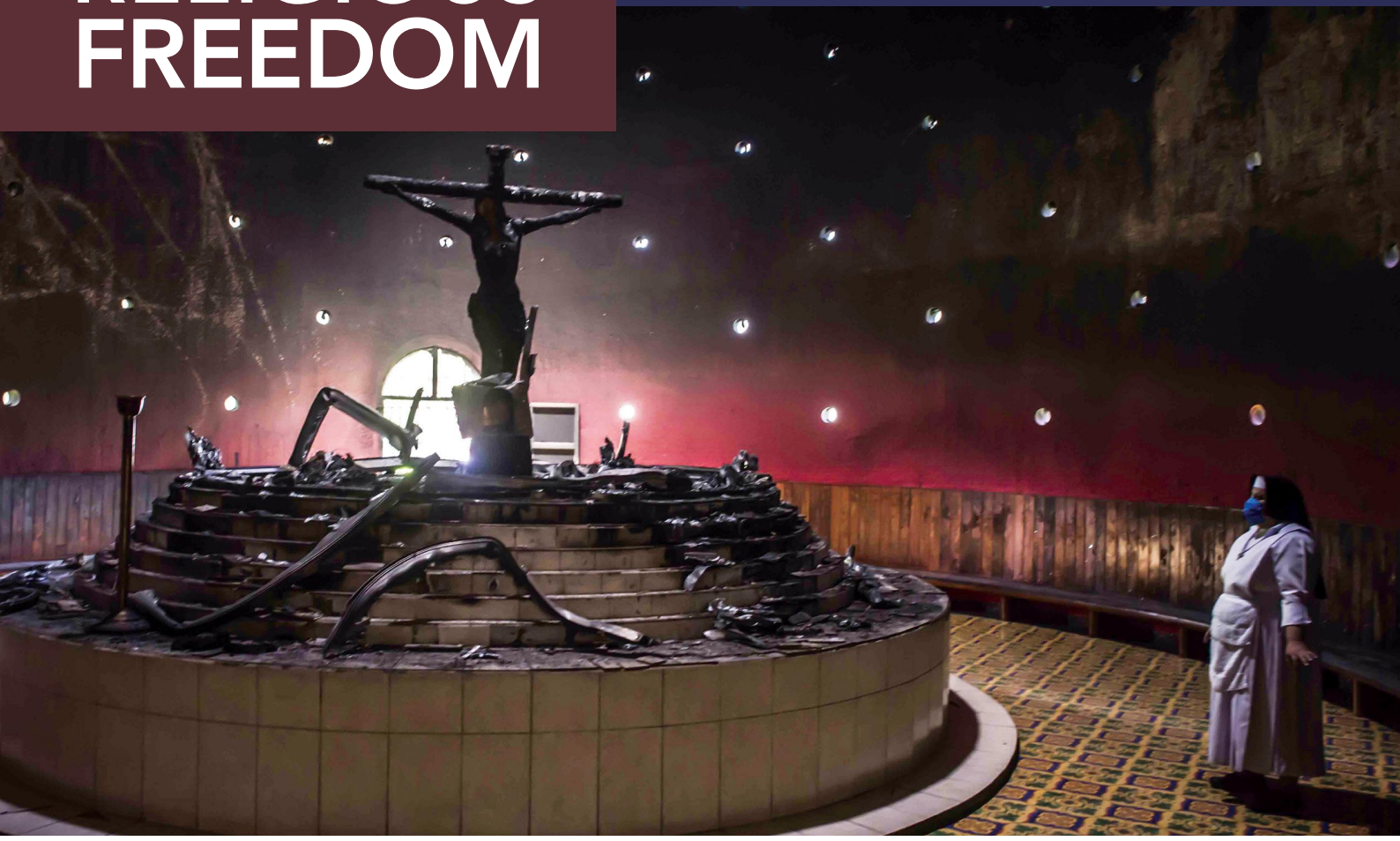
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



Nicaraguan exile Francisco Alvicio, right, a deacon of Nicaragua's Moravian Church, prays in his rented room alongside fellow exile and Miskito leader Salomon Martinez Ocampo in San Jose, Costa Rica, Sunday, Sept. 22, 2024. (AP Photo/Carlos Herrera)

A nun looks at the damaged Blood of Christ chapel attacked with an incendiary device in what the Nicaraguan Bishops Conference called "an act of terrorism" at the Metropolitan Cathedral in Managua, July 31, 2020. (Oscar Navarrete/La Prensa)

ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The smell of ash lingers in the ruins of the Roman Catholic sanctuary, although it is far from Ash Wednesday. Yet sunbeams stream through the skylights above—rays of hope in the darkness.

Nicaragua's Ortega-Murillo regime has increasingly sought to stifle dissent. It has harassed, arrested, tried, and deported numerous members of the Catholic clergy—leaders of the country's largest religious community. It has used intimidation and manipulation to force into exile leaders of the indigenous Moravian Church, including those who appear on the cover of this year's United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Annual Report. It has arrested members of the Mountain Gateway ministry, including U.S. citizens—despite that community's historically positive relationship with the government. The regime has permitted violent attacks on houses of worship, including an arson attack that destroyed the 400-year-old crucifix inside the Chapel of the Blood of Christ in Managua, depicted on the cover.

Religious communities in Nicaragua have continued to show remarkable resilience in the face of such threats. Their members meet discreetly—sometimes in the middle of the night—to exercise their freedom of religion or belief. They continue to provide aid to each other while meeting communal spiritual needs, although the Nicaraguan government views each of these modest acts as deplorable. Like the light streaming through the church skylights, they represent the government's failure to extinguish the human desire for freedom. Ultimately, the tragedy of religious freedom in Nicaragua is not found in the intimidation, arrests, or deportations; it is rather the tragic short-sightedness of a government lacking the moral courage to allow accountability from its own people or to respect as basic a right as freedom of religion or belief.

> *"Ultimately, the tragedy of religious freedom in Nicaragua is not found in the intimidation, arrests, or deportations; it is rather the tragic short-sightedness of a government lacking the moral courage to allow accountability from its own people or to respect as basic a right as freedom of religion or belief."*

Unfortunately, such persecution and religious freedom violations are not unique to Nicaragua. In many other parts of the world, a common denominator of authoritarian rule continued to drive restrictions on religious freedom in 2024. In Afghanistan, the Taliban implemented dozens of religious edicts severely limiting the religious freedom of women and girls while disproportionately restricting the same for Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians. China continued its corrosive sinicization policy, forcing the Chinese Community Party's (CCP) ideological agenda into every facet of religious life for Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, Taoists, and others. Russia continued to deploy antisemitism and Holocaust distortion, ban Jehovah's Witnesses, target and harass vulnerable communities, and persecute groups such as the Protestant Word of Life Church and the Church of Scientology.

Governments also failed to adequately protect religious minority communities from mobs or individuals taking out their anger over such conflicts, perhaps most evident in antisemitic harassment and attacks on Jews—despite the remarkable resilience of Jewish communities in the face of such threats. In Tunisia, protesters attacked and destroyed a Jewish religious site, while a spate of attacks on synagogues systematically targeted Canada's Jewish community. In Germany, Berlin's police chief warned Jews to hide their identity in certain parts of the city to avoid danger. Governments moved quickly to respond to antisemitic threats and violence in each of these cases, and yet Jewish communities around the world continued to experience a worsening environment of fear that impeded their free practice of their religion or belief.

Armed conflicts contributed to the displacement of many individuals, forcing them to seek refuge while causing destruction to houses of worship and severely impeding the ability of many individuals, families, and communities to practice their religion or belief. State and nonstate actors alike invoked religion or belief to justify atrocities that, in many cases, disproportionately impacted or even targeted religious groups.

As a result of religious persecution around the world, including ongoing armed conflicts, scores of refugees and internally displaced persons fled their homes in fear for their lives. Many faced immense restrictions on their freedoms, even after fleeing intolerable conditions in their places of origin. While some governments made efforts to house and temporarily provide for these refugees, they also threatened to refoul them back to their home countries at grave risk to their personal safety.

In June, Pakistan began a mass deportation of Afghans, including religious minorities, women, and girls who face serious religious restrictions or even mortal peril upon their return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Nigeria's government has continued to forcibly close camps hosting displaced Christians who fled violence by Boko Haram, despite persistent security concerns in their communities of origin. In July, the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on India to refrain from the forcible deportation of predominantly Muslim Rohingya refugees to Burma. Waves of refugee displacement continued to prompt religious intolerance and acts of violence as in prior years, particularly against Muslims and Muslim diasporas.

These Muslim communities demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of state and societal harassment, assaults, and violence throughout the year. In June, State Security Service officers in Uzbekistan arrested an estimated 100 Muslim men in the Kashkadarya region. In 2024, some United Kingdom (UK) government officials engaged in anti-Muslim rhetoric, contributing to a worsening climate of intolerance.

During the summer, rioters across the UK chanted anti-Muslim slogans and attacked mosques. In Sri Lanka, Hindu and Buddhist nationalist groups targeted Muslims throughout the year with threats, intimidation, and coercion. Officials in France forbade Muslim women members of its own Olympic team—competing in their own capital city—from wearing the hijab during competition at the Paris Summer Olympic Games.

Now more than ever, U.S. support for the right to freedom of religion or belief must remain a priority as both a strategic national interest and a reflection of our national identity. Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and in practice well before, the United States has stood unreservedly on the side of individuals freely asserting their religion or belief, which includes the right to hold a belief and the right to express it through practice, teaching, or worship according to one's own convictions. American support for religious freedom abroad remains a bedrock of bipartisan conviction—a common cause and indivisible commitment that inspires governments and facilitates burden-sharing in the advancement of freedom of religion or belief.

"Now more than ever, U.S. support for the right to freedom of religion or belief must remain a priority as both a strategic national interest and a reflection of our national identity."

The administration of President Donald J. Trump faces a complex international environment in which to build on its previous success of centering religious freedom as a cornerstone of foreign policy and global leadership. Confirming this commitment to advancing freedom of religion or belief will require calibration and joint action with like-minded governments, and this report outlines concrete policy recommendations for this administration to maximize the success of its efforts as such. These recommendations begin with the prompt appointment of an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, who leads initiatives through the U.S. Department of State to highlight and address religious freedom concerns around the world.

The new Congress, too, must prioritize continuing the vital, bipartisan work of advancing religious freedom abroad, as reflected in this report's congressional recommendations. It should introduce—or reintroduce, in some cases—and pass legislation to fully resource and fund programming to help individuals, families, and communities around the world who face persecution and other threats because of their religion or belief.

About This Report

Created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the State Department, that monitors and reports on religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on the provisions of its authorizing legislation and the standards in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and other international documents. USCIRF's mandate and annual reports are different from, and complementary to, the mandate and annual reports of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom.

USCIRF's 2025 Annual Report assesses religious freedom violations and progress in 28 countries during calendar year 2024 and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The key findings, recommendations, and analysis in this report are based on a year's research by USCIRF, including hearings, meetings, briefings, and travel. The annual report is approved by a majority vote of Commissioners. IRFA expressly provides each Commissioner the right to include in the annual report a statement with his or her own individual or dissenting views. Various Commissioners have done so many times over the years, either to elaborate on or to disagree with some aspect of the report. This year, the chapters on Implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act and Azerbaijan include individual or dissenting views.

The report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: first, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should designate as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) under IRFA, and second, those that USCIRF recommends the State Department should place on its Special Watch List (SWL). The report also includes USCIRF's recommendations of nonstate actors for designation by the State Department as Entities of Particular Concern (EPCs) under IRFA. In addition, the report analyzes the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA during the reporting year and provides recommendations to bolster overall U.S. efforts to advance religious freedom abroad. It includes a section providing background on nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for EPC designation as well as a section discussing key global trends and developments in religious freedom during the reporting period, including in countries that are not recommended for CPC or SWL status. This year, that section covers topics including trends in areas of conflict or political upheaval, increased targeting of Muslims in Europe, antisemitism targeting Jews, artificial intelligence and new technologies limiting freedom of religion or belief, and other issues. Finally, the report's last section highlights key USCIRF recommendations that the U.S. government has implemented since USCIRF's previous annual report.

In this report, USCIRF uses the terms "religious freedom," "freedom of religion," and "freedom of religion or belief" (FoRB) interchangeably to refer to the broad right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief—including the right to nonbelief—protected under international human rights law.

Standards for CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

IRFA defines CPCs as countries where the government engages in or tolerates "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom. It defines the State Department's SWL for countries where the government engages in or tolerates "severe" violations of religious freedom.

Under IRFA, particularly severe violations of religious freedom mean "systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious violations . . . , including violations such as—(A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; (B) prolonged detention without charges; (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine

detention of those persons; or (D) other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons." Although the statute does not specifically define severe violations of religious freedom, in making SWL recommendations USCIRF interprets it to mean violations that meet two of the elements of IRFA's systematic, ongoing, and egregious standard (i.e., that the violations are systematic and ongoing, systematic and egregious, or ongoing and egregious).

To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, as defined above, and must also be "a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

The Annual Report highlights the countries and entities that, in USCIRF's view, merit CPC, SWL, or EPC designation; it is intended to focus U.S. policymakers' attention on the worst violators of religious freedom globally. The fact that a country or nonstate group is not covered in this report does not mean it did not violate religious freedom during the reporting year. It only means that based on the information available to USCIRF, the conditions during that year did not, in USCIRF's view, meet the high threshold—the perpetration or toleration of particularly severe or severe violations of religious freedom—required to recommend the country or nonstate group for CPC, SWL, or EPC designation. In the case of a nonstate group, it also could mean that the group did not meet other statutory requirements, such as exercising significant political power and territorial control.

As USCIRF monitors and has concerns about religious freedom conditions abroad, its reporting documents violations of FoRB perpetrated or tolerated by governments and entities not covered in this report. The full range of USCIRF's work on a wide variety of countries and topics can be found at www.uscirf.gov.

USCIRF's 2025 CPC, SWL, and EPC Recommendations

For 2025, based on religious freedom conditions in 2024, USCIRF recommends that the State Department:

- Redesignate as CPCs the following 12 countries: Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan;
- Designate as additional CPCs the following four countries: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, and Vietnam;
- Maintain on the SWL the following two countries: Algeria, Azerbaijan;
- Include on the SWL the following 10 countries: Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, and Uzbekistan; and
- Redesignate as EPCs the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), 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).

The conditions supporting the CPC or SWL recommendation for each country are described in the relevant country chapters of this report. The conditions supporting the EPC recommendations for Boko Haram and ISWAP are described in the Nigeria chapter and for HTS in the Syria chapter, while the same for other EPC recommendations are included in a standalone section later in this report.

It should be noted that the State Department did not issue CPC, SWL, or EPC designations by the end of 2024 or the conclusion of the administration of President Joseph R. Biden in January 2025, thereby leaving 2023 designations in effect.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

The following description of U.S. government efforts to implement requirements of the International Religious Freedom Act specifically reflects calendar year 2024. However, USCIRF acknowledges that the transition to a new U.S. administration beginning in January 2025 has involved a number of policy shifts that will likely have a direct impact on international religious freedom engagement and advocacy across the U.S. government—and those shifts will continue to evolve and take shape in the months to come.

Key Developments

Despite many religious freedom violations and atrocities around the world in 2024, the year brought a number of significant accomplishments related to the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. government played a central role in securing the release of individuals imprisoned abroad for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). In August, the U.S. Department of State worked with other U.S. government partners to negotiate for the release of Oleg Orlov, co-chair of the human rights organization Memorial, which has advocated for and documented the cases of FoRB prisoners in Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea. In September, the State Department secured the release of 135 political prisoners, including some imprisoned for their religious beliefs or practices, whom Nicaraguan authorities had unjustly detained. Among these were Catholic laypeople as well as a group of pastors and other individuals affiliated with the Mountain Gateway ministry. In September and November, respectively, the U.S. government secured the release of American Pastor David Lin, who spent nearly two decades in a Chinese prison for his religious activities, and the resettlement of three members of the predominantly Muslim Uyghur community, whom Chinese authorities had unjustly subjected to travel bans.

". . . the transition to a new U.S. administration beginning in January 2025 has involved a number of policy shifts that will likely have a direct impact on international religious freedom engagement and advocacy across the U.S. government. . . ."

The U.S. government continued to serve as secretariat for and on the Steering Committee of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA), which rebranded during the year as the Article 18 Alliance (Alliance). Throughout the year, the Alliance issued a number of joint statements, including on the Russian government's killing of religious leaders and destruction of religious sites in Ukraine; the 10th anniversary of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) genocide against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria; and FoRB prisoners in Tibet, Cuba, and North Korea. The Alliance also issued statements on FoRB violations against women, Muslims, and nonreligious individuals.

In addition, the State Department presented international religious freedom (IRF) awards to individuals who made exceptional contributions to religious freedom abroad in the prior year. Those honored include a Nigerian lawyer who defends religious freedom cases and challenges the constitutionality of the country's blasphemy laws, a Nicaraguan religious freedom advocate who documents the government's violations against the Catholic Church, and a Tibetan activist whose work has shed light on how the Chinese government impedes the FoRB rights of Tibetan Buddhists.

Then Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken did not issue CPC, SWL, or EPC designations by the end of 2024 or the conclusion of the administration in January 2025, thereby leaving 2023 designations in effect. Despite that failure to comply with IRFA in regard to those designations, the administration of then President Joseph R. Biden otherwise engaged in many initiatives supporting or advancing IRF, as noted throughout this report.

2023 State Department Designations	
CPC Designations	Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, 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, 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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION:

- Promptly nominate or appoint well-qualified individuals to fill key roles relevant to U.S. IRF policy, including the Special Adviser to the President on IRF on the National Security Council staff and the Ambassador at Large for IRF, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, and Special Coordinator on Tibetan Issues at the State Department, and provide them with the financial resources and staff needed to elevate FoRB issues in engagements with foreign governments;
- Swiftly determine and announce CPC, SWL, and EPC designations, according to USCIRF's latest recommendations as delineated in this report;
- Appoint a Special Envoy for Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin to maximize U.S. diplomatic efforts to address religious freedom violations and atrocity risk in that region;
- Review U.S. policy toward countries designated as CPCs for which waivers on taking any action based on those designations are in place—currently Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—and make appropriate policy changes to demonstrate meaningful consequences and encourage positive change, such as lifting existing waivers or not issuing waivers following future CPC designations or redesignations;
- Develop a working group in the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Bureau of Democracy, Rights, and Governance to deploy the BRIDGES religious community engagement strategy begun and then developed in the last two administrations;
- Deepen vital U.S. leadership and/or engagement on religious freedom with entities such as the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, C5+1, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation;
- Resettle refugees who have fled countries with the most egregious forms of religious persecution, in cooperation with like-minded countries and through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and other humanitarian protection programs, and maintain a robust annual USRAP admissions ceiling for refugees in order to contribute to alleviating the ongoing crisis involving around 43.7 million refugees worldwide—many of whom escaped religious persecution; and
- Establish a plan to fully comply with asylum laws, including addressing flaws that USCIRF has documented in its reporting on Expedited Removal since 2005, to enhance the quality and oversight of the processing of asylum seekers and to improve overall interagency coordination.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS:

- Prioritize the confirmation of key IRF-related appointments, including the Ambassador at Large for IRF, Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, and Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues;
- Sponsor FoRB prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project and 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;
- Advocate for IRF through 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;
- Introduce or reintroduce and pass legislation that advances IRF policy such as:
  - The bipartisan Transnational Repression Policy Act (H.R. 3654) to strengthen U.S. efforts to counter foreign governments' transnational repression on the basis of religion or belief;
  - Prohibiting any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments of countries that the State Department designates as CPCs;
  - Conditioning—for countries the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL—U.S. security assistance and economic or budget support to those governments on improvements in religious freedom conditions;
  - Countering foreign governments' use of misinformation and disinformation or exploitation of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), surveillance, and other technologies to target communities particularly vulnerable to IRF-related restrictions and violence;
  - Amending IRFA to permanently reauthorize USCIRF, mandate the State Department to provide specific rationale for not implementing USCIRF recommendations on CPC and SWL designations, and require the president to appoint a Special Adviser on IRF on the National Security Council staff; and
  - Reauthorizing on a permanent basis the bipartisan Lautenberg 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.
- Request the Government Accountability Office to 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 all U.S. foreign assistance provided to countries that the State Department designates as CPCs or places on the SWL; 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.

- Allocate funding, consistent with Executive Order (E.O.) 13926, through USAID and relevant U.S. embassies to support:
  - Efforts to restore, preserve, and protect places of worship and other religious heritage sites in areas where they are particularly vulnerable or under threat; and
  - Civil society organizations and human rights defenders who document and monitor religious freedom violations, including those who lead efforts to counter the malign activities of "entities of particular concern" (EPCs) and other nonstate actors, in countries where civil society is repressed.
- Conduct congressional delegations to countries USCIRF recommends for designation as CPCs or placement on the SWL to address religious freedom concerns.

Legal Framework

The International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, provides that the president—who has delegated this power to the secretary of state—has 90 days after the release of the State Department's annual IRF Report to make each year's CPC and SWL designations, and another 90 days to notify Congress of the designations and accompanying actions. The State Department released the IRF Report on June 26, 2024, meaning that this 180 day period expired on December 23, 2024 without a new determination of designations. As outlined in IRFA, the previous December 2023 designations therefore remained in force at the end of the reporting period, and the accompanying actions will expire in December 2025 in the absence of their renewal for a two-year period.

IRFA seeks to make religious freedom a priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. These include governmental institutions (USCIRF as an independent legislative branch agency requiring regular reauthorization, the ambassador at large and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, and a special adviser on the White House's National Security Council staff); ongoing monitoring and annual reports on religious freedom violations abroad; the imposition of consequences for the worst violators; and a public list of victims of certain violations of religious freedom. The consequences set forth in IRFA consist of CPC designations and related policy actions or placement on the State Department's SWL for governmental violators, the ability to bar entry to the United States of foreign officials responsible for particularly severe religious freedom violations, and EPC designations for nonstate actors. IRFA outlines additional policies the U.S. government may adopt in response to official religious freedom violations abroad, including public condemnation in multilateral fora; the reduction or cancelation of foreign assistance funds; the delay or cancelation of cultural exchanges; and the delay or cancelation of working, official, or state visits.

IRFA requires that State Department foreign service officers and U.S. immigration officials undergo training on religious freedom and religious persecution. Furthermore, it includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy, and it specifically cites U.S. participation in multilateral organizations as an avenue for advancing religious freedom abroad. IRFA is centered on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief as recognized in international law and as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international instruments and regional agreements.

Alongside IRFA, other laws provide tools to sanction individual religious freedom abusers. Some apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act (CISADA, P.L. 111-195). More broadly, the permanently reauthorized 2016 Global Magnitsky Act allows the president, who has delegated these authorities to the secretaries of the treasury and state, to deny U.S. visas to and freeze the U.S.-based assets of any foreigner responsible for "extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally protected human rights" against someone seeking to expose illegal government activity or to exercise or defend internationally protected rights. E.O. 13818, issued in December 2017 to implement and build on the Global Magnitsky Act, authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in "serious human rights abuse," providing an even more expansive basis for targeted sanctions.

As previously mentioned, IRFA added a provision to the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), contained in INA Section 212(a)(2)(g), making foreign officials who perpetrated particularly severe religious freedom violations ineligible for visas to the United States. Other visa ineligibilities found in Section 212(a) may also apply to religious freedom violators in some cases, particularly the bars on foreigners who perpetrated genocide, torture, or extrajudicial killings (INA 212(a)(3)(E)(ii) & (iii)) or whose admission the secretary of state determines would have serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States (INA 212(a)(3)(C)). In addition, Section 7031(c) of the State Department's fiscal year (FY) 2024 annual appropriations (P.L. 118-47) requires the secretary of state to make foreign officials and their immediate family members ineligible for U.S. entry if there is credible evidence that such individuals have been involved in "a gross violation of human rights." Unlike the visa ineligibility provisions contained in the INA, the names of those subject to visa bans under this provision may be announced publicly.

Key USCIRF Resources & Activities

- **Press Release:** USCIRF Calls for Congressional Hearing after State Department Fails to Designate Nigeria and India as Countries of Particular Concern
- **Press Release:** USCIRF Cautions against Rising Antisemitism on International Holocaust Remembrance Day
- **Press Release:** USCIRF Calls Attention to Prevalence of Anti-Muslim Hate around the World
- **Issue Update:** Protection of Religious Sites during Armed Conflict
- **Special Report:** Revisiting the CPC Designation
- **Factsheet:** Misinformation and Disinformation: Implications for Freedom of Religion or Belief
- **Factsheet:** International Religious Freedom Act
- **Event:** Women in FoRB: Making a Difference
- **Hearing:** Addressing Entities of Particular Concern: Nonstate Actors and Egregious Violations of Religious Freedom

Key U.S. Administration IRF Positions

Then Ambassador at Large for IRF Rashad Hussain continued to implement his mandate through public speeches and meetings, including with the nongovernmental organization IRF Roundtable and other stakeholders. In addition, Ambassador Hussain traveled to New Zealand, The Gambia, Cameroon, Switzerland, and Germany to meet with governmental officials and religious communities to advance FoRB and combat religious intolerance.

Then Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Deborah E. Lipstadt traveled to Germany, the United Kingdom, Romania, Malta, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, Argentina and Brazil, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Canada, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. During her travel to Argentina and Brazil, she launched the Global Guidelines for Countering Antisemitism and commemorated those killed in the 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina. In addition, she commemorated the victims of the Holocaust and emphasized the importance of Holocaust education at the UN in New York. She also testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on antisemitism in Latin America. Both Ambassador Hussain and Special Envoy Lipstadt participated in a USCIRF event highlighting the crucial roles women play in promoting FoRB abroad.

Then Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Uzra Zeya, who served concurrently as the U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, met with the Dalai Lama to reaffirm the U.S. government's commitment to advancing Tibetans' human rights and to support efforts to preserve their distinct historical, linguistic, cultural, and religious heritage. She also spoke about protecting human rights and religious freedom for Tibetans before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC). Under Secretary Zeya also convened meetings with representatives from Iraq's diverse religious communities and visited key Christian and Yazidi sites during her visit to that country in May.

Multilateral Engagement

In 2024, the United States served the third of a three-year term as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). In that capacity, the U.S. government supported resolutions promoting FoRB; protecting the rights of persons belonging to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities; and mandating investigations into human rights violations in Afghanistan, Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Russia, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Ukraine. It also joined multi-country statements on religious freedom and human rights violations occurring in Xinjiang and Afghanistan and cosponsored a side event on violations occurring in Tibet. As part of the UN's Universal Periodic Review process, the U.S. government made recommendations on improving religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, Malaysia, Nicaragua, North Korea, and Vietnam. In addition, it delivered statements at the UN Security Council on violations occurring in Afghanistan and North Korea and at the UN General Assembly on anti-Muslim hatred.

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Sanctions on Individual Violators

There were no known visa denials to foreign officials in 2024 for particularly severe religious freedom violations under Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the INA, the provision added by IRFA. However, in December, the State Department established two new visa restriction policies to promote accountability for wrongful, abusive, and unjust detention practices under INA Section 212(a)(3)(c). These policies allow the State Department to impose visa restrictions on individuals who wrongfully detain people or violate detainees' fundamental freedoms, including individuals responsible for the wrongful treatment of those profiled in USCIRF's FoRB Victims List.

The U.S. government continued its use of the Global Magnitsky Act and the related E.O. 13818, bringing the total number of individuals and entities sanctioned under these authorities for human rights abuses or corruption to 745. In December, the State Department and U.S. Department of the Treasury imposed sanctions on a Houthi entity and its leader for their roles in committing human rights violations against detainees in Houthi-run prison systems.

The U.S. government also used non-Global Magnitsky Act tools to hold religious freedom violators accountable. Pursuant to E.O. 14014, the Treasury Department sanctioned entities that support the Burmese military's ongoing violence against civilians. Pursuant to E.O. 13851, the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Nicaragua's attorney general for his complicity in that government's religious freedom violations and on a Russian government entity that trains the Nicaraguan National Police for its responsibility in such abuses. Pursuant to E.O. 13553, the Treasury Department sanctioned individuals involved in the Iranian government's violent and religiously based repression of the Iranian people. In addition, the State Department—pursuant to Section 7031(c) of the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act—imposed visa restrictions on an Indonesian government official involved in the killing of a Christian pastor in 2020.

Programs

IRFA envisaged the funding of religious freedom programs authorizing U.S. foreign assistance to promote and develop "legal protections and cultural respect for religious freedom." During 2024, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor issued requests for proposals to advance religious freedom and/or provide

protection for Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the Western Hemisphere or South Asia as well as to combat religious discrimination in Kenya.

As in prior years, the United States continued to obligate substantial funding to programs around the world that benefited efforts—often through civil society organizations—to advance FoRB, reinforce broader human rights, support democratic governance, provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance, and implement other initiatives. Many of those initiatives included explicit or implicit support for religious freedom and other human rights in countries that USCIRF has recommended for CPC designation or SWL inclusion. However, U.S. assistance has also at times supported the governments of some of those same countries, often for the purposes of economic development as well as local or regional security through counterterrorism programs, foreign military financing, and other forms. Detailed and up-to-date information on U.S. assistance is available at ForeignAssistance.gov, including a more comprehensive differentiation of assistance that supports civil society programs versus assistance that goes directly to foreign governments for development, security, and other purposes.

The Biden administration also continued to fund humanitarian aid for members of religious groups that have faced persecution or genocide. In May and September, USAID announced $31 million and $199 million, respectively, in additional humanitarian assistance to address the needs of primarily Muslim Rohingya refugees located in Bangladesh and the region. In July, USAID announced $2.2 million in aid to support internally displaced Iraqis and Syrian refugees. In September, USAID announced nearly $535 million in humanitarian assistance to support the people of Syria. In November, USAID announced the launch of an initiative to support Tibetan communities in Southeast Asia, including by preserving their arts, language, and culture.

Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal

According to U.S. law, any noncitizen who is physically present or who arrives in the United States may apply for asylum, a legal protection for those who can establish that they fled their country and cannot return "because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of" one of five specific grounds established in U.S. and international law, which include religion. IRFA authorized USCIRF to examine the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal, the process that allows Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers to quickly deport—without immigration court hearings—noncitizens who arrive at U.S. ports of entry or cross the border without proper documentation, unless they can establish a credible fear of persecution. As mandated by Congress, USCIRF has long monitored the subject, including in reports it released in 2005, 2007, 2013, and 2016 that documented major problems that successive administrations have failed to address. Specifically, USCIRF found that DHS officials often failed to follow required procedures to identify those who fear persecution if returned and refer them for credible fear determinations; that they detained asylum seekers in inappropriate conditions; and that funding disparities and a lack of high-level oversight hampered the complicated, multiagency process. These flaws raise concerns—especially given the expanded use of Expedited Removal in recent years—that the United States is erroneously returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution in violation of both U.S. and international law.

In June, the Biden administration put in place the Securing the Border (STB) policy, which suspended and limited the entry of certain noncitizens at the southern border of the United States and restricted their access to asylum, unless certain exceptions were met. Under this policy, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses a new process known as the "shout test" in which officers are no longer required to ask noncitizens mandatory questions about whether they fear persecution if returned as part of the initial screening process. This change increases the risk that bona fide asylum seekers may not be receiving the opportunity to access legal protection. Additionally, noncitizens who successfully manifest a fear of persecution on their own volition and are referred for a credible fear interview only have four hours to prepare for that interview, which is conducted in CBP custody.

Refugee Resettlement

Under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), a small number of the tens of millions of individuals displaced abroad—who cannot return home due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on one of the five grounds that U.S. and international law provide, which include religion—may be eligible for resettlement to the United States. The president sets a ceiling for how many refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year and, pursuant to Section 1157(d) of Title 8 of the INA, provides an annual report to Congress on that ceiling. Under Section 6472(d) of IRFA, the president is required to include information in that annual report on the religious persecution of refugee populations eligible for consideration for admission in the United States. In September, the White House announced that it was maintaining the admissions ceiling for refugees at 125,000 for FY 2025. For FY 2025, the Biden administration's annual report designated Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox religious adherents in the Baltics and Eurasia with close family ties in the United States for priority consideration for refugee resettlement. The Biden administration also designated religious minorities in Iran for priority consideration.

In March, Congress reauthorized the bipartisan Lautenberg amendment for FY 2024, as this legislation is not yet permanent. The amendment is a family reunification program providing a legal path for resettlement for religious minorities from Iran and former Soviet Union countries who are fleeing government persecution.

Notable Congressional Efforts to Promote Religious Freedom Abroad

Members of the U.S. Congress continued to engage in efforts to promote IRF throughout the year, including the 37 members who advocated for prisoners through the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's (TLHRC) Defending Freedoms Project. The House Foreign Affairs Committee held hearings on human rights and religious freedom in Nigeria and Cuba and on antisemitism in Latin America. The TLHRC held hearings on transnational repression as well as on human rights and religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, and Turkey. The CECC held hearings on China's human rights and religious freedom violations and historical revisionism and culture erasure.

Members of Congress also participated in the USCIRF hearing on religious freedom in Southeast Asia. In addition, Congress

reauthorized USCIRF's mandate through FY 2026 to ensure that robust religious freedom monitoring and reporting continues. Congress further passed the Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act (S. 138), which mandates that the Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues works to combat Chinese government disinformation about the history, people, and institutions of Tibet, including the Dalai Lama. Finally, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 554, which affirms the nature and importance of U.S. government support for religious and ethnic minority survivors of genocide in Iraq.

Additional View on Implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act by Chair Stephen Schneck, Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik, and Commissioners Ariela Dubler, Mohamed Elsanousi, Maureen Ferguson, Susie Gelman, Vicky Hartzler, and Asif Mahmood

Congress must end lobbying by CPC countries. Lobbyists paid to represent the interests of governments that kill, torture, imprison, or otherwise persecute their populations because of what religion they practice or what beliefs they hold should not be welcome in the halls of Capitol Hill.

As Commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, we call upon Congress to prohibit all lobbying on behalf of those countries designated as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) by the Department of State. This prohibition should include not only representatives of the governments of CPC countries, but also representatives of such governments' state-affiliated commercial entities and their interests.

Lobbyists representing Chinese official and commercial interests, for example, actively work the offices of Congress, despite the Chinese government's ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims, cultural genocide of Tibetan Buddhists, and egregious persecution and repressive "sinicization" of other religious faiths. And China is but one example of CPC countries whose representatives lobby Congress today.

The privilege that Congress grants lobbyists to promote the governmental and commercial interests of foreign nations cannot be divorced from the highest values of the American people. Not only is freedom of religion or belief an inalienable and universal right for all, but it is also the first freedom of our beloved Bill of Rights, and it must be a first measure for that privilege.

OTHER GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS

This section highlights some important developments and trends that impacted religious freedom conditions around the world in 2024, particularly—but not only—in countries and regions not covered elsewhere in this report. These developments are not exhaustive, and the omission of specific countries or cases is not indicative of a lack of religious freedom violations in those contexts.

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Restrictions by Nonstate Entities

In 2024, a variety of nonstate entities imposed restrictions on religious freedom, including USCIRF-recommended Entities of Particular Concern as well as entities that did not meet the statutory criteria for that designation. Despite not meeting those specific criteria, however, these groups continued to pose grave challenges to FoRB; the United States designates several of them as terrorist groups, and all of them have regularly targeted specific religious groups with violence, discrimination, and repression.

The Taliban, as the de-facto authority of Afghanistan, continued to severely restrict the religious freedom of all Afghans, by enacting and enforcing draconian religious edicts. Human rights groups and the United Nations (UN) warned of the severely harmful impact of such edicts, as well as the Taliban's use of physical and sexual violence, arbitrary detention, torture, and corporal punishment. The UN Security Council (UNSC) additionally renewed the mandate of a monitoring team overseeing the implementation of sanctions packages on the Taliban, including freezing assets and prevention of travel, citing the unique threat to women and girls and members of minority groups. It also directed the team to document instances of noncompliance.

Hamas and Hizballah continued to use religious sites, including mosques, to hide weapons in their ongoing armed conflict with Israel. Hizballah continued to promote antisemitic ideas through its official media channels, while senior Hamas officials engaged in antisemitic Holocaust denial and distortion.

The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), a regional branch of the jihadist group Islamic State, conducted attacks in multiple countries throughout the year, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. The group has also launched operations in Turkey, Russia, and Iran. It projects additional force in India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. In Afghanistan, ISIS-K claimed responsibility for multiple deadly attacks targeting the minority Hazara Shi'a community and their places of worship. While the Taliban made progress in combating ISIS-K, they reportedly struggled to disrupt their urban cells as the group moved away from controlling territory. In Pakistan, ISIS-K continued to conduct recruitment efforts and launch attacks.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) did not regain territory in Iraq or Syria but increased attacks on military and civilian targets in those countries and continued to intimidate religious minorities throughout the year. Turkey continued to finance and control several Syrian Islamist opposition groups (TSOs), such as factions of the Syrian National Army (SNA), which targeted religious minorities in Syria for forced conversion, sacred site desecration, interrogation, extortion, rape, and torture. In December, after partnering with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad, some TSOs returned to northeast Syrian territories bordering Turkey to escalate their takeover of parts of the region, forcibly displacing and reportedly assaulting members of religious and ethnic minority groups. At the end of the reporting period, as HTS-led interim authorities began absorbing state institutions in Damascus, religious communities in several other parts of the country remained vulnerable to violence from TSOs, independent militias, ISIS, and other militant organizations. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) warned of a full resurgence of ISIS, as that key U.S. ally in the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS struggled to ward off Turkish attacks while overseeing detention camps that house over 43,000 ISIS fighters and their family members.

Other ISIS affiliates continued to perpetrate horrific religious violence in various parts of Africa. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed eight people in Beni during an attack on a Pentecostal church in January. In May, ADF assailants reportedly killed 14 Catholics in North Kivu province for refusing to convert to Islam. The same group reportedly also executed 11 Christians in the village of Ndimo in Ituri State and kidnapped several others. Meanwhile, in Mozambique, Islamic State Mozambique (ISM) and other ISIS-linked insurgents continued their longstanding campaign of violence against civilians and religious sites in Cabo Ligado. Government troops responded with security operations, working along with Rwandan forces. In November, ISM reportedly burned four churches and 16 houses in the villages of Juravo and Tacuane.

FoRB Trends in Countries with Conflict or Political Upheaval

Sudan

Following the 2023 outbreak of civil war in Sudan, the country continued to see a range of documented violence, human rights abuses, and FoRB violations against the country's citizens and their communities. A transitional government had presided over Sudan from 2019 to 2021—following a popular uprising that brought an end to the religiously repressive regime of Omar al-Bashir—and made significant improvements in religious freedom. A military coup in 2021 threatened civilian governance but had largely refrained from reversing those significant FoRB advances. However, rival military factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), sparked the present conflict in 2023 and since raised widespread threats to FoRB across the country—particularly impacting Sudan's most vulnerable religious populations. The ensuing, widespread violence and chaotic circumstances continued to impede reporting on these serious religious freedom challenges, which have included the abuse of Islamic *hudud* (corporal) punishments, forcible conversions to Islam, attacks against places of worship, widespread restriction of worship, and rampant discrimination against religious minorities. Reports of such atrocities contributed to the U.S. decision to sanction a series of individuals and entities in 2024 for perpetrating, arming, or otherwise enabling serious human rights abuses and mass violence across Sudan. In January 2025, after the reporting period, then U.S.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken determined that members of the RSF and allied militias had committed genocide in Sudan which, among other actions, included sanctions against RSF leader Mohammad Hamdan Daglo Mousa ("Hemedti") for his role in systematic atrocities and gross violations of human rights.

Bangladesh

Religious freedom conditions in Bangladesh declined amid a series of attacks against religious minority communities. Following a violent crackdown on protests that resulted in 200 deaths and the removal of Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina, Hindu groups claimed an increase in attacks against their communities and temples. These attacks included vandalism and mob violence. Simultaneously, traditional and social media proliferated false or unsupported claims of violence to discredit the interim caretaker government led by Mohamed Yunus. Hundreds of Hindus were reportedly killed in the violence following Prime Minister Hasina's departure, though reporting suggests the killings were likely related to political affiliation rather than religion. Ahmadiyya Muslim communities also reported physical attacks and vandalism to their property. In response to these and other incidents, the caretaker government expressed its intention to protect minority communities.

Despite those government pledges, systematic pressure on religious minorities continued to generally worsen. Prior to the July protests, two judges of the Bangladesh High Court expressed support for harsher punishments for blasphemy, including capital punishment. Prime Minister Hasina further issued controversial statements suggesting that Christians in the country were plotting to carve out a "Christian state" from parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. In November, police charged a Hindu priest, Chinmoy Krishna Das, with sedition charges for denigrating Bangladesh's flag while demonstrating for the protection of Hindus. The arrest sparked clashes between thousands of Das's supporters and police, resulting in the death of a Muslim lawyer. The same month, an estimated 30,000 Hindus gathered demanding government protection from attacks and harassment.

Throughout the year, predominantly Muslim Rohingya refugees from neighboring Burma also continued to face severe threats, including reported mob violence and desecration of religious materials within their camps in Cox's Bazar. Increased fighting in Burma forced thousands more Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh. In October, Bangladesh's caretaker government called on the UN to establish a safe zone in Burma's Rakhine State to allow internally displaced Rohingya to receive aid in place, calling for expedited resettlement.

Ukraine

In August, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed into law new legal amendments related to the activities of religious organizations, despite widespread concerns about the amendments' compatibility with international law. The revised legislation allows the government to ban religious organizations in Ukraine affiliated with a foreign religious organization whose management center is located in a country waging war against Ukraine. It also bans the Russian Orthodox Church—which only operates in Russian-occupied Ukraine—and "Russian world" (*Russky mir*) ideology. The amendments would likely significantly impact the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which Ukrainian authorities and society have viewed with suspicion following Russia's 2022 invasion, due to the UOC's historical and ecclesiastical ties to the Moscow Patriarchate. Furthermore, the new amendments risk imposing collective punishment on individual members of religious communities. In December, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) criticized the amendments, stating that they established "disproportionate restrictions on the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief." USCIRF has urged the Ukrainian government to ensure that enforcement of the amendments comply with international human rights standards.

Libya

Libya's religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, with each of the two rival governments restricting religious freedom for both the Sunni Muslim majority and religious minority groups. The interim Tripoli-based government in western Libya and affiliated Special Deterrence Forces (SDF) continued to arrest, interrogate, detain, force confessions from, and criminally try Muslims who expressed theological dissent. It also detained, interrogated, and prosecuted atheists, converts from Islam, and both Libyan and foreign national Christians accused of proselytizing. In November, authorities in Tripoli announced the reactivation of a morality police force and the institution of religious *mahram* (male guardian escort) requirements for women. At the same time, the rival Benghazi-based government in the east continued to invoke religious justifications to police Libyans' online speech and other expression that did not align with officials' interpretations of Islam. In December, the eastern Municipal Guard banned New Year's celebrations, which that government characterized as a non-Muslim tradition. It also interrogated and confiscated stock from Benghazi shop owners selling holiday-themed goods. In territories under both governments, government-affiliated security actors and nonstate militias targeted religious minorities, especially vulnerable migrants, for harassment, torture, and kidnapping for ransom.

Emerging Issues in Other Countries

Mexico

Mexico saw an alarming rise in religious freedom violations by nonstate actors during 2024. In April, village leaders in Hidalgo forcibly displaced over 100 Protestants because of their religious identity, including through electricity cuts and property vandalism. In October, gunmen in Chiapas killed Catholic priest and indigenous rights activist Marcelo Pérez after he officiated Mass. Other nonstate actors, including criminal organizations, engaged in additional acts of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious leaders throughout the year.

Venezuela

Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom, the government of Venezuela under President Nicolas Maduro continued its institutionalization of an office for religious affairs. Observers feared the office would impose restrictions on religious groups, specifically Christians. Authorities reportedly pressured Evangelical and Christian leaders to voice political support for the Maduro government in exchange for resources and funding to support religious community institutions. The government also reportedly tolerated nonstate actors' targeting of Christians. In January, unknown assailants murdered a Catholic priest working with indigenous groups.