



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
**INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM**

2018 ANNUAL REPORT



INTRODUCTION

Religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in countries across the globe in 2017. This ongoing downward trend often intersected with authoritarian practices characterized by hostility toward dissent, pluralism, independent media, and active civil society, or took place under the guise of protecting national security or countering terrorism.

In the 28 nations addressed in this report, governments and nonstate actors targeted religious minorities, dissenting members of majority communities, and nonreligious persons. The most severe abuses included genocide and other mass atrocities, killings, enslavement, rape, imprisonment, forced displacement, forced conversions, intimidation, harassment, property destruction, the marginalization of women, and bans on children participating in religious activities or education.

For example, in 2017 in Burma's Rakhine State, the military and security forces, along with nonstate actors, committed what the United States and United Nations labeled "ethnic cleansing" against Rohingya Muslims. In China, the government created police states in Xinjiang and Tibet to persecute Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists and continued its brutal treatment of Falun Gong practitioners. In Cuba, government officials detained religious leaders and activists who advocated for religious freedom. In Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued its genocidal campaign against Christians, Yazidis, and Shi'a Muslims despite losing territory, and the Assad regime and Iranian-backed militias in Syria increased sectarian attacks against Sunni Muslims. In Nigeria, the government failed to prevent or stop increasing violence along religious lines or hold perpetrators to account. In Pakistan, the country's strict blasphemy laws and increased extremist activity further threatened already marginalized minority communities, including Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Shi'a Muslims. In Russia, the government banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and prose-

cuted for extremism peaceful Muslims and "nontraditional" groups, including Scientologists. In Turkey, the continued unjust detention of American Pastor Andrew Brunson had a chilling effect on Christians.

In addition to endangering individuals and communities, severe violations of religious freedom threaten the stability and security of nations and regions, underscoring the importance of U.S. efforts to address and prevent abuses of this fundamental human right. As this report details, U.S. law provides a range of tools to pressure egregious religious freedom violators—including in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act—which the U.S. government should utilize fully. In addition, both the Trump Administration and Congress should amplify their international religious freedom efforts by: working with international partners, humanizing the issue by focusing on prisoners of conscience and victims of blasphemy laws, and stressing the importance of empowering women to fully exercise their rights to freedom of religion or belief.

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and human flourishing. Its full protection requires the freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; as a result, its expansion also bolsters these other fundamental rights.

This report is based on a year's work by Commissioners and staff

of the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad, assess violations and progress, analyze U.S. policy, and develop independent policy recommendations. The results of USCIRF's work are provided through its findings and recommendations in public statements and reports.

In 2017 and early 2018, Commissioners and staff visited 12 countries to assess conditions: Egypt, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Central African Republic, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Ukraine (regarding Russian-occupied areas), Burma, Bangladesh, Bahrain, and Iraq. In addition to its country monitoring, USCIRF prioritized several thematic issues during 2017.

The first theme was advocacy for specific prisoners through [USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#), to shine a light on their cases and press for their release. A focus on these individuals makes concrete and understandable the human impact of unjust laws and policies and underscores the need for reform. During the year, several religious prisoners of conscience highlighted by USCIRF were released from prison.

The second theme was the issue of blasphemy laws, to highlight both their [incompatibility with international human rights principles](#) and some of the [individuals](#) affected by their enforcement. These laws exist in at least 69 countries worldwide and should be repealed.

The third theme was [women and religious freedom](#), to explore the synergies between freedom of religion or belief and women's equality and dispel the common misperception that there is a clash between

these two universal human rights. In fact, women's rights to religious freedom and to equality are indivisible and interrelated, and freedom of religion or belief can play an important role in responding to harmful practices imposed on women in the name of tradition, culture, or religion.

While religious freedom violations in many parts of the world continue to be grave, there are real reasons for optimism 20 years after the U.S. Congress' land-

mark passage of IRFA. Severe violations still occur but are less likely to go unnoticed. The U.S. government, once nearly alone in this effort, has an increasing number of partners with which to work on freedom of religion abroad, including

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international organization entities, foreign government bodies, and a global parliamentary network. The media and civil society in the United States and abroad are more focused on international religious freedom issues than ever before. And the growing recognition of freedom of religion or belief as a tool to empower women provides an opportunity to expand the coalition of those advocating for religious freedom for all, to include individuals and organizations interested in promoting women's rights.

2018 ANNUAL REPORT OVERVIEW

Created by the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998](#) (IRFA), the [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body, separate from the U.S. State Department, that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF bases these recommendations on its statutory mandate and the standards in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and other international documents.

The 2018 Annual Report documents religious freedom violations and progress during calendar year 2017 in 28 countries and makes independent recommendations for U.S. policy. The report is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA and provides recommendations to bolster U.S. efforts to advance freedom of religion or belief abroad.

The second section highlights 16 countries USCIRF concludes meet IRFA's standard for "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, for the period covered by this report, which USCIRF refers to as Tier 1 countries. IRFA requires the U.S. government to designate as a CPC any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations, meaning those that are systematic, ongoing, and egregious. The State Department most recently made CPC designations in December 2017, naming 10 countries, based on violations in 2016. At the same time, the State Department named

In 2018, USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate the following 10 countries as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF also finds that six other countries meet the CPC standard and should be so designated: Central African Republic, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

Pakistan as the first—and only—country on its Special Watch List, a new category created in 2016 by the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) (Frank Wolf Act) for governments that engaged in or tolerated severe violations but are deemed to not meet all the criteria of the CPC test.

The third section of the Annual Report highlights 12 countries USCIRF categorizes as Tier 2, defined by USCIRF as nations in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government during 2017 are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" CPC standard.

In 2018, USCIRF places the following 12 countries on Tier 2: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

Previous annual reports also included a section covering additional countries and regions that USCIRF monitored during the reporting year, but that did not meet the CPC or Tier 2 standards. The 2018 Annual Report does not include this section. USCIRF continues to monitor religious freedom globally but has decided to focus the annual report on Tier 1 and Tier 2 countries. The fact that other countries are not included in this report does not mean religious freedom issues do not exist in those countries or that concerns discussed in previous USCIRF annual reports have improved. Information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries may be found in the State Department's annual [International Religious Freedom reports](#). USCIRF also issues publications throughout the year on a variety of countries and topics, which can be found at www.uscirtf.gov.

As USCIRF's annual reports have long recognized, nonstate actors are among the most egregious violators of religious freedom. The Frank Wolf Act requires the

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

U.S. government to identify nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and designate them as “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. The law defines nonstate actor as “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 State Department did not make any EPC designations in 2017. However, on March 5, 2018, after the end of the reporting period, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson designated the following nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS, ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.”

In 2018, USCIRF recommends that the State Department designate the following organizations as EPCs: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia.

In 2018, USCIRF recommends three organizations for designation as EPCs based on their violations during 2017: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. USCIRF also continues to report, in various country chapters, on particularly severe violations of religious freedom perpetrated by nonstate actors that do not meet the Frank Wolf Act’s definition because, for example, they do not exercise territorial control.

USCIRF 2018		
<p>CPC Recommendations (Tier 1):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Burma* Central African Republic China* Eritrea* Iran* Nigeria North Korea* Pakistan Russia Saudi Arabia* Sudan* Syria Tajikistan* Turkmenistan* Uzbekistan* Vietnam <p><small>*Designated as CPCs by the State Department on December 22, 2017</small></p>	<p>Tier 2 Countries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afghanistan Azerbaijan Bahrain Cuba Egypt India Indonesia Iraq Kazakhstan Laos Malaysia Turkey 	<p>EPC Recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)* The Taliban in Afghanistan* Al-Shabaab in Somalia* <p><small>*Designated as EPCs by the State Department on March 5, 2018</small></p>

USCIRF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TIER 1 AND TIER 2 COUNTRIES

While the U.S. government must pursue freedom of religion or belief as a foreign policy objective within the specific context of each country covered in this annual report, certain common themes and policy options arise. The most common policy recommendations for states categorized by USCIRF as Tier 1 or Tier 2 countries appear below. These recommendations may not be

generalizable to all countries due to special circumstances, such as existing sanctions or lack of bilateral relations. Nonetheless, they represent the most pressing religious freedom concerns worldwide and the most promising avenues for addressing them through U.S. foreign policy.

FOR TIER 1 AND TIER 2 COUNTRIES	
<p>USCIRF recommends the U.S. government pursue the following goals . . .</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urge the country’s government to cooperate fully with international human rights mechanisms, including by inviting visits by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; • Press the country’s government to bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards; • Press the country’s government to conduct professional and thorough investigations—and to prosecute perpetrators—of incidents of sectarian violence, terrorism, and other violations of religious freedom; • Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the country’s government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
<p>. . . through methods including these policy options.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter into a binding agreement with the foreign government of a country designated by the State Department as a CPC, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA (22 U.S.C. §6445(c)), setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster critical reforms to improve religious freedom; • Use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for religious freedom violations, including visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA (section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act) and visa denials and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and Executive Order 13818; • Raise consistently religious freedom concerns at high-level bilateral meetings with the country’s leaders; • Coordinate with other diplomatic missions and foreign delegations, including the UN and European Union, about human rights advocacy in meetings with the country’s officials and during visits to the country; • Ensure that the U.S. Embassy and U.S. consulates, including at the ambassadorial and consular general levels, maintain active contacts with human rights activists. • Help to train the country’s governmental, civil society, religious, and/or educational professionals to better address sectarian conflict, religion-related violence, and terrorism through practices consistent with international human rights standards.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

KEY FINDINGS

The [International Religious Freedom Act](#) (IRFA) gives the U.S. government a range of tools to respond to religious freedom violations abroad and encourage improvements. Although no administration in IRFA's 20-year existence has implemented the law to its full potential, U.S. international religious freedom policy has been more robust since 2015. In 2016, the [Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act](#) (Frank Wolf Act) amended IRFA to address implementation concerns and better reflect current conditions. During 2017, the Trump Administration emphasized its commitment to international religious freedom through statements from President Donald Trump, Vice President Michael Pence, and other high-level officials, as well as in the National Security Strategy. In a year of transition, there was no Ambassador-at-Large

for International Religious Freedom for most of 2017, and a U.S. State Department reorganization that would elevate the Ambassador-at-Large within the bureaucracy and increase the functions and staff of the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF Office) was not complete by year's end. In December, the State Department redesignated as "countries of particular concern," or CPCs, the same 10 nations designated in 2016, and placed Pakistan on its new Special Watch List. The State Department did not designate any nonstate actors as "entities of particular concern," or EPCs, in 2017. With Ambassador-at-Large Sam Brownback in place as of February 1, 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the Trump Administration has an opportunity to build on recent progress and fully implement IRFA, including the new tools provided by the Frank Wolf Act.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Ensure that the Ambassador-at-Large has the necessary authority and resources to carry out IRFA's mandates, including sufficient funding and staffing for the IRF Office.
- Appoint promptly a qualified and experienced individual to be Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom within the National Security Council (NSC) staff, as IRFA envisions.
- Develop and issue a whole-of-government strategy to guide the U.S. government's promotion of religious freedom abroad for all, as well as action plans for specific countries, and establish an interagency working group, chaired by the Ambassador-at-Large, to oversee implementation.
- Implement fully all of IRFA's and the Frank Wolf Act's requirements, including through diplomatic engagement; annual CPC, Special Watch List, and EPC designations; and corresponding actions—especially targeted actions such as visa denials and asset freezes against specific violators.
- Prioritize efforts to seek the release of prisoners identified by the State Department or USCIRF as imprisoned for their religious beliefs, activity, identity, or religious freedom advocacy, especially in countries designated as CPCs or recommended by USCIRF for such designation.
- Engage multilaterally to advance religious freedom abroad, including by participating in and supporting relevant United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) entities and activities and continuing to lead and participate in the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Resettle vulnerable refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution, through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and address the longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal that USCIRF has documented since 2005.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONGRESS

- Ensure sufficient appropriations for the Ambassador-at-Large and the IRF Office to fully execute and effectively achieve IRFA's mandates.
- Focus on competence in international religious freedom during confirmation hearings for relevant officials in the State Department and other agencies.
- Hold annual oversight hearings on the implementation of IRFA and the Frank Wolf Act, as well as hearings on specific religious freedom issues, and raise religious freedom in country-specific hearings and ambassadorial confirmation hearings.
- Support legislation that promotes freedom of religion or belief abroad and, through legislation and appropriations, develop an international religious freedom strategy.
- Examine, during delegation trips abroad, conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs or none, including by meeting with targeted religious communities, religious freedom advocates, and prisoners held for their religion or belief or their religious freedom advocacy.
- Participate in the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's [Defending Freedoms Project](#) to advocate for the release of prisoners of conscience abroad.
- Participate in the [International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), an informal network of legislators working to counter religious persecution and promote the internationally protected right to religious freedom.
- Exercise oversight of Expedited Removal and press for reforms to address concerns about the treatment of asylum-seekers in that process that USCIRF has identified since 2005.

LEGAL PROVISIONS

IRFA, as amended by the Frank Wolf Act, seeks to make religious freedom a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools:

Government Institutions

Inside the U.S. executive branch, IRFA created the position of Ambassador-at-Large (an appointee nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate), to head a State Department office focused on religious freedom abroad: the [IRF Office](#). The law also urges the appointment of a special adviser dedicated to the issue on the White House NSC staff, although no administration since the law's enactment has done so. The Frank Wolf Act reiterates this position's importance. Outside the executive branch, IRFA created [USCIRF](#), an independent body mandated to review religious freedom conditions globally, evaluate U.S. policy, and make policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

Monitoring and Reporting

IRFA mandates that the State Department prepare an annual report on religious freedom conditions in

each foreign country (the [IRF Report](#)), in addition to the department's annual human rights report. It also requires that USCIRF issue its own [annual report](#) setting forth its findings and providing independent policy recommendations. IRFA further requires the State Department to maintain country-by-country lists of prisoners and issues of concern for use by executive and legislative branch officials, and the Frank Wolf Act now requires that USCIRF, to the extent practicable, make available online lists of prisoners and other victims of governments or nonstate actors that USCIRF recommends for CPC or EPC designation.

Consequences for Violators

IRFA requires the president—who has [delegated](#) this power to the secretary of state—to designate CPCs annually and take action designed to encourage improvements in those countries. CPCs are defined as countries whose governments either engage in or tolerate “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. A menu of possible actions is available, including negotiating a bilateral agreement, imposing sanctions, taking “commensurate action,” or issuing a waiver. The Frank Wolf Act amends this provision to add a “Special Watch

List” category, in which the State Department is to place countries it deems to have engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom. The term “severe violations” is not defined. No specific actions are required or delineated for Special Watch List countries.

The Frank Wolf Act also creates a new presidential designation for “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs, for nonstate actors engaging in particularly severe violations. The law defines nonstate actor as “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.” After the reporting period, the president [delegated](#) the power to make EPC designations to the secretary of state on January 26, 2018.

IRFA also makes inadmissible to the United States foreign government officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. The Frank Wolf Act now requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

IRFA defines “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom as “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, 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.”

International Standards

Under IRFA, these reports and determinations are based on international legal standards: the law defines violations of religious freedom as “violations of the internationally recognized right to freedom of religion and religious belief and practice” as articulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), and other international instruments and regional agreements.

Programs and Training

IRFA includes religious freedom as an element of U.S. foreign assistance, cultural exchange, and international broadcasting programs. It also provides that State Department [Foreign Service Officers](#) and U.S. [immigration officials](#) receive training on religious freedom and religious persecution. The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make international religious freedom training mandatory for all Foreign Service Officers at certain points in their careers and to develop a specific curriculum for it.

Refugee and Asylum Issues

In recognition that religious freedom violations can drive displacement, IRFA includes provisions on U.S. refugee and asylum policy, including requiring that the president consider information about religious persecution as part of his annual determination of refugee admissions, and that immigration officials use the IRF Report as a resource in adjudicating refugee and asylum claims. IRFA also sought assessments of whether immigration officials were implementing Expedited Removal—a summary removal procedure that was new when IRFA was enacted—in a manner consistent with the United States’ obligations to protect individuals fleeing persecution, including by authorizing USCIRF to examine the issue.

DEVELOPMENTS IN 2017

High-Level Commitment

During 2017, the Trump Administration emphasized its commitment to international religious freedom through statements from high-level officials, including President Trump, Vice President Pence, and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. For example, in February, President Trump [called](#) freedom of religion “a sacred right” and noted the need to address threats against it, especially terrorism. In his April 14 weekly address, the president expressed hope for a future “where good people of all faiths, Christians and Muslims and Jewish and Hindu, can follow their hearts and worship according to their conscience.” In June, Vice President Pence [repeatedly stressed](#) that the Trump Administration would “condemn persecution of any faith in any place at any time” and that “protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority” of this administration. In

August, then Secretary Tillerson [stated](#): “Where religious freedom is not protected, we know that instability, human rights abuses, and violent extremism have a greater opportunity to take root. . . . The Trump Administration has committed to addressing these conditions in part by advancing international religious freedom around the world. The State Department will continue to advocate on behalf of those seeking to live their lives according to their faith.” In November, in a speech in Sudan, Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan [stated](#) that “President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Secretary Tillerson have made clear that the protection and promotion of religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Administration” and that “the United States will not ignore violations of human rights, including the right to religious freedom” in its relationship with Sudan.

The December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#) also reflects this commitment. In its fourth pillar (on advancing American influence), the document states that the United States will champion American values, including by “supporting and advancing religious freedom—America’s first freedom.” One of the five priority actions in this area

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is “protecting religious freedom and religious minorities”; in this regard, the document declares that the United States “will advocate on behalf of religious freedom and religious minorities,” and will prioritize protecting minority communities from attacks and preserving their cultural heritage.

Ambassador-at-Large and Related Positions

On January 20, 2017, David Saperstein completed his service as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. During his 2015 to 2017 tenure, and with bipartisan Congressional support, the IRF Office expanded its diplomatic, policy, programmatic, and training activity and reinvigorated the CPC process. After the reporting period, on February 1, 2018, [Sam Brownback](#) was sworn into the position. President Trump nominated him in July 2017 and the Senate confirmed him in late January 2018. Ambassador Brownback, who most recently served as the governor of Kansas, is the fifth Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. As a U.S. senator from

1996 to 2011, he was a key sponsor of IRFA and a co-chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Pursuant to IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large is also an ex officio USCIRF Commissioner, and USCIRF welcomed Ambassador Brownback’s [nomination](#) and [confirmation](#).

Under IRFA, the Ambassador-at-Large is to be a “principal adviser to the President and the Secretary of State regarding matters affecting religious freedom abroad” and, under the Frank Wolf Act, is to report directly to the secretary of state. In previous administrations, the Ambassador-at-Large had not reported directly to the secretary. In August 2017, as part of a department-wide reorganization effort, then Secretary Tillerson proposed that the Ambassador-at-Large report to the Undersecretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. The undersecretary is a more senior official than the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, to whom the Ambassador-at-Large previously reported.

Over the years, various administrations and Congress created other State Department positions with overlapping or related mandates, such as special representatives or envoys on religion and global affairs, to Muslim

communities, to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, as well as a special advisor for religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia. Most of these positions were empty during 2017. Then Secretary Tillerson’s reorganization proposal would eliminate the special representative or envoy positions relating to religion and global affairs, Muslim communities, and the OIC, and move their functions and staff into the IRF Office. The proposal also would move the position on religious minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia into the IRF Office and move the position on anti-Semitism into the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

CPC and Special Watch List Designations

On December 22, 2017, then Secretary Tillerson [redesignated](#) as CPCs, for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe religious freedom violations, the 10 countries previously designated as such in October 2016: Burma,

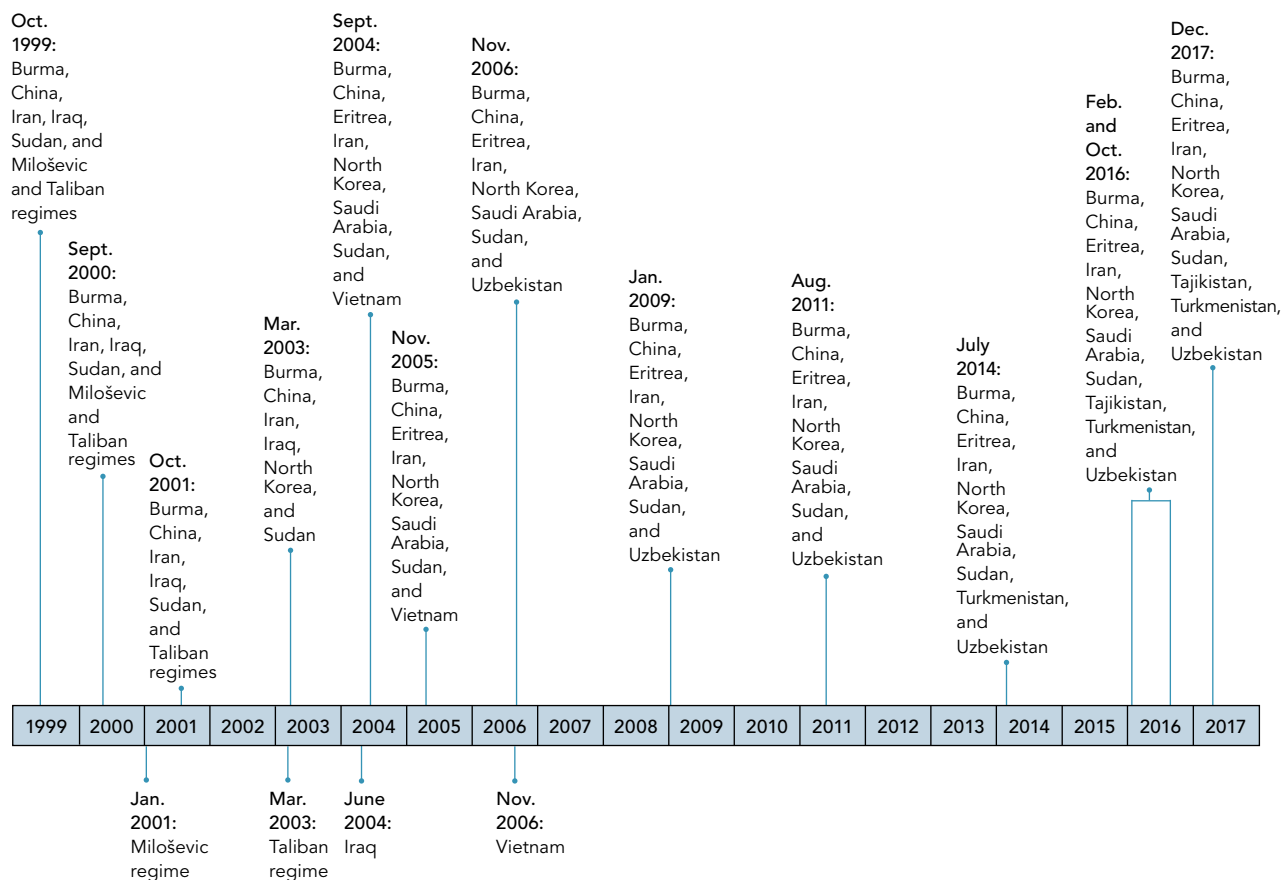
China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF [welcomed](#) these designations and urged that the six other countries USCIRF had recommended as CPCs in the 2017 annual report also be designated. The December 2017 designations were the State Department’s 13th set of CPC designations over IRFA’s existence, and most of the countries had been named for a decade or more. The most recent addition to the State Department’s CPC list was Tajikistan, which was added for the first time in February 2016.

On the same date as the 2017 CPC designations, then Secretary Tillerson also designated Pakistan as the first—and only—country on the department’s Special Watch List, the Frank Wolf Act’s new category for countries that engaged in or tolerated severe violations of religious freedom, a level of violations below the CPC threshold but that neither IRFA nor the Frank Wolf Act define more explicitly.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to make its CPC and Special Watch List designations annually, not later than 90 days after the issuance of the IRF Report. The IRF Report covering 2016, on which these designations were based, was issued on August 15, 2017, meaning that the CPC and Special Watch List designations should have been made by November 13.

The December 2017 CPC designations continued the same presidential actions as the 2016 designations, which are shown in the table below. Of the 10 CPC designees, six are subject to preexisting, or “double-hatted,” sanctions, and four have waivers. Successive administrations have relied on such an approach, and while the statute permits it, USCIRF has long expressed concern that using preexisting sanctions or indefinite waivers provides little incentive for CPC-designated governments to reduce or halt egregious religious freedom violations.

STATE’S DESIGNATIONS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES AS CPCs



STATE’S REMOVALS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES FROM CPC LIST

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information, updated by USCIRF

PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS FOR 2017 CPC DESIGNATIONS (AS DESCRIBED IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER)

For Burma, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For China, the existing ongoing restriction on exports to China of crime control and detection instruments and equipment, under the Foreign Relations Authorization Act of 1990 and 1991 (P.L. 101-246), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Eritrea, the existing ongoing restrictions referenced in 22 CFR 126.1, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Iran, the existing ongoing travel restrictions in section 221(c) of the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (TRA) for individuals identified under section 221(a)(1)(C) of the TRA in connection with the commission of serious human rights abuses, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For North Korea, the existing ongoing restrictions to which the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is subject, pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment), pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Saudi Arabia, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Sudan, the restriction in the annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act on making certain appropriated funds available for assistance to the government of Sudan, currently set forth in section 7042(j) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2015 (Div. K, P.L. 114-113), and any provision of law that is the same or substantially the same as this provision, pursuant to section 402(c)(5) of IRFA.

For Tajikistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Turkmenistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

For Uzbekistan, a waiver as required in the "important national interest of the United States," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to notify Congress of CPC designations not later than 90 days after they are made. The State Department [did so](#) for the December 22, 2017, designations on January 3, 2018. Also pursuant to the Frank Wolf Act, the notification letter included justifications for the waivers on taking action against Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. For all four countries, the State Department cited "the necessity for cooperating with [these governments] on certain core U.S. national security interests, including our collective efforts to counter violent extremism and transnational terrorism," and additionally for Saudi Arabia, "on energy security for the United States." Under the Frank Wolf Act, these waivers are permitted to continue for 180 days; after that period, the law gives the

president waiver authority if the president determines and reports to Congress that the foreign government has ceased violations or that the waiver is required in the important national interest of the United States.

Individual Violators

Section 212(a)(2)(G) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, a provision added by IRFA, makes inadmissible to the United States foreign officials who are responsible for or directly carried out particularly severe religious freedom violations. To date, the provision's only publicly known use was in 2005, when then Chief Minister Narendra Modi of Gujarat State in India was excluded due to his complicity in 2002 riots in his state that resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,100 to 2,000 Muslims. Because of

the confidentiality of visa decisions, there may be other, unknown uses. In recent years, the IRF Office has worked to identify noncitizens who would be inadmissible on this basis should they apply for U.S. visas.

Laws other than IRFA also provide tools to sanction individual violators. Some of these apply to specific countries, such as the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions and Divestment Act (CISADA, [P.L.111-195](#)), which has been used to sanction Iranian officials for human rights violations, including eight officials USCIRF identified as egregious religious freedom violators. More broadly, the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), enacted in December 2016, allows the president 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. The president [delegated](#) these authorities to the secretaries of treasury and state on September 8, 2017. On December 21, 2017, the [State](#) and [Treasury Departments](#) announced the initial set of Global Magnitsky sanctions, including against General Maung Maung Soe, who as head of the Burmese Army’s Western Command oversaw atrocities against Rohingya Muslims. USCIRF [welcomed](#) the first use of this important new accountability tool. Also on December 21, the White House issued [Executive Order 13818](#), which authorizes visa bans and asset freezes against foreign persons involved in “serious human rights abuse,” providing an additional—and potentially even more expansive—basis for targeted sanctions.

The Frank Wolf Act requires the State Department to establish, maintain, and submit to Congress every 180 days “designated persons lists” of foreign individuals denied visas or subject to financial sanctions or other measures for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. No designated persons lists were made public in 2017.

EPC Designations

The State Department did not make EPC designations during 2017. On March 5, 2018, after the end of the

reporting period, then Secretary Tillerson [designated](#) the following nonstate actors as EPCs for particularly severe religious freedom violations: “al-Nusra Front, al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qa’ida, al-Shabab, Boko Haram, ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria], ISIS-Khorasan, and the Taliban.”

Prisoners

During 2017, the Trump Administration prioritized seeking the release of American citizens unjustly imprisoned abroad. One of these cases, that of [Pastor Andrew Brunson](#) in Turkey, is also a high priority for USCIRF, and is part of USCIRF’s [Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project](#). President Trump, Vice President Pence, and then Secretary Tillerson pressed for Pastor Brunson’s release at the highest levels of the Turkish government, but he remained in prison at the end of 2017. USCIRF Vice Chairwomen Sandra Jolley and Kristina Arriaga met with Pastor Brunson in Kiriklar Prison in October 2017, the first nonconsular, nonfamily delegation to visit him.

Refugee and Asylum Issues

Under the USRAP, the president sets a ceiling on how many vulnerable refugees the United States will accept from abroad each year; under IRFA, religious persecution should be considered in this determination. Since 2001, the refugee admission ceiling has ranged from 70,000 to 110,000, averaging 75,000 per year. The Trump Administration suspended the USRAP for part of 2017 to put in place enhanced vetting procedures and set the ceiling for Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 and FY 2018 at 50,000 and 45,000, respectively. While resettlement to a third country is only possible for less than 1 percent of the world’s refugees, USCIRF has [emphasized](#) its importance for the most vulnerable, especially at a time of appalling mass atrocities and unprecedented forced displacement.

Pursuant to IRFA’s authorization, USCIRF has conducted extensive research into the U.S. government’s treatment of asylum-seekers in Expedited Removal. USCIRF’s reports on the subject—released in [2005](#), [2007](#),

Laws other than IRFA also provide tools to sanction individual violators.

2013, and 2016—document major problems, which successive administrations have not addressed. In 2017, the Trump Administration expanded the use of Expedited Removal, which 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 documents, unless they establish a credible fear of persecution or torture. USCIRF’s monitoring of Expedited Removal over more than a decade has revealed that DHS officials often fail to follow required procedures to

identify asylum-seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations, and that they detain asylum-seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions. To ensure the fair and humane treatment of asylum-seekers while protecting U.S. borders, USCIRF has recommended that DHS (1) appoint a high-level official to coordinate refugee and asylum issues and oversee reforms, (2) improve quality assurance measures, (3) give officers additional training, (4) use non-prison-like detention facilities, and (5) increase funding for asylum officers and immigration courts to promptly and fairly adjudicate claims. USCIRF also has urged Congress to exercise oversight on these issues, including by requesting that the Government Accountability Office conduct a study to assess whether noncitizens removed to their home countries under Expedited Removal have faced persecution or torture upon their return.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL MARK

It has been my privilege for the past four years to serve on USCIRF, promoting and defending what we rightly call in this country the “first freedom.” For Americans, religious liberty is our first freedom in part because it comes first in our Bill of Rights. But, in a much deeper way, religious liberty is the first freedom because of its fundamental, foundational nature. It is noteworthy that, twenty years ago, Congress created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, not on International Human Rights. Human rights,

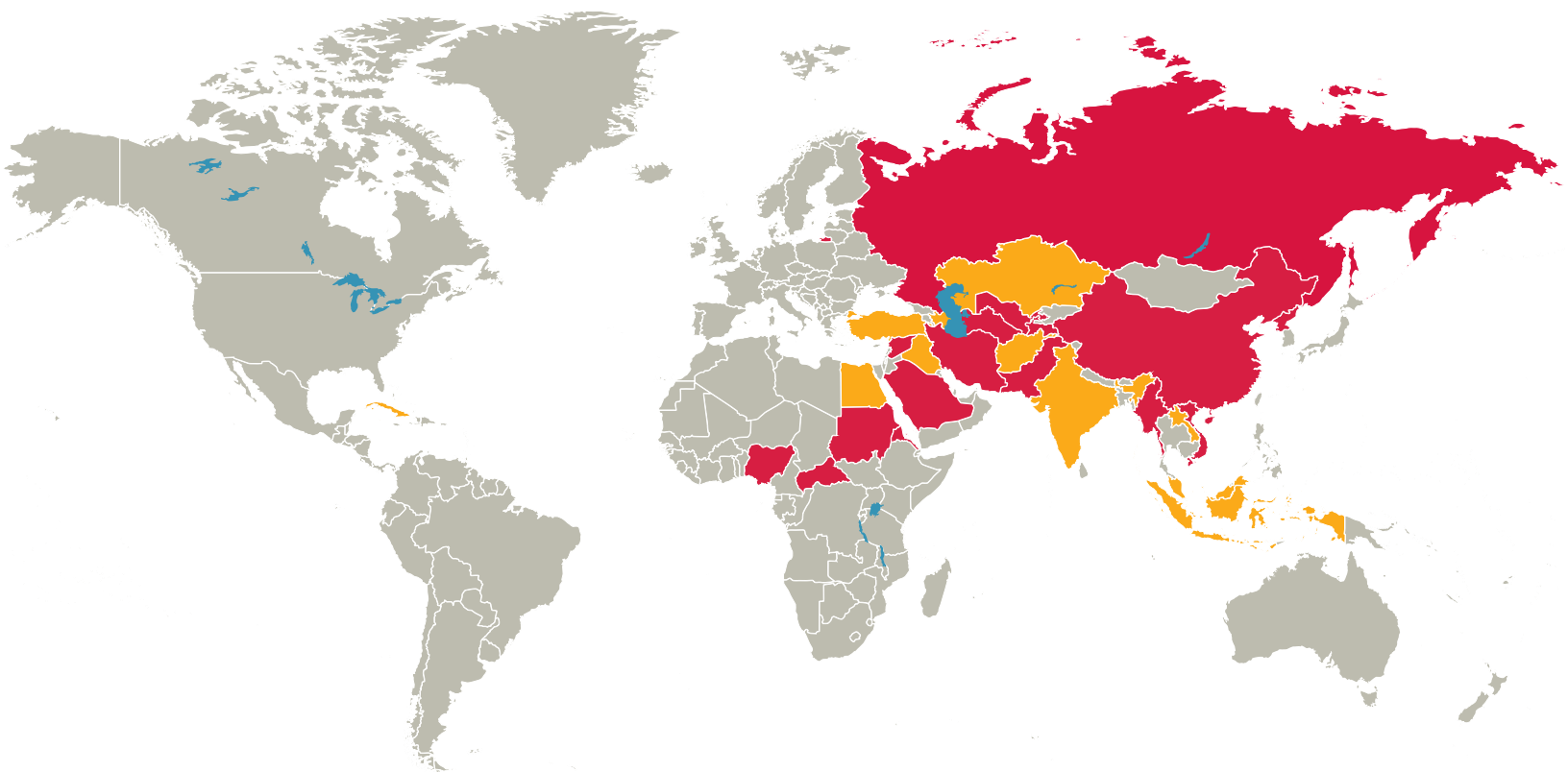
properly understood, are inalienable and inviolable, but Congress saw then—and many continue to see—that religious freedom deserves pride of place. Though profoundly intertwined with other basic rights such as freedom of expression and association, freedom of

religion stands out as the right for which people are most willing to suffer and die. This is because religious freedom safeguards the right to recognize what is most sacred and to live one’s life according to one’s sacred obligations. Moreover, religious freedom is the ultimate bulwark against totalitar-

ianism because it stands as a testament to the notion that the human being does not belong to the state and that the person’s highest commitments lie beyond the control of government. This is an especially critical lesson in our age of rising authoritarianism, and it may underpin the emerging case that religious freedom is a prerequisite for democracy, rather than the other way around. Finally, with mounting evidence that ties religious freedom tightly to peace and prosperity, we also know it is in nations’ interest to respect this paramount right. Though they resist the conclusion at every turn, regimes that wish for stability and development must accept that religious freedom is not the problem but the solution.

USCIRF’s monitoring of Expedited Removal over more than a decade has revealed that DHS officials often fail to follow required procedures to identify asylum-seekers and refer them for credible fear determinations, and that they detain asylum-seekers in inappropriate, prison-like conditions.

2018 COUNTRIES



■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Iran	Russia	Tajikistan
Central African Republic	Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Turkmenistan
China	North Korea	Sudan	Uzbekistan
Eritrea	Pakistan	Syria	Vietnam

■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Indonesia	Laos
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Iraq	Malaysia
Bahrain	India	Kazakhstan	Turkey

KEY FINDINGS

In the past year, religious freedom in Iran continued to deteriorate for both recognized and unrecognized religious groups, with the government targeting Baha'is and Christian converts in particular. While several high-profile Baha'i prisoners were released during the reporting period following completion of their sentences, others were arbitrarily detained based on their religion, and long-term trends of economic and educational persecution of the community continue. Christian converts and house church leaders faced increasingly harsh sentencing; many were sentenced to at least 10 years in prison for their religious activities. Religious reformers and dissenters faced prolonged detention and possible execution, while the government's growing ability to enforce official interpretations of

religion online posed new threats to the freedom and safety of internet users. In a new, troubling development, the suspension of a Zoroastrian elected to the local council of Yazd sparked national debate about limiting the political rights of religious minorities. While the Rouhani Administration signaled its intent to address some religious freedom violations, these promises have yet to be implemented and the number of individuals imprisoned for their beliefs continues to climb. Based on these particularly severe religious freedom violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2018 that Iran be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. Since 1999, the U.S. Department of State has designated Iran as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Iran as a CPC under IRFA;
 - Ensure that violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of multilateral or bilateral discussions with the Iranian government whenever possible;
 - Work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions for religious freedom abuses, especially leading up to Iran's 2019 Universal Periodic Review;
 - Press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience;
 - Speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
 - Identify Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act \(CISADA\)](#), the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;
 - Call on Iran to cooperate fully with the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur—and other relevant UN entities, such as the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention—to visit;
 - Maintain leadership in supporting an annual UN General Assembly resolution condemning severe violations of human rights—including freedom of religion or belief—in Iran and calling for officials responsible for such violations to be held accountable; and
 - Use appropriated funds to advance internet freedom and protect Iranian activists by supporting the development and accessibility of new technologies and programs to counter censorship and to facilitate the free flow of information in and out of Iran.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to pass resolutions condemning the Iranian government's repression of the religious minorities, such as the Baha'i community; and
 - Reauthorize and ensure implementation of the [Lautenberg Amendment](#), which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities and other specified groups seeking refugee status in the United States, and work to provide the president with permanent authority to designate as refugees specifically defined groups based on shared characteristics identifying them as targets for persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Islamic Republic of Iran

GOVERNMENT

Theocratic Republic

POPULATION

82,021,564

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Shi'a Islam (Jaafari and Zaydi), Sunni Islam (Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali), Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

99% Muslim (89–94% Shi'a, 5–9% Sunni)
< 1% Other (includes Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis)

*U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a constitutional, theocratic republic that proclaims the Twelver Jaafari school of Shi'a Islam to be the official religion of the country. The constitution stipulates that followers of five other schools of thought within Islam—Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Zaydi—should be accorded respect and permitted to perform their religious rites. The constitution recognizes only Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, free to perform their rites “within the limits of the law.” Five

(out of a total of 290) seats in the parliament are reserved for these groups (two for Armenian Christians and one each for Assyrian/Chaldean Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians).

The government of Iran discriminates against its citizens on the basis of religion or belief, as all laws and regulations are based on unique Jaafari Shi'a Islamic criteria. Under Iran's penal code, *moharebeh* (“enmity against God,” vaguely defined and often used for political purposes) and *sabb al-nabi* (“insulting the prophet”) are capital crimes. Apostasy is not codified as a crime in the penal code; however, individuals are still tried as apostates because the constitution specifies that Shari'ah be

applied to any cases not explicitly addressed by the law. The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the UN Secretary-General have noted that these crimes are vague and broadly defined, leading to arbitrary interpretation and application. Since the 1979 revolution, many mem-

bers of minority religious communities have been arrested or executed, or have fled in fear of persecution.

In December 2016, President Hassan Rouhani publicly released a nonbinding Charter on

Citizens' Rights that promised, among other rights, recognition of all religious identities and nondiscriminatory legal protection. Members of Iranian religious minorities had hoped President Rouhani's 2017 reelection would lead to greater respect for their rights; however, little real change ensued. In August 2017, President Rouhani appointed Shahindokht Molaverdi as his assistant for civil rights, charged with implementing the charter. Meanwhile, growing numbers of religious minorities, dissident Shi'a Muslims, and human rights defenders have been subject to harassment, arrest, and execution for exercising rights nominally protected by the charter.

The constitution recognizes only Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities, free to perform their rites “within the limits of the law.”

In late December 2017, widespread protests broke out across Iran's provinces, initially sparked by economic grievances but spreading to include political issues including corruption, regional involvement, and the unchecked power of religious authorities like Ayatollah Khamenei. President Rouhani publicly acknowledged some of the protestors' complaints but warned them to refrain from violence or property destruction, while state security responded with force and the government disrupted internet access and blocked social media tools like Instagram and Telegram. By the time the protests dwindled in January 2018, just after the end of the reporting period, over 20 civilians had been killed and several thousand arrested. The head of Tehran's Revolutionary Court stated that detained protestors may face *moharebeh* charges, which carry the death penalty.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Muslims

Over the past few years, Iranian authorities have charged many reformers within the Shi'a community with "insulting Islam," criticizing the Islamic Republic, and publishing materials that allegedly deviate from Islamic standards. Dissident Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Khomeini Boroujerdi, arrested in 2006, was released on medical leave in January 2017 after suffering physical and mental abuse while in prison. Following his release, Ayatollah Boroujerdi has lived under de facto house arrest, summoned repeatedly for questioning and banned from receiving visitors.

The Sunni Muslim population in Iran is concentrated in underdeveloped areas and experiences discrimination in employment and political leadership, and many Sunni activists report harsh treatment in prison due to their religious practices. At least 140 Sunni prisoners reportedly are detained on charges related to their beliefs and religious activities. Human rights groups also allege that communal punishment of the Sunni community through prolonged detention and harassment have intensified following the June 2017 attacks in Tehran by the Islamic State of Iraq and

Syria (ISIS). The repeated requests of Tehran's Sunni community to build an official mosque in the city have all been refused; they therefore hold prayers in smaller spaces they refer to as "prayer halls." In August and September 2017, prominent Sunni leader Molavi Abdul Hamid and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei exchanged a series of public letters regarding anti-Sunni discrimination in employment and mosque construction. Khamenei wrote that "no kind of discrimination or inequality by the institutions of the Islamic Republic is allowed based on race, ethnicity or religion," an assertion in stark contrast to the lived reality of Sunni communities.

Adherents to Sufi orders, which emphasize the mystic elements of Islam, are targeted for "following a deviant sect" that does not conform to the state's official interpretation of Islam. Members of the Nematollahi Gonabadi Sufi order, Iran's largest, continued to face a range of abuses, including attacks on their prayer centers and homes; expulsion from educational and cultural institutions; and harassment, arrests, physical assaults, and travel bans on their leaders. Over the past year, authorities have detained dozens of Sufis,

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sentencing many to imprisonment, fines, and floggings. Iranian state television regularly airs programs demonizing Sufism, and many of the administrators of a popular Sufi website remain

in prison on charges including "membership in a sect endangering national security." In late December 2017, as protests spread nationwide, security forces arrested five Gonabadi Sufis as they visited the hospitalized administrator of the Sufi website.

Baha'is

The Baha'i community, which at over 300,000 people is the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, is deemed by the government a heretical, "deviant sect" whose members are de facto apostates. Baha'is are therefore the most severely persecuted religious minority in Iran, not recognized by the state, and denied their political, economic, cultural, and religious rights. While President Rouhani promised during his 2013

election campaign to end religious discrimination, the amount of anti-Baha'i propaganda aired on official channels has grown steadily. Since 2014, an estimated 26,000 pieces of anti-Baha'i media have run on official or semi-official channels.

Over the past 10 years, more than 1,000 Baha'is have been arbitrarily arrested. In April 2017, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that the 2016 sentencing of 24 Iranian Baha'is to lengthy prison terms was based solely on their religious beliefs and a "violation of their right as a religious minority." In October 2017, the 200th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the Baha'i faith, nearly 20 Baha'is were arrested and 25 homes raided. At the end of the reporting period, over 90 Baha'is were being held in prison solely because of their religious beliefs.

Those imprisoned include four of the seven high-profile Baha'i leaders known as the "Friends of Iran" or *Yaran*. Three of these leaders—Mahvash Sabet, Fariba Kamalabadi, and Behrouz Tavakkoli—were released in September, October, and December 2017, respectively, after completing 10-year sentences on false charges of espionage and spreading propaganda. Prior to the release of Sabet and Kamalabadi, USCIRF advocated on their behalf

as part of the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. The other four leaders—Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naemi, Saeid Rezaie, and Vahid Tizfahm—remained in prison at the end of the reporting period. Two Baha'i instructors imprisoned for their work with the outlawed Baha'i Institute for Higher Education were released from prison in 2017 following completion of five-year sentences. However, five other instructors remained in prison at year's end, and two more were summoned to begin prison terms in November and December 2017.

In April, July, and October 2017, Iranian authorities closed down dozens of Baha'i-owned shops for observing holy days. While some closures were temporary, many shops closed in 2016 remained shuttered at the end of the reporting period despite legal appeals, and over 600 shops have been closed since 2014. In November 2017, the President's Special Assistant for Citizens' Rights Affairs

Shahindokht Molaverdi stated that the Rouhani Administration would "follow legal procedures" to remedy the issue of closures.

Although the Iranian government maintains publicly that Baha'is are free to attend university, the de facto policy of preventing Baha'is from obtaining higher education remains in effect. Over 50 Baha'i students have reported being expelled during the academic year since 2013, despite high scores on standardized tests. In November 2017, three Baha'i students who wrote to the government to protest being denied enrollment in university were sentenced to five years in prison each on charges of "membership in the anti-state Baha'i cult."

In September 2016, Baha'i Farhang Amiri was stabbed to death by two brothers outside of his home in Yazd; the two men later reportedly confessed, saying they killed him because he was an apostate whose murder would guarantee them paradise. In July 2017, the

older brother convicted of the murder was sentenced to 11 years in prison and two years' exile, while the younger brother received five and a half years in prison. Under the Iranian penal code, murder of a Muslim carries the death penalty, while murder of

a Baha'i or other member of an unrecognized religion carries much lighter legal penalties.

Christians

Iran's Christian population, estimated at nearly 300,000, is divided between the traditional Armenian and Assyrian/Chaldean ethnic churches and the newer Protestant and evangelical churches. Members of the historical churches face extensive government surveillance and legal restrictions on construction and renovation of houses of worship. Evangelical Christians and Christian converts, however, are particularly targeted for repression because many conduct services in Persian and proselytize to those outside their community. Pastors of house churches are commonly charged with unfounded national security-related crimes, as well as apostasy and illegal house-church

Three Baha'i students who wrote to the government to protest being denied enrollment in university were sentenced to five years in prison each on charges of "membership in the anti-state Baha'i cult."

activities. During the year, government-controlled and progovernment media outlets continued to spread anti-Christian sentiment, while anti-Christian publications proliferated online and in print throughout Iran.

While Iranian authorities have for decades raided house church services and arrested hundreds of worshippers and church leaders, the severity of sentencing has increased in recent years. In May 2017, four evangelical Christians, three of them Azerbaijani citizens, were sentenced to 10 years in prison each for house church activities and evangelism. The following month, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, who previously served a prison sentence for apostasy and is among those highlighted by USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, faced trial along with three codefendants because of their house church activities. Each of the four Christians was sentenced to 10 years in prison, with Nadarkhani receiving an additional two years in exile. In July, Pentecostal Assyrian Church Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz stood trial along with three other members of his community. Each of the four received 10- or 15-year sentences. In December, two members of the Church of Iran were convicted of false security-related crimes and sentenced to eight years in prison each, following their original arrest in 2012 during a raid on a prayer meeting.

In August 2017, Christian convert Maryam Naghash Zargaran, also one of the individuals highlighted in the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, was released after completing her four-year prison sentence. While leaving prison, however, Zargaran was issued a 50-million-to-man (over \$14,000) bail for allegedly insulting staff of the prison's hospital. She also reportedly received a six-month travel ban upon her release.

Other Religious Communities

Although the vitriolic sentiment was not as pronounced as in previous years, the government continued to propagate anti-Semitism and target members of the Jewish community on the basis of real or perceived "ties to Israel." Throughout the year, high-level clerics continued to make anti-Semitic remarks in mosques, while numerous programs broadcast on state-run television

advanced anti-Semitic messages. In December 2017, two synagogues in Shiraz were attacked and vandalized, leaving sacred texts destroyed. Discrimination against Iranian Jews, who number between 15,000 and 20,000, fosters a threatening atmosphere for the community.

In recent years, members of the Zoroastrian community, which numbers between 30,000 and 35,000 people, have come under increasing repression and discrimination. Following the May 2017 local elections, discrimination against the community rose to national prominence as a Zoroastrian elected in Yazd was suspended from his position due to his religion. The Guardian Council, a governmental body of jurists that assesses legislation for compliance with Islamic values, upheld his suspension based on a pre-election statement from its chairman, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, stating that non-Muslims cannot run for office in majority-Muslim areas, despite protections in the election law allowing members of recognized religions to do so. In December 2017, the Iranian parliament amended the national law on local councils, explicitly affirming the right of recognized religious minorities to hold office. However, this amendment was rejected by the Guardian Council, leaving the debate ongoing at the end of the year.

While the Iranian government considers followers of the Yarsan faith to be Shi'a Muslims who practice

Sufism, members identify as a distinct and separate religion (also known as *Ahl-e Haqq* or People of Truth, estimated to number over one million). Yarsanis whose religious identity is publicly known

In the May 2017 elections, 28 of the 30 Yarsani candidates for local office in the city of Hashtgerd were disqualified from running.

face discrimination in education, employment, and running for political office. In the May 2017 elections, 28 of the 30 Yarsani candidates for local office in the city of Hashtgerd were disqualified from running. The following month, Yarsani leaders published an open letter to President Rouhani requesting that the constitutional status of the Yarsan faith be clarified. As with previous such letters, the community received no reply.

Mohammad Ali Taheri, a university professor and founder of a spiritual movement (*Erfan-e Halgheh* or Spiritual Circle), remains in prison after serving a

five-year sentence for “insulting religious sanctities.” In 2015, Taheri was sentenced to death before the Iranian Supreme Court overturned the death sentence. In August 2017, he was retried and once more sentenced to death for “spreading corruption on earth,” although the sentence reportedly was quashed in October and a retrial set for January 2018. Several dozen of Taheri’s followers were arrested in July and August 2017, and human rights organizations estimate that over 300 have been arrested since 2010. Many *Erfan* instructors and students were released shortly after being interrogated during the year.

Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, and Dissidents

Iranian authorities regularly detain and harass journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders who criticize the Islamic revolution or the Iranian government. Over the past few years, a number of human rights lawyers who defended Baha’is and Christians in court were imprisoned or fled the country for fear of arrest. Author and human rights activist Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was convicted in 2016 of “insulting the sacred” based on her unpublished story in which a protagonist angered by stonings burns a Qur’an. In February 2017, Ebrahimi Iraee was released on a short leave but arrested soon afterward for failing to

return to prison on time. At the end of the reporting period, she remained imprisoned in Evin Prison. In October, poet and human rights activist Reza Akvanian was sentenced to three years in prison and 40 lashes for allegedly insulting the Twelfth Imam in his poetry.

The Iranian government exercises strict control over expression of religious ideas and dissent online as part of its broader censorship and targeted use of technology. Throughout 2017, several young people were convicted of “apostasy” or “insulting the sacred” online. In February 2017, Iranian courts sentenced Sina Dehghan and Mohammad Nouri to death for posting “anti-Islamic materials” on social media. In April, three young men were each sentenced to 12 years in prison based on their political and religious commentary on the popular messaging application

Telegram. In June, Iranian officials announced that they had reached an agreement with Telegram to block “anti-religious” content, shortly after a prominent cleric stated that unrestricted internet would be “a tool for the toppling of Islam.” According to various reports, Iranian government online attacks reveal that religious minority leaders, especially Baha’is, have been particularly targeted by pro-regime hackers exploiting vulnerabilities in the use of technology for advocacy and communication.

Women and Religious Freedom

The government’s enforcement of its official interpretation of Jaafari Shi’a Islam on all citizens regardless of their religion negatively affects the religious and human rights of women in Iran, including their freedoms of movement, association, thought, conscience, and religion or belief. The Iranian justice system does not grant women the same legal status as men; testimony by a man is equivalent to the testimony of two women. In addition, some provisions of the penal code create conditions supportive of violence

against women, including “honor” violence.

The “blood money” for the murder of a Muslim woman is one-half that of the blood money for a Muslim man’s murder.

According to the penal code, murder committed by a female victim’s father or paternal grandfather is subject to light penalty, if any.

For most of the reporting period, Iranian authorities continued their enforcement of the strict dress code for women. By law, Iranian women, regardless of their religious affiliation or belief, must be covered from head to foot while in public or face imprisonment and fines. However, human rights organizations reported declining rigor in enforcement in Tehran, and in December 2017 Tehran police announced that they would no longer detain women in violation of the code. According to state-affiliated media, violators in Tehran will instead be required to attend Islamic education classes at state counselling centers. Media reports claimed that the dress code will remain enforced outside the capital and repeat violators in the city may still face charges.

In February 2017, Iranian courts sentenced Sina Dehghan and Mohammad Nouri to death for posting “anti-Islamic materials” on social media.

U.S. POLICY

In July 2010, then President Barack Obama signed into law the [Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act](#) (CISADA), which requires the president to submit to Congress a list of Iranian government officials or persons acting on their behalf responsible for human rights and religious freedom abuses, bars their entry into the United States, and freezes their assets. In August 2012, then President Obama signed the [Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act](#) (ITRSHRA), which enhances the scope of human rights-related sanctions contained in CISADA. Over the past seven years, the United States has imposed visa restrictions and asset freezes on 20 Iranian officials and 19 Iranian entities pursuant to CISADA, ITRSHRA, and various executive orders. The Obama Administration also worked with the European Union, Iran, and the P5+1 countries to implement the July 2015 [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) (JCPOA), designed to ensure that Iran's nuclear program would be exclusively peaceful.

Since President Donald Trump assumed office, the U.S. government has signaled a strict approach to relations with Iran, emphasizing accountability for Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. In April 2017, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Tehran Prisons Organization and Sohrab Soleimani, a leader of the State Prisons Organization, under [Executive Order 13553](#), marking the first new human rights sanctions designations relating to Iran since 2014. In April and July 2017, the Trump Administration certified to Congress that Iran had complied with the terms of the JCPOA. However, in October, President Trump refused to certify Iran's compliance with the plan. According to the terms of the JCPOA, Congress therefore had the opportunity to revisit the 2015 [Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act](#). The president also delivered public remarks in October outlining a new Iran strategy, which focuses on countering Iran's destabilizing activities, terrorist financing, missile proliferation, and possible development of nuclear weapons.

In 2017, the State Department repeatedly condemned Iran's human rights and religious freedom violations. In his August [remarks](#) at the launch of the State Department International Religious Freedom Report, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson highlighted Iran's religious freedom violations, specifically denouncing the persecution of Christians and Baha'is,

as well as sentencings and executions for apostasy and *moharebeh*. The department also issued public statements throughout the year calling for the release of the Baha'i leaders and Mohammad Ali Taheri.

Throughout the year, high-level U.S. officials in multilateral fora and through public statements urged the Iranian government to respect its citizens' human rights, including the right to religious freedom. In November 2017, for the 15th year in a row, the U.S. government cosponsored and supported a successful UN General Assembly resolution on human rights in Iran, which passed 83 to 30, with 68 abstentions. The [resolution](#) expressed serious concern about ongoing violations of human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor in 2017. The Nigerian government at the national and state levels continued to tolerate violence and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, and suppressed the freedom to manifest religion or belief. The federal government continued to detain the leader of the Shi'a Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, along with his wife and hundreds of other members, and state governments continued to ban the group's activities. Sectarian violence between predominantly Muslim herders and predominantly Christian farmers increased, and the Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetra-

tors accountable. Despite gains made by the Nigerian military in the fight against Boko Haram, the government's nonmilitary efforts remained nascent, and Boko Haram's attacks continued. The government also failed to hold Nigerian Army officers accountable for excessive use of force against IMN members, against Boko Haram, and in efforts to curtail sectarian violence. Finally, other religious freedom abuses continued at the state level, including coercive official or societal actions to enforce particular religious norms. Based on these violations, in 2018 USCIRF again finds that Nigeria should be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Nigeria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Seek to enter into a binding agreement with the Nigerian government, as authorized under section 405 (c) of IRFA, and provide associated financial and technical support, to obligate the Nigerian government to take substantial steps to address violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to:
 - Professionalize and train specialized police and joint security units to respond to sectarian violence and acts of terrorism, including in counterterrorism, investigative techniques, community policing, nonlethal crowd control, and conflict prevention methods;
 - Enhance training for all military and police officers on international human rights standards, and ensure security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable;
 - Conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecute incidents of sectarian violence and terrorism and suspected and/or accused perpetrators;
 - Develop effective conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms at the local, state, and federal levels using practical and implementable criteria;
- Encourage politicians and religious leaders to participate in conflict management training and projects to prevent violence and counter divisive and inciting messages;
- Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter- and deradicalization programs;
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission to discuss further actions to end sectarian violence, address land concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities;
- Ensure religious freedom issues are addressed in the assessments required by Congress under [section 1279A](#) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018, including by:
 - Assessing the role of religious identity in human rights violations by Nigerian security forces;
 - Assessing the engagement of religious leaders by Nigerian forces in efforts to improve protection of civilians; and
 - Incorporating education and training on religious freedom issues into the plan for the U.S. government to work with Nigerian institutions to improve detainee conditions;
- Within existing U.S. assistance to Nigeria, increase funding and support for conflict prevention and management programming in central and northern states facing high levels of sectarian violence, and for research into the relationship between corruption and religious freedom violations in Nigeria; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Federal Republic of Nigeria

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

190,632,261

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

N/A

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

50% Muslim

40% Christian

10% Indigenous beliefs

*Estimates from the CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

With vast ethnic and linguistic diversity and longstanding concerns among the population that some ethnic or religious groups may dominate over others, the Nigerian government seeks to promote a unified national identity and deter ethnic and religious marginalization and sectarian conflict. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria includes provisions protecting freedom of religious belief and prohibiting religious discrimination. Mandated to enforce the constitution's federal character principle, which seeks to ensure that the government reflects the country's diversity, the Federal Character Commission attempts to provide fair and representative access to posts in the civil service, armed forces, police, and other agencies, and to ensure equitable distribution of resources and services. However, because this principle is applied through the controversial "indigene" concept, whereby certain groups are considered native to a particular area and as a result are afforded benefits and privileges not provided to those deemed non-native "settlers," members of some groups have been denied equal citizenship at the local level. Historically, the population in the north has been largely Muslim and, in the south, mostly Christian.

Across Nigeria, traditional rulers and religious leaders still wield influence in politics and governance, although religious groups have argued they receive

unequal representation in government. In 12 Muslim-majority northern Nigerian states, federalism has allowed the adoption of Shari'ah law in the criminal codes. Religious police are also used to enforce Shari'ah, often focusing on family issues and moral behavior.

For decades, Nigeria has struggled to address sectarian violence between farmer and herder communities that are often polarized along religious lines. Inflammatory media reports have increased tensions, and 2017 saw an increase in cycles of violence in these communities as compared to the previous year. Attacks

by the terrorist group Boko Haram, which began in 2009, continued in spite of progress by the Nigerian government in its counterinsurgency efforts. Through its

violent Islamist campaign in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin, Boko Haram is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands, the kidnapping of hundreds, and the displacement of nearly two million Nigerians. Similarly, the pastoralist conflict mainly in the Middle Belt of the country has resulted in mass displacement, destruction of property, and the deaths of thousands.

A USCIRF delegation traveled to Nigeria in January and February 2017, visiting Abuja and Kaduna to meet with government officials, religious communities, and civil society organizations.

Across Nigeria, traditional rulers and religious leaders still wield influence in politics and governance . . .

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Repression of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria

The IMN, the country's largest Shi'a Muslim group, was formed by Sheikh Ibrahim Al Zakzaky in the northern city of Zaria in Kaduna State in the 1980s and 90s, with the aim of establishing an Islamic state. The group has a history of violent clashes with Nigerian security forces and Sunni Muslim groups. Although the IMN has renounced violence, the Nigerian government has continued to classify it as a violent group and to use excessive force to repress its members and activities.

More than two years since the most violent crackdown on IMN—the mass killing and burial of 347 IMN members by the Nigerian Army in Zaria in December 2015—and despite a Kaduna State commission of inquiry finding the army responsible and recommending prosecutions, no Nigerian Army officers have been held to account. Nigerian police also continued to detain hundreds of IMN members—including, most prominently, Sheikh Al Zakzaky and his wife Malama Zeenah Ibrahim, who were held without charges, despite an order from the Federal High Court in Abuja ruling that they be released within 45 days of December 2, 2016. Zakzaky had been severely injured, and three of his sons killed, in the December 2015 attack. In March 2017, in response to public criticism from human rights groups, the Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called Zakzaky's case a "high and sensitive national security issue"; he and his wife remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

Throughout 2017, IMN members staged protests around the country advocating for the release of Zakzaky. In Kaduna and Sokoto, their activities, including religious processions, were banned. Police continued to arrest members, using tear gas to disperse protests. The IMN and news sources reported that the force used was at times excessive, causing both injuries and deaths.

For decades, Nigeria has struggled to address sectarian violence between farmer and herder communities that are often polarized along religious lines.

Sectarian Violence

For decades, farmer and herder communities have clashed throughout Nigeria, most prominently in the Middle Belt region, without adequate government response. Because the groups are predominantly

divided along ethnic and religious lines—with mainly Christian farmers and Muslim herders—communities often perceive the attacks as religiously motivated. In 2017, conflict between herder and farmer communities continued across

the country, and increasingly in southern parts of Nigeria, causing death, destruction, and displacement. For example, in July, over 30 people were killed in sectarian violence in Kaduna. One November 2017 report documented 139 Christians killed in Benue State between January and August 2017. Human rights groups reported 549 deaths in herder-farmer clashes throughout Nigeria in 2017, and thousands of individuals displaced.

Desertification and conflict in the north of the country have led herders to take routes farther south. As farmers and herders dispute land use and contest grazing paths, violence often results. The proliferation of arms on both sides, polarizing media coverage, and shortfalls in security have exacerbated the problem. During USCIRF's visit to Nigeria in 2017, civil society and government officials offered an array of reasons for the complex conflict, including: land disputes; herds-men being more heavily armed to protect their cattle from cattle rustling; Fulani (an ethnic group of mostly nomadic herder people) engaging in revenge attacks in southern Kaduna; and for Christian interlocutors, a Fulani ethnic cleansing campaign against indigenous ethnic groups to take their lands. All parties, including Christians and Muslims, told USCIRF that they did not feel protected by security services. They expressed frustration that there is impunity for attackers, and that when they call for help in advance or during attacks, police do not come.

By the end of the reporting period, herder-farmer conflicts and ethnoreligious tensions continued to rise. There were increased reports of concerns of an ethnic

cleansing campaign against Christian communities, with various media sources and organizations characterizing the perpetrators as coming from a single Fulani militant group. Some religious leaders and organizations from affected communities contributed to inflammatory narratives based on unsubstantiated reports about the conflict, while others called for increased interreligious cooperation and understanding to foster peace. In the strongly religious context of Nigeria, religious leaders' voices in particular can have an elevated influence within society and on political leaders.

Human rights groups, religious leaders, and other civil society organizations have frequently criticized the government and security services for failing to respond to or prevent conflict, or to hold perpetrators to account. Deficiencies in policing have led to the deployment of military forces in attempts to restore order. In these cases, the military has faced criticism for using excessive force, harming civilians, fostering mistrust of authorities and among religious groups, and tacitly encouraging vigilante responses. In one example in November, a militia from a farming community killed between 30 and 60 members—mostly women and children—of a herder community in Kikan. In December, armed herdsmen engaged in a series of reprisal attacks on villages around Adamawa State, and the Nigerian Air Force responded by firing rockets on villages, causing further destruction and killing civilians.

Political debates continued over solutions, including promoting private ranching or state-run cattle colonies, where herders can bring their cattle to graze, and passing anti-open-grazing laws. In July and October 2017, respectively, Taraba and Benue states enacted laws making open grazing by herders a crime. Some herder communities began to move across state borders as a result. Opponents say these laws marginalize herders and impinge on their rights. In December, the governor of Benue State began implementation of the law in Benue by ordering the arrest of herders and confiscation of cattle.

Boko Haram

Since 2009, Boko Haram has inflicted mass terror on civilians, killing at least 20,000 Nigerians, kidnapping thousands, and displacing nearly two million. Boko Haram has destroyed countless churches, homes, and government buildings in attacks and has forcibly closed many schools. The group has killed and harmed people for being “nonbelievers,” including prominent religious leaders. Some of the most affected are women and girls, who have been abducted and subjected to forced marriage, forced conversion, sexual abuse, and torture.

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in the previous year, using more suicide bombings, increasingly carried out by women and children. During the year, the group reportedly killed at least 300 people in Nigeria, and more than 900 in the Lake Chad region. In May, Boko Haram released 82 more schoolgirls from the group of 276 abducted from Chibok in 2014, in

exchange for six Boko Haram fighters. Around 100 girls from that abduction remained missing at the end of the reporting period, along with an unknown number of others. In March, Boko Haram reportedly kidnapped an additional 22 women and girls. Interlocutors repeatedly reported to USCIRF during the 2017 visit that the government and security services were either unable or unwilling to provide security for people in this region or address the ongoing problem of abductions.

With the 2016 split of Boko Haram into one faction supporting Abubakar Shekau and another supporting Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)-endorsed Abu Musab Al Barnawi, some attacks have been attributed to or claimed by the ISIS-West Africa faction. In 2017, such ISIS-West Africa attacks included suicide bombings, as well as targeting of Nigerian and regional troops in northern Nigeria.

The Nigerian military made progress in 2017 in recapturing territory and arresting and dispersing fighters, in part through regional coordination efforts, yet it did not stop Boko Haram's ability to launch major attacks

and terrorize civilians. It also failed to adequately account for or secure the release of abducted individuals. Further undermining military efforts are accusations of security forces committing human rights violations. In October 2017, the Nigerian Army opened a new office in Maiduguri to deal with such abuse cases. The International Criminal Court has ongoing preliminary investigations into potential crimes against humanity by both Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces.

In October 2017, the Nigerian military began a series of secret trials of over 2,300 Boko Haram suspects. According to reports, at least 468 were ordered to participate in deradicalization programs.

State-Level Religious Governance and Policing

Twelve states in northern Nigeria are governed by forms of Shari'ah law and some utilize religious police to supplement the regular police force or provide social services. State enforcement of Shari'ah and the use or funding of religious police (known as Hisbah) organizations varies by location, as does public perception of their value or impact. In some states, vigilante or informal police and neighborhood watches, including Hisbah, are regulated and defined by law. In Plateau and Kaduna states, some neighborhood watch groups are organized along religious lines, including with religious leadership. In 2017, Hisbah police continued to arrest and detain, seize or destroy the property of, and enforce punishments on individuals who violated local religious and morality codes.

Women and Religious Freedom

Although child marriage was outlawed in Nigeria with the Child Rights Act of 2003, which set the minimum age for marriage at 18, many states still do not enforce this prohibition. According to the United Nations, Nigeria has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. [46.8 percent of Nigerian women aged 18–49 were married before the age of 18](#), and Fulani and Hausa

communities have the highest prevalence of child marriage, which is often justified based on religious traditions. However, some religious leaders have opposed the practice. The emir of Kano, Lamido Sanusi II, has been a proponent of ending child marriage, and in 2017 argued to set the legal marriage age limit at 17. He has also spoken out in favor of girls' education and faced backlash from opponents in response.

U.S. POLICY

Nigeria is a key U.S. partner in Africa and one of the biggest recipients of U.S. assistance in the region. In 2010, the U.S.-Nigeria Binational Commission (BNC) was established to strengthen strategic dialogue between the two countries. In 2015, the BNC was reinvigorated with joint commitments around three focus areas: security, economic development, and good governance. The United States continues to provide military and humanitarian assistance as well as programming in line with these priorities in Nigeria, while maintaining a steady emphasis on human rights issues.

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partnership, Nigeria must strengthen transparency of investigations into security operations and hold perpetrators of human rights violations accountable. He raised this need at the [November 2017 BNC meeting](#) in Abuja, where he also noted that an effective response to Boko Haram

in the northeast should be more holistic and not solely a military effort. Deputy Secretary Sullivan reinforced the need for training and accountability of security forces in a [December 2017 address on counterterrorism](#), following his visit to Nigeria.

The U.S. government designated Boko Haram as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2013. A large congressional delegation traveled to Nigeria in August 2017 to strengthen relations and to address the fight against Boko Haram. In December 2017, the [U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018](#) was

signed into law, with a provision requiring the president to develop a strategy on improving defense institutions and security sector forces in Nigeria, and to submit to Congress a report that includes assessments of: the threats posed by Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa, efforts by the Nigerian government to protect civilians and human rights, a plan for the United States to work with Nigerian officials to investigate human rights violations committed by Nigerian security forces, and a plan to work with Nigerian defense and security institutions to improve detainee conditions.

Concerns about human rights violations led the U.S. government to block weapons sales to Nigeria in recent years, but in 2016 relations began to improve. In December 2017, the U.S. government approved a nearly \$600 million sale of planes and equipment. The deal was part of the U.S. commitment to counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin against Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa.

To support Nigeria's fight against corruption, the [United States encouraged](#) the Nigerian government to join the Open Government Partnership (OGP), an international platform focused on making governments more open, accountable, and responsive to citizens, which it did in 2016. The U.S. government funded a project that led to Nigeria creating its 2017–2019 [OGP National Action Plan](#) focused on fiscal transparency, anticorruption, access to information, and citizen engagement. In December 2017, the United States and United Kingdom cohosted the inaugural Global Forum on Asset Recovery (GFAR) headquarters with the focus on recovering stolen assets from four key countries, including Nigeria. In 2017, the U.S. government also pledged support to religious leaders fighting corruption, recognizing their critical role in Nigerian society.

NORTH KOREA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

The North Korean government's approach toward religion and belief is among the most hostile and repressive in the world. Freedom of religion or belief does not exist in North Korea. The regime exerts absolute influence over the handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist, creating a facade of religious life in North Korea. In practice, the North Korean regime treats religion as a threat, particularly faiths associated with the West, such as Christianity, and is known to arrest, torture, imprison, and even execute religious believers. Although it is challenging to obtain information about violations of religious freedom occurring in North Korea, defector accounts and the work of advocacy

and nongovernmental organizations increasingly reveal the regime's abuses and reinforce the international community's entreaties for accountability. In the meantime, throughout 2017 the North Korean government perpetuated its long-standing record of systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, and USCIRF again finds that North Korea, also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), merits designation in 2018 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State repeatedly has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in December 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Maintain the existing, ongoing trade restrictions pursuant to sections 402 and 409 of the Trade Act of 1974 (the Jackson-Vanik Amendment);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act, and other executive, congressional, or United Nations (UN) action;
- Identify and target—with sanctions or other tools—individuals or companies outside North Korea who work directly with North Korean human rights violators or benefit from these abuses;
- Call for a follow-up UN inquiry to track the findings of the [2014 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#) (COI) and assess any new developments—particularly with respect to violations of the freedom of religion or belief—and suggest a regularization of such analysis similar to and in coordination with the Universal Periodic Review process;
- Maintain the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights issues as a full-time position at the State Department and ensure that religious freedom is a priority for that office;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in official and unofficial discussions about or with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization and security, as appropriate;
- Strengthen cooperation with regional partners, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns, including specific religious freedom issues, and press for improvements, including the release of prisoners of conscience and closure of the infamous political prisoner camps and other detention facilities;
- Expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and facilitation of improved internet access so North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information; and
- Encourage Chinese support for addressing the most egregious human rights violations in North Korea, including violations of religious freedom, and regularly raise with the government of China the need to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum-seekers in China, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and international humanitarian organizations to assist them, and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the UN Convention against Torture.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Cosponsor and reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2017 ([H.R. 2061/S. 1118](#)) and incorporate updated language and/or recommendations from the 2014 COI report, particularly regarding freedom of religion or belief.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Democratic People's Republic of Korea

GOVERNMENT

Single-party state; official state ideology of "*Juche*" or "national self-reliance"

POPULATION

25,248,000+

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Government-sponsored religious groups (e.g., the Korean Religious Practitioners Association, the Korean Christian Federation, the Korean Buddhist Federation, the Korean Catholic Association, the Korean Chondokyo Central

Committee, and the Korean Orthodox Committee) exist to provide the illusion of religious freedom

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

(NOTE: figures are outdated and difficult to confirm)
<1% Christian

OTHER GROUPS

Historical traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shamanism, as well as Chondoism (also spelled Cheondoism), a local religious movement

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook, the U.S. Department of State, and the Korea Institute for National Unification

BACKGROUND

Current North Korean leader Kim Jong-un inherited his cult of personality from his father and grandfather, who crafted a cult-like ideology known as *Juche*, which translates into a communist-like style of governance. All citizens are required to be unfailingly loyal; as a result, deifying the Kim family and the state has become a religion unto itself. Those who follow a religion or belief do so at great risk and typically in secret, at times even keeping their faith hidden from their own families in an attempt to protect them from being accused of "guilt by association" and sent to one of North Korea's notorious political prison camps. Authorities apply such collective punishment to family members of individuals suspected of religious or political activities. In addition to abuses prisoners experience, the overall human rights situation in North Korea remains bleak, including reports of malnutrition; limited freedom of movement, expression, and access to information; sexual assault; forced labor and enslavement; and enforced disappearances. North Korea's human rights violations occur in the context of its increasingly aggressive nuclear posturing, such as several missile launches during 2017 and its

sixth known underground nuclear test, which involved a hydrogen bomb, according to the regime's claims.

Throughout 2017, the UN continued to address human rights abuses in North Korea. In February 2017, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK issued a report to the UN Human Rights Council; in March, the Council renewed the Special Rapporteur's mandate for one year. Also in March, the Council adopted a resolution strengthening the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' office in Seoul, South Korea, to include experts on legal accountability for human rights violations. In May 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities visited the country—the first-ever visit to North Korea by a UN Human Rights Council-designated independent expert.

In 2017, the UN Security Council met several times in response to North Korea's missile tests, including a December 2017 meeting requested by the United States and eight other Member States to discuss North Korea's human rights abuses; representatives from Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine all mentioned religious freedom in their remarks.

Defectors are an important source of information about the North Korean regime's abuses. In 2017, former North Korean diplomat Thae Yong-ho testified before the U.S. Congress about his 2016 defection to South Korea, and in an interview with the National Endowment for Democracy stated that "North Korean society can only be maintained in a way that Kim Jong-un is depicted and is respected like a god by the popular masses." According to South Korea's Ministry of Unification, between January and September 2017, a total of 881 North Korean defectors entered into South Korea, the overwhelming majority of whom were women. However, South Korean officials anticipated fewer total defections in 2017 than in previous years, in part because of increased government monitoring and tighter border controls between North Korea and China.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Government Control and Repression of Christianity

All religious groups are prohibited from conducting religious activities except through the handful of state-controlled houses of worship, and even these activities are tightly controlled and largely manufactured for the benefit of foreign audiences.

(There are three Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and the Holy Trinity Russian Orthodox Church.) Underground churches do exist in North Korea, but

information about their location and number of parishioners is nearly impossible to confirm. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, individuals face persecution for propagating religion, possessing religious items, carrying out religious activities (including praying and singing hymns), and having contact with religious persons. For example, in June 2017, North Korean authorities arrested Kim Seung-mo and charged him with spying after learning he had come into contact with Christian family members and others during a visit to China. According to the State Department, the North Korean regime currently detains an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 individuals in political prison camps known as *kwanliso*, though there are other types of facilities where authorities detain individuals. Reports indicate that tens of thousands

of prisoners facing hard labor or execution are Christians from underground churches or who practice in secret.

The North Korean regime reviles Christianity and considers it the biggest threat among religions; the regime associates Christianity with the West, particularly the United States. Through robust surveillance, the regime actively tries to identify and seek out Christians practicing their faith in secret and imprisons those it apprehends, often along with their family members even if they are not similarly religious. In May 2017, some Christian defectors informed USCIRF about their life in North Korea. One defector explained that there is only one religion in North Korea: the worship of leader Kim Jong-un. Still, the defector depicted the Gospel as a lifeline for many North Korean Christians, especially in an environment in which they, in his words, "do not have a right to think" and are "forced to live in a certain way."

In December 2017, the War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association issued a report about crimes against humanity in North Korea's political prisons. The report noted that "Christians are heavily persecuted and receive especially harsh treatment in prison camps"; prisoners are "tortured and killed on account of their religious affiliation" or for participating

One defector explained that there is only one religion in North Korea: the worship of leader Kim Jong-un.

in Christian meetings, reading the Bible, or encountering Christianity outside North Korea; and "Christians (or those suspected of being Christians) [are] incarcerated

in specific zones within the prison camp at which prisoners were subjected to more severe deprivation." The report also revealed that one of the reasons North Korea created political prisons in the 1950s was to eliminate so-called "enemies of the party and state," a vague grouping that includes religious followers.

In rare positive news, in August 2017, North Korean authorities released Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim, a South Korean-born Canadian citizen sentenced in December 2015 to life in prison with hard labor for alleged subversive activities and insulting North Korea's leadership. Authorities released Reverend Lim on humanitarian grounds after he reportedly was hospitalized during his imprisonment. A high-level Canadian delegation visiting North Korea—with the assistance of the Swedish

Embassy—helped secure Reverend Lim’s release after he spent two and a half years in a labor camp.

North Korean Refugees in China

North Korean defectors who flee to and remain in China live a life of constant risk, and many times fall prey to economic and/or sexual exploitation. In recent years, North Korean officials have collaborated with their Chinese counterparts to fortify border areas frequented by North Koreans attempting to flee, and they increasingly target groups who work to assist the refugees. These efforts, along with China’s inhospitable attitude toward asylum-seekers, create additional peril for individuals believed to have interacted with missionaries or engaged in religious activities. When USCIRF met with North Korean defectors in 2017, they confirmed reports that individuals who flee to China and whom the Chinese government forcibly repatriates to North Korea are treated more harshly upon their return if they are believed to be Christians or came into contact with Christianity in China. China’s forcible repatriation of North Koreans attempting to cross into China violates its obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

... individuals who flee to China and whom the Chinese government forcibly repatriates to North Korea are treated more harshly upon their return if they are believed to be Christians or came into contact with Christianity in China.

U.S. POLICY

Throughout 2017, the U.S. government attempted to recalibrate its approach to North Korea, including taking strong positions at the UN and making efforts to encourage regional partners, particularly China, to increase pressure on the regime. In April 2017, President Donald Trump’s Administration announced a new North Korea policy, “Maximum Pressure and Engagement,” which signaled an openness to dialogue while still using strong rhetoric and sanctions. Some analysts have noted that the new policy, in practice, does not differ significantly from previous administrations’ policies. On April 28, 2017, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson chaired a meeting of the UN Security Council about enforcing sanctions against North Korea; while his [remarks](#) did not specifically mention religious freedom, he stated that “helping the North Korean regime means enabling

cruelty and suffering,” and he asked other countries to “help us preserve security and protect human dignity.” In May 2017, the United States, represented by then Secretary Tillerson, hosted foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations for a discussion about North Korea.

In addition to multilateral efforts in 2017, the administration also took steps to underscore human rights and related concerns with the North Korean regime. In August 2017, the State Department issued a [fact sheet](#) that revealed evidence of starvation, malnutrition, forced labor, and torture in six North Korean

political prison camps. On September 1, 2017, the State Department implemented a travel ban on U.S. citizens traveling to, in, or through North Korea, allowing only those who obtain a one-time-use special passport to travel. Later in September,

the Treasury Department named eight North Korean banks and 26 North Korean banking officials who live abroad in a new round of sanctions aimed at those who facilitate North Korea’s weapons programs.

In October 2017, the State Department released its third [report](#) on North Korea’s human rights abuses and censorship pursuant to the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 (P.L. 114-122). The report added seven individuals and three state entities to the list of those responsible for human rights violations and censorship; in total, the three reports have named 42 individuals and entities, including North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. None of the reports specifically mention religious freedom, though in statements for all three reports, the State Department characterized human rights abuses in North Korea as “among the worst in the world.” President Trump noted the North Korean regime’s suppression of religion during his November 7 [remarks](#) at the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), stating that “Christians and other people of faith who are found praying or holding a religious book of any kind are now detained, tortured, and in many cases, even executed.” Also in November, the United States returned North Korea

to the [list](#) of State Sponsors of Terrorism and imposed sanctions on a Chinese businessman and Chinese trading companies doing business with North Korea and on North Korean shipping and trading companies and vessels. The United States sanctioned two more North Korean officials in December 2017 for their role in that country's missile program.

North Korea continues to target individuals with close ties to the United States; the regime routinely detains them and compels confessions, using them as pawns in an effort designed to embarrass and undermine the United States. In 2017, North Korean authorities arrested two U.S. citizens, both of whom were teachers at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. Authorities accused both men, Kim Hak-Song and Kim Sang-Duk (also known as Tony Kim), of alleged "hostile acts." They join Kim Dong-chul, a naturalized U.S. citizen born in South Korea, whom North Korea's Supreme Court sentenced in 2016 to 10 years of hard labor on charges of alleged spying. Another U.S. prisoner was Otto Warmbier, who died in June 2017 after North Korean officials released him from prison on humanitarian grounds. Warmbier was serving 15 years of hard labor for allegedly committing a "hostile act" when he tore down a political banner from a Pyongyang hotel. Ambassador Joseph Y. Yun, the Special Representative for North Korea Policy, held several talks with North Korean officials to advocate for the young man's release and traveled to North Korea to accompany the medical team that returned Warmbier to the United States. Following Warmbier's passing, a State Department spokesperson expressed condolences and called for release of the other three Americans, whom Ambassador Yun reportedly met in person during his trip to Pyongyang.

The State Department last redesignated North Korea as a CPC in December 2017. In lieu of prescribing sanctions specific to the CPC designation, the State Department consistently has applied "double-hatted" sanctions against North Korea, in this case extending restrictions under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of the Trade Act of 1974. Jackson-Vanik originated when Congress sought to pressure Communist countries for their human rights violations, and has since been used to restrict trade with countries like North Korea.

SAUDI ARABIA

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the Saudi government continued implementing economic and social reforms from the Vision 2030 plan, including many that may improve human rights and religious freedom conditions. Despite the easing of some social restrictions, religious freedom conditions did not improve in 2017. The government maintained its ban on non-Muslim public religious observance and continued to prosecute individuals for dissent, blasphemy, and apostasy. Saudi Arabia's new counterterrorism law did not address its vague definition of terrorism, and nonviolent offenders convicted on charges of "advocating atheism" continued to serve lengthy prison terms. While the government responded strongly to past attacks on Shi'a sites, the Shi'a community experienced ongoing discrimination and was especially targeted by a May 2017 security operation in Awamiya. After over 15 years of slow progress, the Saudi government has not completed reforms

to textbooks that propagate intolerance and violence; in fact, some of the most egregious content remained in textbooks in use during the current school year. Despite some promising steps to restrict it, the guardianship system remained in force, adversely affecting the religious freedom of women. On a positive note, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other senior officials made strong statements against violent extremism. Based on particularly severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Saudi Arabia merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the U.S. State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC since 2004, most recently in December 2017, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006. The waiver releases the administration from taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA and lift the waiver;
- Fully engage the Saudi government to take concrete action toward completing reforms confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions, including removing inflammatory and intolerant content in government-issued textbooks;
- Consider inaugurating a new U.S.-Saudi bilateral strategic dialogue, which would include human rights and religious freedom among the areas of discussion;
- Encourage the Saudi government to take further action toward ending the guardianship system, make public the steps taken since a royal decree on women's access to services, and penalize actors that continue to require a guardian's permission for services covered under the decree;
- At the highest levels, press for the release of Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other prisoners of conscience, and press the Saudi government to end prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Press the Saudi government to denounce publicly the continued use around the world of older versions of Saudi textbooks and other materials that promote hatred and intolerance, and to make every attempt to retrieve previously distributed materials that contain intolerance;
- Press the Saudi government to pursue integration of Shi'a Muslim citizens into government, the judiciary, public service, and the security sector, and prioritize inclusive governance in ongoing initiatives supported by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor in Saudi Arabia;
- Press the Saudi government to pass and fully implement an antidiscrimination law protecting the equal rights of all Saudi citizens and expatriate residents;
- Press the Saudi government to exclude advocating atheism and blasphemy from the new counterterrorism law, and to end the detention under this law of nonviolent actors exercising their human rights and religious freedom;
- Work with the Saudi government to codify the right of non-Muslims to private religious practice and to permit foreign clergy to enter the country openly with religious materials to carry out worship services; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R.4549](#), the Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act, which would require the secretary of state to submit annual reports on religious intolerance in Saudi educational materials.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy

POPULATION

28,571,770

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

Muslim (official; citizens are 85–90% Sunni and 10–15% Shi'a)
Other (more than eight million expatriate workers include at least two million non-Muslims, including Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, folk religions, and religiously unaffiliated)

*CIA World Factbook and U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

Saudi Arabia is officially an Islamic state governed by a Basic Law of Governance issued by royal decree in 1992. According to this law, the constitution is the Qur'an and the *sunna* (traditions of the Prophet). The judicial system is largely governed by Shari'ah as interpreted by judges trained as religious scholars in the Hanbali Sunni school of jurisprudence. The king appoints the members of the Shura Council, a legislative advisory body, and may dissolve and reconstitute the council at will. The current monarch, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, took the throne in 2015, and in 2017 appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud as crown prince.

The government restricts most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with its interpretation of Sunni Islam. Saudi officials base these restrictions on their interpretation of *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet), stating that such a stance is what is expected of them as the country that hosts the two holiest mosques in Islam, in Mecca and Medina. However, the United Nations (UN) estimates that expatriate residents make up as much as 37 percent of the Saudi population; although exact numbers are not available, at least two million of these expatriates are non-Muslim, including Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, practitioners of folk religions, and the religiously unaffiliated. In addition, an unknown but growing number of Saudi citizens

identify as atheists or Christians but avoid public recognition given harsh social and legal consequences for leaving Islam. Therefore, policies restricting public religious expression violate the rights of not only the sizable Shi'a Muslim population but also adherents of unrecognized religious communities.

Since April 2016, the Saudi government has been implementing Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Program 2020, ambitious economic reform plans that seek to reduce the country's dependence on oil revenues. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs is responsible to ensure that Vision 2030 is compliant with Shari'ah law. In line with these broader plans, the government has announced specific reform measures related to taxation, women's rights, public entertainment, and social norms. Most notably, King Salman announced in September that the government would begin issuing driver's licenses to Saudi women in June 2018, while the government announced in December that it would begin licensing movie theaters within 90 days. If fully implemented, these plans, though primarily social and economic, could lead to greater civic space and respect for human rights and religious freedom in the Kingdom. As of the end of the reporting period, however, many human rights activists who previously advocated for similar reforms remained imprisoned for their activities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Restrictions and Attacks on Shi'a Muslims

For many years, Shi'a Muslims have experienced discrimination in education, employment, the judiciary, and access to positions in government and the military. Outside of majority-Shi'a areas in the Eastern Province, the Saudi government restricts the building of Shi'a mosques, broadcasts of Shi'a-specific calls to prayer, and establishment of Shi'a cemeteries. Shi'a

Muslims have been detained and imprisoned for holding religious gatherings in private homes without permits, celebrating religious holidays in non-Shi'a-majority areas, and reading religious materials in *husseiniyas* (prayer halls). The Saudi government maintains that all such restrictions are related to national security and alleged community ties to and support of Iran. However, representatives of the Shi'a community assert that very few members of their community are sympathetic to Iran.

Protests in the Eastern Province have been ongoing since their peak in 2011 and often feature demands for release of political prisoners, greater economic and political opportunity, and reforms related to education and religious freedom. While most of these protests began nonviolently, some later featured acts of violence against property and security forces. The town of Awamiya in the Qatif governorate has been the epicenter of local demonstrations, resulting in sporadic attacks targeting police and government officials.

In 2016, the Saudi government announced plans to redevelop much of Awamiya into a commercial zone, which many residents viewed as an attempt to displace the largely Shi'a community. In April 2017, three UN experts [released a statement](#) calling on the Saudi government to halt the planned demolition of Awamiya's old town district, noting the cultural importance of its historic mosques and *husseiniyas*. The following month, Saudi security forces began demolishing the area, displacing thousands of residents to whom the government provided financial compensation. Saudi forces reported that armed local Shi'a men moved into vacated properties and opened fire on demolition forces. The security

response spread throughout Awamiya in the following months, reportedly including the use of heavy artillery, displacing as many as 20,000 residents, and resulting in dozens of deaths, both police and civilians. Human

rights organizations reported that security forces sealed the town in July, preventing residents from leaving or accessing humanitarian aid, and engaged in excessive and indiscriminate use of force against civilians, including children. By

Outside of majority-Shi'a areas in the Eastern Province, the Saudi government restricts the building of Shi'a mosques, broadcasts of Shi'a-specific calls to prayer, and establishment of Shi'a cemeteries.

August, the Ministry of Interior stated that 95 percent of the old town was under state control. By the end of the reporting period, most residents who desired to return had done so, but much of the city reportedly remained under a heavy military presence.

Restrictions on Non-Muslims

Although the Saudi government bans the public practice of non-Muslim faiths, the government repeatedly has stated that non-Muslims who are not converts from Islam may practice their religion privately without harassment. However, the policy allowing private worship has not been codified, and government officials have shown little interest in pursuing codification.

In recent years, members of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), which enforces government rules on public morality, have raided private non-Muslim religious gatherings organized by expatriate workers and arrested or deported participants, especially when the gatherings were loud or involved large numbers of people or symbols visible from outside the building. However, in 2016 the powers of the CPVPV were sharply curtailed by royal decree, and both Muslims and non-Muslims have reported decreased harassment and raids. In a positive development, Lebanese Maronite Patriarch Beshara al-Rai conducted an official visit to Saudi Arabia in November 2017, reportedly the first such visit since 1975.

Nevertheless, non-Muslims seeking to practice their religion privately operate in a climate of fear, especially outside of compounds populated largely by

foreign workers. Expatriate non-Muslim religious communities restrict the number and size of their services and other activities in order to avoid undue notice by their neighbors or authorities. Saudi converts from Islam also keep their religious observations private out of fear of the consequences of discovery, and communicate with each other solely by private electronic channels. Saudi Christian converts, in particular, report questioning and detention if neighbors or family members suspect their religion.

Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Sorcery Charges

The Saudi government continues to use criminal charges of apostasy and blasphemy to suppress debate and silence dissidents. In December 2017, officials at the Ideological Warfare Center, a Ministry of Defense-affiliated initiative launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to combat extremist ideology, asserted that there were varying religious interpretations regarding the punishment for apostasy.

However, the Saudi government responded by [affirming](#) that the Kingdom would continue to criminalize apostasy, stating that removing the punishment would run contrary to the country's Basic Law.

Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, one of the individuals highlighted in USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience project, is among Saudi Arabia's most high-profile prisoners of conscience following his 2014 sentencing on charges of insulting Islam and the 2015 court ruling that upheld his sentence of 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a fine of one million Saudi riyals (\$266,000). The sentence called for Badawi—the founder and editor of a website that served as an online forum for the free expression of diverse views—to be lashed 50 times a week for 20 consecutive weeks. Many human rights groups and government entities, including USCIRF, condemned the January 2015 imposition of Badawi's first 50 lashes. Badawi has not received additional lashings due to the level of international outcry and a medical doctor's finding that he could not physically endure

more. In March 2017, Badawi's family announced that the Saudi court confirmed his sentence and reiterated the demand that he pay his fine.

Palestinian poet and artist Ashraf Fayadh also remains in prison under a November 2015 death sentence for apostasy, due to his allegedly questioning religion and spreading atheist thought in his poetry. In February 2016, an appeals court quashed the death sentence and issued a new verdict of eight years in prison and 800 lashes to be administered on 16 occasions. According to his lawyer, Fayadh also must renounce his poetry in Saudi state media.

In April 2017, a Saudi court sentenced Ahmad al-Shamri to death for apostasy following his arrest

in 2014 on charges of atheism and blasphemy for posting social media content that allegedly insulted Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Shamri has had two appeals rejected and remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

Raids and arrests for witchcraft and sorcery—both crimes punishable by death—continued during the reporting period. Most of those arrested in these cases were expatriate workers from Africa or Southeast Asia accused of using witchcraft against their employers or, more broadly, disrupting Saudi society by dividing families or distorting religious texts. The CPVPV has special units throughout the country to combat sorcery and witchcraft. In December 2017 it also publicized a special training event, in conjunction with the General Presidency for the Affairs of the Grand Mosque, to instruct CPVPV members in Mecca how to identify sorcerous materials.

Arbitrary Detention of Dissidents and Religious Leaders

In September, the Saudi government detained more than 20 prominent writers, journalists, academics, and religious leaders. The official Saudi Press Agency released a statement asserting that the detainees had been conducting intelligence activities on behalf of foreign parties in order

Most of those arrested in these cases were expatriate workers from Africa or Southeast Asia accused of using witchcraft against their employers or, more broadly, disrupting Saudi society by dividing families or distorting religious texts.

to provoke sedition and disturb national unity. At the end of the reporting period, most—if not all—remained in detention without charge, and many reportedly were held incommunicado and without access to proper medical care. Among those detained without charge were influential clerics Salman al-Awda and Abdullah al-Maliki, who had in recent years advocated for human rights through religious reform and publicly criticized the Saudi government as theocratic and autocratic.

In January 2018, after the end of the reporting period, a group of UN experts, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, issued a [joint statement](#) noting a pattern of arbitrary detention in Saudi Arabia beginning with the September 2017 detentions. The statement urged Saudi Arabia to release all those detained for “peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly, association and belief.”

2014 and 2017 Counterterrorism Laws

Saudi Arabia’s 2014 counterterrorism law, the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing, and a series of subsequent royal decrees criminalized as terrorism virtually all forms of peaceful dissent. Under the law, a conviction could result in a prison term ranging from three to 20 years. According to a related legal document produced by the Ministry of Interior, terrorism included “[c]alling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based.” Terrorism-related crimes are tried in the Specialized Criminal Court, a non-Shari’ah body created in 2008; some human rights groups assert that this court is often used as a political tool against dissidents.

In July 2014, Waleed Abu al-Khair, legal counsel to blogger Raif Badawi, became the first human rights defender to be sentenced under the counterterrorism law, receiving 15 years in jail on various spurious charges related to his advocacy. In March 2016, journalist Alaa Brinji was sentenced to five years in prison under the counterterrorism law for “insulting the rulers” and “ridiculing Islamic religious figures,” based in large part on his tweets in support of women’s rights and pris-

oners of conscience. Both remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

In November 2017, the Saudi government implemented a new version of the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing. This version addresses some of the human rights critiques of the original by ref-

In November 2017, the Saudi government implemented a new version of the Penal Law for Crimes of Terrorism and its Financing.

erencing use of violence as one possible aspect of terrorism, but retains an overly broad definition of terrorism that includes “obstructing the application of the Basic Law” (which names the Qur’an

and *Sunna* as the constitution), “disturbing public order,” and portraying the king and crown prince “in any way that brings religion and justice into disrepute.”

Shortly after the announcement of the new counterterrorism law, nurse and online activist Naimah al-Matrod became the first woman sentenced for participating in and documenting protests in the Eastern Province. She was tried by the Specialized Criminal Court and sentenced in November according to the newly released law to six years in prison and a six-year travel ban on charges including “inciting sectarian strife.”

Countering Violent Extremism

Saudi Arabia has taken aggressive steps to counter violent extremism in the Kingdom. After a surge of terrorist attacks in 2015, including against Shi’a Muslim places of worship, the number of attacks dropped significantly in recent years, reflecting a rigorous government campaign against domestic terrorism and the ideologies that support it. This campaign was bolstered in 2017 by the explicit support of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who stated in October that he and the young Saudi generation sought a return to “a moderate Islam open to the world and all religions.”

During the reporting period, the government challenged religious and ideological messages of extremist groups through initiatives including the Ideological Warfare Center, the Digital Extremism Observatory, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue, and the newly launched Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology. These centers focus on confronting extremist ideology and sectarian divisions through promotion

of a national culture of dialogue and a moderate, welcoming interpretation of Islam. In particular, the Digital Extremism Observatory focuses on countering extremist messaging and recruitment in new media, while other centers similarly engage with social media as a venue for messages of moderation and tolerance. The Saudi government also continued to retrain clerics through the Center for National Dialogue, and in October 2017 Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir stated that the government had fired several thousand clerics for spreading extremism. Despite these efforts, some clerics continued to use intolerant rhetoric about non-Sunni Muslims during Friday sermons.

Progress and Ongoing Concerns with Saudi Textbooks

For more than 15 years, the Saudi government has been addressing intolerant content in official textbooks. The reform process became more systematic after the attacks of September 11, 2001, which raised international concerns about the propagation of intolerance and violence in Saudi curricula. While the Saudi government repeatedly has announced completion of milestones in reforming its textbooks, the process remains ongoing and incomplete. In October 2017, during a meeting with USCIRF, Saudi Minister of Education Ahmed Al-Eisa stated his intent to revise all textbooks by the 2018–2019 school year, adding that the ministry intends to use mainly electronic textbooks by 2020.

Through regular review of Saudi textbooks for more than a decade, USCIRF had found continued—though slow and incremental—progress toward removing or revising passages that included incitement to hatred and violence. However, a USCIRF analysis of 2017–2018 religion textbooks revealed the continued presence of some of the most egregious content promoting violence and intolerance, once thought to have been removed. This content included language permitting the execution of apostates and those who unrepentantly mock God or the Prophet; explaining jihad as a joined battle against disbelievers; characterizing Christians as liars and

Jews as desiring to destroy Islam; and calling for Muslim leaders to fight protestors until they cease. The textbooks also contained disparaging references to Zoroastrians, Sufis, Shi'a Muslims, polytheists, non-Muslim proselytizers, homosexuals, and women who do not wear the hijab.

During 2017, human rights groups also raised concerns about Saudi teacher training and delivery of lessons in the classroom. Given the rapid pace of government-led reform during the reporting period, Saudi officials have acknowledged that educators are key to implementation. The Saudi government reported that 200 Saudi teachers completed a government-sponsored professional development program in the United States during the 2016–2017 school year and 450 teachers and principals will do so in 2017–2018, while other participants trained in Europe. Domestically, the King Abdulaziz Center for National Dialogue continued to train Islamic studies teachers. Furthermore, according to Saudi officials, teachers in the highly centralized education system who do not follow the newly developed, more tolerant curricula are dismissed.

Concerns also remained about the propagation of intolerance abroad through the use of old Saudi educational materials, especially following reports that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) used Saudi textbooks in 2015. Saudi officials have stated that they have requested the return of all old textbooks from their institutions abroad and sent out new, revised books to replace them, but an unknown number of materials reportedly remain in circulation. In recent years, a Saudi royal decree banned financing outside Saudi Arabia of religious schools, mosques, hate literature, and other activities

that support religious intolerance and violence. In January 2018, after the end of the reporting period, the Saudi government agreed to hand over control of the historic Grand Mosque in Brussels, Belgium, to local

Islamic authorities, following years of allegations that the Saudi-controlled mosque was preaching violent extremism. According to reports, the Saudi government is considering following a similar

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approach for mosques and religious schools in other countries around the world.

Women and Religious Freedom

Although the Saudi government announced promising reforms on women's rights and women's participation in society, the state's application of a largely uncodified legal system based on the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence continued to adversely affect the human rights of women in Saudi Arabia, including their religious freedom. Women's rights are constrained in particular by the legal guardianship system enforced by Shari'ah courts regardless of women's religious affiliation and based on the government's interpretation of a Qur'anic verse describing men as "protectors and maintainers of women." Under the system, Saudi women do not have equal legal status and must have permission from a male guardian to obtain a passport, marry, or travel abroad, as well as sometimes to access healthcare or other services.

In April, King Salman signed a royal decree instructing ministries to allow women access to government services without requiring the permission of a male guardian unless required by government regulations in line with Shari'ah. The decree also called for ministries to provide within three months a list of procedures that would require a guardian's approval. The full extent of implementation remained unclear at the end of the reporting period. Saudi government officials have stated that women will have greater access to education, health, work, banking, and social services without guardian consent, but will still need the permission of a guardian to obtain a passport and travel abroad.

Personal status law is governed by courts implementing the Hanbali jurisprudence or, for Shi'a Muslims, Ja'fari jurisprudence. However, Shi'a courts are limited in number and located only in Qatif and Ahsa governorates in the Eastern Province. Saudi courts' interpretation of Shari'ah law results in rulings that women's testimony is worth half of men's, that men may divorce their wives without cause or cost,

and that child marriage still is permitted. In 2013, the Saudi government criminalized domestic violence, but women can still legally be convicted and sentenced by a court on charges like "disobedience." In 2017, the Shura Council discussed draft bills that would set the legal age of marriage at 15 and provide Saudi women with equal rights in passing nationality to their children; however, neither had been implemented by the end of the reporting period.

U.S. POLICY

During its first year, the Trump Administration strengthened the Saudi-U.S. relationship, with President Donald Trump and other administration officials emphasizing support for Saudi Arabia in regional struggles against Iranian influence and countering terrorism and extremism. In a January 2017 call with King Salman, President Donald Trump [affirmed](#) the "longstanding friendship and strategic partnership" between the two countries, underlined the importance of countering Iranian destabilizing activities, and expressed support for Vision 2030, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's trademark program for economic and social change.

Both President Trump and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Saudi Arabia for the May 2017 Riyadh Summit, during which President Trump and King Salman signed a [Joint Strategic Vision Decla-](#)

Both President Trump and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Saudi Arabia for the May 2017 Riyadh Summit, during which President Trump and King Salman signed a Joint Strategic Vision Declaration.

[ration](#). The declaration charted the future of the countries' strategic relationship, including a focus on countering violent extremism, disrupting terrorism financing, and expanding regional security partnerships. The two leaders

also signed a defense agreement involving nearly \$110 billion in intended sales of American defense equipment and services. President Trump's [remarks](#) during the summit called on Middle Eastern countries to confront "the crisis of Islamist extremism and the Islamist terror groups it inspires" and to make the region a place where "every man and woman, no matter their faith or ethnicity, can enjoy a life of dignity and hope." At the summit, President Trump, King Salman, and

other leaders also initiated the launch of the Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology to coordinate international efforts to counter extremism online. In June, then Secretary Tillerson [stated](#) that the State Department had requested that the center retrieve and replace intolerant textbooks and develop standards for accountability in this area.

In August 2017, during the rollout of the 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, then Secretary Tillerson [expressed concern](#) about religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia, citing violations against non-Muslims; application of severe criminal penalties for charges such as apostasy, atheism, blasphemy, and insulting Islam; and attacks targeting Shi'a Muslims as well as the "continued pattern of social prejudice and discrimination against them." In a briefing on the report, another State Department official noted the Saudi government's "excessive or overbroad use" of counterterrorism laws against Shi'a Muslims and atheists.

The State Department redesignated Saudi Arabia as a CPC in December 2017 but kept in place a waiver of any sanctions, citing important national interests that include "collective efforts to counter violent extremism and transnational terrorism, and energy security," pursuant to section 407 of IRFA. Despite this waiver, the department stated that it expected the Saudi government to make "further and more meaningful

progress on religious freedom." The waiver has been in place indefinitely since 2006, when the State Department announced that ongoing bilateral discussions with Saudi Arabia had enabled the U.S. government to identify and confirm a number of policies the Saudi government "is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purpose of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups." In reviewing implementation of the policies since the 2006 announcement, USCIRF has found

Despite this waiver, the department stated that it expected the Saudi government to make "further and more meaningful progress on religious freedom."

that progress had been achieved in several areas, but that other areas require significant work. These incomplete areas include halting dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology, revising

textbooks to remove intolerant content, protecting the right to private worship for all, and bringing the Kingdom's rules and regulations into compliance with international human rights standards.

In December 2017, Congress introduced [H.R. 4549](#), the Saudi Educational Transparency and Reform Act. If enacted, this legislation would require the secretary of state to submit a yearly review of Saudi educational materials indicating whether all intolerant content had been removed, and analyzing the Saudi government's efforts to retrieve and destroy previous materials, retrain teachers, and stop global exportation of intolerant materials.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, religious freedom conditions, as well as human rights, remained dire in Syria. For most of the year, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued to carry out mass executions, attack civilian populations, and kidnap religious minorities. By year's end, the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS largely had defeated the group in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor. The Syrian government continued to target and depopulate Sunni Muslim-dominated areas. The year also saw a massive spike in the involvement of the Syrian Local Defense Forces (LDF)—militias backed and funded by Iran and integrated into the Syrian Armed Forces—in sectarian violence targeting Sunni Muslims. Allies of the Syrian regime, including foreign Shi'a fighters recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, also carried out sectarian attacks. Areas held by the armed opposition continued to

vary in levels of restriction of religious freedom. In northeastern Syria, Christians living in the Kurdish-held Autonomous Administration complained of increased interference in private Christian schools and confiscation of property. Armed Islamist opposition groups in northern Syria, including the al-Qaeda affiliated Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), attacked Shi'a pilgrims and harassed those opposed to their strict Islamic rules. Due to the collective actions of the Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again finds in 2018 that Syria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2014. USCIRF also finds that, based on conditions in 2017, ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern" (EPC) for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Syria as a CPC under IRFA;
- Designate ISIS as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, for its control of territory and conduct in 2017;
- Condemn the Assad regime's crimes against humanity and brutal persecution of Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the United Nations (UN) Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions [2118](#), [2139](#), [2165](#), [2209](#), and [2254](#);
- Continue to support international efforts to investigate and collect evidence of gross human rights abuses during the conflict, including the UN Human Rights Council-mandated [Independent International Commission of Inquiry](#) (COI) and the UN General Assembly-mandated [International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria](#) (IIIM);
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom; these tools include the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, visa denials under section 604(a) of IRFA and the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), and asset freezes under the Global Magnitsky Act;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, in its ongoing international meetings, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to fund and develop programs that bolster intra- and interreligious tolerance, alleviate sectarian tensions, and promote respect for religious freedom and related rights, both in neighboring countries and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria; and
- Continue the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting—with priority being given to victims of ISIS and vulnerable religious minority communities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017; [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017; and [S. 905](#), the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act, to help prevent, mitigate, and respond to genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Syria; and
- Pass [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes terrorism-related sanctions on two Iranian-controlled militias, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, that have carried out sectarian crimes in Syria.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Syrian Arab Republic

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic, highly authoritarian regime

POPULATION

18,028,549 (July 2017 estimate)

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam (Sunni/Shi'a), Christianity, Judaism, and Druz

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

87% Muslim (includes 74% Sunni and 13% Alawi, Ismaili, and Shi'a)

10% Christian (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian)

3% Druze

>1% Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo)

*CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

The Assad family has ruled over Syria for more than 50 years. Following the death of his father, Bashar al-Assad became president in 2000. The Assads are from the Alawite community, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam and a minority group that makes up about 13 percent of Syria's population. Since the Assad family's ascent to power, loyal Alawites have been placed in the government, including in senior security, intelligence, and military positions. Although to consolidate their power the Alawi-dominated government did forge ties with prominent Sunni Muslim families, most of the population lived alongside coreligionists, often distrusting members of other religious groups. As a result, when civil uprising and anti-government demonstrations began in 2011, it did not take long for built-up historical sectarian tensions to emerge.

Shortly after the demonstrations started, the government released from the infamous Sadnaya Prison around 200 prisoners previously designated as "Islamic fundamentalists." Many went on to become leaders of ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliated HTS. President Assad and his regime played on historical sectarian fears, repeatedly stating the government was fighting

"extreme Islamist factions" that were acting to increase sectarian tensions. Religious minority communities, including Druze, Ismailis, Christians, and Alawis, began to perceive President Assad as the only entity capable of shielding them from Sunni extremists.

The year 2017 saw the following major developments in the Syria conflict: (1) the evacuation of Aleppo, the last major city under armed opposition control; (2) an agreement to create "de-escalation zones" by Iran,

Russia, and Turkey; (3) the liberation of Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor from ISIS by the Global Coalition; and (4) an attack on Idlib by Syrian-, Russian-, and Iranian-backed forces, in addition to a strict siege on the Damascus suburb

Shortly after the demonstrations started, the government released from the infamous Sadnaya Prison around 200 prisoners previously designated as "Islamic fundamentalists."

of al-Ghouta, both areas purportedly covered by the "de-escalation zone" agreement. The dynamics of the conflict also changed dramatically after eastern Aleppo City fell to the Syrian Armed Forces and their Iranian allies. Almost immediately, the number of Syrian fighters registered with Iranian-backed militias significantly increased. Since the spring of 2017, LDF units, supported by Iran, have recruited almost 90,000 local Syrian troops. In April 2017, the Syrian parliament passed

legislation formally integrating the LDF into the register of the Syrian Armed Forces. LDF militias report directly to IRGC and/or Hezbollah commanders, and use highly sectarian Shi'a flags and imagery.

As of the end of 2017, ISIS largely had been defeated in Syria. In late 2017, the terrorist organization lost its capital of Raqqa City, as well as its territory in Deir-ez-Zor Province; the group fled to the Hama countryside and other desert areas. The Global Coalition killed many ISIS members in combat. Others fled Syria, some going to the Sinai Peninsula.

The humanitarian consequences of nearly seven years of conflict have been grave. According to the UN, by the end of the reporting period there were almost six million Syrian refugees, as well as more than 6.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs); total deaths exceeded 470,000. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 10,204 civilians were killed in 2017 alone, including 4,148 by the Syrian regime, 1,436 by Russian forces, 316 by the Kurdish-dominated Autonomous Administration, 25 by HTS, and 186 by various factions of the armed opposition. The Syrian Network for Human Rights also documented a total of 898 attacks on vital civilian facilities during the year, including 431 by the Syrian regime, 239 by Russian forces, 29 by ISIS, nine by HTS, and 182 by other entities. Of the total, 182 were on houses of worship, perpetrated by various armed actors.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Violations by the Assad Regime and Affiliated Groups

In 2017, the Alawite-led Syrian government continued to attack majority-Sunni populations in opposition-held territories. Of the total civilian death toll in Syria, the UN-created COI found that Sunni Muslims accounted for the majority of civilian casualties and detainees, and that the Syrian government used sieges of Sunni-majority opposition areas as weapons of war. For example, the COI documented that Hezbollah and government forces encircled the Sunni-majority town of Madaya from July 2015 until April 2017, forcing residents to resort to “eating

grass, leaves, and cats, which religious leaders were forced to officially sanction as religiously permissible.” The government continued to prohibit Sunni Muslims from communicating with foreign coreligionists, although it allowed members of other religions, such as Christians, to do so. The government continued to prohibit any communication between the Jewish community and Jews living in Israel.

In addition, Shi'a foreign fighters, primarily recruited by the IRGC from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, were relocated to fight alongside the LDF and Syrian Armed Forces. Although the exact numbers of foreign fighters are unknown, at least 2,000 Afghans reportedly have been killed, and another 8,000 injured, while fighting in Syria as part of the Fatemi-youn division; many reportedly were under the age of 14. Most of the Afghan foreign fighters were refugees in Iran promised citizenship in exchange for registering

to fight in Syria, where they were told they would defend Shi'a shrines in Damascus. Instead, they were used to fight elsewhere, including against ISIS in Deir-ez-Zor and against HTS in Idlib, while Hezbollah and IRGC fighters watched over the shrines. Because of Shi'a

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foreign fighter recruitment in countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sunni communities have launched attacks on Shi'a communities in those countries, an indicator that the Syrian conflict is exacerbating Sunni-Shi'a tensions elsewhere. As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, two militia groups controlled by IRGC Commander Qassem Soleimani, also were identified as having committed sectarian crimes, including raping, attacking, and abducting Sunni Muslims in Syria. They fought in the battles to retake Aleppo City and Deir-ez-Zor on behalf of the Syrian regime.

The aftermath of the fall of Aleppo also highlights the forced displacement and depopulation of Sunni-majority areas—such as the suburbs of Damascus and eastern Syria's Deir-ez-Zor Province—and their repopulation with Iraqi, Lebanese, and Iranian Shi'a militias and their families. According to analysts, this follows

a pattern Iran has implemented in other countries, including Afghanistan, of relocating Shi'a Muslims to strategic areas. In Syria, this was most visible in formerly Sunni Muslim areas in the Damascus suburbs, Homs, and Deir-ez-Zor. Christians in Damascus's oldest Christian neighborhoods, such as Bab Tuma and Bab Sharqi, also reported pressure to sell their property to private Iranian businessmen helping to execute this depopulation scheme. According to human rights organizations, Sunni Muslims and Christians who lived in Qusayr, a village in the Homs countryside, were denied entry to return to their homes. After the reporting period, in January 2018, the Assad regime agreed to open in all Syrian cities branches of the Iranian Islamic Azad University, which is closely affiliated with the IRGC.

Ismailis and Druze continued to complain of pressure from the Syrian government to serve in the Syrian Armed Forces. Because the two communities live in areas relatively segregated from other religious groups, they have been easy targets for all armed groups, including the Syrian regime. The government has jailed or kidnapped men from the two communities who resisted the Syrian government's demand that males aged 18 to 42 be conscripted into the army. As a result, most men in this age group have fled the country.

Violations by ISIS

The Global Coalition and the U.S.-backed, largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated numerous prisons, but ISIS had emptied most before their defeat. SDF forces found 100 prisoners still alive in Abu Hamam Prison in the Deir-ez-Zor countryside. However, many religious minority prisoners remain missing. Twenty-five Christian prisoners held by ISIS have yet to be released, and their whereabouts remain unclear. Additionally, the liberation of ISIS-held territory in 2017 highlights the continued disappearance of some of Syria's most prominent Christian leaders, including Italian Jesuit priest Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of

Aleppo Paul Yazigi, Armenian Catholic priest Father Michel Kayyal, and Greek Orthodox priest Father Maher Mahfouz, among others.

Throughout the year, ISIS continued its attacks on civilians. In May, ISIS fighters launched attacks on Aqarib al-Safiyah and al-Manboujah, both villages in Hama Province predominantly inhabited by Ismailis, a minority Shi'a Muslim group. The attack on the two villages resulted in the deaths of 52 people. Survivors reported that ISIS fighters verbally harassed them for their religious beliefs. In October, the group seized a bus full of Druze travelers in Hama en route from Damascus to Idlib. The group initially took the 50 people as hostages and shortly thereafter released all but two, who were likely killed.

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In late October, in al-Qaryatan, Homs, a historically Christian-dominated city, ISIS executed 116 people within a span of 20 days prior to the city's recapture by Syrian regime forces.

within a span of 20 days prior to the city's recapture by Syrian regime forces. The city, home to 2,000 Christians before the advent of ISIS, had only a few hundred Christians by the time ISIS took control in 2015, as many

had fled in anticipation and out of fear of the group's pending arrival. When the group first entered the town of al-Qaryatan, it took 200 Christians hostage until they agreed to pay a *jizya* (tax) in order to remain in the city.

Armed Opposition Groups

Areas under the control of the armed opposition do not have formal or consistent policies toward Christians or non-Sunni Muslims. In 2017, the Syrian government, along with its Russian and Iranian allies, recaptured much of the territory formerly under the control of the Syrian opposition, leaving fewer areas under their governance. As a result, the armed opposition perpetrated fewer incidents of religious freedom violations than in previous years. That being said, all armed groups continued to commit human rights violations in the areas they continued to control.

For example, the small Druze community living in areas occupied first by ISIS and then by HTS was forced to convert to Sunni Islam in 2015 and remained unable

to freely exercise their religious practices or return to their Druze traditions in 2017.

The COI also reported that in March, HTS claimed responsibility for two explosions in the parking lot of the Bab al-Saghir cemetery, a well-known Shi'a pilgrimage site, that killed 44 civilians and injured another 120, the majority of whom were Shi'a pilgrims. The COI also reported a bombing in the Aleppo City suburb of al-Rashidin, predominately targeting Shi'a evacuees from Fu'ah and Kafriya who were picking up deliveries of food, that killed at least 95 people, including 68 children, and injured another 276. Bystanders chanted sectarian insults as the attack took place. No specific armed group took responsibility.

Additionally, armed groups kidnapped prisoners they viewed as valuable to force prisoner exchanges with the government or other armed groups for ransom. As of September, up to 100 men from the Damascus suburb of Adra al-Omaliyah belonging to religious minority groups remained in captivity as hostages.

Kurdish Autonomous Administration

Religious and ethnic minority communities and non-Kurds have complained of human rights abuses by the Kurdish-majority Autonomous Administration (AA), which controls 30 percent of a de facto autonomous area in northeastern Syria. According to the Assyrian Monitor for Human Rights, non-Kurdish communities in this area reported forced demographic changes, including the displacement of Armenian and Assyrian Christians and Sunni Arab Muslims and their replacement by Kurds, and the imposition of Kurdish language and culture in some areas. The Assyrian Human Rights Monitor also reported increasing pressure on Christian private schools in al-Hasakeh Province to teach the Kurdish language, hire Kurdish teachers, and modify their curriculum—including incorporating lessons about Abdallah Ocalan, leader of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)—or be shut down. Christian community leaders also informed USCIRF that Kurdish authorities appropriated homes that had been

abandoned due to fighting. In late 2017, a new AA regulation ordered abandoned Christian homes in the city of Tabqa, Raqqa Province, to be appropriated for Kurdish families if their owners had not yet returned. Christian and Sunni Muslim minorities also accused the largely Kurdish SDF of working with the AA to sideline, discriminate against, and at times even attack non-Kurdish populations.

U.S. POLICY

In 2017, the first priority of U.S. policy in Syria was the destruction of ISIS. The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, increasingly assisted by the U.S.-backed Syrian Defense Forces, achieved notable success on that front, freeing approximately 3.2 million Syrians from ISIS control. After the reporting period, in January 2018, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated five priorities for the United States with regard to Syria: (1) preventing both ISIS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as HTS, from regaining power or carrying out attacks on American citizens at home or abroad or on U.S. allies; (2) remaining committed to resolving the crisis through a UN-led political process prescribed in [UN Security Council Resolution 2254](#), including transparent and free elections under a stable, unified, independent post-Assad Syria; (3) diminishing Iranian influence in Syria; (4) facilitating the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees and IDPs to their homes; and (5) ensuring that Syria is free of weapons of mass destruction.

In December 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis stated that in order to ensure the stabilization of Syria and

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to prevent the reemergence of ISIS, U.S. military presence in the country will likely last between 18 months and two years. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of December 2017 there were approximately 2,000 U.S. troops deployed in

Syria. The United States continues to support both the Geneva peace process led by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura and the mandate of the COI. The United States does not play an organizing role in either the Astana or Sochi conferences, two other conferences that are supported by Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other regional allies.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, the United States continued to be the largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian crisis. At the end of the reporting period, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) estimated that 13.1 million Syrians remained in need of humanitarian assistance, including 6.3 million IDPs and six million refugees in neighboring countries. Total U.S. assistance since 2012 has exceeded \$7,482,000,000. U.S. funding supported humanitarian programs, including agriculture and food safety, health, nutrition, and protection programs, as well as emergency food assistance.

The U.S. Department of State supported civil society and media programming in opposition-held areas. The United States also has consistently supported international efforts to investigate and collect evidence of gross human rights abuses during the conflict, including the UN Human Rights Council-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry (COI) and the UN

General Assembly-mandated International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Those Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes in Syria (IIIM). Several other international initiatives also focused on accountability for atrocities, including the Commission for International Justice and Accountability as well as the Syrian Justice and Accountability Center.

In 2017, the U.S. Congress was considering two companion bills focusing on Iraq and Syria. Both [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017, introduced in May 2017, and [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017, introduced in January 2017, focus on stabilization and peace-building in Iraq and Syria. S. 1158 would direct the secretary of state to establish a mass atrocities task force within the State Department, with the mandate of strengthening the department's efforts at atrocity prevention and response and coordinating the interagency processes on these issues. H.R. 390 would authorize the secretary of state and the USAID administrator to provide assistance to support the efforts of entities, including NGOs, to undertake activities to address ISIS-committed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Iraq and Syria, including

conducting criminal investigations and collecting and preserving evidence. The bill also would authorize the secretary of state and USAID administrator to provide assistance to entities they determine can effectively manage and deliver humanitarian, stabilization, or recovery assistance to members of Iraqi and Syrian religious or ethnic minorities that have been subjected to ISIS genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes, or are otherwise persecuted groups.

Additionally, [S. 905](#), the Syrian War Crimes Accountability Act, was introduced in June 2017. The bill would require a report on—and authorize technical assistance for—accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Syria. In

Then Secretary of State Tillerson stated in August that "ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled."

addition, [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, introduced in November 2017, would impose terrorism-related sanctions on two of the most nefarious Iranian-controlled mili-

tias in Iraq and Syria: As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, which have carried out sectarian crimes throughout Syria.

Then Secretary of State Tillerson stated in August that "ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled. ISIS is also responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups, and in some cases against Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other minorities. . . . The protection of these groups—and others subject to violent extremism—is a human rights priority for the Trump administration." He and other senior U.S. officials reiterated this priority throughout 2017. During the year, former U.S. Special Envoy for Syria Michael Ratney and other officials met with Syrians from diverse religious backgrounds, including members of the Orthodox Christian, Sunni, Druze, and Alawite communities, to discuss assistance to vulnerable populations.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the Bahraini government made a concerted effort to promote religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and peaceful coexistence, including by King Hamad bin Al Khalifa issuing the Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration and announcing the establishment of the King Hamad Global Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence. In addition, non-Muslim religious communities continued to be able to freely practice their faith, both publicly and privately. Nevertheless, religious freedom conditions did not improve for the majority Shi'a Muslim community amid an ongoing stifling of dissent and a deterioration of human rights conditions generally. While Shi'a religious leaders were not targeted in 2017 as they had been during the summer of 2016, a significant crackdown in May 2017 resulted in the deaths of five Shi'a Muslim demonstrators, injuries to dozens, and the arrests and detentions of civilians and religious leaders. In addition, during the year, authorities continued to deny some

Shi'a clerics access to specific mosques and banned others from conducting Friday prayers, sermons, and other religious services. Discrimination against Shi'a Muslims in government employment and some public and social services continued. Also, during the reporting period, Iranian government support for subversive activity by Shi'a militant groups in Bahrain increased. In 2017, the government made some progress in redressing past abuses against Shi'a Muslims but backtracked on other recommendations it had made progress on from the 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). As a consequence of developments in 2017, in 2018 USCIRF—for the second year in a row—places Bahrain on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, egregious” standard for designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Encourage the Bahraini government to address religious freedom concerns both privately and publicly, and report openly on the government’s success or failure to implement genuine reforms, including by making public an annual assessment of Bahrain’s progress, or lack thereof, on implementing BICI recommendations;
- Urge the Bahraini government to continue to make progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, including those related to freedom of religion and belief, sectarian incitement, and accountability for past abuses against the Shi’a community;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the country’s government to treat prisoners humanely and allow them access
 - to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
 - Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
 - Ensure clear and consistent messaging at all levels of the U.S. government regarding Bahrain’s human rights and religious freedom obligations under international law;
 - Increase support for rule of law, community policing, and countering violent extremism programs;
 - Assist in the training of government entities, including security officials,
- Urge the Bahraini government to pass a law in the Shura Council addressing incitement to violence in the media, ensuring compliance with international human rights standards; and
- Urge the Bahraini government to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting visits from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief;

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Kingdom of Bahrain

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy

POPULATION

1,410,942

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Registered religious organizations represent Sunni and Shi'a Islam, as well as Christianity (including Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican, Seventh-day Adventist, Syrian Orthodox, Malankara Orthodox, and Indian Orthodox churches), Hinduism, the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, and Judaism

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

70.3% Muslim (60% Shi'a, 35–40% Sunni)

14.5% Christian

9.8% Hindu

2.5% Buddhist

0.6% Jewish

<0.1% Folk religion

1.9% Unaffiliated

0.2% Other (including Sikhs and Baha'is)

*Estimates compiled from the U.S. Department of State and CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

According to the Bahraini constitution, Islam is the religion of the state and Shari'ah is a principal source for legislation. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, and freedom to perform religious rites. Of the country's population of approximately 1.4 million, slightly less than half are Bahraini citizens, with a slight majority comprising expatriate workers, primarily from South and Southeast Asia.

During the past year, the overall human rights situation continued to decline. In June 2017, authorities shut down the sole remaining independent news site, Al Wasat, which reported on issues affecting the majority Shi'a community, reportedly for "creating discord" and damaging Bahrain's relations with other countries. In May, the government suspended indefinitely the last major political opposition entity, the National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad), for criticizing the execution of three Bahrainis in January 2017. In addition, prominent human rights defenders and members of outlawed political opposition groups were sentenced to prison during the year or continued to serve lengthy terms. For example, in July 2017, noted human rights

defender Nabeel Rajab was sentenced to two years in prison for criticizing the government in a tweet; in February 2018, after the end of the reporting period, Rajab was sentenced to an additional five years in prison for tweets criticizing alleged abuses by authorities in Bahraini prisons and the conflict in Yemen. In September 2017, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein stated that "democratic space in the country has essentially been shut down" and that since June 2016, Bahraini authorities have imposed "severe restrictions on civil society and political activism through arrests, intimidation, travel bans and closure orders." The Bahraini government contends that those arrested and charged breached public order laws during authorized processions or protests, in some cases carrying weapons. Bahraini and international human rights groups, the UN, and the State Department dispute this.

Furthermore, in 2017, Bahraini authorities cited increased efforts by Iran to expand its influence in the country as the reason for heightened government concern about subversive activity by Iranian-backed Shi'a militants. While Iran's support for such activities in Bahrain has been documented more widely during the past year, the Bahraini government sometimes used this pretext to crack down on some Shi'a opposition

leaders, clerics, and activists without substantiating subversion or criminal activity; such rhetoric and actions also exacerbated sectarian tensions in the country. Most Bahraini Shi'a clerics deny any subversive relationship with Iran and state their primary tie with the country is having acquired religious training in Qom, Iran, the largest center for Shi'a religious study in the world.

In October 2017, USCIRF staff and representatives of the International Religious Freedom Office at the State Department traveled jointly to Bahrain. In March 2018, after the end of the reporting period, USCIRF Commissioners and staff traveled to Bahrain to assess religious freedom conditions and meet with Bahraini government officials, the government-appointed National Institution for Human Rights, the U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials, lawyers, and representatives of civil society and religious communities.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Positive Developments and Ongoing Challenges

In September 2017, Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa announced the release of The Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration, a document that highlights the rich history of religious diversity and pluralism in Bahrain and calls for religious freedom for all and peaceful coexistence. In September 2017, the Bahraini government also announced that the King Hamad Global Centre for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Co-Existence would be inaugurated in 2018 in Bahrain. The center is expected to host dialogues and conferences on religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, among other things.

Compared to other countries in the region, Bahrain is—and has long been—pluralistic, and among the most tolerant of religious minority communities.

The majority Shi'a Muslim community—despite facing challenges since uprisings in 2011—is generally free to worship in mosques without incident and perform religious rites and ceremonies without

interference. Nevertheless, over the past two years, authorities increasingly have targeted religious leaders and some religious activities while clamping down on freedoms of expression, association, and assembly. In response to concerns about the negative effect on religious freedom conditions, Bahraini officials argue that religious freedom is not being violated, but rather that opposition groups and activists are causing political and security problems by violating laws or creating discord.

Non-Muslim Religious Minority Communities

Approximately half of the expatriate workers in the country are non-Muslim. The government officially recognizes 19 religious entities, including more than a dozen Christian denominations, a tiny Jewish community, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Baha'is. The various communities reported the ability to publicly and privately practice their faiths without interference or limitation. Bahrain hosts an active 200-year-old Hindu temple—the oldest in Gulf—the Arabian Peninsula's only intact synagogue, and the seat of the Catholic Vicarate of Northern Arabia, which includes Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. A new Catholic church—which will be the largest in the Gulf region—is in the process of being built on land donated by the King.

Targeting of Shi'a Religious Leaders and Activists

In 2017, the targeting of Shi'a clerics was less pronounced when compared to the previous year. Many of the clerics who were arrested, detained, and imprisoned during the summer of 2016 were either released or completed their prison terms; others have pending cases on which authorities took no action. Sheikh Mohammad al-Shahabi was among the first of the clerics to be released, leaving prison in February 2017 after his sentence was commuted from two years to six months.

Nevertheless, during the year, the government continued to target and prosecute Shi'a Muslim political

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figures—some affiliated with Al Wefaq, the leading Shi'a Islamist political society that was dissolved in 2016—often on unfounded or unsubstantiated charges with implications for religious freedom. In May, Sheikh Isa Qassim, Bahrain's most senior Shi'a cleric, was given a one-year suspended sentence on charges of money laundering, which human rights groups called unsubstantiated; Shi'a activists claim the charges stemmed from Sheikh Qassim's collection

of *khums*, which senior Shi'a clerics receive and spend to serve the poor and indigent. Two of Sheikh Qassim's aides, Sheikh Hussein Mahrus and Mirza al-Obaidli, were given three-year suspended sentences on the same charges. In 2016, authorities revoked Sheikh Qassim's citizenship for allegedly seeking to form an organization supporting foreign religious leaders, an allegation he denied.

Later in May, soon after Sheikh Qassim's sentencing, Bahraini authorities undertook a security operation in the predominantly Shi'a Muslim village of Diraz, the location where Sheikh Qassim has been living under house arrest since 2016, and where supporters staged regular demonstrations since his citizenship was revoked. According to human rights organizations, the security operation shut off access to the village and authorities cleared out the area using live ammunition, resulting in the deaths of five civilians, injuries to dozens, including police officers, and nearly 300 arrests. Several individuals, including some Shi'a clerics, were charged and convicted of incitement to hatred and violence and illegal gathering; their cases were ongoing at the end of the year. In June, a group of UN human rights experts, including the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, [criticized](#) Bahrain security forces for using "excessive and lethal force to disperse peaceful protestors who had gathered in a sit-in." The statement urged the government to "cease its campaign of persecution against human rights defenders, journalists and anyone else with divergent opinions, and take all measures to guarantee a safe and enabling environment for all Bahrainis, independent of their political opinions, beliefs or confession." The government claimed it gave ample warning before clearing out the village, but

many demonstrators opted not to leave. At the end of the reporting period, authorities continued to deny Shi'a clerics and worshippers access during Friday prayers to the Imam al-Sadiq Mosque in Diraz.

... the targeting of Shi'a clerics constitutes a systematic campaign of harassment that violates their rights to freedom of assembly, speech, and religion.

According to Bahraini and international human rights groups, the targeting of Shi'a clerics constitutes a systematic campaign of harassment that violates their rights to freedom of assembly, speech, and religion. In

many of these cases, the Bahraini government has used charges of insulting religious symbols and/or religion, illegal gathering, unlawful protesting, engaging in political speech in sermons, and supporting terrorism.

The Dissolution of Al Wefaq

In July 2016, the government dissolved the Shi'a Islamist political society, Al Wefaq, and seized its assets, on accusations that it provided "a nourishing environment for terrorism, extremism, and violence." Al Wefaq disputed these charges and appealed the ruling to the highest court in Bahrain, the Court of Cassation. In February 2017, the Court of Cassation denied the appeal, drawing strong criticism from the UN and international human rights groups.

In December 2016, Al Wefaq's former secretary general, Sheikh Ali Salman, was sentenced to nine years in prison in a retrial ordered by the Court of Cassation. Sheikh Salman was convicted on a range of security-related charges—including inciting regime change and insulting the Ministry of Interior—that UN experts have criticized as violating his freedoms of expression, association, and religion. In April 2017, his sentence was reduced to four years. In November 2017, he was charged separately with spying for Qatar, which he denied; at the end of the reporting period, that case was ongoing. In the past, the State Department called for Sheikh Salman's unconditional release; he has been imprisoned since December 2014.

Implementation of BICI Recommendations

The Bahraini government asserts that it has implemented all 26 of the BICI recommendations, including

those related to freedom of religion or belief. However, human rights groups and the State Department have concluded that only some recommendations have been implemented, while others were either fulfilled partially or not fulfilled at all. The latest assessment, a June 2016 [State Department report](#), found that “much work remains to be done” in implementing the recommendations, including in areas related to religious freedom and sectarian incitement.

As recommended in the BICI report, the Bahraini government has created entities to address accountability for abuses, including a Civilian Settlement Office to compensate for deaths and injuries from the 2011 unrest, an Office of the Ombudsman in the Ministry of Interior to ensure compliance with policing standards and receive reports of misconduct, and a Special Investigations Unit (SIU) in the Office of Public Prosecution to investigate and prosecute security personnel for committing crimes against civilians. According to the SIU, since 2011, 51 cases have been referred to criminal courts and more than 120 defendants for trial, including 17 officers employed by the Ministry of Interior. Of those convicted, prison sentences ranged from six months to seven years. During the last four months of 2017, the SIU received 31 complaints and referred 13 members of the security forces for criminal prosecution; those cases are ongoing.

During the past year, the government appeared to backtrack in two areas where it had made progress. In January 2017, Bahraini authorities restored arrest and investigation powers to the National Security Agency, which the BICI report found to have tortured and abused predominantly Shi’a Muslim demonstrators. In April, the king signed a bill amending the constitution to allow military courts the right to try civilians; human rights groups called the move an attempt to deny due process to Shi’a Muslim dissidents and activists charged with unsubstantiated or unfounded terrorist-related crimes.

By the end of the reporting period, the Bahraini government had rebuilt 20 of the 30 Shi’a mosques and religious structures that were destroyed in 2011 and identified in the BICI report. The government estimated

it spent approximately \$10 million doing so. Three structures still require legal and administrative approval, and no progress has been made on their rebuilding. Seven structures were built at the expense of the Shi’a community. According to the State Department, the Bahraini government claimed it had reimbursed the Shi’a community for reconstruction costs through payments to the national Shi’a endowment; however, members of the Shi’a community dispute this claim. The government also has stated that it helped secure legal permits for the seven structures.

Limitations on Religious Expression and Sectarian Incitement

While government officials discouraged sectarian language in media outlets, progovernment and private media at times used inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric. In addition, the Ministry of Information Affairs has drafted a new law that would curb incitement to violence, hatred, and sectarianism, as recommended in the BICI report; however, the law has not yet been referred to the Shura Council for consideration.

In May 2016, the parliament passed, and the Shura Council ratified, article 5 of the Political Societies Law, which prevents clerics who give sermons from joining political societies that engage in any political activities. The law also states that “political societies’ heads and leaders shouldn’t be religious preachers, even if they occupy the position in the societies without being paid.”

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Human rights groups view this as limiting clerics’ free speech and association rights, while Bahraini officials see it as a way to prevent the politicization of religious activities. Bahraini officials claim that freedom of

expression and speech is upheld in the country, but say that some groups use this defense to incite hatred and sectarian violence.

Article 169 of the penal code imposes up to two years’ imprisonment and a fine for publishing “falsified” or “untrue” reports, and states that laws on freedom of expression must be “compatible with values of a democratic society.” Human rights groups are concerned that

such broad language, subject to varying interpretations, increases the likelihood of infringement of freedom of expression, including religious expression.

Furthermore, articles 309 and 310 of the penal code criminalize insulting a recognized religious community, its rituals, or religious symbols—with a term of imprisonment up to one year or a fine not exceeding 100 Bahraini dinars (approximately \$265). Despite charges and convictions in previous years, there were no known convictions during the reporting period.

Other Forms of Discrimination

According to human rights groups, members of the Shi'a community still cannot serve in the active military, only in administrative positions, and there are no Shi'a Muslims in the upper levels of the Bahraini government security apparatus, including the military and police. In addition, [UN experts found](#) patterns of cultural, economic, educational, and social discrimination against the Shi'a Muslim community, including in the education system, media, public sector employment, and other government social policies such as housing and welfare programs. The Bahraini government denies any discrimination against the Shi'a community in government employment, and asserts there has been progress to diversify the military and security apparatus. For example, the government continued recruiting individuals from all segments of society, including the Shi'a Muslim community, into its community policing program.

In October 2017, authorities reportedly interfered with some Ashura commemorations. According to human rights groups, security forces removed religious banners and posters from 21 predominantly Shi'a Muslim neighborhoods, met protests with tear gas and live ammunition, and arrested 12 civilians. Bahraini officials claimed they were forced to intervene due to excessive vandalism and looting by youth.

New Personal Status Law

In July 2017, Bahrain became the first country in the region to pass a unified personal status law, covering both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The new law weakens the

power of religious courts to regulate marriage, divorce, and custody issues, among other things. The Bahraini government hailed the passage of the law as significant progress on the legal status of all female Bahraini citizens, both Sunni and Shi'a Muslim. Some Shi'a Muslim legislators and others within the Shi'a community opposed the law, arguing that only senior Shi'a clerics should have the authority to legislate on such matters, not the state.

U.S. POLICY

U.S.-Bahraini relations have been focused primarily on geopolitical concerns, including the regional influence of Iran and security cooperation. Bahrain, a longstanding U.S. ally in the region, has hosted a U.S. naval presence since 1946 and is home to over 8,000 members of the U.S. armed services, mostly affiliated with the Fifth Fleet of the United States Navy. In 2002, the United States designated Bahrain as a “major non-NATO ally,” allowing the country access to defense research cooperation and purchase of certain otherwise-restricted U.S. arms.

While the Obama Administration conditioned the sale of F-16 fighter jets on specific human rights progress, the Trump Administration has prioritized a closer defense relationship with Bahrain. In March 2017, the administration announced it planned to drop all human rights conditions

In July 2017, Bahrain became the first country in the region to pass a unified personal status law, covering both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims.

on the sale of F-16 fighter jets and other arms to Bahrain, and in September it approved a \$3.8 billion arms deal package. In November 2017, President Donald Trump and then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa in Washington, DC. These discussions reportedly focused on countering Iranian regional influence, resolving ongoing Gulf tensions, and promoting economic relations. President Trump also extended the 1991 U.S.-Bahrain Defense Cooperation Agreement for another 15 years.

Also in March, the State Department [designated](#) two Bahraini nationals, Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, as Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224. Both Yusuf and Alawi are affiliates of a Bahrain-based violent group, al-Ashtar Brigade,

that has claimed responsibility for about 20 bombings since 2013. In publishing the designation, the State Department noted that Iran funded and supported the Brigade and, therefore, the designations were part of the U.S. effort to “aggressively target Iran’s destabilizing and terrorism-related activities in the region.”

The 2011 BICI report has provided the major framework in recent years for U.S. assessments of progress on human rights reforms in Bahrain. In both 2013 and 2015, Congress directed the secretary of state to submit an assessment of Bahrain’s progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, including a description of specific steps taken and an assessment of compliance with each recommendation. The State Department produced two such reports, one in 2013 and one in 2016. Both reports found the government had made some progress, but that more was needed, particularly relating to the independence and accountability of investigative bodies and promotion of national reconciliation. The 2016 report noted progress in rebuilding demolished Shi’a mosques and in implementing tolerance in school curricula.

During 2017, State Department officials spoke out about human rights developments in Bahrain. In June, the State Department [expressed concern](#) about the

dissolution of the opposition Wa’ad political society and about the deaths in Diraz. In July, the State Department called for the release of human rights defenders [Nabeel Rajab](#) and Ebtisam al-Saegh and urged Bahrain to respect fundamental freedoms.

In August 2017, during the rollout of the 2016 international religious freedom report, then Secretary Tillerson [expressed concern](#) that the Bahraini government “continued to question, detain, and arrest Shia clerics, community members, and opposition politicians” as well as about “ongoing discrimination in government employment, education, and the justice system” against the Shi’a community, which he urged the government to stop. According to the State Department, U.S. government officials at all levels, including embassy staff, have urged the Bahraini government to fully implement the BICI recommendations, end discrimination against the Shi’a community, support national unity and reconciliation efforts, respect freedom of expression, bolster the independence of watchdog organizations, and provide for the religious freedom of prisoners.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, despite a deteriorating human rights situation overall, including arrests of political dissidents and journalists, religious freedom conditions in Egypt largely remained the same as in 2016. President Abdel-fatah al-Sisi continued his overtures to promote religious tolerance, including attending Coptic Christmas Eve Mass for the fourth consecutive year. The government also continued its education curriculum reform process and planned to revamp the entire education system. The Egyptian government prioritized the construction and reconstruction of several prominent non-Muslim houses of worship, including St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo and the Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, but as of early 2018, only 53 out of the 5,540 churches that applied had received approvals for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law. Despite positive developments, the number of blasphemy cases filed against individuals increased

in 2017 from 2016. In addition, human rights groups reported more than 120 sectarian attacks, including mob attacks against Christians and churches, and the lack of effective prosecution of perpetrators remained a serious concern. A series of attacks in 2017 by affiliates of the terrorist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) targeted houses of worship, including Egypt's deadliest attack on a Sufi mosque, in Sinai, that resulted in the deaths of 305 people, and bombings and attacks against churches and Christians that resulted in almost 100 deaths and hundreds of injuries. The Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness communities also remained unrecognized. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Egypt on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Egyptian government to accelerate approvals for the churches that have applied for renovation, construction, or registration under the 2016 Church Construction Law;
- Ensure that a portion of U.S. military assistance is used to help police implement an effective plan for dedicated protection for religious minority communities and their places of worship;
- Press the Egyptian government to undertake further reforms to improve religious freedom conditions, including: repealing decrees banning the Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths, removing religion from official identity documents, and passing laws consistent with article 53 of the constitution to create an independent antidiscrimination body;
- Urge the Egyptian government to repeal or revise article 98(f) of the penal code, which criminalizes contempt of religion, or blasphemy, and in the interim provide the constitutional and international guarantees of the rule of law and due process for those individuals charged with violating article 98(f);
- Press the Egyptian government to prosecute perpetrators of sectarian violence through the judicial system and to ensure that responsibility for religious affairs is not under the jurisdiction of the domestic security agency, which should only deal with national security matters such as cases involving the use or advocacy of violence;
- Press the Egyptian government to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims, including by prosecuting clerics who incite violence against Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities;
- Press the Egyptian government to continue to revise all textbooks and other educational materials to remove any language or images that promote intolerance, hatred, or violence toward any group of persons based on religion or belief, and include the concepts of tolerance and respect for the human rights of all individuals, including religious freedom, in all school curricula, textbooks, and teacher training;
- Provide support for education reform and teacher training initiatives;
- Provide support to human rights and other civil society or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to advance freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians;
- Place particular emphasis, in its annual reporting to Congress on human rights and religious freedom, on the Egyptian government's progress on the protection of religious minorities and the prosecution of perpetrators of sectarian violence; and
- Apply the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Arab Republic of Egypt

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

97,041,072 (July 2017 estimate)

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam (Sunni/Shi'a), Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant)

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

85–90% Muslim (predominantly Sunni)

10–15% Christian (majority Coptic Orthodox, other Christians include Armenian Apostolic, Catholic, Maronite, Orthodox, and Anglican) (2015 estimate)

*CIA World Factbook and U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

Egypt's constitution identifies Islam as the state religion, and the principles of Shari'ah as the primary source of legislation. While article 64 of the constitution states that "freedom of belief is absolute," only Muslims, Christians, and Jews can practice their religion publicly and build places of worship. Of the country's estimated 97 million people, 85 to 90 percent are Sunni Muslims, and non-Sunni Muslims comprise less than 1 percent. Ten to 15 percent are Christians, the vast majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church and less than 2 percent of whom belong to various other denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, Maronite, Armenian Apostolic, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, and Anglican. There are at least 2,000 Baha'is, approximately 1,500 Jehovah's Witnesses, and fewer than 10 Jews.

Egypt has seen progress and setbacks during its political transition since 2013. In 2014, a new constitution was overwhelmingly approved by referendum, and in May 2014, Sisi was elected president. Parliamentary elections in late 2015 resulted in 39 Christians out of a 596-member House of Representatives, seated in January 2016. Presidential elections are scheduled to be held in late March 2018.

In 2017, the government's efforts to combat extremism and terrorism continued to negatively affect human

rights conditions and civil society activities. The government continued to crack down on dissent. Five individuals who attempted to run for president were either arrested or intimidated into withdrawing their candidacy. Sympathizers and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, journalists, secular and liberal activists, and opposition figures have been harassed, jailed, and given harsh prison terms, including death sentences for Brotherhood members and other Islamists, sometimes on legitimate—though other times on unfounded—security charges.

Law 70 of 2017 for Regulating the Work of Associations and Other Institutions Working in the Field of Civil Work, enacted in May 2017, prohibits NGOs from carrying out any work that may "harm national security, public order, public morality, or public health." However, none of these terms are explicitly defined. The law grants several government agencies, including the General Intelligence Directorate and the Defense and Interior Ministries, the authority to oversee NGOs, including monitoring day-to-day activities, and the power to object to an organization's choice of leadership or the scheduling of internal meetings. Relocating buildings without informing the proper authorities is subject to punishments ranging from imprisonment of one to five years, to a fine of 50,000 to 1,000,000 Egyptian pounds (approximately \$2,800 to \$56,600).

In January 2017 and March 2018, the latter after the reporting period, USCIRF delegations traveled to Egypt to assess religious freedom conditions and met with a range of Egyptian government officials, including the Minister of Education and the Minister of Religious Endowments; the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Ahmed El-Tayeb; Pope Tawadros II, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church; the U.S. chargé d'affaires and other embassy officials; and members of civil society, including religious leaders, human rights defenders, and lawyers.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Positive Developments

In 2017, President Sisi and his government continued their efforts to highlight Egypt's religious diversity to both domestic and international audiences. For example, in May 2017, at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, President Sisi referred to Egypt as a "land of Islam, Christianity and Judaism" and "an epitome of moderate thought, tolerance and enlightenment."

For the fourth year in a row, President Sisi, along with members of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, attended Coptic Christmas Mass, held this year at the Church of the Nativity of Christ, a church being built in the new administrative capital outside of Cairo.

The Ministry of Education also continued to remove and/or clarify passages from primary school textbooks, particularly Islamic education books, deemed to promote extremist ideology. During USCIRF's March 2018 visit, the Minister of Education outlined plans to roll out over a period of several years a new education system and curriculum for primary and secondary schools starting in the fall of 2018. According to Egyptian officials, the government continued to dismantle and close down a number of private schools operated by groups teaching extremist ideology.

In both January 2017 and March 2018, USCIRF met with the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University, Ahmed El-Tayeb, who highlighted the institution's commitment to promoting religious tolerance and understanding.

The university continued to train imams and provide Islamic education, which served approximately two million primary and secondary students and 350,000–400,000 university students throughout the country, as well as approximately 35,000 students from 108 foreign countries. Al-Azhar, along with the Coptic Orthodox Church and other Christian denominations, continued to lead and participate in the Egyptian Family House. The 27-member leadership council's purpose is to engage directly with government ministers concerning public policy, and it has made special efforts to promote religious tolerance, especially in Upper Egypt. Al-Azhar, as well as the Ministry of Religious Endowments, worked with the National Council of Women, a government body focused on the advancement of women, to create a program to bring together more than 500 female Muslim lay preachers and nuns to promote religious tolerance throughout Egypt.

Regarding reform to religious discourse in society, the Egyptian government actively monitored *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by clerics. Dar al-Ifta, a govern-

ment entity headed by the Grand Mufti, continued to counter *fatwas* online that espouse radical views. It has also created its own magazine, *Insight*, as a counter-narrative to the one promoted by extremist groups. The Ministry of Religious Endowments

During USCIRF's March 2018 visit, the Minister of Education outlined plans to roll out over a period of several years a new education system and curriculum for primary and secondary schools starting in the fall of 2018.

and Dar al-Ifta continued to train senior imams on the skills of issuing responsible and accurate *fatwas*. Dar al-Ifta will also hold its fourth international conference in October 2018, meant to bring together imams and non-Muslim religious leaders to discuss radicalization and effective ways of countering it.

Attacks by ISIS Affiliates

Throughout 2017, ISIS affiliates targeted Christians. In February 2017, ISIS-linked militants in the Sinai released a video inciting violence against Egypt's Christians. In April, on Palm Sunday, a bombing at St. George's Church in Tanta killed 30 people and injured 79, and a second bombing at St. Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria, the seat of the Coptic papacy, killed 17 people and injured 48. In

May, ISIS-linked militants killed a father and son in the Sinai; they shot the father and burned the son alive. Also in May, unknown gunmen killed 28 pilgrims who were en route by bus to the Monastery of St. Samuel in Minya. In October, Father Samaan Shehata, a Coptic priest, was stabbed in Cairo. In late December, ISIS militants opened fire on the Helwan Church near Cairo, killing 11 civilians and a policeman.

In 2017, ISIS affiliates also targeted Sufi Muslims in what was considered the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history. ISIS-linked militants bombed a Sufi mosque in the Sinai Peninsula and then sprayed gunfire on worshippers as they tried to escape. A total of 305 people were killed and at least 128 others were injured. Several international leaders, including President Donald Trump, offered their condolences to the Egyptian president.

President Sisi has made firm statements in the wake of terrorist attacks, particularly the ones on the Sufi mosque and Helwan Church, vowing to continue "cleansing the country of terrorism and extremism." While perpetrators of some of these incidents were arrested and/or prosecuted, accountability for all actors involved remained insufficient, as discussed below in the section on Sectarian Attacks and Impunity. Some members of the Christian community remain fearful that perpetrators may evade punishment.

During USCIRF's visit, Christian interlocutors voiced concern about the vulnerability of their facilities but had differing views about the government's ability to protect them. Some stated that the government had increased security for churches and was trying to prevent future acts of terrorism, but others said the government did not effectively protect them and that some church security personnel conducted surveillance rather than guarding the churches.

Construction, Renovation, and Registration of Churches

In September 2016, the parliament passed and President Sisi approved a new law to regulate the construction and renovation of churches. At the time, the Coptic

Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican denominations publicly supported the law. However, some Christian and human rights organizations voiced concern that the law allows governors to deny church-building permits with no clear avenue to appeal, requires that churches be built "commensurate with" the number of Christians in an area, and allows authorities to deny construction permits if granting them would undermine "public safety." The law also creates a committee, appointed by the cabinet, to review applications to license informal or unlicensed churches, of which there are many due to the difficulty of obtaining official permits. The 10-member committee has nine government representatives (including from the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and General Intelligence Services) but just one representative from "the church" (without specifying which denomination).

A year after its passage, discontent with the law has grown. At the end of the reporting period, none of the 5,540 churches that had applied during 2017 for licenses had been approved. During the week of USCIRF's visit

in early March 2018, 53 churches were approved, with promises from officials that another 200 were to come soon after. Some Christian leaders stated that the law had been used to justify closing

down churches and had prevented maintenance of existing churches, and that the government's management of churches under Egypt's new terrorism laws had targeted their community disproportionately. However, government officials informed USCIRF that regulation of churches is necessary to ensure compliance with property and construction laws at both the city and governorate levels. Since September 2016, the government has issued four decrees to allocate land for the sole use of churches (in Port Said, Minya, Fayyoub, and South Sinai). Over the last six years, only 11 church construction permits had been awarded.

Sectarian Attacks and Impunity

According to human rights groups, in 2017 alone there were 22 cases of attacks against churches, including many perpetrated by ISIS affiliates and others perpetrated by

At the end of the reporting period, none of the 5,540 churches that had applied during 2017 for licenses had been approved.

sectarian mobs. Perpetrators of these and other sectarian-related attacks continued to go largely unpunished, perpetuating an atmosphere of impunity. In some cases, instead of pursuing justice through the rule of law, local Egyptian authorities, particularly in Upper Egypt, continued to conduct “customary reconciliation” sessions between Muslims and Christians. Local authorities and Muslim and Christian religious leaders at times have abused these sessions to compel victims to abandon their claims to any legal remedy. Human rights groups have argued that reconciliation sessions disadvantage Christians, in some cases resulting in Christian families being forced to leave their villages and sell their property.

There were a few relevant prosecutions in 2017. In March 2017, a court sentenced Adel Soliman to death for the January 2017 murder of Coptic shopkeeper Youssef Lamei in Alexandria; at year’s end, the sentence remained under appeal. Following an attack on a Coptic Christian-owned house used as an unregistered church in Atfih village in December 2017, a court imposed on approximately 15 individuals one-year suspended sentences and fines of 500 Egyptian pounds (\$28), which they too may appeal. The court also fined the owner of the house 360,000 Egyptian pounds (\$20,500) for converting his house into a church without a license; the Archdiocese of Atfih reportedly had applied for a license for the church, which has been used for 15 years, under the 2016 Church Construction Law. In January 2018, after the reporting period, a public prosecutor filed murder charges against a man accused of killing 11 individuals in the December 2017 Helwan Coptic Church attack; the case remains ongoing. In February 2018, also after the end of the reporting period, a court confirmed a death sentence for Ahmed el-Sonbati for the October 2017 murder of Coptic Orthodox priest Fr. Samaan Shehata, after the Grand Mufti ratified the November 2017 sentence.

Discrimination Against Christians

Discriminatory laws and policies that remain in place continued to impact Christians negatively, including the blasphemy law (discussed below) and limits on conversion from Islam. Egyptian-born Muslims who

have converted to Christianity still cannot reflect their change of religious affiliation on identity documents, and in many cases face intense social hostility. Some Christian leaders told USCIRF of intimidation and arrests by security services when they learned of conversions. In addition, incidents of kidnappings for ransom and extortion of Christians continued to occur, particularly in Upper Egypt.

Few Christians hold positions of authority in the government. USCIRF met with the first Coptic co-chair of the parliament’s Committee for Religious Affairs and Endowments. However, only one of the 36 government ministers is Christian, and there are no Christian governors, even in Christian-majority areas. Between 1971 and 2015, there were no Christian members in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces; in 2016, the military named the first one.

Blasphemy Law and Limits on Religious Expression

Article 98(f) of the Egyptian penal code prohibits citizens from “ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife.” Authorities use this law to detain, prosecute, and imprison members of religious groups whose practices deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs or whose activities are alleged to jeopardize “communal harmony” or insult Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. In December 2017, a bill to ban atheism was proposed—but failed—in the parliament’s Committee on Religious

Affairs. After the reporting period, in January 2018, the Minister of Religious Endowments, Mukhtar Jum’a, publicly equated atheists with terrorists.

In 2017, there were 15 known cases and investigations under article 98(f), an increase from 2016, many involving expression on social media. While the majority of such charges in Egypt are leveled against Sunni Muslims, most of those sentenced by courts to prison terms for blasphemy have been Christians, Shi’a Muslims, and atheists. A conviction can result in a prison term of up to five years and a fine. For example, in February 2017, Sunni Muslim cleric Mohamed Abdullah al-Nasr was sentenced to five years in prison for “contempt of religion” for questioning various

In 2017, there were 15 known cases and investigations under article 98(f), an increase from 2016, many involving expression on social media.

interpretations of Qur'anic texts on Facebook; at the end of the reporting period, he remained in prison pending appeal. In December 2017, Ibrahim Khalil, a 29-year-old from a Christian family, was accused of "administering a Facebook page that promotes atheism." He was interrogated for five hours, and—as of March 2018—remained detained and under investigation.

According to the leader of the community in Cairo, only five Jews remain in the capital, and three in Alexandria.

Baha'is and Jehovah's Witnesses

The Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths have been banned since 1960 by presidential decrees. As a result, Baha'is living in Egypt are unable to meet or engage in public religious activities. In 2017, members of the community could not publicly celebrate the birthday of the Baha'i faith's founder, Baha'u'llah. Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Center has issued *fatwas* over the years urging the continued ban on the Baha'i community and condemning its members as apostates. In recent years, the Ministry of Religious Endowments has sponsored public workshops to raise awareness about the "growing dangers" of the spread of the Baha'i faith in Egypt. The ministry sold a book at the 2017 Cairo Book Fair that discussed the dangers of the Baha'i faith.

As a policy, Baha'i marriage is not recognized because the community has no recognized spiritual institution. In January 2018, after the end of the reporting period, one Baha'i couple was awarded a marriage license after the couple took its case to the courts. Two other such cases are pending.

As reported previously, the government has permitted Jehovah's Witnesses to meet in private homes in groups of fewer than 30 people, despite the community's request to meet in larger numbers. Jehovah's Witnesses are not allowed to have their own places of worship or to import Bibles and other religious literature. According to community members, this largely stems from the Coptic Church's refusal to recognize Jehovah's Witnesses as Christians. For the past several years, security officials continued to harass and interrogate Jehovah's Witnesses by monitoring their activities and communications.

Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Community

The Jewish community in Egypt is virtually extinct. According to the leader of the community in Cairo,

only five Jews remain in the capital, and three in Alexandria. In 2017, anti-Semitic content remained rampant in Egypt's state-controlled and semi-official media, and state authorities

failed to take adequate steps to curb anti-Semitic statements. Community sites, such as synagogues and cemeteries, including the second-largest Jewish cemetery in the world, remained in dire need of renovation and repair. In a positive development, the Egyptian government is restoring the 160-year-old Eliyahu Hanavi synagogue in Alexandria, one of the largest synagogues in the Middle East. The Ministry of Antiquities' Project Sector is investing \$2.2 million in the project.

U.S. POLICY

Historically, Egypt has been one of the United States' most important allies in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, the U.S. and Egyptian governments have cooperated closely on military and counterterrorism efforts, as well as on overall regional stability. According to the Congressional Research Service, between 1946 and 2016 the United States provided Egypt with a total of \$78.3 billion in bilateral foreign aid, including \$1.3 billion a year in foreign military financing (FMF) from 1987 to the present.

President Trump has sought to improve relations with Egypt, but his administration has voiced occasional concern about Egypt's human rights record and the NGO law in particular, as well as the detention of U.S. citizens in Egypt. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 omnibus allocates \$112.5 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) to Egypt. In August 2017, the administration reprogrammed away from Egypt \$65.7 million of the FY2017 FMF funds, as well as \$30 million of FY2016 economic aid. As of March 2018, it had also delayed Egypt's ability to use \$195 million in FY2016 FMF due to concerns about human rights and Egypt's relationship with North Korea. For FY2019, the president has requested a total of

\$1.38 billion in foreign assistance for Egypt, almost all of which would come from the FMF account.

After the reporting period, in January 2018, Vice President Mike Pence met with President Sisi in Egypt to discuss a series of issues, including the Trump Administration's December 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, which was met with criticism in Egypt. Pope Tawadros II and the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmed El-Tayeb refused to meet with the vice president during his visit. The vice president also highlighted the continued detention of two U.S. citizens in Egypt and the shared fight against terrorism. In November 2017, President Trump offered his sympathy for the attack on the Sufi mosque in Sinai, calling it a "horrible and cowardly terrorist attack on innocent and defenseless" worshippers and emphasizing that terrorism and its ideological roots must be defeated.

According to State Department officials, the U.S. government continues to prioritize religious freedom concerns with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Interior. This includes urging the government to hold the perpetrators of sectarian crimes accountable, repeal article 98(f) on blasphemy, and prevent discrimination against and the intimidation of Egypt's smallest religious minority groups. It has also emphasized the need to accelerate the approvals under the 2016 Church Law. The State Department also welcomed anticipated changes to the education curriculum, as well as religious institutions' commitment to curbing extremism and terrorism. Finally, the U.S. Embassy continues to support programs seeking to encourage and promote religious tolerance, including among youth.

KEY FINDINGS

The year 2017 concluded with the ousting from Iraqi territory of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the group that had posed the greatest existential threat to Iraq's religious minorities. Before its defeat, the group continued to launch a series of deadly attacks throughout 2017, especially in Shi'a-dominated areas, including Baghdad. In the aftermath of the liberation of areas from ISIS, particularly Sunni-dominated Mosul, human rights groups documented discrimination, torture, and reprisal killings of Sunni Muslims, many of whom were suspected of harboring ISIS sympathies. Additionally, in some locations, "ISIS family camps" were set up after many Sunni Muslims were denied the right to return to their homes. In October, following the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) independence referendum, armed conflict broke out between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) on one side, and the Kurdish Peshmerga units on the other, destabilizing an already volatile northern Iraq. This led to a change of control from the KRG to the government of Iraq in areas where significant numbers of religious minorities resided, including the

Nineveh Plains, Kirkuk, and the Sinjar Mountains. It remains to be seen whether or not such loss of territory from the KRG to the government of Iraq will be detrimental to the communities living in those areas. While the KRG has made clear overtures since 2014 to integrate religious minority communities into its governing bodies and local representation, the Iraqi government's plan on how it will integrate them effectively and ensure both their security and development remains unclear. Based on these concerns, in 2018 USCIRF again places the government of Iraq on its Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Also, USCIRF finds that, based on its control of territory and conduct during the reporting period, ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern," or EPC, for particularly severe religious freedom violations that occurred during this reporting period, as defined by December 2016 amendments to IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate ISIS as an EPC under IRFA, as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016, for its control of territory and conduct in 2017;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Encourage both the government of Iraq and the KRG to cease conflict by peacefully negotiating through territory disputes and outstanding budget and oil revenue issues, as well as protecting the rights of all Iraqis;
- Assist the government of Iraq in swiftly implementing United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 2379, which includes the selection of a Special Advisor and establishment of an independent investigative team to

support domestic efforts to hold ISIS accountable for its actions in Iraq;

- Provide, in an expeditious manner, U.S. assistance to the most vulnerable communities, especially in minority areas such as predominantly Christian Nineveh Province;
- Prioritize funding for rehabilitation and stabilization for areas liberated from ISIS control to help create conditions to allow displaced communities to return, and to mitigate ethnosectarian tensions, including credible accountability and transitional justice mechanisms;
- Prioritize working with the Iraqi government to curb sectarian attacks by some elements of the PMF and armed groups that promote a sectarian agenda; and
- Stipulate in all military or security assistance to the Iraqi government and the KRG that security forces be integrated to reflect the country's religious and ethnic diversity, and provide training for recipient units on universal human

rights standards and how to treat civilians, particularly religious minorities.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Pass [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017, which mandates the provision of emergency relief to victims of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Iraq and Syria, and seeks to provide accountability for perpetrators of these crimes; and
- Pass [S. 1158](#), the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017, which seeks to enhance U.S. government capabilities to prevent, mitigate, and respond to genocide and other atrocities.
- Pass [H.R. 4238](#), the Iranian Proxies Terrorist Sanctions Act of 2017, which imposes terrorism-related sanctions on two Iranian-controlled militias, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, that have carried out sectarian crimes in Syria.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Iraq

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic

POPULATION

39,192,111

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam, Christianity, Sabeian-Mandaenism, the Baha'i faith, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, folk religion

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

99% Muslim (55–60% Shi'a, 40–45% Sunni)

< 1% Other (includes Christians, Sabeian-Mandaeans, Baha'is, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, adherents of folk religions)

*CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

The past year was a pivotal one for Iraq. The most significant development in 2017 was the defeat in December of ISIS, a group that then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared in August was “clearly responsible for genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled.” In an effort to begin to hold ISIS accountable, in September 2017 the UN Security Council approved [UN Security Council Resolution 2379](#) to authorize a UN investigative team to collect, preserve, and store evidence in Iraq of acts by ISIS that may be war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide.

In addition, the KRG's independence referendum in September triggered armed conflict between the government of Iraq and the KRG. This led to a change in control of territory and instability in several areas, including the Nineveh Plains, Kirkuk, and the Sinjar Mountains, areas heavily populated by religious minority communities. Although the Iraqi government is making efforts to curb sectarian tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a communities, as well as the Shi'a and Kurdish communities in areas where clashes took place following the

referendum, it has not been able to halt attacks by the Iranian-backed elements of the PMF that have exacerbated sectarian tensions.

Iraq has long suffered from sectarian tensions, which have adversely affected human rights and religious freedom conditions. Developments since the U.S. invasion in 2003 have led to a severely bifurcated society, with deadly tensions between the Shi'a and Sunni communities, now including Kurdish Sunni Muslims in the aftermath of the September 25 KRG independence referendum. Since 2014, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has attempted to reverse former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian policies, but much work remains. Moreover, al-Abadi has not successfully merged the Iranian-backed PMF with the ISF, leaving them to operate outside of government control in

parts of the country, most recently in areas the PMF and ISF seized from Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

This climate helped to facilitate ISIS's rise in northern and central Iraq, and continues to pose

problems for Iraq despite ISIS's defeat. Saddam Hussein's favoritism of the Sunni population and al-Maliki's favoritism of the Shi'a population created divisions and significant distrust between the two communities; these

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tensions have only worsened over time. The Sunni population does not trust the Shi'a majority government to protect its community or incorporate its voice effectively in government; the reverse also holds true for the Shi'a population. In addition, religious minority communities, including the Yazidi and Christian communities, are skeptical of the Iraqi government's willingness and capability to protect them from both Shi'a and Sunni violent armed groups, including ISIS and elements of the PMF. The government of Iraq has tried to bring minority rights—especially within Nineveh Province—to the forefront, and in August appointed Mehdi al-Alaq as General Secretary of the Council of Representatives, with the task of hosting a conference in Bartella on the future of Iraqi minorities. That being said, many religious minority communities remain wary of the notion that religious freedom and human rights are priorities for the government.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Disappearance of Religious Minorities

Even before ISIS's rise, the country's smallest religious communities—which include Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Yazidis, and Sabean-Mandaeans—were already significantly diminished, and their numbers have continued to decline since ISIS first appeared in Iraq in 2014. According to the Iraqi government's latest statistics from 2010, which do not necessarily capture the true population numbers, especially after the advent of ISIS, almost all of the population is Muslim. Shi'a Muslims—including Arabs, Turkmen, and Faili (Shi'a) Kurds—constitute between 50 and 60 percent of the population. Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims constitute 40 percent of the population. Iraq is in particular danger of losing its ancient Christian community, a population that has decreased dramatically in number over the last 15 years. According to Christian leaders, there are now fewer than 250,000 Christians in Iraq, down from a pre-2003 estimate of 1.4 million. Although Christian religious leaders have tried to encourage their followers to remain in the country, many have fled war-ravaged northwestern Iraq, which lacks security or economic opportunity. Yazidi leaders claim their community is now about 400,000–500,000, while the Kaka'i community is not more than 300,000. The Sabean-Mandaean

community is between 1,000 and 2,000, and there are fewer than 2,000 Baha'is.

Violations by ISIS

On December 9, 2017, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced the complete liberation of all Iraqi territory from ISIS. After more than three years of battle, the United States led the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS—which included 73 partners—to fully liberate all areas from the group's control. That being said, the military defeat has not led to the release of all religious minority prisoners held by ISIS. According to various sources, of the 6,400 Yazidis once captured by ISIS, approximately 3,200 of them are still hostages, many of them as sexual slaves.

Attacks by ISIS continued throughout most of 2017. Beginning in January, as the battle to retake Mosul waged on, the group launched a series of attacks on Sadr City and Samarra. Simultaneously, the group set off bombs in Baghdad as well, bringing the total death toll in a matter of three days in the three cities to over 60. In May, during the holy month of Ramadan, the group targeted an ice cream shop in the Karrada neighborhood in Baghdad, a majority Shi'a area, killing 17 people and injuring another 32. In September, in the southern Iraqi city of Nasiriyah, a double attack launched by the group on a restaurant frequented by Shi'a pilgrims killed 84 people and injured more than 90.

Mass graves have been discovered throughout the areas previously under ISIS control. Since November 2015, over 50 mass graves have been uncovered, many of them containing Yazidi victims. Following the liberation of Mosul this year, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) uncovered mass graves throughout northern Iraq. In February, at the Khasfa sinkhole seven kilometers outside of Mosul, 4,000 bodies were discovered, the largest mass grave found to date. Human rights groups found that ISIS would dump bodies, including those of captured policemen and Yazidi men, after mass killings. In March 2017, in Nineveh, a grave of 600 bodies from Badoush Prison and Al Jadaa was discovered. According to survivors of the massacre, ISIS separated out the Sunni and Christian prisoners from the Shi'a prisoners, ordering the Shi'a prisoners to kneel over the mass grave, where they were shot.

On September 21, 2017, after four years of negotiations with the government of Iraq, the UN Security

Council approved [UN Security Council Resolution 2379](#) to authorize a UN investigative team to collect, preserve, and store evidence in Iraq of acts by ISIS that may be war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide. The resolution also creates the position of UN Special Adviser to promote accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide committed by ISIS, and to work with survivors in a manner consistent with relevant national laws. Prior to this resolution, there were informal efforts to prosecute captured ISIS members, such as the Nineveh Investigations Unit, which brought together 12 judges who hear approximately 40–50 cases a day. The unit claims that more than 5,000 ISIS members are being held in makeshift prisons in empty houses around Mosul, and two to three members are dying daily due to poor prison conditions. Others have been shot on sight by the PMF or the ISF. The creation of a formal accountability mechanism undoubtedly will bring appropriate attention to the atrocious crimes carried out by ISIS. It also will bring a sense of reconciliation and justice to the religious minority communities and hopefully will deter the commission of retaliatory crimes.

Violations by the Iraqi Government

Throughout 2017, the fight to defeat ISIS was the top priority for the Iraqi government. However, as more cities were liberated from the group's control, suspicion of Sunni Muslims significantly increased; as a result, Sunni Arabs were denied return to their homes and, in some instances, were attacked, tortured, killed, or forcibly disappeared. For example, following the liberation of Mosul in June 2017, members of the local Sunni Muslim community reported that they were not able to return home—either because they were denied entry through checkpoints or because of delays by local authorities in processing documentation required to return. Families suspected of any possible ties to ISIS are still denied the right to return home and some are being placed in “ISIS family camps.” This is being done under the guise of “de-ISIS-ification,” similar to the informal “de-Baathification” policy that was carried out after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Additionally, throughout the Mosul offensive, numerous reports surfaced that some elements of the ISF and the Iranian-backed PMF, in addition to local Shi'a community members, committed systematic and egregious violations, including killing,

torturing, and forcibly disappearing Sunni Muslim men and boys who they claimed were ISIS supporters. Footage was released in February 2017 showing Shi'a militia groups carrying the Iraqi government flag, dragging the body of a man through the streets of east Mosul and maiming his and two other bodies in public. In the summer of 2017, multiple human rights organizations reported that Sunni Muslim males were washing up on the banks of the Tigris River, while another 15 bodies were found shot between the village of Athba and Hammam al-Alil, south of Mosul.

As in Syria, As-Saib Ahl Al-Haq and Harakat Hizballah Al-Nujaba, two militia groups controlled by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Qassem Soleimani, were identified as having committed sectarian crimes, including raping, attacking, and abducting Sunni Muslims in Iraq. They fought in battles to recapture territories from ISIS on behalf of the Iranian-backed PMF. In the aftermath of ISIS, Sunni-Shi'a tensions have increased, and local leaders and activists have relayed to USCIRF repeatedly that the Iraqi government must address Sunni grievances to prevent the re-emergence of sectarian violence.

Other Iraqi Government Issues

On November 17, the Iraqi parliament rejected an amendment to its Personal Status Law that would have allowed the Shi'a and Sunni religious establishments to control marriage-related matters. The amendment, introduced by the Fadhila Party along with several Shi'a Muslim parties, included issues of inheritance and divorce, and, by giving certain religious communities power to impose family laws, would have allowed girls to be married as young as age eight under some of these laws. Although the parliament's Women's Rights Committee was able to successfully spearhead push-back against this amendment, in the leadup to the May 2018 national elections, many parties have threatened to reintroduce the bill. If reintroduced and passed, this law would alter Iraq's current secular legal system that does not identify Iraqi citizens on the basis of religion. It would require the courts to apply religious law on issues of marriage, divorce, and inheritance.

The 2015 National Identity Card Law remains problematic for Iraq's minorities. Article 26 of the National Identity Card Law forces children with one Muslim

parent to identify as Muslim, even in cases where a non-Muslim woman was raped by an ISIS member. It also reinforces existing restrictions that Muslims cannot change their religious identification on their identity cards after conversion to any other religion. Christian leaders have said that in some cases, families that are formally registered as Muslim but practice Christianity have fled to avoid registering their children as Muslims or to have their children remain undocumented. The bill, passed in late 2015, was sent back to parliament in 2016 by Prime Minister al-Abadi but was not modified at the time. Now, President Fuad Masum has returned the law to parliament for further debate, based on concerns from religious minority communities.

Issues in the KRG

The KRG held its independence referendum on September 25, 2017, resulting in 92 percent of the population supporting independence. Shortly after the results were announced, then Secretary of State Tillerson stated that the United States would not recognize the KRG's unilateral referendum, urging it "to respect the constitutionally-mandated role of the central government." Additionally, Baghdad, Iran, and Turkey met to condemn the KRG's move and results, as well as to consider sanctions. As of the end of the reporting period, Baghdad had halted all international flights into Erbil, which impacted the movement of international humanitarian workers and their ability to provide desperately needed aid to religious minority communities. As of December 2017, the KRG hosted over 1.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), along with 238,000 Syrian refugees, many of whom remain reliant on international and local humanitarian aid organizations for survival.

Since the referendum's passage, the KRG lost to the Iraqi government significant control of much of the territory it had captured from ISIS. The ISF took control of half of the Nineveh Plains, while the other half has remained under KRG control. This led members of the religious minority communities living in these areas to flee, some finding themselves displaced multiple times since 2014. Yazidi militias affiliated with the ISF/PMF have taken control of Sinjar, which some Yazidis say finally has ended the blockade previously imposed by the KRG. More than 700 families reportedly have been displaced from their homes in the traditional Christian town of Teleskof due

to bombardment from ongoing clashes between the Peshmerga and the ISF/PMF. Kirkuk, a disputed territory and the most oil-rich area in northern Iraq, was also the site of heavy but short-lived clashes; it was ultimately surrendered to ISF/PMF units and is under the control of the Iraqi government. This area, which is one of Iraq's most ethnically and religiously diverse, remains a hotbed for potential conflict. Overall, while some religious minority communities informed USCIRF that they were relieved at the KRG's withdrawal from certain territories, including Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains, many worried about Iranian-backed PMFs that seek to take KRG-controlled lands and operate in a sectarian manner. The KRG remains vulnerable to attacks by the PMF and ISF, and fears of increasing Iranian influence and allegations of abuses by Iranian-backed forces in KRG areas are widespread. Some of Iraq's top religious leaders, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, have called on the Iraqi government to protect the Kurds, a rare move for one of Iraq's most respected Shi'a Muslim religious leaders.

The KRG's retreat to the boundaries it held in 2003 (prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq) and the resulting change in control of territory from the KRG to Baghdad may prove to have problematic consequences for northern Iraq's religious minorities. Many members of minority communities fled to and settled in areas under KRG control following ISIS's rise, where their voices—which had not been given the attention they deserved by Iraq's central government—had more weight. As a result, more minority communities were involved in local governance and decision-making in the KRG. Prior to the most recent clashes between Baghdad and the KRG, there was increasing space for religious freedom in the KRG. Nevertheless, there are legitimate concerns for religious minority communities living there, which were detailed in USCIRF's [Wilting in the Kurdish Sun: The Hopes and Fears of Religious Minorities in Northern Iraq](#). At the end of the reporting period, religious minority communities were in desperate need of immediate security and stability; without either, interethnic fear will only worsen, fueling potential combat between and among groups.

U.S. POLICY

On December 9, ISIS, a group that then Secretary of State Tillerson declared was "clearly responsible for genocide," was brought down by the Global Coalition to

Defeat ISIS, led by the United States. The U.S. Administration continues to partner with the ISF, training and equipping them during this time of instability as IDPs return to their homes. The U.S. government also announced it will continue to work with the government of Iraq in order to prevent the reemergence of ISIS or any other violent extremist organization. This includes support to the Iraqi government to provide near-term stabilization activities, including the provision of necessary food, electricity, potable water, and housing.

On October 26, 2017, Vice President Mike Pence [announced](#) that the Department of State would expand funding beyond the UN Development Program (UNDP) and provide direct support through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) for new programs addressing persecuted and displaced religious minority communities. In late 2017, USAID solicited programming ideas from communities, including faith-based groups and private organizations. Such a move was welcomed by many religious minority communities, many of whom had reported that UN funding was difficult to apply for and was not reaching them with the urgency their situation required.

Nevertheless, since June 2015, the UNDP's Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS) program has assisted more than 960,000 IDPs who remain in need of critical humanitarian aid. The FFS, supported by the Global Coalition, was created at the request of Prime Minister al-Abadi to help the Iraqi government stabilize cities and districts liberated from ISIS in order to facilitate national reconciliation. The FFS has contributed to the return of 2.2 million Iraqis to their homes. It continues to implement more than 1,200 projects in 28 locations. As of late 2017, the UNDP had 161 projects in eight Christian areas scheduled for completion by early 2018. Repairs for houses belonging to Christian communities have been fast-tracked; in the months ahead, a total of 2,500 homes were scheduled for rehabilitation. The UNDP also has implemented 55 projects in predominantly Yazidi towns, and has undertaken 27 projects in other minority communities.

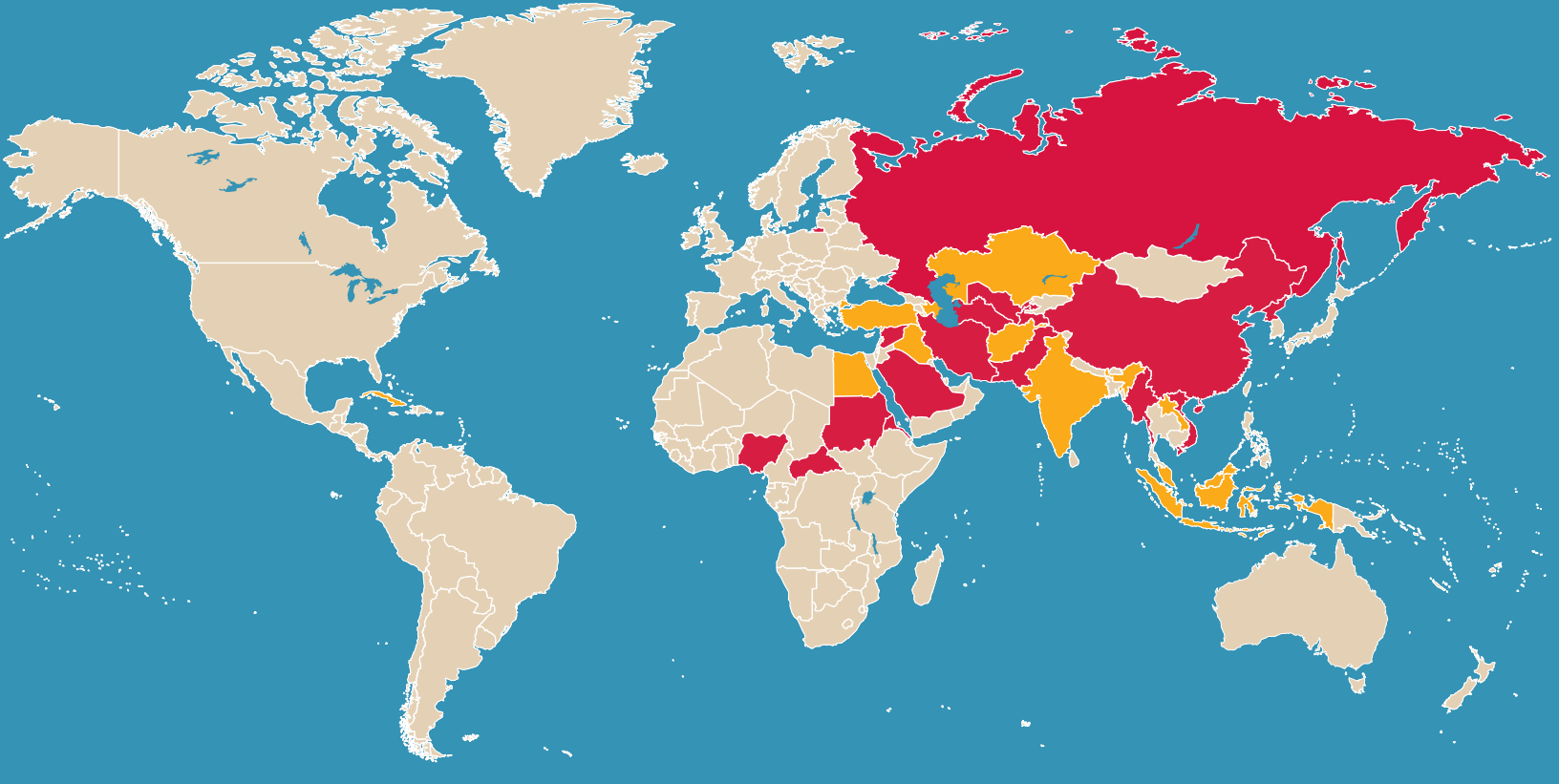
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In 2017, the U.S. government provided a total of more than \$601 million in humanitarian assistance to support the 11 million people in need of aid in Iraq, including more than 790,000 people displaced after the Mosul liberation, 940,000 people displaced from the Christian-dominated Nineveh governorate, and more than 240,000 Syrian refugees. The efforts financed by the United States included camp coordination, health and medical support, education projects, food assistance, psychosocial support, shelter rehabilitation, and livelihood development. The United States also has allocated \$112 million to clear improvised explosive devices,

mines, and unexploded ordinance, in addition to educating Iraqis on the dangers of explosive hazards that ISIS left behind.

In 2017, the U.S. Congress was considering two companion bills focusing on Iraq and Syria, both of which USCIRF supported. Both [S. 1158](#), the Elie

Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2017, and [H.R. 390](#), the Iraq and Syria Genocide Emergency Relief and Accountability Act of 2017, focus on stabilization and peace-building in Iraq and Syria. S. 1158 would direct the secretary of state to establish a Mass Atrocities Task Force within the State Department, with the mandate of strengthening the department's efforts at atrocity prevention and response and coordinating the interagency processes on these issues. H.R. 390 would authorize the secretary of state and the USAID administrator to provide assistance to support the efforts of entities, including NGOs, to undertake activities to address ISIS-committed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes in Iraq, including conducting criminal investigations and collecting and preserving evidence. The bill also would authorize the secretary of state and USAID administrator to provide assistance to entities they determine can effectively manage and deliver humanitarian, stabilization, or recovery assistance to members of Iraqi and Syrian religious or ethnic minorities that have been subjected to ISIS genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes, or otherwise are a persecuted group.



2 0 1 8 C O U N T R I E S

■ TIER 1 COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Burma	Iran	Russia	Tajikistan
Central African Republic	Nigeria	Saudi Arabia	Turkmenistan
China	North Korea	Sudan	Uzbekistan
Eritrea	Pakistan	Syria	Vietnam

■ TIER 2 COUNTRIES

Afghanistan	Cuba	Indonesia	Laos
Azerbaijan	Egypt	Iraq	Malaysia
Bahrain	India	Kazakhstan	Turkey



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

732 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Telephone: (202) 523-3240 Fax: (202) 523-5020
www.uscirf.gov