

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

USCIRF—RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in the Central African Republic (CAR) remained poor. Armed group violence, which resumed in early 2020 after a brief respite, led to the politicization of religious identity in several localities and resulted in violence based on religious or ethnoreligious affiliation. Previous years' trends of state-backed fighters targeting Muslim civilians with violence, torture, and extrajudicial detention continued. In at least one instance, fighters defending Muslim communities targeted Christian civilians in retaliation for state-backed abuses against Muslims.

The CAR government continued to collaborate with nonstate armed actors, including the [Wagner Group](#)—a military contractor with ties to the Russian government—and local vigilante fighters, despite trends of these actors targeting religious minorities and committing human rights abuses. Furthermore, the CAR government [made efforts](#) to shield these partners from accountability for abuses, inhibiting multilateral efforts to investigate allegations of religious targeting and human rights violations.

From September 2021 to February 2022, national defense forces and other security personnel recruited approximately 600 fighters from local vigilante groups in Basse-Kotto and Ouaka Prefectures to fight against rebel groups. Elements from the former Christian and animist-affiliated anti-balaka armed groups [committed abuses](#), mainly against Muslim communities. In [May](#), national defense forces arrested and tortured three Fulani Muslim

youths in Bokolobo, Ouaka Prefecture, killing one of them. The *Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique* (Union for Peace in Central African Republic), a local rebel group in the area, [vowed retaliation](#) and subsequently [attacked](#) a national defense forces checkpoint in Bokolobo, Ouaka Prefecture, killing two soldiers, six anti-balaka combatants, and five civilians from the Christian community. On the following day in the same area, presumed national defense forces and anti-balaka combatants carried out a reprisal attack on a Muslim community, killing nine civilians.

Muslim Central Africans also continue to face discrimination and displacement. Government authorities charge Muslims higher fees and fines than non-Muslims for the same services or penalties. Analysts familiar with the situation on the ground assess that Muslims are disproportionately represented among CAR's displaced population and have struggled to return safely to their areas of origin due to continued intimidation and lack of support.

The Special Criminal Court (SCC) tried its [first cases](#) against armed group leaders responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and severe violence and made several other prominent arrests. However, executive authorities continued trends of [undermining justice mechanisms](#) and constitutional power in 2022. President Faustin-Archange Touadera [forcibly removed](#) the Constitutional Court's presiding judge, who had spoken out against the illegality of Touadera's efforts to change the constitution to allow himself to run for a third presidential term.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain CAR on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Provide financial, administrative, and diplomatic support to the SCC and other investigations into ethnoreligious targeting and other human rights abuses by state actors or state-backed foreign fighters in CAR, and urge the CAR government to cease all obstructions to such investigations;
- Impose targeted sanctions on CAR government agencies and officials and other relevant foreign actors responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States
- Continue to allocate funding for humanitarian assistance, including for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and returnees as well as funding programs to rebuild mosques destroyed during the civil conflict.
- under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Factsheet: [Religious Freedom Concerns in Central Africa](#)
- Podcast: [Religious Freedom Backslides in Central African Republic](#)

Background

CAR's constitution provides for freedom of religion or belief and equal protection under the law, regardless of religion. [Approximately](#) 89 percent of CAR's population identify as Christian, nine percent identify as Muslim, one percent practice folk religions, and one percent are religiously unaffiliated.

In 2012, predominantly Muslim militias in CAR's north mobilized and marched on the capital in response to longstanding grievances with the government's marginalization of and discrimination against Muslim minorities. In response, militias from predominantly Christian and folk religion-practicing communities mobilized for self-protection and began retaliating against Muslim civilian communities. This triggered more than half a decade of political and ethnoreligious violence, including attacks on individuals based on their religious identity and deliberate attacks on houses of worship and religious enclaves in cities across CAR. Muslim communities bore the brunt of the conflict, with violence displacing an estimated 80 percent of CAR's Muslim population in the first two years.

In 2019 and 2020, instances of religious violence decreased following a political agreement and increased CAR government cooperation with the Wagner Group. However, following contested elections at the end of 2020 and the remobilization of a united rebel militia, state-sponsored abuses against Muslims have been on the rise.

Politicization of Religion by Armed Actors

In several regions of CAR, ethnicity and religion are so strongly linked that violence based on ethnoreligious identity poses a risk to religious freedom. Since the resumption of fighting in December 2020, the United Nations (UN) secretary general has found that targeted arrests of alleged rebel collaborators "[disproportionately affected religious and ethnic minorities](#)." A joint human rights investigation reported a notable "increase in targeted attacks against the civilian population, [especially Muslims](#)" and found that CAR authorities used a state of emergency to commit abuses that "specifically targeted certain communities (Muslims and Peuhl)."

The CAR government has also tolerated religious freedom violations by both foreign and domestic proxy fighters it enlists to help achieve military objectives. In Ouaka prefecture, the CAR government recruited fighters from former Christian- and animist-affiliated anti-balaka militias that reportedly [targeted Muslim communities](#) on the basis of religion in their campaign to eliminate rebel militias. These vigilante fighters also carried out a [reprisal attack](#) on a Muslim community in Bokolobo after rebel fighters in the area attacked their checkpoint in May.

Relying on foreign and proxy fighters complicates the CAR government's involvement in the violations they commit, but it does not absolve the government of complicity or responsibility. CAR authorities have acted to [protect](#) both Wagner and anti-balaka elements operating on the government's behalf from accountability for religious violence and human rights abuses.

Justice Progress and Setbacks

Strong justice mechanisms are crucial to achieving justice for victims of religious violence in CAR and deterring future violations. In particular, the SCC, a hybrid court established to investigate and prosecute serious international crimes committed since 2003, began hearing cases in 2022. Its [first case](#) resulted in the conviction of three members of rebel militia 3R for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and severe violence against civilians. The SCC also arrested two former Central African Armed Forces members and one ex-Séléka militia general in 2022 on charges of crimes against humanity.

Yet, SCC trials and other justice efforts have been under threat from other parts of the CAR government. Last year, national security forces [prevented](#) the SCC from accessing former armed group leader Hassan Boubba Ali for his scheduled appearance and released him in contravention of the SCC's warrant. In 2022, the CAR government [obstructed](#) UN efforts to investigate religious targeting and other human rights abuses.

President Touadera also sought in 2022 to undermine other government institutions and the constitution. In May, Touadera proposed reforms to eliminate term limits, and in August he [established a commission](#) to revise the constitution. When the independent [Constitutional Court](#) declared those efforts unconstitutional and annulled the commission, Touadera requested the Constitutional Court's head jurist, Daniele Darlan, to retire, which [she refused](#) to do. Touadera then forcibly dismissed Darlan by decree, which many considered unconstitutional, and [appointed](#) Jean Pierre Waboé as the new head of the Constitutional Court.

Given that security forces under executive control in CAR have shown bias against religious minorities, the independence of judicial institutions is critical to ensuring accountability for abuses by government actors. Recent government efforts undermine the constitution and erode the independence of the judiciary, threatening mechanisms designed to provide justice for human rights abuses and religious freedom violations.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2022, the United States [pledged](#) \$48 million in emergency humanitarian assistance to CAR in addition to the \$140 million already allocated. The U.S. government remains a [main source](#) of financial support to the SCC.

In October, the spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in Bangui, CAR, [publicly expressed](#) concern regarding political developments in the country after Touadera's administration removed the president of the Constitutional Court. A delegation from CAR attended the Joseph R. Biden administration's [U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit](#) in December.

On November 30, recognizing escalating state abuses against Muslim communities in CAR, the U.S. Department of State [placed](#) CAR on its Special Watchlist for the first time for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom. The U.S. government also designated the [Wagner Group](#), a military contractor closely linked with the Russian government, as an Entity of Particular Concern for engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations in CAR in 2021, including [attacks on mosques](#) and [disappearing Muslim leaders](#).