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KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in China deteriorated. The government [intensified](#) the [implementation](#) of its multifaceted “sinicization of religion” policy, demanding that [all](#) major religious groups [obey](#) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its ideology and policies. Sinicization requires groups to [follow](#) the CCP’s Marxist interpretation of religion, including by [altering](#) religious scriptures and doctrines to [conform](#) to that interpretation. Authorities [demolished](#) and forcibly [modified](#) Christian [churches](#) and Muslim [mosques](#) because of architectural features they deemed “foreign.” In the ethnoreligious minority regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, sinicization entailed [forced assimilation](#) of local populations that [threatened](#) their religious and cultural identities. In September, the government implemented its new [Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues](#), further [restricting](#) religious freedom.

During the year, top CCP officials Xi Jinping and Wang Huning [vowed](#) to [strengthen](#) repressive policies and continue sinicizing Islam in Xinjiang. Authorities continued to [detain](#) and [imprison](#) Uyghurs. According to reports, some became [critically ill](#) in custody while others [died](#) in prison or shortly after [release](#). The government continued to subject Uyghurs to [forced labor](#), including in [prisons](#). Authorities heavily [surveilled](#) and [prevented](#) Uyghurs from fasting during Ramadan and [rebranded](#) Xinjiang as a tourist destination. The government also [increased](#) its repression of [Hui Muslims](#) across several provinces, subjecting them to similar mistreatments experienced by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.

The government intensified its suppression and [sinicization](#) of Tibetan Buddhism. Authorities [increased](#) surveillance and [security measures](#) on Tibetan Buddhists, [restricting](#) their peaceful religious activities, [arresting](#) and [imprisoning](#) them for engaging in such activities and possessing the Dalai Lama’s portraits or teachings, and [placing](#) them in “political re-education” camps to prevent self-immolation. Some Tibetan Buddhist monks [died](#) in prison. The

government [separated](#) one million Tibetan children from parents, [putting](#) them in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them. Some local authorities [banned](#) parents from teaching religion to Tibetan children. The government [controlled](#) the ordination of Tibetan monks and [reiterated](#) its intent to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation and appoint his successor.

Despite the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, in April the government [installed](#) a bishop without Vatican approval. Authorities continued to [forcibly disappear](#) and [convict](#) underground Catholic [priests](#)—including Bishop Augustine Cui Tai and Joseph Yang Xiaoming—who refused to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

Persecution of Protestant house church Christians intensified. The government continued its nationwide crackdown on house churches, [detaining](#), [arresting](#), and [sentencing](#) independent Protestants on security and criminal charges. Authorities [tortured](#) Christians held in secret detention centers and [prisons](#). Authorities in Henan Province required Protestants to [register](#) on a government “smart-religion” app to attend worship services. Authorities also continued to persecute [ethnic minority](#) Protestants, such as [Miao](#), [Lisu](#), and [Nu](#) Christians.

The government continued its persecution of Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God (CAG), often using “anti-cult” provisions under [Article 300](#) of China’s Criminal Law. In 2023, Falun Gong sources documented [6,514](#) cases of harassment and arrest, [1,190](#) prison sentences, and [209](#) deaths because of persecution. Across China, authorities [arrested](#) and tortured thousands of CAG members, some of whom reportedly [died](#) due to abuses.

The government engages in sophisticated and comprehensive campaigns of [transnational repression](#), using a wide array of physical, digital, and psychological tactics to attempt to silence those it views as threats, such as Uyghurs.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate China as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Continue imposing sanctions, in coordination with partners, to target Chinese officials and entities responsible for severe religious freedom violations, especially within the CCP’s United Front Work Department and the public security and state security apparatus;
- Work with like-minded partners to address China’s technology-enabled

religious freedom and other human rights violations by strengthening the effectiveness of existing export control regimes—including by establishing a formal, binding, multilateral export control regime—countering China’s economic coercion, reducing economic and trade dependence on China, and diversifying supply chains;

- Expand the network of countries that abide by U.S.-led technology governance regimes that respect and protect religious freedom and other related human rights, including rules governing the development and use of AI systems

and other emerging critical technologies; and

- Work in close coordination with international partners to exchange intelligence and to continue prosecuting those engaging in transnational repression against religious minorities on behalf of the Chinese government.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Ban foreign lobbying by agents representing the Chinese government and its state-affiliated commercial entities that undermine religious freedom and related human rights.

Background

China is officially an [atheist state](#). China's religious regulations and policies explicitly [require](#) state-controlled religious organizations to be loyal to the CCP and to serve its political objectives and interests. Of China's [estimated](#) 1.4 billion people, approximately 18 percent are Buddhist, including Tibetan Buddhists; five percent are Christian; and two percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religion practices.

International Accountability in the United Nations

In March 2023, the United Nations (UN) Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights [expressed](#) concern over the Chinese government's use of forced labor and restriction and criminalization of religious practices in Xinjiang. The committee also noted China's sinicization and forced assimilation policy imposed on Tibetan children and its destruction of religious sites in Xinjiang and Tibet. In April, six UN special rapporteurs [expressed](#) concern that China's "labor transfer" and "vocational training" programs in Tibet could lead to forced labor and that Tibetans placed in such programs are "discouraged from expressing their religious identity," violating international law. They urged China to dismantle its "discriminatory ideas and practices."

In September, three UN special rapporteurs [raised](#) grave concerns over China's forced assimilation of Uyghur children in state-run boarding schools, leading to "a loss of connection with their families and communities" and undermining "their ties to their cultural, religious and linguistic identities." Also in September, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk called on China to take "strong remedial action" in Xinjiang, per his office's recommendations. Following China's [election](#) to the UN Human Rights Council (2024–2026) in October, 51 countries [delivered](#) a joint statement at the UN Third Committee, urging China to end its human rights and religious freedom violations in Xinjiang.

Religious Freedom in Hong Kong

According to a Hong Kong Watch [report](#), religious freedom in Hong Kong is slowly being [undermined](#). Chinese and Hong Kong authorities continued to implement the draconian National Security Law, which severely restricts related human rights such as the freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and press. This increased political pressure has led to self-censorship among Hong Kong's religious leaders and [closures](#) of some religious groups. In 2023, Catholic religious freedom advocate and democracy activist [Jimmy Lai](#) remained imprisoned in solitary confinement.

Transnational Repression and Malign Influence

The Chinese government engages in transnational repression against diaspora religious communities with ties to China, including in the United States. During 2023, the U.S. government prosecuted individuals who engaged in these illegal activities on behalf of the Chinese government. In April, the U.S. Department of Justice arrested and

[charged](#) Lu Jianwang and Chen Jinping in connection with operating an illegal Chinese overseas police station in New York City. Lu has a history of engaging in transnational repression on behalf of the Chinese government, targeting religious groups and dissidents on U.S. soil. In May, the Justice Department [charged](#) John Chen and Lin Feng for furthering the Chinese government's transnational repression against Falun Gong practitioners in the United States. The Chinese government's malign political influence campaigns, particularly its [lobbying efforts](#) in the U.S. Congress, represent a particularly insidious form of political influence, aimed at shaping federal policymaking to further the Chinese government's interests and goals.

Key U.S. Policy

In August, the U.S. Department of State [imposed](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials involved in the forced assimilation of more than one million Tibetan children in state-run boarding schools. In September, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [restricted](#) the imports of three Xinjiang companies, pursuant to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (P.L. 117-78). Also in August, the administration of President Joseph R. Biden [signed](#) an executive order prohibiting certain U.S. investment in China and other countries of concern in the sensitive technology sectors of semiconductors and microelectronics, quantum information technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI). In October, the Biden administration [updated and strengthened](#) existing export controls rules to more effectively [ban](#) exports of high-end chips used in AI for human rights violations and military applications.

In November, President Biden met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in California and [raised](#) concerns regarding China's human rights abuses, including in Xinjiang—which the administration affirmed as genocide and crimes against humanity—Tibet, and Hong Kong. In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Chinese officials Gao Qi and Hu Lianhe for their connection to ongoing serious human rights abuses in Xinjiang, pursuant to the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (P.L. 116-145). On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) China as a CPC under IRFA and reimposed existing restrictions on exports of crime control or detection instruments or equipment to China. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government obligated approximately \$12 million in [assistance](#) for programs in China.

In February, Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) introduced the Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2023 ([H.R.1154](#)), which passed the U.S. House of Representatives in March. In April, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Representative Young Kim (R-CA) introduced the Uyghur Policy Act of 2023 ([S.1252/H.R.2766](#)) to support the human rights—including freedom of religion or belief—of Uyghurs and other minority groups in Xinjiang. In July, Representative Jennifer Wexton (D-VA) introduced the Uyghur Forced Labor Disclosure Act ([H.R.4840](#)), requiring publicly traded companies to review and disclose all information about links between their products and Uyghur forced labor in Xinjiang. In October, Representative Mark Alford (R-MO) introduced the Combatting the Persecution of Religious Groups in China Act ([H.R.6069](#)).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Policy Update:** [Countering China's Techno-Authoritarianism, Transnational Repression, and Malign Political Influence](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Congress Must Act to Stop the China Lobby](#)
- **Hearing:** [Transnational Repression of Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [China](#)

**Additional View on China by
Chair Abraham Cooper, Vice Chair Frederick A.
Davie, and Commissioners David Curry, Susie
Gelman, Mohamed Magid, Stephen Schneck, Eric
Ueland, and Frank Wolf**

Religious communities are suffering under Chinese Communist oppression. We have seen Chinese officials target anyone advancing religious freedom and human rights for persecuted religious and ethnic groups, in particular Uyghurs. USCIRF has experienced this first-hand, as Chinese authorities sanctioned seven USCIRF Commissioners in 2021, including current Commissioner Nury A. Turkel. It is part of an alarming pattern of Chinese transnational repression against American citizens serving the U.S. Government that requires urgent attention and action. Not only have Chinese officials attempted to intimidate individuals directly, but Chinese security officials also regularly harassed and intimidated family members as a form of retaliation.

The government of a world power does not have the right to threaten anyone advocating for religious freedom and human rights. There must be consequences for the trampling of anyone's fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief.

As a friend and admirer of the people of China, we promise to continue to lend our voices, on behalf of all suffering religious communities, and to continue to raise, on a humanitarian basis, Mr. Turkel's mother's case, at every opportunity.

The Chinese government should allow this ailing, elderly woman to travel to the United States to see her children and grandchildren. It is our hope that such gestures will encourage the Chinese government to allow all of its population to be able to freely practice their religion in the future.

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It is imperative to ban lobbying for the Chinese government, its state-affiliated commercial entities, and their interests while the government continues its egregious acts of religious persecution. These harsh actions impact every faith group in China with leaders of the Catholic Church and Protestant house churches imprisoned and even "disappeared."

Cultural genocide devastates Tibet where Buddhist monks die in prison. Physical genocide ravages Uyghur Muslims, with millions in detention camps and children taken from their parents. Organs are harvested from Falun Gong and Uyghurs, some while still alive. Hong Kong represses Christians, including 92-year-old Cardinal Zen.

China's influence spreads worldwide. China supports Iran, which provided training and weapons for the attacks on Israel by Hamas and they supply arms to Hezbollah and the Houthis.

China aids Russia in its war on Ukraine and supports North Korea, one of the world's worst religious persecutors. China supports both Nicaragua and Cuba where Christians are being aggressively persecuted.

Concerns are rising over China threatening to attack Taiwan, which many experts believe may lead to direct U.S. involvement and the loss of American military lives.

Amidst all of this, the words of 18th-century British parliamentarian William Wilberforce about the evils of the slave trade come to mind: "You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you do not know."

Congress cannot look the other way. For the good of our country and religious freedom worldwide, Congress must ban lobbying for the Chinese government and its interests.