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KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Algeria remained poor. Since beginning its campaign to forcibly close Evangelical churches in 2017, the Algerian government has failed to show meaningful commitment to improving religious freedom conditions over the last five years. Government authorities continued to forcibly close churches and prosecute members of Muslim and non-Muslim minority communities on charges of blasphemy, proselytization, and unauthorized worship. The Algerian government also continued to deny several religious minority groups the registration required to worship collectively, including the Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA) and the Ahmadiyya Muslim community.

Algerian law regulates the manifestation of religion or belief through several legal mechanisms, including the Algerian Penal Code and Ordinance 06-03 on the regulation of non-Muslim organizations. Some of these provisions, including laws penalizing blasphemy, proselytization, and unregistered religious activity—all subject to imprisonment and fines—are inconsistent with international legal protections for religious freedom.

In 2022, the *wali* (governor) of Tizi Ouzou commenced proceedings to close at least four churches in that province, bringing the total number of EPA churches closed by the government to 21. Civil society members report that the government has encouraged individual churches to register outside of the EPA umbrella in an attempt to fracture the growing community.

Authorities arrested the EPA's top leader, [Pastor Salaheddine Chalah](#), in November 2021 following the U.S. government's decision to add Algeria to its Special Watch List for engaging in severe religious freedom violations. Other EPA leaders reportedly experienced harassment at the same time, including surveillance and property searches by government officials. In March, a court in Tizi Ouzou convicted Chalah of "practicing worship without the prior (approval) of the National Commission for non-Muslim worship" and "calling

through social media for the disobedience of laws by a clergyman," sentencing him to 18 months in prison and a fine of \$1,400 (200,00 dinars). The government charged Chalah as a "clergyman" while at the same time refusing to register the EPA as a religious organization, reflecting a biased government double standard specifically against the EPA.

Authorities sentenced Mohamed Derrab, a Christian convert, to 18 months in prison for proselytization while continuing to prosecute Pastor Hamid Boussadi on charges of proselytization and holding worship without permission. In September, the Algerian government [requested](#) that Caritas, a nongovernmental development organization affiliated with the Catholic Church, cease operating in the country, reportedly due to its purported foreign influences. In a context where the government has [a history](#) of undermining religious freedom and then [justifying](#) it as protecting against foreign influence, this development raises red flags for the future.

Several Muslims remain detained on charges of blasphemy, including political opposition members [Yacine Mebarki](#) and [Walid Kechida](#) and scholar [Dr. Said Djabelkhir](#). According to local [media reports](#), at least one additional unnamed Muslim individual faced blasphemy charges in 2022. In June, a tribunal in Bejaia [charged](#) 18 Ahmadiyya Muslims with blasphemy and unauthorized group participation, detaining three members of the group. The judge ordered the immediate detention of three members and released the others pending further investigation. In December, Abdul Ghani became the sixth Ahmadiyya Muslim to be sentenced to a multiyear prison sentence, with the judge accusing the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of being a "threat to national security" and a threat to Algeria's traditional Maliki school of thought. Advocates estimate that over 100 Ahmadis are facing prosecution, most of them for "unauthorized worship" in the context of the religious group's unregistered status.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Algeria on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Enter into an agreement with the Algerian government and provide associated financial and technical support to obligate the Algerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
 - Decriminalizing blasphemy and proselytization and releasing those detained on charges of blasphemy and proselytization;
 - Registering the EPA and the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslim and Muslim religious organizations, respectively;
 - Reopening closed and sealed churches and working in good faith with EPA members to address remaining health and safety code violations; and
- Direct U.S. Embassy officials to attend and observe court proceedings on blasphemy charges or cases related to houses of worship to emphasize the U.S. government's concerns about such cases.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Continue to raise the implementation of blasphemy laws and closure of houses of worship with the U.S. Department of State and relevant Algerian counterparts to ensure religious freedom concerns are incorporated into the U.S.-Algeria bilateral relationship.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Law and Religion in Algeria](#)
- **Podcast:** [The State of Religious Freedom in Algeria](#)

Background

Algeria is home to [nearly 43 million](#) people, 99 percent of whom are estimated to be Sunni Muslim. The remaining one percent of the population comprises Jews, nonbelievers, Muslim minorities (including Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims), and Christians (including Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians). [Algeria's constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official state religion.

Algeria has a long history of repression and persecution of religious minorities, including against [Jews](#), people who practice the [Baha'i faith](#), Protestant Christians, and [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#). Despite Algeria's constitution affording all Algerians the right to freedom of opinion and worship, the Algerian government limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor a particular interpretation of Islam and restrict religious activities. Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize blasphemy, with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and fines. Algeria's Criminal Code also censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals."

Through [Ordinance 06-03](#), passed in 2006, the Algerian government requires all non-Muslim organizations to register with the Minister for Non-Muslim Affairs in order to conduct activities and establish places of worship. The process for registration has been opaque and poorly implemented, creating legal uncertainty for some non-Muslim religious communities, which the government exploits to repress and prosecute religious minorities. Ordinance 06-03 also criminalizes proselytization by non-Muslims, with punishments of up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of \$8,347 (one million dinars).

Restrictions on Christians

Authorities convicted the EPA's top leader, Pastor Salaheddine Chalah, and three other parishioners of "practicing worship without the prior opinion (or approval) of the National Commission for non-Muslim Worship." The three parishioners were sentenced to six months in prison, while Pastor Chalah, who was also convicted of "calling through social media for the disobedience of laws by a clergyman," was sentenced to 18 months in prison. Other EPA leaders reported increased harassment in late 2021 and early 2022.

A court in Tizi Ouzou sentenced Christian convert Mohamed Derrab to 18 months in prison for "shaking the faith of a Muslim." Derrab was preaching and distributing Bibles outside of his church in Tizi Ouzou following its closure by authorities. The government also continued to prosecute Pastor Hamid Boussadi for holding unauthorized worship services and proselytizing.

Restrictions on Muslims

Several Muslims remain detained on charges of blasphemy, including political opposition members [Yacine Mebarki](#) and [Walid Kechida](#) and scholar [Dr. Said Djabelkhir](#). Authorities arrested Mebarki in 2020 for "inciting atheism" and "offending Islam" after finding a ripped Qur'an in his home. In 2021, authorities sentenced opposition activist [Kechida](#) to three years in prison with charges including "offending the

precepts" of Islam in internet memes. In 2021, authorities arrested scholar and Sufism expert [Djabelkhir](#) and charged him with blasphemy after a fellow academic filed a complaint about his writings on various Islamic rituals. Local [media reports](#) indicate that at least one unnamed Muslim individual has been arrested on charges of blasphemy in 2022.

On June 6, 2022, the First Instance Tribunal in Bejaia [charged](#) 18 Ahmadiyya Muslims with "participation in an unauthorized group" and "denigrating Islam" under Article 46 of the Law on Associations and Article 144 of the Algerian Penal Code, respectively. The judge ordered the immediate detention of three members and released the others pending further investigation. Advocates estimate that over 100 Ahmadi Muslims are facing prosecution, mostly for "unauthorized worship" in the context of their unregistered status.

Targeting Religious Actors Perceived as Foreign

The Algerian government has historically [targeted](#) religious leaders and communities it views as foreign, sometimes threatening religious freedom rights in the process. Officials [prosecute](#) individuals associated with "foreign movements" with blasphemy charges to override a lack of evidence or extend prison sentences.

On December 26, an Algerian court sentenced Ahmadiyya Muslim Abdul Ghani to three years in prison and a fine of \$1,500 (200,000 dinars). In his verdict, the judge accused the Ahmadiyya Muslim community of being a "threat to national security," an entity "working for foreign interests," and a threat to Algeria's traditional Maliki school of thought.

In 2022, the Algerian government [requested](#) that Caritas, a non-governmental development organization affiliated with the Catholic Church, cease operating in the country. Analysts posit that Caritas' supposed foreign ties influenced the government's decision. While members of the Catholic community still worship and practice their religion in Algeria, some religious minorities expressed concern that the government's targeting of Caritas may precede further restrictions against religious minorities viewed as outsiders.

Key U.S. Policy

On November 30, the State Department [maintained](#) Algeria on its Special Watch List for severe violations of religious freedom. Several high-profile U.S. officials visited Algeria in 2022, including Secretary of State [Antony J. Blinken](#), Deputy Secretary of State [Wendy R. Sherman](#), and an [interagency delegation](#) that included officials from the State Department, Department of Defense, and National Security Council. Topics for discussion included human rights and religious freedom concerns as well as stabilization and development assistance.

The United States is one of Algeria's [top trading](#) partners, and professional exchanges play a valuable role in strengthening the U.S.-Algeria law enforcement and security partnership at both the senior and working levels. The [Middle East Partnership Initiative](#) has supported the work of Algeria's civil society through programming that provides training to journalists, businesspeople, female entrepreneurs and parliamentarians, legal professionals, and the heads of leading nongovernmental organizations.