

USCIRF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2026

For 2026, based on religious freedom conditions in 2025, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. Department of State:

- [Redesignate](#) as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) the following 13 countries: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following five countries: Afghanistan, India, Libya, Syria, and Vietnam;
- [Maintain](#) on the Special Watch List (SWL) the following two countries: Algeria and Azerbaijan;
- Include on the SWL the following 9 countries: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey, and Uzbekistan;
- [Redesignate](#) as Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) the following six nonstate actors: al-Shabaab; Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad (JAS), formerly known as Boko Haram; the Houthis; Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP); Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), also referred to as ISIS-West Africa; and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM); and
- Designate as an EPC the following nonstate actor: Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

State Department Designations (Last Issued December 29, 2023*)	
CPC Designations	Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, Nigeria**, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan
SWL Countries	Algeria, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam
EPC Designations	Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Houthis, ISIS – Sahel (formerly known as Islamic State in Greater Sahara), the Islamic State in West Africa, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban

* Presidential actions associated with designations remain in effect for a two-year period, as outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

** President Donald J. Trump separately designated Nigeria as a CPC on Oct. 31, 2025.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION:

- Promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill [key roles](#) relevant to U.S. international religious freedom (IRF) policy, including the ambassador at large for IRF, USCIRF Commissioners, special adviser to the president on IRF on the National Security Council staff, special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, and special coordinator on Tibetan issues at the State Department, and provide them with sufficient financial resources and staff to prioritize freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) issues in engagements with foreign governments;
- Provide sufficient financial resources, staff, and other necessary support to all offices in the administration involved in the implementation of IRFA requirements, including at the State Department, National Security Council, and others;
- Prioritize IRF in the planning and implementation of U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance programs, including reviewing policy toward countries that the administration designates as CPCs, to advance meaningful consequences and positive change;
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to religious freedom improvements in USCIRF-recommended CPC or SWL countries;
- Advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners in all relevant bilateral and multilateral engagements;
- Implement the State Department [policy](#) regarding visa restrictions on “individuals who have directed, authorized, significantly supported, participated in, or carried out violations of religious freedom and, where appropriate, their immediate family members,” with a particular emphasis on countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation;
- Expand U.S. engagement on FoRB with the United Nations (UN) and regional entities such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), C5+1, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC);
- Advance the protection of individuals fleeing religious persecution by taking the following steps:
 - Increase the annual U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) admissions ceiling to provide sufficient slots for those at risk, such as Iranian religious minorities registered for the Lautenberg-Specter program;
 - Resume the resettlement of refugees fleeing religious persecution to help alleviate the [ongoing crisis](#) involving millions of such refugees worldwide;
 - Reestablish full asylum access for individuals fleeing religious persecution to mitigate the risk of refoulement as prohibited under international law;

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION: (CONTINUED)

- Reinstatement of other protections, such as Temporary Protected Status and humanitarian parole, to maintain these lifelines for individuals from countries with poor religious freedom conditions who fear religious persecution upon return;
- Lift or provide exceptions to existing restrictions to enter the United States for individuals fleeing religious persecution; and
- Fund programs that promote IRF, including initiatives that provide lifesaving emergency support for victims of religious persecution, as well as efforts to support civil society and news broadcasters—especially in CPC and SWL countries—that independently document or report on religious freedom violations.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS:

- Swiftly confirm key IRF-related [appointments](#) upon their nomination, including the ambassador at large for IRF and special envoy for North Korean human rights issues, and appoint USCIRF Commissioners;
- Advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners, such as sponsoring prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) [Defending Freedoms Project](#), including those documented in USCIRF's [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), and raising their cases during congressional delegations or other engagements with relevant foreign governments;
- Exercise oversight of Expedited Removal and press for reforms to address concerns, which USCIRF has identified since 2005, about the treatment of asylum seekers in that process;
- Support IRF-related matters at the country, regional, and global level through:
 - An increase in funding appropriated for programs that advance IRF;
 - Existing task forces or caucuses such as the U.S. House of Representatives or Senate Bipartisan Task Force for Combating Antisemitism, the House IRF Caucus, or the Ahmadiyya Muslim Caucus;
 - Hearings on religious freedom conditions abroad; and
 - Congressional delegations to countries USCIRF recommends for CPC or SWL designation, or in which EPCs operate, to raise religious freedom concerns with relevant governments and engage directly with civil society organizations, religious communities, and others.
- Introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy, such as:
 - Addressing the humanitarian needs of large populations displaced by religious persecution, including in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps in countries such as Bangladesh, Iraq, Nigeria, and Sudan, to include funding that supports education, healthcare, and other lifesaving initiatives;
 - Reauthorizing on a permanent basis the bipartisan Lautenberg-Specter Amendment to allow individuals legally residing in the United States to sponsor the resettlement of members of persecuted religious minority groups from their countries of residence to the United States;
 - Pass current and future legislation to directly advance IRF or address foreign policy issues with substantial IRF implications, such as:
 - [H.R. 1744](#) – United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025
 - [H.R. 959](#) – Combating International Islamophobia Act
 - [H.R. 3504](#) – Artemis Act of 2025
 - [S. Res. 52](#) – A resolution recognizing religious freedom as a fundamental right, expressing support for IRF as a cornerstone of United States foreign policy, and expressing concern over increased threats to and attacks on religious freedom around the world
 - [S. 676](#) – Stop Funding Religiously Oppressive Regimes Act of 2025
 - [S. 1542/H.R. 2635](#) – Uyghur Policy Act of 2025
 - [S. Res. 525/H.R. 925](#) – A resolution condemning the Government of Iran's state-sponsored persecution of the Baha'i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights
 - Prohibiting any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments of countries that the State Department designates as CPCs;
 - Conditioning U.S. security assistance and economic or budget support to CPCs, SWL countries, or countries in which EPCs operate on improvements in religious freedom conditions;
 - Amending IRFA to permanently reauthorize USCIRF and mandate the State Department to provide specific rationale for not implementing USCIRF recommendations on CPC and SWL designations; and
- Request that the Government Accountability Office conduct an:
 - Assessment of the use of the Global Magnitsky Act and other human rights-related financial and visa authorities to hold accountable severe religious freedom violators;
 - Accounting of U.S. [foreign assistance](#) provided to countries USCIRF recommends for CPC, SWL, or countries in which EPCs operate, including but not limited to Nigeria and Sudan, to determine whether such assistance supports or hinders efforts to advance religious freedom; and
 - Analysis of available tools to strengthen and enhance U.S. government policy and U.S. collaboration with allies to deter and counter transnational targeting of religious communities and religious freedom advocates.

Key USCIRF Recommendations Implemented in 2025

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended, mandates USCIRF to make independent policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. The recommendations are based on USCIRF's research on religious freedom conditions abroad and assessment of U.S. policy. In addition, USCIRF's mandate includes tracking the U.S. government's implementation of USCIRF's recommendations and reviewing, to the extent practicable, the effectiveness of such implemented recommendations in advancing religious freedom abroad.

While notable U.S. government actions pursuant to USCIRF's recommendations are detailed throughout this report, this section highlights key USCIRF recommendations implemented during 2025. The list, which is not exhaustive, is meant to showcase the effectiveness of USCIRF's recommendations.

Significant actions by the administration to advance religious freedom abroad

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. administration "promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill key roles relevant to U.S. IRF policy" and "deepen vital U.S. leadership and/or engagement on religious freedom" in multilateral and international fora.

Throughout the year, the administration indeed implemented these recommendations in part and in a variety of settings, including:

- 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 State Department. The Senate confirmed Special Envoy Kaploun's nomination in December but Walker's nomination expired at the end of the year without confirmation, necessitating a new nomination in 2026 for that role.
- In July, President Trump issued a [statement](#) on Captive Nations Week highlighting the administration's work to "expand and strengthen America's efforts to defend religious freedom around the world." In September, he also [called](#) on representatives gathered at the UN General Assembly to "protect religious liberty."
- Vice President JD Vance spoke at the civil society-led [IRF Summit](#) in February, affirming that the second Trump administration would continue critical steps to protect religious communities abroad. He noted in his remarks that "part of our protecting religious freedom initiatives means recognizing in our foreign policy the difference between regimes that respect religious freedom and those that do not."
- U.S. Secretary of State Marco 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.
- In November, the United States Mission to the UN [hosted](#) an event on religious violence targeting Christians in Nigeria and [reiterated](#) its concerns to the UN Security Council (UNSC) about increasing insurgent activities in West Africa and the Sahel.
- Representatives for the administration delivered remarks at the UNSC on religious freedom violations in several other contexts, including [Afghanistan](#), [Burma](#), [Syria](#), and [West Africa](#), and [highlighted](#) the repression of Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims. Religious freedom was also reportedly a component of some bilateral discussions, including with [Turkmenistan](#), [Syria](#), and [the Vatican](#).
- 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 also engaged with the Organization of the American States (OAS), including through hosting a high-level [dialogue](#) on confronting antisemitism in the Americas.
- The U.S. government continued to serve as [secretariat](#) for the [Article 18 Alliance](#).
- In December, the State Department [announced](#) a policy under Section 212(a)(3)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) to restrict 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."

Congressional action promoting religious freedom

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. Congress "introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy" as well as "highlight international religious freedom issues through legislation, hearings, briefings, congressional delegations, and other actions."

The 119th Congress was particularly active throughout 2025 in terms of its IRF-related efforts, with a broad range of legislative and other activities related to countries, regions, and issues. Members of the Senate and House of Representatives introduced over 50 relevant pieces of legislation, including bills and resolutions referenced above as well as:

- [H.R. 1774](#): United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2025, extending and authorizing annual appropriations for USCIRF through fiscal year 2028; Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced this bill with a bipartisan group of six co-sponsors.
- [H.R. 738: Expressing Concern Regarding Severe Restrictions on Religious Freedom Abroad](#), spotlighting religious freedom conditions in countries USCIRF recommends for placement on the SWL, broadening congressional efforts to include several key U.S. partners.
- [S. 2747/H.R. 5808](#): The Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act, reflecting growing concern in Congress over religious

freedom conditions in Nigeria, including mandating the CPC designation (prior to President Trump’s decision as such in October).

- [S. Res. 463](#): Condemning the CCP’s persecution of religious minority groups, including Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists and the detention of Pastor Mingri “Ezra” Jin and leaders of the Zion Church, and reaffirming the United States’ global commitment to promote religious freedom and tolerance.
- [H.R. 1848](#): Houthi Human Rights Accountability Act, imposing sanctions on the EPC-designated Houthi movement in Yemen for its efforts to impose its “violent, anti-Semitic, and extremist worldview” on all Yemenis.
- [S. Res. 540](#): Recognizing Human Rights Day on December 10, 2025, and commemorating the 77th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including recognizing that “religious minorities, religious freedom advocates, and missionaries are unjustly targeted, detained, and repressed for exercising their freedom to believe or not to believe.”

In addition, Congress engaged in a wide range of activities to advance IRF apart from legislation, including:

- Congress held several hearings on or relevant to IRF issues, including House Foreign Affairs Committee hearings on [Nigeria](#), [Burma](#), and [Sudan](#), in addition to Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on [Hong Kong](#) and [Syria](#).
- In December, the House Committee on Appropriations convened a [joint briefing](#) with the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Nigeria’s religious freedom crisis, in which several members of Congress and USCIRF Chair Vicky Hartzler participated.
- 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](#).
- Members of Congress participated in USCIRF’s hearings on [China](#), [Central Asia](#), and [Turkey](#), along with the [launch](#) of USCIRF’s 2025 Annual Report.
- Rep. Mario Díaz-Balart (R-FL) led a [congressional delegation](#) to Nigeria in December to assess religious freedom conditions and engage with the government of the country following the CPC designation.
- Reps. Brad Sherman (D-CA), French Hill (R-AR), Mike Lawler (R-NY), and Nicole Malliotakis (R-NY) provided statements supporting Coptic Christians in Egypt during a civil society gathering devoted to that community’s religious freedom challenges.
- In November, a bipartisan group of 12 members of the U.S. House of Representatives sent a letter to Secretary Rubio to express support for President Trump’s designation of Nigeria as a CPC the previous month.

USCIRF recommended in the 2025 Annual Report that the U.S. Congress “advocate for the release of FoRB prisoners, including those documented in USCIRF’s Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, in multilateral fora and bilateral meetings with relevant governments.”

Members of the House and Senate engaged in advocacy on behalf of FoRB prisoners around the world throughout the year, pursuant to this recommendation, including:

- Thirty-three members of Congress advocated for religious prisoners through the [TLHRC Defending Freedoms Project](#).
- Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), and Rep. John Moolenaar (R-MI) sent a [letter](#) on behalf of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) to President Trump in which they requested, among other items, that he prioritize the cases of Gulshan Abbas, Pastor Ezra Jin, and Ekpar Asat—all three of whom USCIRF includes in its [FoRB Victims List](#)—including personally raising their plight with General Secretary Xi Jinping.
- Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) introduced [S. Res. 472](#) in support of the designation of October 30 as the International Day of Political Prisoners, expressing “unwavering solidarity with all those who are imprisoned around the world for peacefully expressing their political or religious beliefs.”
- Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) also introduced [S. Res. 350](#) in response to Eritrea’s “widespread decades-long human rights abuses”; it calls on that government to “release all unjustly and arbitrarily detained political prisoners” and points out that “religious persecution remains widespread in Eritrea, with members of faiths not recognized by the government routinely imprisoned and subjected to torture and other cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment for practicing their beliefs.”

USCIRF recommendations on specific countries

Individual country chapters throughout this report provide details on specific actions the U.S. administration and Congress took throughout the year that partially or fully met USCIRF’s recommendations related to those respective countries. However, a representative sample of such actions includes:

- **Burma:** In September, the U.S. Department of the Treasury further [sanctioned](#) three Burmese nationals and a Yangon-based company to disrupt their weapons sales to the Tatmadaw. In addition, the State Department [confirmed](#) in March its provision of \$73 million in fiscal year 2025 financial aid for Rohingya refugees through the World Food Program, and in September, the administration stated it had [secured](#) an additional \$60 million in commitments from partner countries to [support](#) Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.
- **China:** The CECC held a [hearing](#) in November on the CCP’s policies targeting those who practice a religion.
- **Cuba:** 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.
- **Iran:** The Treasury Department [sanctioned](#) individuals and Iranian entities and individuals responsible for facilitating Iran’s evasion of U.S. sanctions and continued repression of Iranians as well as separate [sanctions](#) on a transnational criminal organization connected to Iran for carrying out attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets in Europe.
- **Nigeria:** President Trump [designated](#) Nigeria as a CPC in late October, which USCIRF has recommended since 2009, including in its [2025 Annual Report](#). In September, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) introduced [S. 2747](#), the Nigeria Religious Freedom Accountability Act of 2025, which called for that very designation; in March,

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced [H.R. 220](#) with 23 co-sponsors, calling for the same action.

- **Syria:** In October, the State Department [announced](#) humanitarian aid for Suweida, Syria, to support 60,000 people—mostly religious minorities affected by violence. In addition, President Trump signed into law Public Law 119-60 in December ([S.1071](#) National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026), which included a repeal of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 while requiring the president to certify that Syrian transitional authorities were “upholding religious and ethnic minority rights in Syria, including with respect to freedom of worship and belief, and allowing for fair and equitable representation in the government, including ministries and parliament.”