

INTRODUCTION

Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in countries across the globe in 2017. This ongoing downward trend often intersected with authoritarian practices characterized by hostility toward dissent, pluralism, independent media, and active civil society, or took place under the guise of protecting national security or countering terrorism.

In the 28 nations addressed in this report, governments and nonstate actors targeted religious minorities, dissenting members of majority communities, and nonreligious persons. The most severe abuses included genocide and other mass atrocities, killings, enslavement, rape, imprisonment, forced displacement, forced conversions, intimidation, harassment, property destruction, the marginalization of women, and bans on children participating in religious activities or education.

For example, in 2017 in Burma's Rakhine State, the military and security forces, along with nonstate actors, committed what the United States and United Nations labeled "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims. In China, the government created police states in Xinjiang and Tibet to persecute Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists and continued its brutal treatment of Falun Gong practitioners. In Cuba, government officials detained religious leaders and activists who advocated for religious freedom. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued its genocidal campaign against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'a Muslims despite losing territory, and the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias in Syria increased sectarian attacks against Sunni Muslims. In Nigeria, the government failed to prevent or stop increasing violence along religious lines or hold perpetrators to account. In Pakistan, the country's strict blasphemy laws and increased extremist activity further threatened already marginalized minority communities, including Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Shi'a Muslims. In Russia, the government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and prose-

cuted for extremism peaceful Muslims and "nontraditional" groups, including Scientologists. In Turkey, the continued unjust detention of American Pastor Andrew Brunson had a chilling effect on Christians.

In addition to endangering individuals and communities, severe violations of religious freedom threaten the stability and security of nations and regions, underscoring the importance of U.S. efforts to address and prevent abuses of this fundamental human right. As this report details, U.S. law provides a range of tools to pressure egregious religious freedom violators—including in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act—which the U.S. government should utilize fully. In addition, both the Trump Administration and Congress should amplify their international religious freedom efforts by: working with international partners, humanizing the issue by focusing on prisoners of conscience and victims of blasphemy laws, and stressing the importance of empowering women to fully exercise their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

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and human flourishing. Its full protection requires the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; as a result, its expansion also bolsters these other fundamental rights.

This report is based on a year's work by Commissioners and staff

of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad, assess violations and progress, analyze U.S. policy, and develop independent policy recommendations. The results of USCIRF's work are provided through its findings and recommendations in public statements and reports.

In 2017 and early 2018, Commissioners and staff visited 12 countries to assess conditions: Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Central African Republic, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Ukraine (regarding Russian-occupied areas), Burma, Bangladesh, Bahrain, and Iraq. In addition to its country monitoring, USCIRF prioritized several thematic issues during 2017.

The first theme was advocacy for specific prisoners through [USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#), to shine a light on their cases and press for their release. A focus on these individuals makes concrete and understandable the human impact of unjust laws and policies and underscores the need for reform. During the year, several religious prisoners of conscience highlighted by USCIRF were released from prison.

The second theme was the issue of blasphemy laws, to highlight both their [incompatibility with international human rights principles](#) and some of the [individuals](#) affected by their enforcement. These laws exist in at least 69 countries worldwide and should be repealed.

The third theme was [women and religious freedom](#), to explore the synergies between freedom of religion or belief and women's equality and dispel the common misperception that there is a clash between

these two universal human rights. In fact, women's rights to religious freedom and to equality are indivisible and interrelated, and freedom of religion or belief can play an important role in responding to harmful practices imposed on women in the name of tradition, culture, or religion.

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mark passage of IRFA. Severe violations still occur but are less likely to go unnoticed. The U.S. government, once nearly alone in this effort, has an increasing number of partners with which to work on freedom of religion abroad, including

international organization entities, foreign government bodies, and a global parliamentary network. The media and civil society in the United States and abroad are more focused on international religious freedom issues than ever before. And the growing recognition of freedom of religion or belief as a tool to empower women provides an opportunity to expand the coalition of those advocating for religious freedom for all, to include individuals and organizations interested in promoting women's rights.