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KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, Algeria escalated its ongoing repression of religious minorities. The government systematically cracked down on the Evangelical Protestant community in particular through a string of church closures and raids, including two of the largest Protestant churches in the country. The current crackdown mirrors the scale of past waves of church closures in 2008 and 2011, and has been ongoing since November 2017 and worsened in 2019. Officials have made arbitrary demands that churches cease all religious activities, accusing them of violating safety regulations, operating illegally, or evangelizing, or giving them other justifications for sealing off their places of worship.

The Algerian government forcibly closed three of the country's largest Protestant churches in October 2019. The Association of Protestant Churches of Algeria (L'Eglise Protestant d'Algerie, or EPA) has not been permitted to register officially since the [Law on Associations](#) came into effect in 2012 and required churches to reapply for official authorization. The EPA currently represents 45 churches in Algeria, many of which have been targeted for closure over the past two years—in particular in the Tizi Ouzou and Béjaia provinces. In 2019, USCIRF met with EPA leadership, who reported that 12 of their member churches remained closed by authorities at the end of the reporting period.

The government of Algeria systematically restricts non-Muslims' ability to register, operate houses of worship, proselytize, and practice their faith in other ways. Passed in 2006, Algeria's

Ordinance 06-03 places unique limitations on non-Muslims' freedom of religion or belief. It requires non-Muslim religious groups to register formally with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which reportedly meets rarely and has not issued permits for any churches. Ordinance 06-03 also limits proselytization by prohibiting anyone from "shaking the faith of a Muslim." Executive Decrees 07-135 and 07-158 further elaborated on the responsibilities of the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and limitations on religious activities of non-Muslims. These laws are actively used to arrest and charge individuals for proselytism, or for transporting or possessing religious objects such as Bibles.

The Algerian government further discriminates against minority communities that do not conform to mainstream Sunni Islam, such as Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslims, often asserting that they are not Muslim. In addition to placing specific restrictions on these communities, the government also exerts control over the Sunni Muslim majority. It directly hires and trains imams and places speech restrictions on religious leaders. Under the Penal Code, authorities may fine or imprison anyone who preaches in a mosque or other public place without being appointed or authorized, or anyone who preaches "against the noble mission of the mosque" to "undermine social cohesion" or who advocates for such preaching. In 2019, the government further closed civic space by arresting and intimidating human rights defenders, restricting free assembly, and constraining journalists and the media.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Algeria on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Encourage U.S. Embassy officials to meet with the Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups to clarify and assess its process for reviewing and approving registration and permits for houses of worship; and
- Condition future cultural exchange programs between the United States and Algeria on the improvement of religious freedom conditions and related human rights.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Special Report:** [Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Hate Speech Laws in Africa](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Alarmed over Systematic Church Closures in Algeria](#)

Background

Algeria is a presidential republic and its state religion is Islam; the government often penalizes those who do not conform to the state-endorsed interpretation of Islam. The population is estimated to be 99 percent Sunni Muslim, with the remaining 1 percent of the population comprising Jews, Ahmadi Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Catholics, Methodists, Anglicans, Coptic Christians, and other communities. The Christian community of Algeria includes Roman Catholics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Methodists, members of the EPA, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, Anglicans, and an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Egyptian Coptic Christians. Algeria's Jewish community mostly fled following popular riots and government persecution after the country gained independence in 1962, and the government has made little progress on its [2014 commitment](#) to reopen synagogues it seized between [1967 and 1968](#), many of which were converted to mosques or churches. Baha'i activities in Algeria have been [banned by law](#) since 1969.

Following sustained popular protests that began in February 2019, the president of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, resigned on April 2. Bouteflika had been president since 1999, when he ran as an independent candidate supported by Algeria's military. He was replaced on April 9, 2019, by Interim President Abdelkader Bensalah, the leader of Algeria's upper house of parliament. In December 2019, Algerians elected Abdelmadjid Tebboune president. Tebboune was a member of several of then President Bouteflika's former cabinets and faces ongoing pressure from protestors to rout corruption and manage the strong influence of Algeria's military.

Algeria limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor Islam specifically and restrict religious activities. Article 144 Section 2 of the Criminal Code and article 77 of the Information Code of 1990 prohibit blasphemy against Islam and other "heavenly religions." The punishment for blasphemy in Algeria [includes imprisonment](#) for up to five years and a [fine](#) of up to 100,000 Algerian dinars (\$829). Article 26 of the Criminal Code censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals, national values, [or] human rights, or which defends racism, fanaticism, or treason."

Closure of Protestant Churches

On October 15, the government forcibly closed three EPA churches in Tizi Ouzou Province, including the two with the country's largest congregations: the Church of the Full Gospel of Tizi Ouzou, headed by Pastor Salah Chalah, who is also the head of the EPA; and the Source of Life Church in Makouda, led by Pastor Nourredine Benzid. Police violently beat and removed Pastor Salah and other congregants during their afternoon worship service before sealing off the church building. Other churches in Tizi Ouzou, Tigzirt, Boghni, Ighzer Amokrane, Akbou, and Boudjima have faced similar notices and closures. Congregants have tried to protest through sit-ins or appeals to authorities to stop the closures, and some have reportedly been arrested or detained for protesting.

Blasphemy Charges and Treatment of Muslim Minorities

The government particularly restricts the Ahmadi community in Algeria—estimated to have around 2,000 followers—through Ordinance 06-03 and blasphemy provisions. In 2019, at least three Ahmadis appealed charges from 2017 for crimes such as insult to Islam, illegal association, or illegal fundraising. In November, a [European Parliament resolution](#) called for "an end to violations of the freedom of worship of Christians, Ahmadis, and other religious minorities" in the country. More than 315 Ahmadis have [stood trial](#) in Algeria between June 2016 and March 2018, often on charges of insulting Islam or collecting donations without a license. Ahmadis have reported hundreds of arrests and prosecutions over the past three years.

Key U.S. Policy

The U.S. maintains close relations with Algeria focused on security and counterterrorism, economic ties, and cultural and educational programs. In January 2019, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel [convened](#) the fourth session of the U.S.-Algeria Strategic Dialogue to discuss these issues. Algeria is an important U.S. partner for regional stability in North Africa and the Sahel. U.S. foreign aid to Algeria is [focused on](#) supporting economic growth, counterterrorism, and educational exchange. The U.S. government also supported humanitarian efforts in Algeria in 2019, including \$2 million through the [Food for Peace](#) program for Sahrawi refugees in Algeria. During the year, multiple U.S. officials raised religious freedom concerns with the government of Algeria, including the situation of church closures. In October 2019, Representative Steven Lynch (D-MA) led a [congressional delegation](#) to the country to discuss economic issues and counterterrorism cooperation between Algeria and the United States.