury Department also [imposed](#) sanctions on Sudanese actors pursuant to [E.O. 14098](#) to limit the influence of efforts to enforce a singular interpretation of Shari'a law. In addition, the State Department imposed [visa restrictions](#) on Cuban judicial and prison officials involved in the detention and torture of July 2021 protesters, which included a number of FoRB victims.

In February, President Trump [extended E.O. 14014](#), which allows for the sanctioning of entities that support the Burmese military's ongoing violence against civilians. In July, the Treasury Department [removed](#) several sanctions against entities supplying weapons and

support to Burma's junta. The UN special rapporteur for Myanmar [decried](#) this move as "unconscionable," noting that these entities have supported the junta's violence against civilians. In September, the Treasury Department further [sanctioned](#) three Burmese nationals and a Yangon-based company to disrupt their weapons sales to the armed forces of Burma (also known as the Tatmadaw).

In May, President Trump [announced](#) that the United States would lift sanctions on Syria. The administration [initially](#) implemented this change in U.S.-Syria policy through temporary and incremental waivers of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019. This gave the United States leeway to enact the administration's [vision](#) of opening Syria to reconstruction and growth while still monitoring and adjusting for Syrian interim authorities' progress on religious freedom. In December, the President signed into law the [National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#), which repealed the Caesar Act sanctions and requires presidential certification that Syria has taken certain steps to protect religious freedom.

Key U.S. Administration IRF Positions

Throughout 2025, the State Department advanced IRF in several ways. Among its activities, the Office of the SEAS held bilateral meetings with countries including Poland, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. SEAS continued to [advocate](#) for the endorsement of the [Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism](#) as a vital tool to strengthen government responses to antisemitism.

The State Department [underwent](#) a reorganization that was completed in July 2025. As part of this reorganization, the [Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights \(J\)](#) position was removed and replaced with a new position entitled the [Under Secretary for Foreign Assistance, Humanitarian Affairs, and Religious Freedom \(F\)](#). This new undersecretary role—the highest at the State Department to reference religious freedom in its title—includes a mandate to advocate for religious freedom.

As part of the reorganization, several functional offices that reported to J and contributed to broader IRF efforts were eliminated. Furthermore, the IRF Office and the Office of the SEAS were reconstituted under the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL). This reversed the first Trump administration's elevation of the IRF Office out of DRL. While some have [argued](#) that merging the IRF Office into DRL could diminish IRF advocacy, the administration maintained it would strengthen efforts by placing IRF and countering antisemitism at the center of human rights diplomacy. As part of the reorganization, the regional bureaus and posts are now primarily [responsible](#) for human rights policy and programming.

While the State Department released its [2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#) in August, which included references to IRF and other enabling rights, the State Department had not yet [released](#) its 2024 IRF Report as of the end of 2025.

Programs and Other Initiatives to Advance IRF

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. The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other agencies historically fulfilled this mandate through a robust portfolio of global

programs, including supporting civil society. In recent years, Congress has directed certain [amounts](#) of [funding](#) for the [IRF Office](#) and for IRF foreign assistance programs.

[E.O. 14169](#) [paused](#) all foreign assistance in January 2025. During the pause, the administration conducted a review to determine that programs were efficient and consistent with U.S. foreign policy under the administration. The pause applied to programs advancing religious freedom and benefiting religious communities, including a program that provided emergency assistance to victims of religious persecution. The suspension in funds left hundreds of victims of religious persecution receiving support in immediate need of life-saving assistance in countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Egypt, Nigeria, and Vietnam. This suspension also impacted religious minorities receiving foreign aid. For example, humanitarian programs halted post-genocide recovery efforts for Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, including those that provided psychosocial services and electricity, water, and other essential utilities for internal displacement camps. The pause further impacted funding to civil society organizations that promote [religious freedom](#) programs globally. While the administration lifted the freeze on some organizations' funding, such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in March, the pause constituted a major operational disruption for organizations receiving U.S. government funding.

Soon after the suspension of foreign assistance, the [administration](#) initiated significant [structural](#) changes to [USAID](#), which played a key role in the prioritization of religious freedom through policy and foreign assistance, expanded through [E.O. 13926](#). The agency maintained a robust portfolio of programs advancing IRF, including direct assistance to victims of religious persecution, and democratic governance and human rights work focused on IRF and other enabling rights. In March, Secretary Rubio announced [cuts](#) to 5,200 USAID programs—representing 83 percent of all USAID programs, including 85 percent of human rights and rule of law programs. In July, USAID [ceased](#) to implement foreign assistance and certain functions of USAID were [realigned](#) under the State Department.

USCIRF received information that a significant portion of programs that utilized funds directed by Congress to promote IRF were terminated. This included projects to combat blasphemy laws and other legal restrictions on FoRB, provide for early warning systems to protect religious minorities, promote interfaith dialogue, and document IRF violations, including crimes against humanity and genocide. Emergency assistance for religious freedom activists in Burma and Afghanistan, as well as a flagship USAID program that had supported 4,000 members of religious minority groups facing discrimination and persecution, were also terminated. As an example of how such cancellations could impact religious freedom conditions, one source argued that ending a USAID program that supported early warning systems in Nigeria's Middle Belt could leave communities without support to prevent violence, creating vulnerability for future attacks against Christians.

Programs that provided humanitarian assistance to persecuted religious communities were canceled. For example, witnesses that testified at USCIRF's [hearing](#) on Burma shared their concerns that substantial cuts to humanitarian assistance funding severely and directly impact the lives of Rohingya refugees by removing the critical support they need for survival. Over 80,000 ethnic Karen refugees residing along the Burma-Thailand border, many of them Christians

who fled persecution prior to the 2021 coup, lost significant food aid. In addition, more than 227,500 Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar lost access to education. U.S. funding cuts to multilateral funding contributed to 11.6 million [refugees](#), including many fleeing religious persecution, losing access to humanitarian assistance. These cuts also reduced funding to UN institutions that advanced FoRB, such as the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar, which gathers evidence of mass atrocities to hold perpetrators accountable for crimes against the Rohingya.

Cuts to programs focused on increasing access to information have also limited the amount of information available regarding religious freedom violations. [E.O. 14238](#), issued in March, significantly reduced the activities of the executive agency [U.S. Agency for Global Media](#), the parent company for a number of broadcasters, including [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty \(RFE/RL\)](#), [Radio Free Asia](#), and [Voice of America \(VOA\)](#), which resulted in a major reduction in reporting for these and other outlets. These agencies delivered news independently from foreign government-controlled media outlets, including reporting on religious freedom conditions in repressive countries such as Burma, Cuba, China, Iran, North Korea, Russia, and Vietnam. The president of RFE/RL [testified](#) at USCIRF's hearing on Russia, providing examples on the use of reporting on religious freedom to counter Russian propaganda.

Other congressionally mandated initiatives to advance IRF were also impacted. [E.O. 14217](#) limited the activities of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to its statutory minimum in March. Congress founded USIP in 1984 to promote peace by preventing, mitigating, and resolving violent conflict abroad. USIP worked to understand the role of religion in peacebuilding and maintained a number of programs related to the intersection of religion and conflict, including in Afghanistan, Burma, and Nigeria. [The Wilson Center](#), chartered by Congress in 1968 to provide nonpartisan counsel and insights on global affairs to policymakers, was also [reduced](#) to its statutory minimum in March. The Wilson Center provided analysis on a range of topics relevant to IRF, including [religion](#), [refugees](#), and [human rights](#).

In moving forward with new foreign assistance aligned with administration priorities, there were [no](#) public notices of funding opportunities announced by DRL or the IRF Office in 2025. In March, the State Department confirmed its provision of \$73 million in financial aid, through the World Food Program, to provide critical food and nutrition assistance for more than one million Rohingya refugees. In September, the administration committed an additional \$60 million to [support](#) the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and \$32.5 million to support internally displaced people in conflict-affected areas in Nigeria. In October, the State Department [announced](#) humanitarian aid for Suweida, Syria, to support 60,000 people—mostly religious minorities affected by violence.

Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

Refugee Resettlement

Under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), individuals displaced abroad—who cannot return home due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on one of the five grounds that U.S. and international law provide, which include religion—may be eligible as refugees for resettlement to the United States. The president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad

each year and [provides](#) an annual report to Congress on that ceiling. Under Section [6472\(d\)](#) of IRFA, the president is required to include information in that annual report on the religious persecution of refugee populations eligible for consideration for admission in the United States.

In January, [E.O. 14163](#) suspended the refugee program pending a review. This suspension halted the progress of resettlement for all refugees in the pipeline, including refugees fleeing religious persecution. According to reports, about 130,000 conditionally approved refugees, including religious minorities from Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iran, and countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, remain in limbo along with 15,000 registered Iranian Christians, Jews, and Baha'is. USRAP remains suspended and has not resumed the processing of refugees, except for an [exemption](#) allowing the resettlement of Afrikaners.

In October, the administration issued its [presidential determination](#) that set the refugee ceiling at 7,500 to be primarily “allocated among Afrikaners from South Africa, and other victims of illegal or unjust discrimination in their respective homelands.” This historically low ceiling leaves little room to resettle refugees fleeing the most egregious forms of religious persecution. Lawmakers [expressed](#) concern that the ceiling was set without the legally required consultations with Congress.

Congress reauthorized the Lautenberg-Specter Amendment for the remainder of FY 2025 in March. However, this legislation is not yet permanent and requires reauthorization for the current FY 2026. The amendment is a family reunification program providing a legal path for resettlement for religious minorities from Iran and former Soviet Union countries who are fleeing government persecution.

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

According to U.S. law, any noncitizen who is physically present or who arrives in the United States may apply for asylum, a legal protection for those who can establish that they meet the [definition](#) of refugee in U.S. and international law, as outlined above. IRFA authorized USCIRF to examine 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 documentation unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution. As mandated by Congress, USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in reports it released in [2005](#), [2007](#), [2013](#), [2016](#), and [2025](#) that documented many problems that successive administrations have failed to address. These flaws raise concerns that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution in violation of both U.S. and international law.

In January, the administration [suspended](#) entry at the border and shut off avenues for individuals to apply for asylum, including those fleeing religious persecution. At the same time, DHS expanded the [scope](#) of [Expedited Removal](#) to “the fullest extent authorized by Congress,” now applying to individuals apprehended anywhere in the United States who have been present less than two years. The expansion of Expedited Removal has exposed more individuals to this process, increasing the risk of [refoulement](#). For instance, at least 11 Iranian Christian converts fleeing religious persecution in Iran entered the United States in February and were summarily deported to Panama. Members of this group reportedly requested asylum but did not receive credible fear

interviews, despite the [risks](#) these individuals would face if returned to Iran. In September, the administration deported 54 Iranians back to Iran, including a Christian convert who was unable to seek U.S. asylum.

Additional Protections for Individuals Fleeing Religious Persecution

Under domestic law, DHS has the [discretion](#) to grant parole (commonly referred to as humanitarian parole) to allow noncitizens to temporarily enter or remain in the United States for a specific time period for a specific public benefit or humanitarian need. It has historically been used as a last resort to provide temporary lawful status for vulnerable groups. During 2025, the administration reduced access to humanitarian parole programs for individuals fleeing religious persecution, including through [E.O. 14165](#), issued in January, which directed the termination of “all categorical parole programs” that [conflict](#) with administration policy. That same month, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) [paused](#) processing new applications for all [programs](#). Following these directives, there were reports that some individuals fleeing religious persecution whose parole was revoked received notices to self-deport, including Afghans and Iranians. Also in January, DHS [published](#) guidance to apply Expedited Removal on individuals whose parole status was revoked, exposing individuals that had utilized authorized pathways to summary deportations.

When parole is terminated, the government can proceed with deportations unless an individual secured protection from another legal status, such as [Temporary Protected Status \(TPS\)](#). TPS is a temporary immigration status that protects individuals who cannot safely return to their home country due to ongoing armed conflict or other extraordinary circumstances. During 2025, DHS curtailed TPS for countries with significant religious freedom concerns, including [Afghanistan](#), [Burma](#), [Nicaragua](#), and [Syria](#), and indicated it would end protections for Somalia, eliminating this lifeline for individuals who fear religious persecution upon return.

In June, [Proclamation 10949](#) suspended or limited entry to the United States for nationals from 19 countries, 10 of which USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation, or from countries in which EPCs operate, thereby impacting individuals fleeing religious persecution. These restrictions apply to both immigrants and nonimmigrants, although it includes exceptions for immigrant visas for ethnic and religious minorities facing persecution in Iran, individuals granted asylum by the United States, and refugees already admitted. In December, invoking national security reasons, DHS issued a [policy memorandum](#) that paused immigration applications for individuals from these countries and placed a hold on all asylum applications pending a review. [Proclamation 10998](#), also issued in December, suspended or limited entry for nationals from 20 additional countries, including five that USCIRF recommends for designations under IRFA.

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

Members of Congress engaged in efforts to promote IRF throughout the year, including the 33 members who advocated for prisoners through the [Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s \(TLHRC\) Defending Freedoms Project](#). Out of [26 prisoners](#) without congressional advocates in the project, there are 15 FoRB victims who would benefit from congressional advocacy.

Congress held hearings to evaluate U.S. policy options in response to religious freedom violations. For example, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on the need for a CPC designation for [Nigeria](#), a subsequent hearing on the outcomes of the CPC designation of [Nigeria](#), and additional hearings on the ongoing crises in [Burma](#) and [Sudan](#). The TLHRC held hearings on transnational [repression](#) and the worldwide [persecution](#) of Jews as well as on human rights and religious freedom conditions in [Azerbaijan](#), [Turkey](#), and [Pakistan](#). The Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) held a hearing on China’s policies targeting those who practice a [religion](#). Further, numerous members of Congress participated in USCIRF’s hearings on [China](#), [Central Asia](#), and [Turkey](#), along with the [launch](#) of USCIRF’s 2025 Annual Report.

There were bipartisan initiatives to affirm the centrality of FoRB in U.S. foreign policy during 2025. USCIRF [welcomed](#) the U.S. House of Representatives’ bipartisan resolution [Expressing Concern Regarding Severe Restrictions on Religious Freedom Abroad](#) (H.Res.738), reiterating the prioritization of religious freedom. This resolution spotlighted religious freedom conditions in countries USCIRF recommends for placement on the SWL, broadening congressional efforts to include several key U.S. partners. In February, the Senate introduced a bipartisan resolution [Recognizing Religious Freedom as a Fundamental Right](#) (S.Res.52), underscoring rising global threats to FoRB and reaffirming the central role of promoting IRF in U.S. foreign policy. Also in February, the House introduced the bipartisan [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025](#) (H.R. 1744) that sought to reauthorize USCIRF through FY2028 to ensure that robust religious freedom monitoring and reporting continues.

Members of Congress pursued other innovative approaches to advancing religious freedom abroad. For example, the Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act was introduced in both the Senate ([S. 2747](#)) and House ([H.R. 5808](#)) in September and October, respectively. Reflecting growing concern in Congress over religious freedom conditions in Nigeria, this act mandated the State Department to designate Nigeria as a CPC and required the president to impose targeted sanctions in response to these religious freedom violations. The [Stop Funding Religious Oppressive Regimes Act of 2025](#) (S. 676), if passed, would have directed the president to identify countries that impose the death penalty or life imprisonment for blasphemy or apostasy, or impose these sentences for interfaith marriage, and bar U.S. foreign assistance to those governments. In response to the February 2025 deportation of Iranian Christians to Panama, [the Artemis Act of 2025](#) (H.R. 3504) sought to amend Section 235 of the INA to create an exemption to Expedited Removal for individuals fleeing religious persecution in CPC or SWL countries. Although none of these initiatives ultimately passed, they collectively reflect congressional ingenuity in exploring new approaches and identifying new tools to promote IRF.

There was also significant congressional activity to address China’s religious freedom violations and support impacted religious communities. Notably, the House passed the Uyghur Policy Act of 2025 ([H.R. 2635](#)) in September. In November, the Senate [agreed](#) to a bipartisan resolution condemning the CCP’s persecution of Protestant house church Zion Church and other religious minorities.

Commissioners Meir Soloveichik and Maureen Ferguson and Chair Vicky Hartzler Dissent on IRFA Implementation

USCIRF’s mandate includes monitoring the state of religious freedom abroad and advocating for US policies to be adopted in response to governments violating or tolerating the violation of religious freedom. How US foreign assistance advances the ideals and interests of the United States is an important policy issue, as is the urgency of assuring that the funding is received by those that share these ideals. Commentary—in this chapter and elsewhere in this report, including the introduction—on an administration’s choices regarding the redirecting of funds, especially pertaining to the funding of NGOs, is, as we understand it, beyond the purview of USCIRF and our calling.

We further add our agreement to the view voiced by our former colleague Eric Ueland, in his dissent in USCIRF’s 2024 report, that a proper response to those seeking religious asylum should include a “rigorous review process” along with the US working “to expand the number of countries” that can adopt “religiously based refugee admittance programs.”