



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
**INTERNATIONAL
RELIGIOUS
FREEDOM**



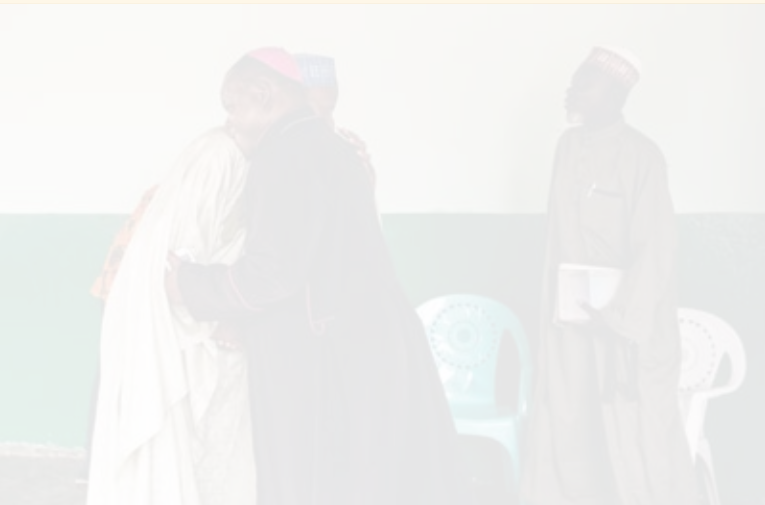
2017 ANNUAL REPORT
KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS





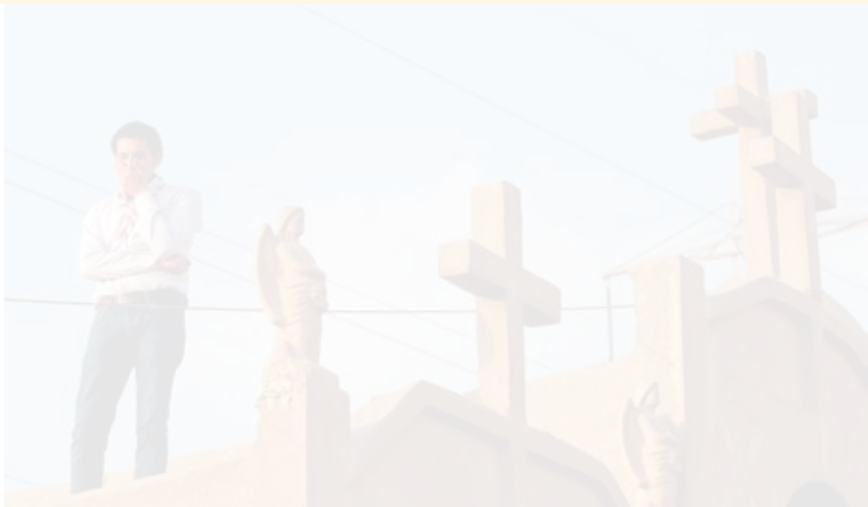
Left: A woman holds a Crimean Tatar flag during a memorial ceremony on the Independence square in Kiev on May 18, 2016 in commemoration of the 72nd anniversary of the deportation of the indigenous population of the Crimea by the Soviet Union. AFP/GENYA SAVILOV/AFP/Getty Images

Right: A Tibetan girl holds a placard featuring Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama, during a protest ahead of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, in New Delhi May 17, 2013. REUTERS/Anindito Mukherjee



Left: Imam of the Bangui Central Mosque, Sheikh Tidjani Moussa Nahib (L) welcomes Bangui Archbishop Dieudonne Zapalainga in Bangui on December 3, 2015. AFP/MARCO LONGARI/AFP/Getty Images

Right: A man cries during the funeral of victims killed in the bombing of Cairo's Coptic cathedral, at the Mokattam Cemetery in Cairo, Egypt December 12, 2016. REUTERS/Amr Abdallah Dalsh



ANNUAL REPORT

OF THE U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This abbreviated version of USCIRF's 2017 Annual Report provides a quick reference to the Key Findings and Recommendations made to the U.S. government for countries/regions USCIRF monitors. The full report may be found at www.USCIRF.gov.

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ACRONYMS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BICI	Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CISADA	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act
COI	Commission of Inquiry
CPC	Country of Particular Concern
CPVPV	Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EPC	Entity of Particular Concern
FTO	Foreign Terrorist Organization
FY	Fiscal Year
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IEEPA	International Emergency Economic Powers Act
IMN	Islamic Movement of Nigeria
IRFA	International Religious Freedom Act
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ITRSHRA	Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
MINUSCA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGOs	Non governmental Organizations
NLD	National League for Democracy
NSC	National Security Council
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorists
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USCIRF	U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
USRAP	U.S. Refugee Admissions Program
VOA	Voice of America

INTRODUCTION

The state of affairs for international religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations. The blatant assaults have become so frightening—attempted genocide, the slaughter of innocents, and wholesale destruction of places of worship—that less egregious abuses go unnoticed or at least unappreciated. Many observers have become numb to violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines this right to include freedom to change one's religion or belief, and freedom—either alone or in community with others and in public or private—to manifest one's religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.

A year ago, then Secretary of State John Kerry declared that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was committing genocide. This declaration marked the first time since Darfur in 2004 when a U.S. administration proclaimed an ongoing campaign as genocide.

ISIS seeks to bring its barbaric worldview to reality through violence and genocide cloaked in a distortion of Islam. While the world has come to know ISIS and expects no better, there are members of the United Nations Security

Council whose assaults on religious freedom are less violent, but no less insidious. On April 20, the Russian Supreme Court issued a ruling banning the existence of the Jehovah's Witnesses in that country. Their right to religious freedom is being eliminated thoroughly—and yet “legally” under Russian law. Russia's continued use of its “anti-extremism” law as a tool to curtail religious freedoms is one of the reasons USCIRF has recommended for the first time that Russia be designated as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

The right to the freedom of religion or belief is an encompassing right that can be taken away directly or indirectly, and thus:

You cannot have religious freedom without:

- ... the freedom of worship;
- ... the freedom of association;
- ... the freedom of expression and opinion;
- ... the freedom of assembly;
- ... protection from arbitrary arrest and detention;
- ... protection from interference in home and family; and
- ... You cannot have religious freedom without equal protection under the law.

And on it goes.

Many violations of religious freedom do not appear to be aimed at religion. Violations can seem mundane, such as requirements for building permits (to establish/repair places of worship) or less mundane, such as restrictions on association (constraining the right to worship). Nonetheless, they are violations of international religious freedoms and they are

increasing in numbers and frequency.

USCIRF also finds that many restrictions on religious freedoms are done under the guise of protecting national security. However, this “securitization” of religion is a double-edged sword.

The challenge of supporting religious freedom and enhancing security can be seen in both Bahrain and Egypt. During the year, the Bahraini government has increasingly cracked down on the religious freedom of its majority-Shi'a Muslim population, yet the U.S. Administration is lifting human rights conditions on the sale of weapons to Bahrain. Egypt, on the other hand, is working toward positive progress on certain aspects of religious freedom, yet the overall state of human rights remains dismal. Outreach by the government to religious minority groups, such as the Copts, is needed and positive, but has drawn the attention of extremists, such as ISIS, that are committing violence against such groups. Efforts by the government that erode the public's ability to associate freely and express themselves inevitably

... USCIRF has recommended for the first time that Russia be designated as a “country of particular concern,” ... for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

curtail broader religious freedoms and send mixed, if not contradictory, messages.

Blasphemy laws are yet another example of governments using laws as a tool for restricting religious freedom under the purported need to protect religions from defamation. In more than 70 countries worldwide, from Canada to Pakistan, governments employ these laws, which lead to grave human rights violations, embolden extremists, and are, in the long run, counterproductive to national security.

Religious freedom, at its core, is the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief, and is a basic human right.

State-sponsored or condoned oppression of the freedom of religion or belief is only part of the challenge. Non-state actors represent a less official yet no less virulent threat to such freedoms. The 2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act requires the president to identify non-state entities engaged in severe religious freedom abuses and deem them “entities of particular concern,” or EPCs. This directive was both appropriate and overdue. Entities that control territory and have significant political control within countries can be even more oppressive than governments in their attacks on religious freedom. In this report, USCIRF recommends that ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia all be designated EPCs.

USCIRF advocates for religious freedom through its policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. USCIRF also strengthens religious freedom advocacy networks abroad through education and outreach, including:

1. Collaborating with the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief;
2. Highlighting the complexities and synergies between the rights of women and girls and freedom of religion or belief; and

3. Advocating on behalf of religious prisoners of conscience by raising awareness of the violations of their freedom of religion or belief.

Religious freedom, at its core, is the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or belief, and is a basic human right. Protecting that right falls to each and every one of us, requiring people from all countries, political views, and faiths to come together to fight religious persecution and work to protect religious freedom for all.

2017 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 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 2017 Annual Report represents the culmination of a year's work by Commissioners and professional staff to document religious freedom violations and progress and to make independent policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

The 2017 Annual Report covers calendar year 2016 through February 2017—although in some cases significant events that occurred after the reporting period are mentioned—and is divided into four sections.

The first section focuses on the U.S. government's implementation of IRFA, and provides recommendations for specific actions to bolster current 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. IRFA requires the U.S. government to designate as a CPC any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations that are systematic, ongoing, and egregious. During the reporting period, the State Department made two sets of CPC designations—in February and October 2016—naming 10 countries, including Tajikistan for the first time in February 2016.

USCIRF's 2017 CPC recommendations include, for the first time, the recommendation that Russia be designated as a CPC. Based on improvements in religious freedom conditions in Egypt and Iraq, USCIRF does not recommend those two countries for CPC designation in 2017, as it had for Egypt since 2011 and for Iraq since 2008.

CPC RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2017, USCIRF recommends that the State Department again designate 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.

TIER 2

In 2017, USCIRF places the following 12 countries on Tier 2: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, and Turkey.

EPC RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2017, 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.

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 are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" CPC standard. Due to deteriorating religious freedom conditions, Bahrain is included on Tier 2 in 2017 for the first time.

The last section briefly describes, based on USCIRF's ongoing global monitoring, religious freedom issues in eight other countries—Bangladesh, Belarus, Ethiopia, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Nepal, and Somalia—as well as in the Western Europe region. This section of the report typically includes countries previously recommended for CPC designation or on Tier 2 and in which USCIRF continues to monitor ongoing concerns; countries USCIRF visited during the reporting year but did not find to meet the CPC or

The 2017 Annual Report represents the culmination of a year's work . . . to make independent policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

Tier 2 standards; and countries where USCIRF saw emerging issues or troubling trends that merited comment but did not rise to the CPC or Tier 2 level. Nepal and Mexico are new additions to this section this year.

The fact that other countries are not included in this report does not represent a determination that no religious freedom concerns exist in those countries. USCIRF does not have the mandate or resources to report on all foreign countries. Information on religious freedom conditions in all foreign countries may be found in the State Department’s annual International Religious Freedom reports.

As USCIRF’s previous Annual Reports have recognized and documented, non-state actors are some of the most egregious violators of religious freedom in today’s world. Amendments to IRFA enacted in December 2016 in P.L. 114-281, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, require the U.S. government

to identify non-state actors engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and designate any such entity as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC. The amendments define non-state actor as “a non-sovereign 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.” In this Annual Report for the first time, as required by IRFA as amended, USCIRF recommends in 2017 three organizations for designation as EPCs: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. As it has in past years, USCIRF also continues to report, in various country chapters, on particularly severe violations of religious freedom perpetrated by non-state actors that do not meet the December 2016 amendments’ limited definition because, for example, they do not exercise territorial control.

USCIRF 2017 CPC RECOMMENDATIONS	USCIRF 2017 TIER 2 COUNTRIES	USCIRF 2017 EPC RECOMMENDATIONS
Burma*	Afghanistan	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
Central African Republic	Azerbaijan	The Taliban in Afghanistan
China*	Bahrain	Al-Shabaab in Somalia
Eritrea*	Cuba	
Iran*	Egypt	
Nigeria	India	
North Korea*	Indonesia	
Pakistan	Iraq	
Russia	Kazakhstan	
Saudi Arabia*	Laos	
Sudan*	Malaysia	
Syria	Turkey	
Tajikistan*		
Turkmenistan*		
Uzbekistan*		
Vietnam		

*Designated as CPCs by the State Department on October 31, 2016

COMMON POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While the U.S. government must pursue freedom of religion or belief as a foreign policy objective contextualized for 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 CPCs and for those listed as Tier 2 countries

appear below. These recommendations may not be generalizable to all countries in each category 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.

COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN	
For those countries categorized as countries of particular concern, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government pursue the following goals . . .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Urge the country’s government to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, 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 of and prosecute future 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, lawyers, and the ability to practice their faith;
. . . through methods including these policy options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enter into a binding agreement with the foreign government, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster critical reforms to improve religious freedom and establish a pathway that could lead to the country’s eventual removal from the CPC list; • Use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as adding further names to the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the Treasury Department’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; • Continue to 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 consuls general levels, maintain active contacts with human rights activists.

TIER 2 COUNTRIES	
<p>For those states categorized as Tier 2, 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 mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; • Press the country’s government to conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecute future incidents of sectarian violence, terrorism, and other violations of religious freedom; • 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 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;
<p>. . . through methods including these policy options.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to raise consistently religious freedom concerns at high-level bilateral meetings with the country’s leaders; • Ensure that the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Consulates, including at the ambassadorial and consuls 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.

IRFA IMPLEMENTATION

KEY FINDINGS

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) is a landmark law, passed with overwhelming congressional approval and diverse civil society support, that seeks to make religious freedom a higher priority in U.S. foreign policy through a range of mechanisms and tools. No administration, since the law's enactment, has implemented IRFA to its full potential, for reasons including a lack of high-level support, staffing gaps, inconsistent application of the law's provisions, and insufficient training

and funding. Over the past year, however, U.S. international religious freedom policy has been reenergized and placed on a more positive trajectory, including through heightened diplomacy, a reinvigorated "country of particular concern" (CPC) process, and expanded programs and training. Moreover, amendments to IRFA enacted in December 2016 in P.L. 114-281 make major substantive updates to the law's requirements, better equipping the U.S. government to respond to current conditions.

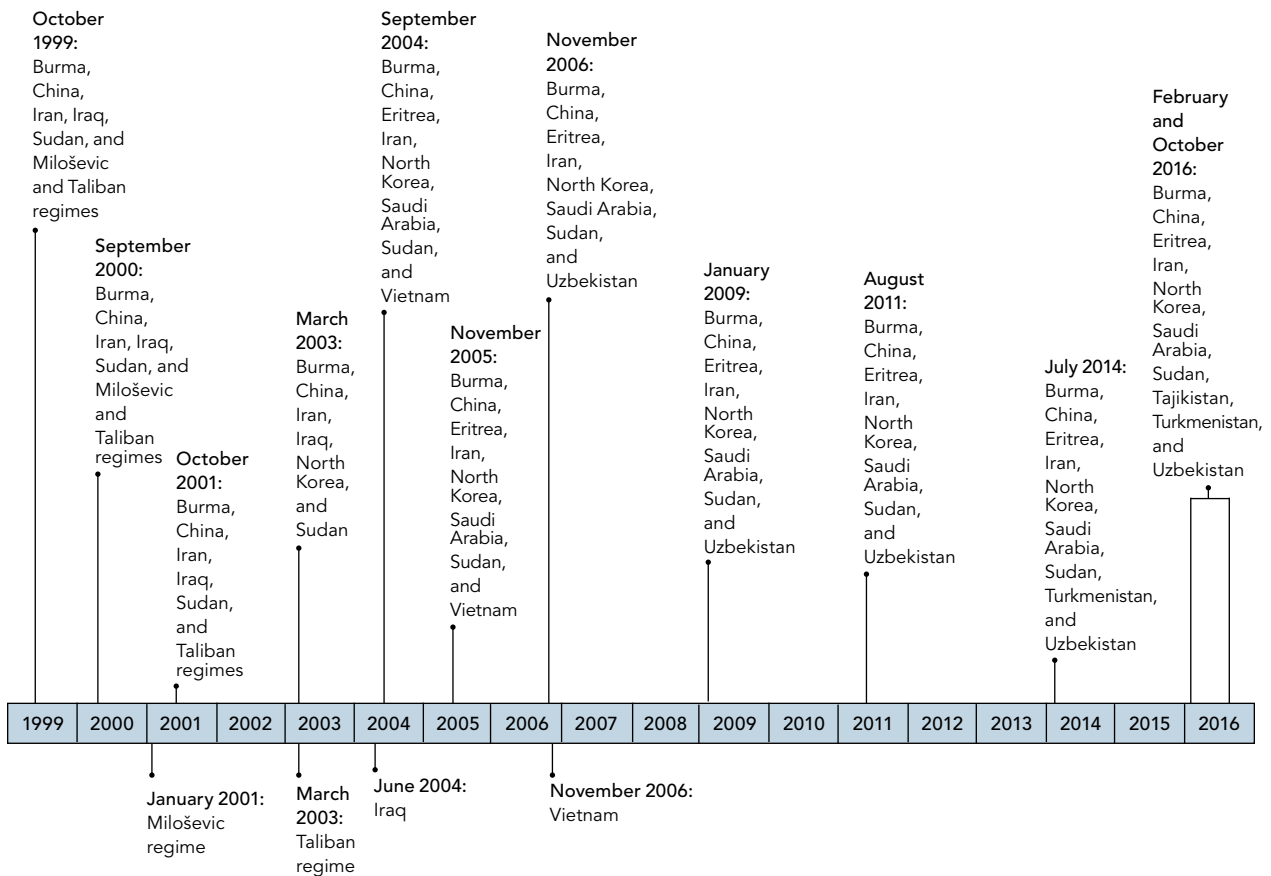
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION

- Nominate promptly a qualified and experienced Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and provide him or her, when confirmed, with the authority and resources necessary to carry out the position, including by continuing Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 staffing and program funding levels for the State Department's International Religious Freedom Office (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.
- Stress consistently the importance of religious freedom for everyone, everywhere, in public statements and public and private meetings in the United States and abroad, especially statements and meetings by the president, vice president, secretary of state, and other high-ranking officials.
- Develop and issue a whole-of-government strategy to guide how the U.S. government will protect and promote religious freedom abroad for all, using all available diplomatic and legal tools, as well as action plans for specific countries, and establish an interagency working group, co-chaired by the Ambassador-at-Large and the Special Adviser to the President on International Religious Freedom, to oversee implementation.
- Implement fully all of IRFA's requirements, including through diplomatic engagement, annual designations of CPCs and "entities of particular concern" (EPCs), and corresponding actions, especially targeted actions such as visa denials and asset freezes against specific violators when they can be identified.
- Prioritize efforts to seek the release of prisoners whom the State Department or USCIRF identify as being 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, as IRFA envisions, including by participating in and supporting relevant United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) entities and activities, as well as by continuing to lead and participate in the International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Protect refugees and asylum seekers, including those fleeing religious persecution, by continuing the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and addressing the longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal that USCIRF has documented since 2005.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CONGRESS

- Confirm promptly a qualified and experienced nominee for Ambassador-at-Large and focus on competency in international religious freedom during confirmation hearings for other relevant officials in the State Department and other agencies.
- Ensure sufficient appropriations for the Ambassador-at-Large and the IRF Office to enable the mandate of IRFA, as amended, to be fully executed and effectively achieved.
- Hold annual oversight hearings on the implementation of IRFA, as amended, as well as hearings on specific religious freedom issues, and ensure religious freedom is raised in country-specific hearings and ambassadorial hearings.
- Support legislation that promotes the freedom of religion or belief abroad and, through legislation and appropriations, develop an international religious freedom strategy.
- Conduct oversight on the implementation of P.L. 114-281, the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, including regarding the required curriculum development and training for State Department Foreign Service officers.
- Examine, during delegation trips abroad, religious freedom conditions for persons of all faiths and beliefs or none, including by meeting with individuals and organizations that promote religious freedom and related human rights, targeted religious communities, 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 fight religious persecution and promote the internationally protected right to religious freedom.
- Exercise oversight of the expanded implementation 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.

STATE'S DESIGNATIONS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES AS CPCs



STATE'S REMOVALS OF COUNTRIES AND REGIMES FROM CPC LIST

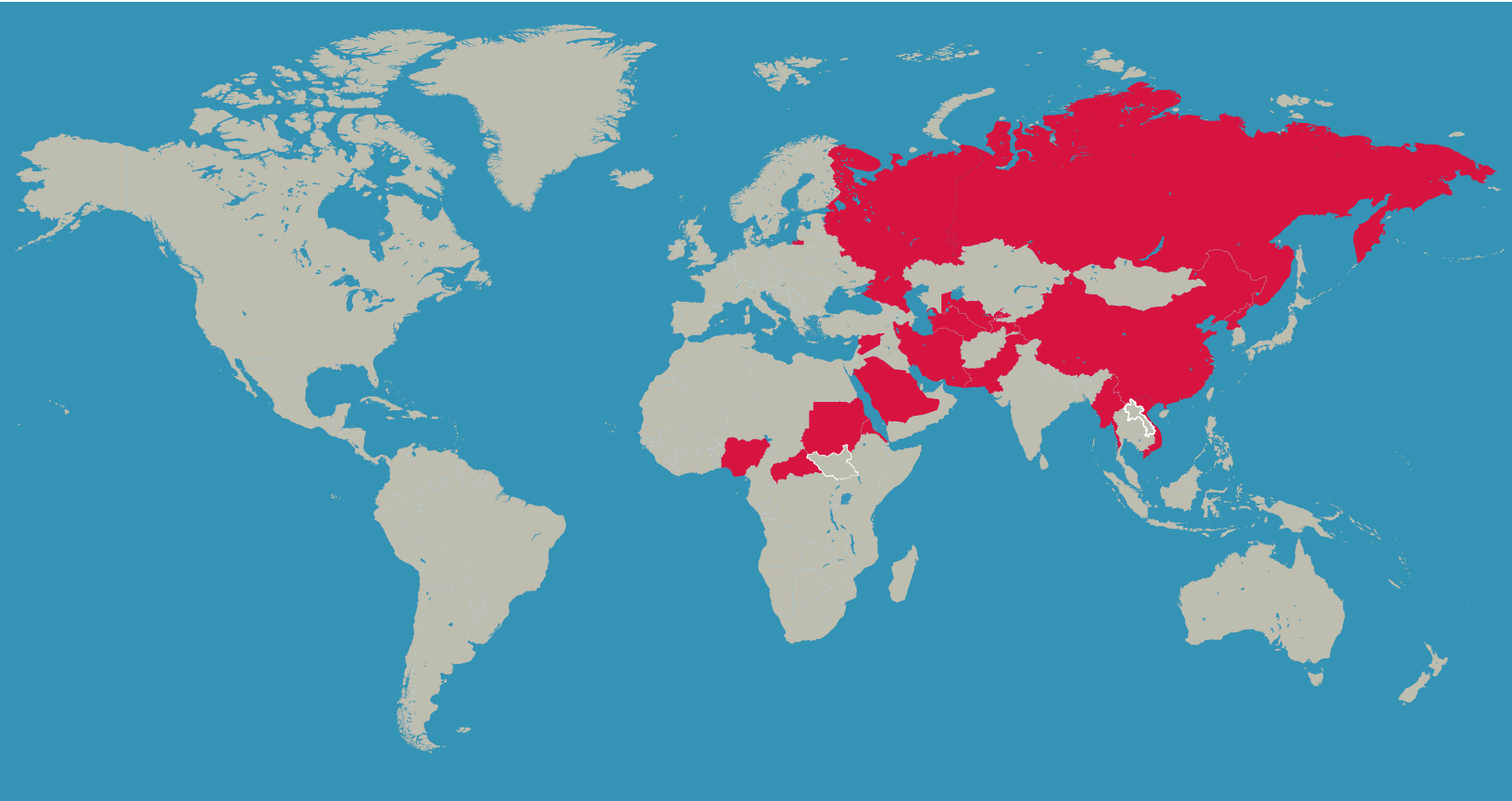
Source: GAO analysis of Department of State information

TIER 1 COUNTRIES

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

TIER 1 DESIGNATION

The International Religious Freedom Act requires the U.S. government to designate as a CPC any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe religious freedom violations that are "systematic, ongoing, and egregious."



TIER 1 USCIRF-RECOMMENDED CPC COUNTRIES

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

*Designated as CPCs by the State Department on October 31, 2016

KEY FINDINGS

The year 2016 marked a historic and peaceful transition of government in Burma, also known as Myanmar. Yet while the political handover occurred without incident, conditions during the year continued to decline for Rohingya Muslims, as well as for other religious and ethnic minorities. In addition, fresh and renewed fighting in some ethnic areas highlighted the schism between Burma's civilian-controlled leadership and the military, which controls three powerful ministries and significant portions of the economy. Although the circumstances and root causes driving the ill treatment of religious and ethnic groups differ, there are two common elements: (1) the outright impunity for abuses and crimes committed by the military and some non-state actors, and (2) the depth of the humanitarian crisis faced by displaced persons and others targeted for their religious and/or ethnic identity. Due to both governmental and societal discrimination, Rohingya

Muslims—tens of thousands of whom are currently displaced—are stateless and vulnerable, and many Christians are restricted from public worship and subjected to coerced conversion to Buddhism. Given that the National League for Democracy (NLD) government has allowed systematic, egregious, and ongoing violations of freedom of religion or belief to continue, USCIRF again finds that Burma merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, in 2017 under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999, most recently in October 2016. Non-state actors such as Ma Ba Tha and other nationalist individuals and groups do not meet the definition of an “entity of particular concern” under the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (P.L. 114-281), but merit continued international scrutiny for their severe violations of religious freedom and related human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Burma as a CPC under IRFA;
- Enter into a binding agreement with the government of Burma, as authorized under section 405(c) of IRFA, setting forth mutually agreed commitments that would foster critical reforms to improve religious freedom and establish a pathway that could lead to Burma's eventual removal from the CPC list, including but not limited to the following:
 - Taking concrete steps to end violence and policies of discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities, including the investigation and prosecution of those perpetrating or inciting violence; and
 - Lifting all restrictions inconsistent with international standards on freedom of religion or belief;
- Continue to encourage Burma's government to allow humanitarian aid and workers, international human rights monitors, and independent media consistent and unimpeded access to conflict areas, including in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states and other locations where displaced persons and affected civilian populations reside, and direct U.S. assistance to these efforts, as appropriate;
- Support efforts by the international community, including at the United Nations, to establish a commission of inquiry or similar independent mechanism to investigate the root causes and allegations of human rights violations in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan states and other conflict areas, and to hold accountable those responsible—including members of the military and law enforcement—for perpetrating or inciting violence against civilians, particularly religious and ethnic minorities;
- Encourage Burma's government to become party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Engage the government of Burma, the Buddhist community (especially its leaders), religious and ethnic minorities (including Rohingya Muslims and Christian communities), and other actors who support religious freedom, tolerance, inclusivity, and reconciliation, to assist them in promoting understanding among people of different religious faiths and to impress upon them the importance of pursuing improvements in religious tolerance and religious freedom in tandem with political improvements;
- Use the term “Rohingya” both publicly and privately, which respects the right of Rohingya Muslims to identify as they choose;
- Encourage crucial legal and legislative reform that strengthens protections for religious and ethnic minorities, including citizenship for the Rohingya population through the review, amendment, or repeal of the 1982 Citizenship Law or some other means, and support the proper training of local government officials, lawyers, judges, police, and security forces tasked with implementing, enforcing, and interpreting the rule of law;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and persons detained or awaiting trial, and press Burma'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; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials, agencies, and military units identified as having participated in or being responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as adding further names to the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the Treasury Department'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.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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

KEY FINDINGS

The Central African Republic (CAR) remains fragile, susceptible to outbreaks of sectarian violence, and fractured along religious lines. Militias formed along opposing Muslim and Christian lines continue to kill individuals based on their religious identity, leading to retaliatory attacks and waves of violence. CAR's Muslim population remains disproportionately displaced, and in the western part of the country, the Muslim community cannot freely practice their faith. The CAR government has taken some positive steps to address interfaith tensions, but has failed to increase its reconciliation efforts to reverse the ethnic cleansing of Muslims or improve interfaith relations. Since a 2013 coup that resulted

in rampant lawlessness and the complete collapse of government control, state authorities have almost no presence outside of the capital. USCIRF again finds in 2017 that CAR merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In 2015, USCIRF determined that the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and sectarian violence in CAR meet IRFA's standard for CPC designation. While IRFA's language focuses CPC designations on governmental action or inaction, its spirit is to bring U.S. pressure and attention to bear to end egregious violations of religious freedom and address the actual drivers of persecution.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate CAR as a CPC under IRFA;
- Sustain a high level of engagement with CAR authorities, the United Nations (UN), and international donors to ensure that issues related to ending sectarian violence and impunity, increasing interfaith reconciliation, and affirming the rights of religious freedom and religious minorities are supported and raised in all engagements with relevant parties;
- Press CAR authorities to undertake initiatives to ensure that CAR Muslims have a future in the country by issuing statements that Muslims are full and equal citizens, undertaking development missions in the northeast, ensuring Muslim participation in government administration, safeguarding sustainable returns of Muslim refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to their homes, recognizing Muslim holidays as national holidays, and rebuilding destroyed mosques and Muslim properties;
- Press CAR authorities, the UN Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and international donors to increase activities on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration equally for all armed groups, while simultaneously providing sustainable reintegration opportunities;
- Work with the UN Security Council to continue to sanction ex-Séléka and anti-balaka members responsible for organizing and/or engaging in sectarian violence, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, and continue to speak out regularly against sectarian violence and gross human rights abuses;
- Continue to contribute to and work with international donors to ensure that future security forces and police units reflect the country's diversity, re-establish and professionalize the CAR's judiciary, and fully fund the Special Criminal Court;
- Continue to support interfaith dialogue and efforts by religious leaders to rebuild social cohesion at national and local levels; and
- Continue to support humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons, as well as rebuilding projects.

KEY FINDINGS

During 2016, as China's President Xi Jinping further consolidated power, conditions for freedom of religion or belief and related human rights continued to decline. Authorities target anyone considered a threat to the state, including religious believers, human rights lawyers, and other members of civil society. In 2016, the Chinese government regularly emphasized the "sinicization" of religion and circulated revised regulations governing religion, including new penalties for activities considered "illegal" and additional crackdowns on Christian house churches. The government continued to suppress Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, including through new regional government regulations that limit parents' rights to

include their children in religious activities. Authorities evicted thousands of monks and nuns from the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in Tibet before demolishing their homes. The government continued to detain, imprison, and torture countless religious freedom advocates, human rights defenders, and religious believers, including highly persecuted Falun Gong practitioners. Based on China's longstanding and continuing record of severe religious freedom violations, USCIRF again finds that China merits designation in 2017 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated China as a CPC since 1999, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate China as a CPC under IRFA;
- Continue to raise consistently religious freedom concerns at the Strategic and Economic Dialogue and other high-level bilateral meetings with Chinese leaders, and at every appropriate opportunity encourage Chinese authorities to refrain from imposing restrictive and discriminatory policies on individuals conducting peaceful religious activity, including activities the Chinese government conflates with terrorism or perceives as threats to state security;
- Coordinate with other diplomatic missions and foreign delegations, including the United Nations (UN) and European Union, about human rights advocacy in meetings with Chinese officials and during visits to China, and encourage such visits to areas deeply impacted by the government's religious freedom abuses, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Zhejiang Province;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy and U.S. consulates, including at the ambassadorial and consuls general level, maintain active contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and religious freedom advocates, and press the Chinese 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;
- Press the Chinese government to abide by its commitments under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and also independently investigate reports of torture among individuals detained or imprisoned, including reports of organ harvesting;
- Initiate a "whole-of-government" approach to human rights diplomacy with China in which the State Department and National Security Council staff develop a human rights action plan for implementation across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including providing support for all U.S. delegations visiting China;
- Increase staff attention to U.S. human rights diplomacy and the rule of law, including the promotion of religious freedom, at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing and U.S. consulates in China, including by gathering the names of specific officials and state agencies who perpetrate religious freedom abuses;
- 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 Treasury Department'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; and
- Press China to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers crossing its borders, 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 Convention Against Torture.

KEY FINDINGS

The Eritrean government continues to repress religious freedom for unregistered—and in some cases registered—religious communities. Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups. The situation is particularly grave for unregistered Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The

government dominates the internal affairs of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, the country’s largest Christian denomination, and suppresses the religious activities of Muslims, especially those opposed to the government-appointed head of the Muslim community. In light of these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Eritrea merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated Eritrea as a CPC since 2004, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Eritrea as a CPC under IRFA, and maintain the existing, ongoing arms embargo referenced in 22 CFR 126.1(a) of the International Traffic in Arms Regulations;
- Continue to use bilateral and multilateral diplomatic channels to urge the government of Eritrea to:
 - Release unconditionally and immediately detainees held on account of their peaceful religious activities, including Orthodox Patriarch Antonios;
 - End religious persecution of unregistered religious communities and register such groups;
 - Grant full citizenship rights to Jehovah’s Witnesses;
 - Provide for conscientious objection by law in compliance with international human rights standards;
- Bring national laws and regulations, including registration requirements for religious communities, into compliance with international human rights standards;
- Bring the conditions and treatment of prisoners in line with international standards; and
- Extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Eritrea, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and the International Red Cross;
- Ensure that development assistance, if resumed, be directed to programs that contribute directly to democracy, religious freedom, human rights, and the rule of law;
- Support the renewal of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea;
- Intensify efforts with the Ethiopian government, the UN, and other relevant partners to resolve the current impasse between Eritrea and Ethiopia regarding implementation of the boundary demarcation as determined by the “final and binding” decision of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission that was established following the 1998–2000 war; and
- Encourage unofficial dialogue with Eritrean authorities on religious freedom issues by promoting a visit by U.S. and international religious leaders, and expand the use of educational and cultural exchanges.

KEY FINDINGS

During the past year, the government of Iran engaged in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. Severe violations targeting religious minorities—especially Baha'is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims—continued unabated. Sufi Muslims and dissenting Shi'a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. Since President Hassan Rouhani was elected in 2013, the number of individuals from religious minority communities who are in prison

because of their beliefs has increased, despite the government releasing some religious prisoners of conscience during the reporting period. While Iran's clerical establishment continued to express anti-Semitic sentiments, the level of anti-Semitic rhetoric from government officials has diminished during President Rouhani's tenure. Since 1999, the State Department has designated Iran as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), most recently in October 2016. USCIRF again recommends in 2017 that Iran be designated a CPC.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate 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, and continue to work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through a combination of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions for religious freedom abuses;
- Continue to speak out publicly and frequently at the highest levels about the severe religious freedom abuses in Iran, press for and work to secure the release of all prisoners of conscience, and highlight the need for the international community to hold authorities accountable in specific cases;
- Continue to 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) and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- Call on Iran to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Iran, including allowing the Special Rapporteur—and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief—to visit;
- Continue to support 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:

- Reauthorize 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.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Nigeria remained poor during the reporting period. The Nigerian government at the federal and state levels continued to repress the Shi'a Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), including holding IMN leader Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky without charge, imposing state-level bans on the group's activities, and failing to hold accountable Nigerian Army officers who used excessive force against IMN members in December 2015. Sectarian violence between predominately Muslim herders and predominately Christian farmers increased, and the Nigerian federal government failed to implement effective strategies to prevent or stop such violence or to hold perpetrators accountable.

The Nigerian military continued to successfully recapture territory from Boko Haram and arrest its members, but the government's nonmilitary efforts to stop Boko Haram remain nascent. Finally, other religious freedom abuses continue at the state level. Based on these concerns, in 2017 USCIRF again finds that Nigeria merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2009. Nigeria has the capacity to improve religious freedom conditions by more fully and effectively addressing religious freedom concerns, and will only realize respect for human rights, security, stability, and economic prosperity if it does so.

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 defined in section 405(c) of IRFA, and be prepared to provide financial and technical support to help the Nigerian government undertake reforms to address policies leading to violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to the following:
 - 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 and capacities;
 - Conduct professional and thorough investigations of and prosecute future 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;
- Advise and support the Nigerian government in the development of counter- and deradicalization programs;
- Ensure that all military and police training educates officers on international human rights standards; and
- Develop a system whereby security officers accused of excessive use of force and other human rights abuses are investigated and held accountable.
- Hold a session of the U.S.-Nigeria Bi-National Commission on the increased sectarian violence to discuss further actions to end the violence, address land concerns, hold perpetrators accountable, and reconcile communities;
- Continue to speak privately and publicly regarding the IMN situation about the importance of all parties respecting rule of law and freedom of religion or belief;
- Expand engagement with federal and state government officials, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, and nongovernmental interlocutors to address hate speech and incitement to violence based on religious identity;
- 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 Treasury Department'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;
- Continue to support civil society and faith-based organizations at the national, regional, state, and local levels that have special expertise and a demonstrated commitment to intra-religious and interreligious dialogue, religious education, reconciliation, and conflict prevention; and
- Assist nongovernmental organizations working to reduce tensions related to the reintegration of victims of Boko Haram, including youth and women, and of former Boko Haram fighters.

NORTH KOREA

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

KEY FINDINGS

The North Korean government continues to rank as one of the world's most repressive regimes, in part because of its deplorable human rights record. Freedom of religion or belief does not exist and is, in fact, profoundly suppressed. The regime considers religion to pose the utmost threat—both to its own survival and that of the country. The North Korean government relentlessly persecutes and punishes religious believers through arrest, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution. Once imprisoned, religious believers typically are sent to political prison camps where

they are treated with extraordinary cruelty. Based on the North Korean government's longstanding and continuing record of systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF again finds that North Korea, also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), merits designation in 2017 as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate North Korea as a CPC under IRFA;
- Continue to impose targeted sanctions on specific North Korean officials and government agencies, or individuals or companies working directly with them, for human rights violations—particularly violations of the freedom of religion or belief—or for benefitting from these abuses, as part of sanctions imposed via one or more of the following: an executive order, the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the Treasury Department'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, other congressional action, or action at the UN;
- 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;
- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in formal and informal 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;
- Coordinate efforts with regional allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns and specific concerns regarding freedom of religion or belief, and press for improvements, including the release of prisoners of conscience and closure of the infamous political prisoner camps;
- Explore innovative ways to 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 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:

- Reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act beyond 2017, incorporate updated language and/or recommendations from the 2014 COI report, particularly regarding freedom of religion or belief, and authorize funds for the act's implementation.

KEY FINDINGS

During the past year, the Pakistani government continued to perpetrate and tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations. Religiously discriminatory constitutional provisions and legislation, such as the country's blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, continue to result in prosecutions and imprisonments. At least 40 individuals have been sentenced to death or are serving life sentences for blasphemy, including two Christians who received death sentences in June 2016. During the year, an Ahmadi and a Shi'a Muslim were convicted and imprisoned for five years, and four Ahmadis were charged under the anti-Ahmadiyya provisions. Religious minority communities, including Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and Shi'a Muslims, also experience religiously motivated and sectarian violence from both terrorist organizations and individuals within society; the government's longstanding failure to prevent or prosecute such

violence has created a deep-rooted climate of impunity that has emboldened extremist actors. Provincial textbooks with discriminatory content against minorities remain a significant concern. Reports also continue of forced conversions and marriages of Hindu and Christian girls and women, although the Pakistani government took some positive steps on this issue and made other encouraging gestures toward religious minorities. Based on these violations, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Pakistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), as it has found since 2002. Designating Pakistan as a CPC would enable the United States to more effectively press Islamabad to undertake needed reforms. Despite USCIRF's longstanding recommendation, the State Department has never designated Pakistan as a CPC.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Pakistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Pakistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reforms and releasing prisoners sentenced for blasphemy; such an agreement should be accompanied by U.S.-provided resources for related capacity building through the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mechanisms;
- 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 Treasury Department'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;
- Press the Pakistani government to implement the Supreme Court's 2014 decision to create a special police force to protect religious groups from violence and actively prosecute perpetrators, both individuals involved in mob attacks and members of militant groups;
- Include discussions on religious freedom in U.S.-Pakistan dialogues or create a special track of bilateral engagement specifically regarding religious freedom and the promotion of interfaith harmony and acceptance;
- Work with international partners to jointly raise religious freedom concerns with Pakistani officials in Islamabad and in multilateral settings, and to encourage the Pakistani government to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief for a country visit;
- Encourage the Pakistani government and provincial education boards to reform textbooks and curricula in government schools and the *madrassah* system to remove negative information and misinformation on all religions and to ensure they promote religious and ethnic tolerance;
- Urge the Pakistani government and provincial governments to review all cases of individuals charged with blasphemy in order to release those who were falsely accused, while still calling for the unconditional release of all individuals sentenced to prison for blasphemy;
- Continue to call for the repeal of the blasphemy prohibitions in Penal Code article 295; until this can be accomplished: urge the Pakistani government to reform article 295 to make blasphemy a bailable offense, penalize false accusations, and require evidence by accusers; and call for the enforcement of preexisting penal code articles that criminalize false accusations in any legal matter;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the unconditional release of prisoners of conscience and persons detained or awaiting trial, and press Pakistan's government to treat prisoners humanely and continue to allow them access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and lawyers and the ability to practice their faith;
- Continue to call for the repeal of anti-Ahmadiyya laws, especially articles 298-(A), (B), and (C) of the country's penal code;
- Urge the Pakistani government to pass a law recognizing Christian marriages and that prevent forced marriages and conversions, and train and educate police, lawyers, and judges to interpret and enforce this law correctly;
- Encourage the government of Pakistan to launch a public information campaign about the historic role played by religious minorities in the country, their contributions to Pakistani society, and their equal rights and protections, and use the tools of U.S. public diplomacy, such as the International Visitors Program, other educational and cultural exchanges, and U.S.-funded media, to highlight similar themes; and
- Ensure a portion of existing U.S. security assistance is used to help police implement an effective plan for dedicated protection of religious minority communities and their places of worship.

KEY FINDINGS

Russia represents a unique case among the countries in this report—it is the sole state to have not only continually intensified its repression of religious freedom since USCIRF commenced monitoring it, but also to have expanded its repressive policies to the territory of a neighboring state, by means of military invasion and occupation. Those policies, ranging from administrative harassment to arbitrary imprisonment to extrajudicial killing, are implemented in a fashion that is systematic, ongoing, and egregious. In mainland Russia in 2016, new laws effectively criminalized all private religious speech not sanctioned by the state, the Jehovah’s Witnesses stand on the verge of a nationwide ban, and innocent Muslims were tried on fabricated charges of terrorism and extremism. In the North Caucasus, particularly in Chechnya and Dagestan, security forces carried out arrests, kidnappings, and disappearances of

persons suspected of any links to “nontraditional” Islam with impunity. In Crimea, occupied by Russia since 2014, Russian authorities have coopted the spiritual life of the Muslim Crimean Tatar minority and arrested or driven into exile its community representatives. And in the Russian-occupied para-states of eastern Ukraine, religious freedom is at the whim of armed militias not beholden to any legal authority. Nor did Russia show any tolerance for critics of these policies in 2016; the two most prominent domestic human rights groups that monitor freedom of religion or belief were officially branded as “foreign agents.” Based on these particularly severe violations, in 2017 USCIRF for the first time finds that Russia merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. USCIRF has been monitoring and reporting on Russia since its first annual report in 2000.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Russia as a CPC under IRFA;
- Work to establish a binding agreement with the Russian government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Urge the Russian government to amend its extremism law in line with international human rights standards, such as adding criteria on the advocacy or use of violence, and to ensure the law is not used against members of peaceful religious groups or disfavored communities;
- Press the Russian government to ensure other laws, including the religion law and the foreign agents law, are not used to limit the religious activities of peaceful religious groups, and encourage the Russian government to implement European Court of Human Rights decisions relating to freedom of belief;
- Under the Magnitsky Act, continue to identify Russian government officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom and human rights, freeze their assets, and bar their entry into the United States;
- Raise concerns on freedom of religion or belief in multilateral settings and meetings, such as meetings of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and urge the Russian government to agree to visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the OSCE Representatives on Tolerance, as well as the establishment of an international monitoring presence in occupied Crimea;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience, and press the Russian 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;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists, and that the ambassador meets with both representatives of religious minorities as well as of the four “traditional” religions;
- Encourage increased U.S. funding for Voice of America (VOA) Russian and Ukrainian Services and for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s (RFE/RL) Russian and Ukrainian Services;
- Call on the Russian government to stop the persecution of religious minorities in the occupied areas of Crimea and Donbas, beginning with the reversal of the ban on the Crimean Tatar Mejlis and the abolition of repressive religious registration requirements; and
- Ensure violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are included in all relevant discussions with the Russian government over Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its support of rebels in the Donbas, and work closely with European and other allies to apply pressure through advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions.

SAUDI ARABIA

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

KEY FINDINGS

During the past year, in line with the Saudi government's Vision 2030 efforts to economically and culturally transform the country, religious freedom conditions in Saudi Arabia improved in certain areas, including a significant decrease in power of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), a continued government commitment to textbook and curricula reform, and increased efforts to counter extremist ideology at home and abroad. Nevertheless, the government continues to privilege its own interpretation of Sunni Islam over all other interpretations and prohibits any non-Muslim public places of worship in the country. Saudi courts continue to prosecute and imprison individuals for dissent, apostasy, and blasphemy, and a law classifying blasphemy and the promotion of atheism as terrorism has been used to target human rights defenders, among others. While there were improved conditions

for public worship among Shi'a Muslims in the Eastern Province, the community continued to face discrimination based on its religious affiliation, and authorities sporadically interrogate, arrest, and imprison dissident Shi'a clerics and activists. Despite progress in some areas, the government continues to restrict a broad range of human rights, especially women's participation in society, including through the legal guardianship system. Based on continuing severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Saudi Arabia merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Although the State Department has designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC repeatedly since 2004, most recently in October 2016, an indefinite waiver has been in place since 2006 on taking an otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Saudi Arabia as a CPC under IRFA;
- Fully engage the Saudi government to take concrete action toward completing reforms confirmed in July 2006 in U.S.-Saudi bilateral discussions; provide a detailed report on progress and lack of progress on each of the areas of concern; and consider, over the course of a year, whether issuing an indefinite waiver furthers the purposes of IRFA;
- Consider inaugurating a new U.S.-Saudi bilateral strategic dialogue, which would include human rights and religious freedom among the areas of discussion;
- At the highest levels, press for and work to secure the release of Raif Badawi, his counsel Waleed Abu al-Khair, and other prisoners of conscience, and press the Saudi government to end state prosecution of individuals charged with apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery;
- Undertake and make public an annual assessment of the relevant Ministry of Education religious textbooks to determine if passages that teach religious intolerance have been removed;
- 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, or buy back, previously distributed materials that contain intolerance;
- Encourage the Saudi government to respect the diverse interpretations and practices of Islam, especially in its propagation of the faith abroad;
- Press the Saudi government to continue to address incitement to violence and discrimination against disfavored Muslims and non-Muslims, including by prosecuting government-funded clerics who incite violence against Muslim minority communities or members of non-Muslim religious minority communities;
- 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 remove the classification of advocating atheism and blasphemy as terrorist acts in its 2014 counterterrorism law;
- Include Saudi religious leaders, in addition to government officials, educators, and judges, in mutual exchanges and U.S. visitor programs that promote cultural exchange, religious tolerance, and interfaith dialogue; and
- Encourage the Saudi government to take further steps toward phasing out the guardianship system, in line with its acceptance of relevant recommendations from the 2009 and 2013 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council; and
- Work with the Saudi government to codify the right of non-Muslims to private religious practice, and permit foreign clergy to enter the country openly to carry out worship services and to bring religious materials for such services.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Sudan continued to deteriorate in 2016. Government officials arrested and prosecuted Christian leaders and marginalized the Christian community. The government of Sudan, led by President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, imposes a restrictive interpretation of Shari'ah and applies corresponding *hudood* punishments on Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In

2017, USCIRF again finds that Sudan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. The State Department has designated Sudan as a CPC since 1999, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Sudan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Seek to enter into an agreement with the government of Sudan, which would set forth commitments the government would undertake to address policies leading to violations of religious freedom, including but not limited to the following:
 - Repeal the apostasy and blasphemy laws;
 - Ensure that a new constitution maintains all of the provisions respecting the country's international human rights commitments and guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief currently in the interim constitution;
 - Lift government prohibitions on church construction, issue permits for the building of new churches, and create a legal mechanism to provide compensation for destroyed churches and address future destructions if necessary;
 - Revive and strengthen the Commission on the Rights of Non-Muslims to ensure and advocate religious freedom protections for non-Muslims in Sudan;
 - Repeal or revise all articles in the 1991 Criminal Code that violate Sudan's international commitments to freedom of religion or belief and related human rights; and
- Hold accountable any person who engages in violations of freedom of religion or belief, including attacking houses of worship, attacking or discriminating against any person because of his or her religious affiliation, and prohibiting any person from fully exercising his or her religious freedom.
- Convey that the normalization of relations with Sudan and any lifting of U.S. sanctions must be preceded by demonstrated, concrete progress by Khartoum in implementing peace agreements, ending abuses of religious freedom and related human rights, and cooperating with efforts to protect civilians;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the release of prisoners of conscience, and press the government of Sudan 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;
- 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 Treasury Department'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;
- Maintain the position of the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan and South Sudan and ensure that religious freedom is a priority in that office;
- Work to ensure that Sudan's future constitution includes protections for freedom of religion or belief, respect for international commitments to human rights, and recognition of Sudan as a multireligious, multiethnic, and multicultural nation;
- Continue to support dialogue efforts with civil society and faith-based leaders and representatives of all relevant political parties; educate relevant parties to the national dialogue about international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief; and work with opposition parties and civil society to resolve internal disputes related to freedom of religion or belief; and
- Urge the government in Khartoum to cooperate fully with international mechanisms on human rights issues, including by inviting further visits by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Sudan, and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom conditions in Syria continued to deteriorate throughout 2016 as internal conflict worsened and the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continued. Syria's religious communities have endured religious freedom violations from various actors, including President Bashar al-Assad's regime, the approximately 100 armed opposition groups, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as ISIS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The deliberate targeting and indiscriminate bombing of Sunni Arab-dominated areas by President al-Assad's regime and its Iranian and Russian allies have heightened tensions between Sunni Arabs and many other communities in Syria, including the Christian, Alawite, Shi'a, and Druze communities. The United Nations (UN) has also found al-Assad guilty of using chemical weapons at least 14 times in rebel-held areas, although the government claimed it had surrendered its stockpile of chemical weapons

in 2014. Meanwhile, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, and the Euphrates Shield, supported by the Turkish government, recaptured the northern Syrian cities of Manbij and Jarablus from ISIS, which continues to rule over its territories with brute force, targeting anyone who does not adopt its ideology. Armed opposition groups' fighters, while not adhering to any unified policy, have engaged in sectarian attacks. Due to the collective actions of the al-Assad regime, elements of the armed opposition, and U.S.-designated terrorist groups, USCIRF again finds in 2017 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. In 2017, USCIRF also finds that 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 "entity of particular concern" under December 2016 amendments to IRFA;
- Condemn the al-Assad regime's brutal persecution of and crimes of humanity against Sunni Muslims and others, and urge other nations to do the same;
- Urge the UN Security Council and its member states to rigorously implement and comply with ratified resolutions, including UN Security Council resolutions 2118 (calling for the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons), 2139 (calling for humanitarian access into besieged areas and an end to barrel bombs), 2165 (approving humanitarian access across conflict lines), 2209 (calling for an end to the use of chlorine bombs), and 2254 (ceasefire and roadmap for peace in Syria);
- Continue to call for an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into crimes committed by the al-Assad regime, following the models used in Sudan and Libya;
- Call for or support a referral by the UN Security Council to the ICC to investigate ISIS violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities;
- Encourage the Global Coalition to Counter 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, prioritizing the resettlement of the most vulnerable to third countries, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Ensure U.S. government planning for a post-conflict Syria is a "whole-of-government" effort and includes consideration of issues concerning religious freedom and related human rights, and that USCIRF and other U.S. government experts on those issues are consulted as appropriate;
- Initiate an effort among relevant UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and like-minded partners among the Global Coalition to Combat 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 hosting refugees (especially Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey), and in preparing for a post-conflict Syria;
- Continue the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States—subject to proper vetting and a prioritization based on vulnerability—in order to aid those Syrians in the greatest peril, demonstrate U.S. leadership in efforts to address this extraordinary humanitarian crisis, and show support for governments in the Middle East and host communities that are supporting millions of Syrian refugees; and
- Allocate sufficient resources to the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies that conduct the rigorous individualized vetting of refugees being considered for resettlement to allow them to expeditiously process applications and thoroughly conduct background checks, in order to facilitate resettlement without compromising national security.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Include in the relevant U.S. appropriations law for the current and next fiscal years a provision that would permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for in-kind assistance for investigating and prosecuting genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.

KEY FINDINGS

The government of Tajikistan suppresses religious activity independent of state control, particularly of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses, and imprisons individuals on unfounded criminal allegations due to their Muslim identity. In 2016, there were mass raids and arrests of alleged Salafi Muslims across the country. In 2015, a Tajik court banned as "extremist" the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), whose legal status was part of the country's post-civil war peace treaty; since then, 150 IRPT members have

been imprisoned, and 13 were sentenced to prison terms in June 2016, including two IRPT leaders who were jailed for life. Jehovah's Witnesses remain banned. Based on these concerns, as it has since 2012, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Tajikistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department designated Tajikistan as a CPC for the first time in February 2016 and did so again in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking an action as a consequence of the CPC designation and negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Tajikistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reform, an end to police raids, prisoner releases, and greater access to foreign coreligionists; should an agreement not be reached, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Condition U.S. assistance to the Tajik government, with the exception of aid to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, on the government establishing and implementing a timetable of specific steps to reform the 2009 religion law and improve conditions of freedom of religion or belief;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset 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;
- Work with the international community, particularly during OSCE events on countering terrorism, to include private and public criticism of Tajikistan's approach to regulating religion and countering extremism, which risks radicalizing the country's population;
- Urge the Tajik government to permit visits by the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, the independence of the judiciary, and torture; set specific visit dates; and provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Tajik 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;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Ozodi; and
- Ensure that INTERPOL implements announced reforms to more effectively process complaints about the misuse of international arrest and extradition requests, known as "red notices," to pursue political and religious dissidents.

TURKMENISTAN

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

KEY FINDINGS

In a climate of pervasive government control of information, particularly severe violations of freedom of religion or belief persisted in Turkmenistan in 2016. The government requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. A new 2016 religion law further tightened registration requirements. Police raids and harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continued. At least 20 Sunni Muslims who engaged in private religious study remain jailed; their leader, Bahram Saparov, is serving a 15-year term and reportedly has been

severely tortured. Two Jehovah's Witnesses, Mansur Masharipov and Bahram Hemdemov, are known to be in prison for religious activity and reportedly have suffered torture. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service, and six Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors are known to be detained. In light of these severe violations, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Turkmenistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC since 2014, most recently in October 2016.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking an action as a consequence of the CPC designation and negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Turkmenistan, under section 405(c) of IRFA, to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reform, an end to police raids, prisoner releases, and greater access to foreign coreligionists; should an agreement not be reached, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset 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;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Turkmen 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;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, continues to maintain appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Encourage the establishment of a regular regional forum for U.S. and Central Asian civil society groups on human rights issues, including freedom of religion or belief;
- Raise concerns about Turkmenistan's record on religious freedom and related human rights in bilateral meetings, such as the Annual Bilateral Consultations, as well as appropriate international fora, including the United Nations and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe;
- Encourage the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) and the OSCE Presence, both based in Ashgabat, to enhance the human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, aspect of their activities;
- Urge the Turkmen government to agree to another visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, as well as visits from the Special Rapporteurs on independence of the judiciary and on torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for their visits;
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azatlyk; and
- Continue to press the Turkmen government to resume the U.S. Peace Corps program.

UZBEKISTAN

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

KEY FINDINGS

With an estimated 13,500 religious and political prisoners, the government of Uzbekistan continues to perpetrate severe violations of religious freedom. In April 2016, the sections of the criminal and administrative codes used to restrict freedom of religion or belief were amended to increase penalties for various infractions. The Uzbek government continues to imprison hundreds of Muslims who do not conform to officially prescribed religious practices or whom it claims are extremist. The suspicion of terrorism was used to justify persecution of Uzbek labor migrants and their families, while Kazakh and Russian citizens were

arrested at the border for possessing religious materials. Members of Protestant denominations were subjected to frequent harassment through raids on private homes, seizures of religious literature, and the levying of fines. Based on these systematic, egregious, ongoing violations, USCIRF again finds in 2017 that Uzbekistan merits designation as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). While the State Department has designated Uzbekistan as a CPC since 2006, most recently in October 2016, it has indefinitely waived taking any action as a consequence of the designation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Continue to designate Uzbekistan as a CPC under IRFA;
- Lift the waiver on taking an action as a consequence of the CPC designation, in place since January 2009, and work to establish a binding agreement with the Uzbek government, under section 405(c) of IRFA, on steps it can take to be removed from the CPC list; should negotiations fail or Uzbekistan not uphold its commitments, impose sanctions, as stipulated in IRFA;
- Condition U.S. assistance, except humanitarian assistance and human rights programs, on the Uzbek government’s adoption of specific actions to improve religious freedom conditions and comply with international human rights standards, including reforming the 1998 religion law and permitting international investigations into the 2005 Andijon events and the 2010 prison death of Muslim leader Akram Yuldashev;
- Make the return of corruption-linked funds seized by the United States under the Kleptocracy Asset Recovery Initiative dependent on the Uzbek government’s adoption of specific actions to improve religious freedom conditions and comply with international human rights standards;
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the “specially designated nationals” list maintained by the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset 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;
- Press for UN Human Rights Council scrutiny of the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, as well as raise concerns in other multilateral settings, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and urge the Uzbek government to agree to visits by UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on the independence of the judiciary, and on torture; set specific visit dates; and provide the full and necessary conditions for such a visit;
- Ensure that U.S. statements and actions are coordinated across agencies so that U.S. concerns about religious freedom and related human rights are reflected in its public statements and private interactions with the Uzbek government, including calls for the release of religious prisoners;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains appropriate contacts with human rights activists and religious leaders;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Uzbek 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;
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Ozodlik and the Uzbek Service of the Voice of America; and
- Ensure that INTERPOL implements announced reforms to more effectively process complaints about the misuse of international arrest and extradition requests, known as “red notices,” to pursue political and religious dissidents.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2016, Vietnam continued to make progress to improve religious freedom conditions. While the government's Law on Belief and Religion, approved on November 18, 2016, does not comply fully with international standards, the measure reflects the government's and National Assembly's good faith efforts to solicit input from some religious organizations, incorporate guidance from international experts in a relatively transparent fashion, and address myriad religious freedom challenges in the country. Nevertheless, severe religious freedom violations continued, especially against ethnic minority communities in rural areas of some provinces. Given the law's approval late in the reporting period, its effective date of January 1, 2018, and the serious scope and nature of ongoing abuses during

2016, USCIRF again finds that Vietnam merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 2017, as it has every year since 2002. USCIRF believes Vietnam may be on the right path toward comprehensive and enduring improvements in religious freedom conditions; continued positive movement along this path may prompt USCIRF to consider moving Vietnam to its Tier 2 list in the future. This possible change in tier status will depend, in part, on whether the Vietnamese government implements and enforces the new law in a manner that ensures the rights of religious organizations and individual believers, providing equal treatment and fairness to both state-sponsored and independent groups, as well as registered and unregistered groups.

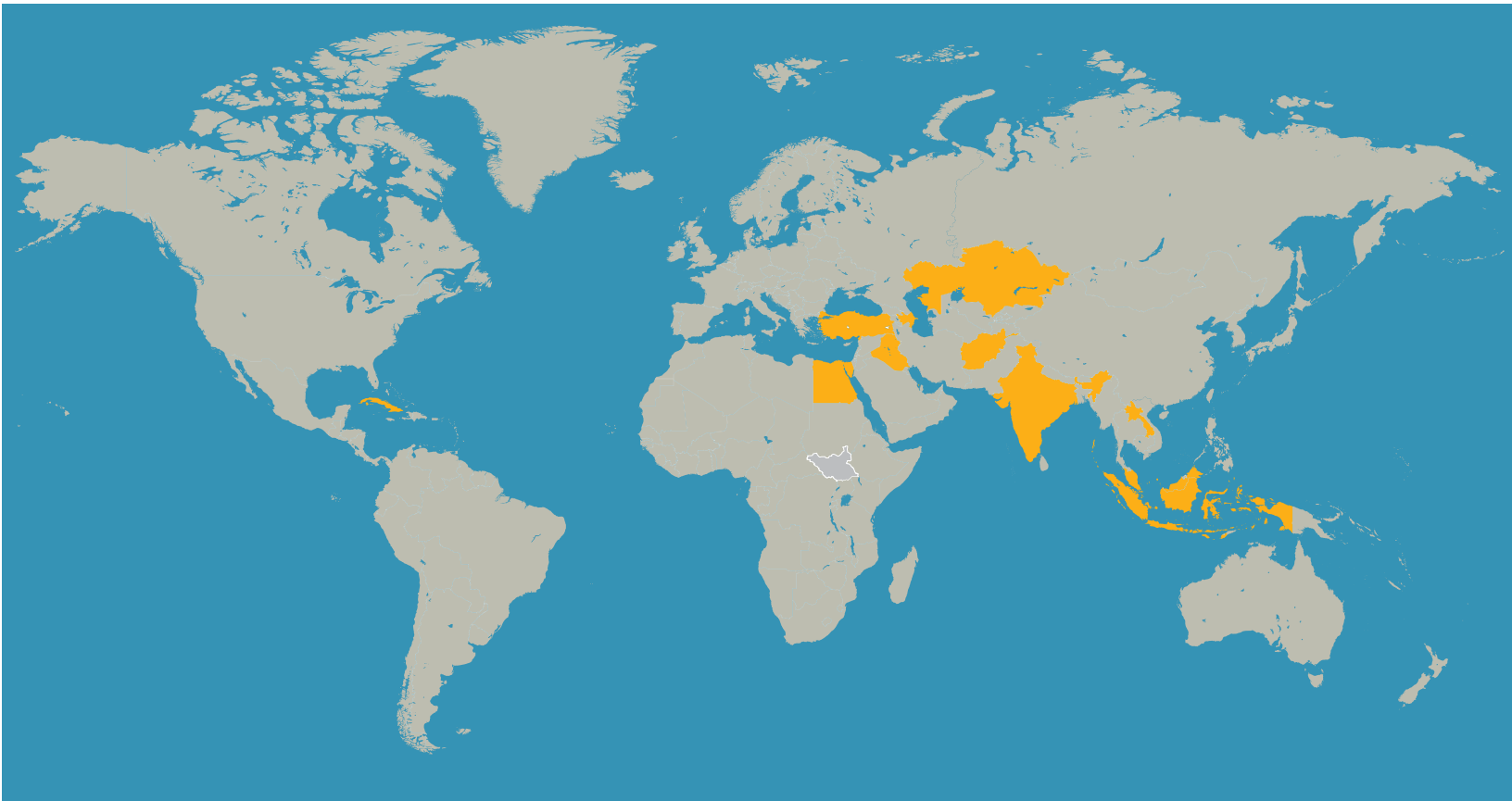
RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Vietnam as a CPC under IRFA;
- Continue to work with the government of Vietnam on the Law on Belief and Religion to ensure its implementation is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage accountability for central and local government officials and law enforcement as well as non-state actors acting in contravention to Vietnamese law, its constitution, and international standards;
- Encourage the government of Vietnam to acknowledge and address violations against religious communities by state and non-state actors, including individuals sponsored by the government carrying out such acts, and support the proper training of local government officials, lawyers, judges, and police and security forces who implement, enforce, and interpret the rule of law;
- Ensure that human rights and religious freedom are pursued consistently and publicly at every level of the U.S.-Vietnam relationship, including in discussions related to military, trade, or economic and security assistance, and in programs on Internet freedom and civil society development;
- Continue regular, visible U.S. government visits to remote, rural areas in Vietnam, including direct contact with independent religious communities as appropriate;
- Urge the Vietnamese government to cease detaining and imprisoning members of religious organizations, as well as human rights activists, for peaceful religious activity or religious affiliations, and to promptly and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience;
- Encourage the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi and the U.S. Consulate General in Ho Chi Minh City to maintain appropriate contact, including in-person visits, with Vietnamese prisoners of conscience, and press the government of Vietnam to ensure them regular access to their families, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and proper legal representation, as specified in international human rights instruments;
- Continue to advocate for and provide support to individuals threatened, detained, assaulted, or arrested by the Vietnamese government due to their participation in or attendance at domestic and international meetings and other gatherings with U.S. officials and other international stakeholders; and
- Use targeted tools against specific officials and agencies identified as having participated in or responsible for human rights abuses, including particularly severe violations of religious freedom, such as the "specially designated nationals" list maintained by the Treasury Department'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.

TIER 2 COUNTRIES

TIER 2 DESIGNATION

USCIRF defines Tier 2 countries as nations in which the violations engaged in or tolerated by the government are serious and characterized by at least one of the elements of the “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” standard for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC).



TIER 2 COUNTRIES

Afghanistan
Azerbaijan
Bahrain
Cuba
Egypt
India

Indonesia
Iraq
Kazakhstan
Laos
Malaysia
Turkey

AFGHANISTAN

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

Afghanistan's overall stability and security remain precarious despite a sustained U.S.-led international effort to combat the Afghan Taliban and other extremist groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. These groups' violent ideologies and attacks threaten all Afghans, including the minority Shi'a Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Christian, and Baha'i communities. In 2016, with international assistance, the Afghan government made some progress in ousting the Taliban from areas it controlled in previous years. However, the government lacks the capacity to protect civilians from attacks due to its internal political instability; fragmented police, military, and intelligence forces; corruption; and weak economy. In

addition, the country's constitution and other laws are contrary to international standards for freedom of religion or belief. Based on these concerns, and recognizing that the Afghan government faces significant challenges in combating the Taliban and other violent extremist groups and generally lacks the capacity to protect religious and ethnic communities from violent attacks, in 2017 USCIRF again places Afghanistan on Tier 2, where it has been since 2006. In 2017, USCIRF also finds that the Taliban merits designation as an "entity of particular concern" for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate the Taliban as an "entity of particular concern" under December 2016 amendments to IRFA;
- Continue to raise directly with Afghanistan's president and chief executive officer the importance of religious freedom;
- Encourage Afghan government officials to publicly promote freedom of religion or belief and work toward creating a civic space for the open discussion of diverse opinions on matters of religion and society in the country;
- Urge the government to reform the Afghan constitution and laws to comply with international standards of freedom of religion or belief, including by revoking the 2004 media law prohibiting writings deemed un-Islamic and the 2007 ruling that the Baha'i faith is blasphemous and converts to it are apostates;
- Ensure the integration of religious freedom issues into State Department and Defense Department strategies concerning Afghanistan, including by reviving the interagency U.S. government taskforce that operated between 2013 and 2015 and prioritized countering religious extremism, attacks on non-Muslim communities, and Sunni-Shi'a violence;
- Include a special working group on religious freedom in U.S.-Afghan strategic dialogues;
- Encourage the Afghan government to sponsor, with official and semi-official religious bodies, an initiative on interfaith dialogue that focuses on both intra-Islamic dialogue and engagement with different faiths; and
- Ensure that human rights concerns, including freedom of religion or belief, are integrated into all bilateral or multilateral talks seeking peace and reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban, and that the parties to any peace agreement pledge to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

AZERBAIJAN

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

The status of religious freedom in Azerbaijan deteriorated in 2016. During the year, the Azeri government increased its repression of independent religious activity, closing Sunni mosques, raiding religious bookshops, and harassing Jehovah's Witnesses and certain Protestant communities. While Azerbaijan is at risk from international terrorism, that danger increasingly serves as a pretext in official efforts to suppress peaceful religious dissent amidst a general crackdown on human rights. In

January 2017, 18 Shi'a activists were sentenced to prison terms of between 10 and 20 years on numerous charges, including purported terrorism. A local non governmental organization coalition that monitors the status of Azerbaijan's prisoners of conscience estimated that as of December 2016, 86 persons were imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Based on these concerns, in 2017 USCIRF again places Azerbaijan on Tier 2, where it has been since 2013.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Azerbaijani government to reform its religion law to bring it into conformity with recommendations by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2012;
- Work with the highest levels of the Azerbaijani government to secure the release of prisoners of conscience and ensure detainee access to family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, legal counsel, and religious accommodations;
- Continue the maintenance of contact, including at the ambassadorial level, between the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan and human rights and religious freedom activists;
- Encourage scrutiny of Azerbaijan's violations of international religious freedom and related norms at the United Nations (UN) and OSCE, and urge the OSCE to engage these issues publicly;
- Urge the Azerbaijani government to agree to visits by the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on independence of the judiciary, and on torture; set specific visit dates; and provide the necessary conditions for such visits;
- Press the government of Azerbaijan to allow religious groups to operate freely without registration, including amending the religion law's registration requirements;
- Specify freedom of religion or belief as a grants category and area of activity for the U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, and encourage the National Endowment for Democracy to make grants for civil society programs on tolerance and freedom of religion or belief; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azadlyg, the Azeri Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and the Azeri Service of the Voice of America.

KEY FINDINGS

Amidst an overall worsening of human rights conditions during the past year, religious freedom for the majority-Shi'a community deteriorated. There was a sharp increase in the number of interrogations, arrests, convictions, and arbitrary detentions of Shi'a Muslim clerics, mostly on unfounded and unsubstantiated charges. In addition, authorities denied 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 other public and social services continued, as did inflammatory, sectarian rhetoric by pro-government

media, despite officials often making public statements condemning sectarian hatred and violence. Although the government continued to make progress in implementing some recommendations from the 2011 report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), it has not fully implemented recommendations that would redress past abuses against Shi'a Muslims and further improve religious freedom conditions. As a consequence of deteriorating conditions, in 2017 USCIRF places Bahrain on its Tier 2 for the first time. Between 2012 and 2016, Bahrain was covered in the Other Countries Monitored section of the Annual Report.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Address religious freedom concerns with the Bahraini government both privately and publicly and report openly on the government's success or failure to implement genuine reforms;
- 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;
- Urge the Bahraini government to cease its targeting of individuals, particularly religious leaders, on the basis of religion or belief or advocacy of human rights and religious freedom;
- 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;
- Assist in the training of government entities, including security officials, prosecutors, and judges, to better address sectarian violence and incitement through practices consistent with international human rights standards;
- Include Bahraini civil society and religious leaders in exchange and U.S. visitor programs that promote religious tolerance, interreligious understanding, and interfaith dialogue;
- Urge the Bahraini government to implement fully the BICI recommendations, including those related to freedom of religion and belief, sectarian incitement, and accountability for past abuses against the Shi'a community;
- Undertake and make public an annual assessment of Bahrain's progress, or lack thereof, on implementing BICI recommendations;
- Urge the Bahraini government to reimburse the Shi'a community for expending its own funds to rebuild seven mosques and religious structures that were demolished in 2011;
- 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 Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

KEY FINDINGS

During the reporting period, religious freedom conditions in Cuba continued to deteriorate due to the government’s short-term detentions of religious leaders, demolition of churches, and threats to confiscate churches. In addition, the Cuban government harasses religious leaders and laity, interferes in religious groups’ internal affairs, and prevents—at times

violently—human rights and pro-democracy activists from participating in religious activities. The Cuban government actively limits, controls, and monitors religious practice through a restrictive system of laws and policies, surveillance, and harassment. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Cuba on its Tier 2 in 2017, as it has since 2004.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Convey that changes in policy do not diminish the Cuban government’s need to improve religious freedom conditions on the island;
- Denounce—clearly and consistently—violations of religious freedom and related human rights in Cuba;
- Press the Cuban government to:
 - Stop arrests and harassment of religious leaders;
 - End the practice of preventing democracy and human rights activists from attending religious services;
 - End destruction of, threats to destroy, and threats to expropriate houses of worship;
 - Lift restrictions on the building or repairing of houses of worship, holding of religious processions, importation of religious materials, and admittance of religious leaders;
- Allow unregistered religious groups to operate freely and legally, and repeal government policies that restrict religious services in homes or other personal property;
- Cease interference with religious activities and religious communities’ internal affairs; and
- Hold accountable police and other security personnel for actions that violate the human rights of religious practitioners;
- Encourage Cuban authorities to extend an official invitation for unrestricted visits by USCIRF and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief;
- Increase opportunities for Cuban religious leaders from both registered and unregistered religious communities to travel to, exchange aid and materials with, and interact with coreligionists in the United States;
- Continue the U.S.-Cuba human rights dialogue and include freedom of religion or belief as part of the dialogue with the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and other relevant participants;
- Use appropriated funds to advance Internet freedom and protect Cuban 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 Cuba; and
- Encourage international partners, including key Latin American and European countries and regional blocs, to ensure violations of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights are part of all formal and informal multilateral or bilateral discussions with Cuba.

KEY FINDINGS

Despite the government's widespread repression of human rights, religious freedom conditions improved in several areas over the past year. President Abdel Fattah Sisi consistently condemned sectarian attacks and pressed for assistance for victims and accountability for perpetrators, pushed for reform in religious discourse, and attended a Coptic Christmas Eve mass for the third consecutive year. In August, the newly-seated parliament passed a long-awaited law on the construction and maintenance of churches and, by early 2017, the government completed rebuilding and restoring more than 50 churches destroyed by extremists in 2013. While sectarian attacks targeting Christians spiked, particularly in Upper Egypt and North Sinai, and a major suicide bombing occurred near St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Cairo,

Egyptian courts made some progress in bringing to justice perpetrators of past attacks. In 2016, prosecutions, convictions, and imprisonment of Egyptian citizens for blasphemy and related charges decreased. Some discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict freedom of religion or belief remain in place, but public debates occurred in parliament and civil society on a range of religious freedom concerns. Based on these developments, while still deeply concerned by the deplorable human rights conditions in Egypt, USCIRF places Egypt on its Tier 2, as it did from 2002 to 2010. From 2011 to 2016, USCIRF had recommended that Egypt be designated as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

Because Egypt's progress and stability hinge on full respect for the rule of law and compliance with international human rights standards, including freedom of religion or belief, the U.S. government should:

- 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 religious minority faiths, including the Baha'i and Jehovah's Witness faiths; removing religion from official identity documents; and passing laws consistent with Article 53 (creating an independent anti-discrimination body) of the constitution;
- 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 government-funded 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 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 to advance freedom of religion or belief for all Egyptians; and
- 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;
 - Prosecution of perpetrators of sectarian violence; and
 - The ability of Egyptian NGOs to receive outside funding from sources including the U.S. government.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2016, religious tolerance and religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate in India. Hindu nationalist groups—such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Sangh Parivar, and Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)—and their sympathizers perpetrated numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence against religious minority communities and Hindu Dalits. These violations were most frequent and severe in 10 of India’s 29 states. National and state laws that restrict religious conversion, cow slaughter, and the foreign funding of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and a constitutional provision deeming Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains to be Hindus helped create the conditions enabling these violations. While Prime

Minister Narendra Modi spoke publicly about the importance of communal tolerance and religious freedom, members of the ruling party have ties to Hindu nationalist groups implicated in religious freedom violations, used religiously divisive language to inflame tensions, and called for additional laws that would restrict religious freedom. These issues, combined with longstanding problems of police and judicial bias and inadequacies, have created a pervasive climate of impunity in which religious minorities feel increasingly insecure and have no recourse when religiously motivated crimes occur. Based on these concerns, in 2017 USCIRF again places India on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2009.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Integrate concern for religious freedom into bilateral contacts with India, including the framework of future Strategic Dialogues, at both the federal and provincial levels, and encourage the strengthening of the capacity of state and central police to implement effective measures to prohibit and punish cases of religious violence and protect victims and witnesses;
- Increase the U.S. Embassy’s attention to issues of religious freedom and related human rights, including through visits by the ambassador and other officials to areas where communal and religiously motivated violence has occurred or is likely to occur, and through meetings with religious communities, local governmental leaders, and police;
- Press the Indian government to allow USCIRF to visit the country, and urge the Indian government to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief to visit India;
- Urge India to boost training on human rights and religious freedom standards and practices for the police and judiciary, particularly in states and areas with a history or likelihood of religious and communal violence;
- Urge the central Indian government to press states that have adopted anti-conversion laws to repeal or amend them to conform with internationally recognized human rights standards; and
- Urge the Indian government to publicly rebuke government officials and religious leaders who make derogatory statements about religious communities.

KEY FINDINGS

Indonesia is often characterized as a model of majority-Muslim democracy. Yet in some parts of the country, discrimination and violence against religious minorities continue, often instigated or inspired by hardline individuals and groups. The Indonesian government often intervenes when abuses arise, particularly if they involve violence; yet by many accounts, violations of the freedom of religion or belief continue to rise and/or increase in

intensity, and experts believe many incidents go unreported. Non-Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims endure ongoing difficulties obtaining official permission to build houses of worship, experience vandalism at existing houses of worship, and are subject to sometimes violent protests that interfere with their ability to practice their faith. In 2017, USCIRF again places Indonesia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2004.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Indonesian government at central, provincial, and local levels to comply with the Indonesian constitution and international human rights standards by:
 - Overturning the 2008 Joint Ministerial Decree on the Ahmadiyya community and any provincial bans on Ahmadi religious practice;
 - Amending or repealing article 156(a) of the Penal Code and unconditionally releasing anyone sentenced for “deviancy,” “denigrating religion,” or “blasphemy;” and
 - Amending the 2006 Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship to allow religious communities the right to build and maintain their places of worship free from discrimination and threats;
- Offer technical assistance and guidance to the Indonesian government as it drafts legislation protecting religious freedom, as appropriate;
- Raise in public and private with Indonesian officials the need to protect Indonesia’s tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism by investigating and prosecuting individuals or groups who discriminate or incite or perpetrate acts of violence against religious communities;
- Prioritize funding for governmental, civil society, and media programs that promote religious freedom, counter extremism, build intra-faith and inter-faith alliances, expand the reporting ability of human rights defenders, train government and religious officials to mediate sectarian disputes, and enhance rule of law and build capacity for legal reform advocates, judicial officials, and parliamentarians to better fulfill Indonesia’s obligations under international human rights law; and
- Help to train Indonesian police and counterterrorism officials at all levels to better address sectarian conflict, religion-related violence, and terrorism, including violence against places of worship, through practices consistent with international human rights standards, while ensuring those officers have not been implicated in past human rights abuses pursuant to Leahy Amendment vetting procedures.

KEY FINDINGS

Severe religious freedom violations continued in Iraq throughout 2016. Iraqi and international efforts against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) recaptured a series of important cities, including Ramadi and Fallujah, but the terrorist group continued to ruthlessly target anyone who did not espouse its extremist Islamist ideology, including members of the Christian, Yazidi, Shi'a, Turkmen, and Shabak communities, as well as of the Sunni community. In March 2016, then Secretary of State John Kerry declared that ISIS's persecution of these groups amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity. ISIS is by far the most egregious perpetrator of religious freedom violations. The group has caused the displacement of over 3.4 million Iraqis, many of whom have fled to the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional

Government (KRG). Meanwhile, the Iraqi government has made efforts to curb sectarian tensions between the Sunni and Shi'a communities of Iraq; however, it has not been able to halt attacks on Sunni Muslims by the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Lastly, while the KRG has sheltered and provided some level of support for large numbers of displaced minorities within its territory, there were also charges of appropriation of Christian lands and lack of effective representation for minorities in the Kurdish system. Based on these concerns, in 2017, USCIRF places the government of Iraq on its Tier 2 and finds that ISIS merits designation as an "entity of particular concern" for religious freedom violations under December 2016 amendments to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate ISIS as an "entity of particular concern" under December 2016 amendments to IRFA;
- Prioritize working with the Iraqi government in order to curb sectarian attacks by the PMF, ensure that a liberated Mosul is not dominated by armed groups bent on promoting a sectarian agenda, and establish in Baghdad a representative government that includes all Iraqi communities;
- Call for or support a referral by the United Nations (UN) Security Council to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for investigating and prosecuting ISIS violations in Iraq and Syria against religious and ethnic minorities, following the models used in Sudan and Libya, or encourage the Iraqi government to accept ICC jurisdiction to investigate ISIS violations in Iraq after June 2014;
- Encourage the anti-ISIS coalition, in its ongoing activities, to work to develop measures to protect and assist the region's most vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities, including by increasing immediate humanitarian aid, prioritizing the resettlement to third countries of the most vulnerable, and providing longer-term support in host countries for those who hope to return to their homes post-conflict;
- Develop a plan of action to work with and help protect displaced and threatened religious minorities in Iraq and to rehabilitate liberated areas in Nineveh, Sinjar, and Mosul;
- Support capacity-building efforts to assist the Iraqi judicial and criminal investigative sectors to hold members of the PMF accountable for abuses of noncombatant Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities;
- Include in all military or security assistance to the Iraqi government and the KRG a requirement 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;
- Urge the Iraqi government and the KRG to include the protection of rights for all Iraqis and ending discrimination as part of negotiations between the KRG and the Iraqi government on disputed territories, and press the KRG to address alleged abuses against minorities by Kurdish officials in these areas and to investigate claims of land appropriations;
- Continue to support programs that would empower communities at the local, municipality level to foster an environment of communication, accountability, and community reconciliation to address grievances and tensions; and
- Make efforts to protect and preserve significant religious and cultural heritage sites such as Babylon and ancient churches and mosques, as well as historical and religious relics and artifacts.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Include in the relevant U.S. appropriations law for the current and next fiscal years a provision that would permit the U.S. government to appropriate or allocate funds for in-kind assistance to investigate and prosecute genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes cases at the ICC on a case-by-case basis and when in the national interest to provide such assistance.

KAZAKHSTAN

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

Although the Kazakh government promotes religious freedom for “traditional” religious communities at the international level, domestic conditions for freedom of religion or belief and other civil liberties deteriorated in 2016, with officials’ heightened fears of public disorder leading to new restrictions on religion. The country’s restrictive 2011 religion law bans unregistered religious activity and is enforced

through police raids, detentions, fines, and the closing of religious institutions. Increasingly, terrorism and religious extremism laws with multiyear prison sentences are deployed against religious nonconformity and political opposition, blurring the line between violent extremism and peaceful dissent. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Kazakhstan on its Tier 2 in 2017, where it has been since 2013.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Urge the Kazakh government, in line with the recommendations of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee, to ensure anti-extremism laws do not serve as a pretext for infringement on the right to peaceful religious observance and expression;
- Call on the Kazakh government to invite to its Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions a representative array of religious communities peacefully residing in Kazakhstan, including minority religious groups;
- Urge the Kazakh government to agree to visits by the three Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Personal Representatives on Tolerance, set specific dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for such visits;
- Ensure the U.S.-Kazakh Strategic Partnership Dialogue (SPD) includes discussion of issues relating to freedom of religion or belief;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and press the Kazakh 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;
- Ensure the U.S. Embassy, including at the ambassadorial level, maintains active contacts with human rights activists; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azattyq.

KEY FINDINGS

Based on Laos's overall record on human rights, it consistently ranks as one of the least free and most repressive countries in the world due to government restrictions on expression, assembly and association, independent media and Internet access, and other rights. The Lao government also continues to heavily restrict freedom of religion or belief. In some parts of the country, religious freedom conditions are generally free, especially for the majority Buddhist community. But in other areas, local authorities harass and discriminate against religious and ethnic minorities, and pervasive government control and onerous regulations impede freedom of religion or belief.

Local officials who inconsistently interpret and implement religious regulations also tend to be highly suspicious of Christians. In 2017, USCIRF again places Laos on its Tier 2, as it has since 2009. As Laos implements revised religious regulations, USCIRF will monitor whether these changes or other modifications to the Lao government's policies and practices become consistent with international human rights standards—including the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, to which Laos is a state party—which may influence how USCIRF reports on the country in future Annual Reports.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Initiate with the Lao government a formal human rights mechanism, similar to existing U.S. human rights dialogues with Burma and Vietnam, as well as the European Union's and Laos's Working Group on Human Rights and Governance, to regularly and consistently address with the Lao government issues such as ethnic and religious discrimination, torture and other forms of ill treatment in prisons, unlawful arrests and detentions, and the lack of due process and an independent judiciary;
- Work with the Lao government to ensure the implementation of Decree 315 is consistent with international human rights standards, and encourage accountability for central, provincial, and local government officials and law enforcement acting in contravention to Lao law, its constitution, and international standards;
- Continue to engage the Lao government on specific cases of religious freedom violations, including but not limited to forced evictions and/or forced renunciations of faith, and emphasize the importance of consistent implementation, enforcement, and interpretation of the rule of law by officials at all levels of government and law enforcement authorities;
- Support technical assistance programs that reinforce the goals of protecting religious freedom, human rights defenders, and ethnic minorities, including: rule of law programs and legal exchanges that focus on implementing Decree 315 consistent with international human rights standards; training for Lao police and security forces, provincial and local officials, and lawyers and judges in human rights, the rule of law, and religious freedom and tolerance; and capacity building for Lao civil society groups carrying out charitable, medical, and developmental activities;
- Ensure that Lao police and security officials participating in training or technical assistance programs are thoroughly vetted pursuant to the Leahy Amendment to confirm that they are not implicated in human rights abuses, and deny U.S. training, visas, or assistance to any unit or personnel found to have engaged in a consistent pattern of violations of human rights, including religious freedom; and
- Continue to inquire consistently into the whereabouts of Sombath Somphone, given that the Lao government's inability to provide any information from its investigation into his disappearance is emblematic of its overall approach to human rights, civil society, and individual rights.

KEY FINDINGS

In 2016, opposition to the government from both within and outside political spheres negatively impacted religious freedom as stakeholders increasingly jockeyed for support ahead of the 2018 general elections. This ongoing trend continued to invigorate individuals and groups who believe Sunni Islam is the only true form of Islam and that Malaysia must prioritize the Malay Muslim identity, often to the disadvantage of religious and ethnic minorities. The Malaysian government actively restricts freedom of expression and punishes those who criticize it, including online. During 2016, the Malaysian parliament considered a measure to strengthen punishments under the

Islamic penal code and bolster Shari'ah courts at a time when the jurisdictional lines between Shari'ah and civil courts are increasingly indistinct; parliament is expected to further debate the matter in 2017. A landmark court decision enabled a man who was converted to Islam as a child to finally be recognized as a Christian, though many legal challenges remain for those choosing to convert and those involved in interfaith custody disputes. The government continues to ban so-called "deviant" religious groups, such as the Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, and Al-Arqam communities. In 2017, USCIRF again places Malaysia on its Tier 2, where it has been since 2014.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Ensure that human rights and freedom of religion or belief are pursued consistently and publicly at every level of the U.S.-Malaysia relationship, including in the Comprehensive Partnership and other discussions related to military, trade, or economic and security assistance, and in programs that address freedom of speech and expression and civil society development, among others;
- Press the Malaysian government to bring all laws and policies into conformity with international human rights standards, especially with respect to freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religious expression, including the rights to use the word "Allah" and to possess religious materials;
- Encourage the Malaysian government to become party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (without reservations), and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol;
- Urge the Malaysian government to substantively amend or repeal the Sedition Act and cease the arrest, detention, and prosecution of individuals under the act;
- Urge the Malaysian government to cease the arrest, detention, or forced "rehabilitation" of individuals involved in peaceful religious activity, such as members of Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya, Baha'i, and Al-Arqam groups, among others, and to release unconditionally those detained or imprisoned for related charges; and
- Encourage the Malaysian government to establish or support independent institutions, such as the judiciary, office of the Attorney General, and law enforcement, and to address the human rights shortcomings of the parallel civil-Shari'ah justice systems, in order to guarantee that all Malaysians, regardless of ethnicity or religion, enjoy freedom of religion or belief.

TURKEY

TIER 2

KEY FINDINGS

While the Turkish government has increasingly restricted a broad range of human rights, especially in the aftermath of the failed July 2016 coup d'état attempt, it has nevertheless taken some positive steps to improve religious freedom conditions in Turkey. The government has returned properties expropriated from religious minority communities, provided dual citizenship to Greek Orthodox Metropolitans so they can participate in their church's Holy Synod, and revised school curricula. However, due to the Turkish government's strict interpretation of

secularism as requiring the absence of religion in public life, no religious community—including the majority Sunni Muslim community—has full legal status, and all are subject to state controls limiting their rights to maintain places of worship, train clergy, and offer religious education. Additionally, long-standing religious freedom concerns persist pertaining to religious properties, listing of religious affiliations on national identification cards, and education. Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Turkey on its Tier 2 in 2017.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

In addition to expressing concerns to the Turkish government about the deplorable human rights situation in the country, the U.S. government should:

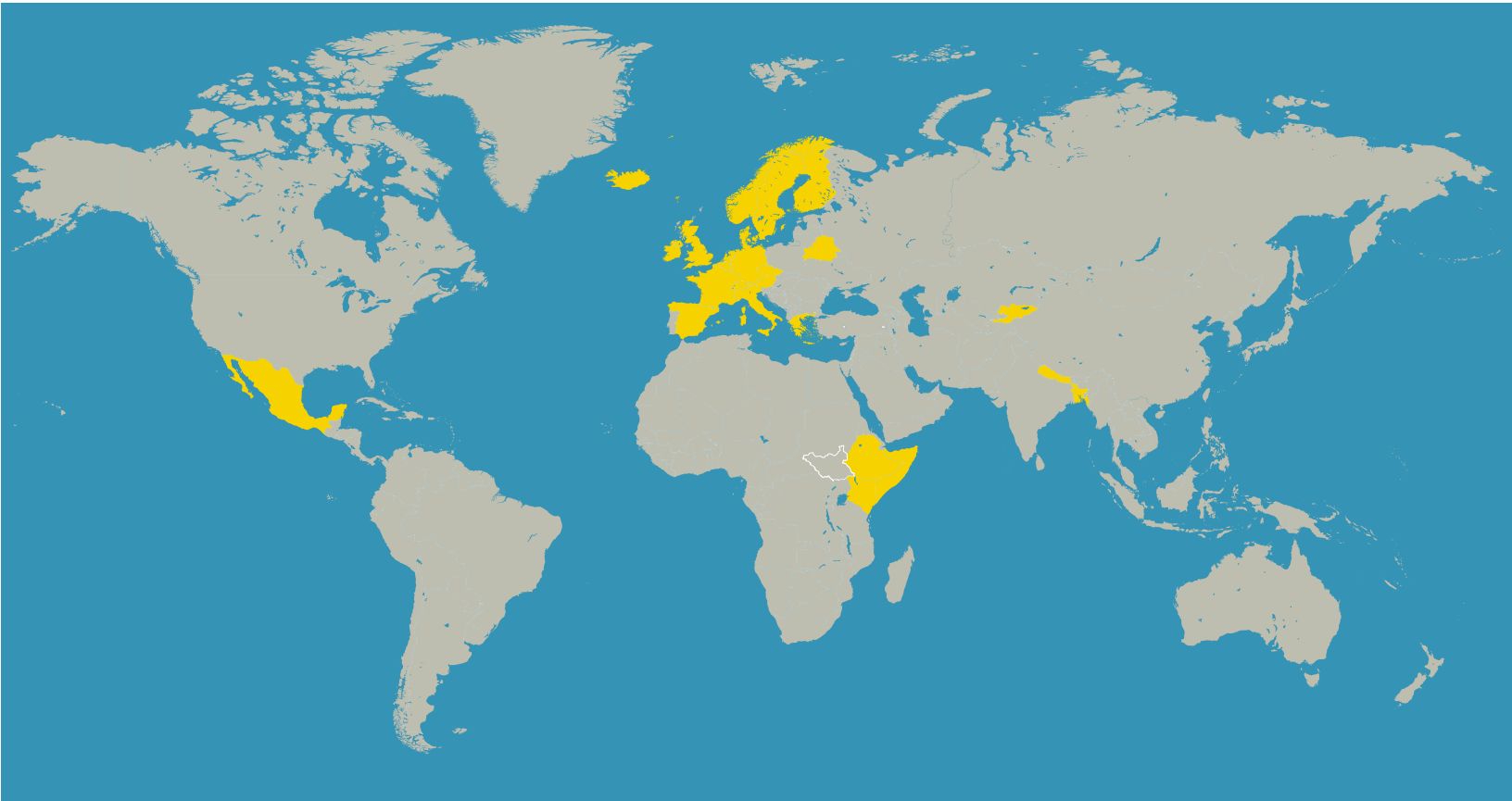
- Raise religious freedom issues with the Turkish government at the highest levels, including by:
 - Urging the government of Turkey to fully comply with European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including
- by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevis* (gathering places) as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedes* (faith leaders) as religious leaders;
- Pressing the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic or derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey; and
- Pressing the government of Turkey to fulfill private and public promises that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary would be reopened, and to permit other religious communities to open and operate their seminaries.
- Provide financial and in-kind support to the Turkish government to assist it in aiding the nearly three million Syrian refugees located throughout Turkey.

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED DESIGNATION

This section of the report typically includes countries previously recommended for designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) or on Tier 2 and in which USCIRF continues to monitor ongoing concerns; countries USCIRF

visited during the reporting year but did not find to meet the CPC or Tier 2 standards; and countries where USCIRF saw emerging issues or troubling trends that merited comment but did not rise to the CPC or Tier 2 level.



OTHER COUNTRIES AND REGIONS MONITORED

Bangladesh
Belarus
Ethiopia
Kenya
Kyrgyzstan

Mexico
Nepal
Somalia
Western Europe

BANGLADESH

KEY FINDINGS

In 2016, the frequency of violent and deadly attacks against religious minorities, secular bloggers, intellectuals, and foreigners by domestic and transnational extremist groups increased. Although the government, led by the ruling Awami League, has taken steps to investigate, arrest, and prosecute perpetrators and increase protection for likely targets, the threats and violence have heightened the sense of fear among Bangladeshi citizens of all religious groups. In addition, illegal land appropriations—commonly referred to as land-grabbing—and ownership disputes remain widespread, particularly against Hindus and Christians. Other concerns include issues related to property returns and the situation of Rohingya Muslims. In March 2016, a USCIRF staff member traveled to Bangladesh to assess the religious freedom situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should: provide technical assistance and encourage the Bangladeshi government to further develop its national counterterrorism strategy; urge Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and all government officials to frequently and publicly denounce religiously divisive language and acts of religiously motivated violence and harassment; assist the Bangladeshi government in providing local government officials, police officers, and judges with training on international human rights standards, as well as how to investigate and adjudicate religiously motivated violent acts; urge the Bangladeshi government to investigate claims of land-grabbing and to repeal its blasphemy law; and encourage the Bangladeshi government to continue to provide humanitarian assistance and a safe haven for Rohingya Muslims fleeing persecution in Burma.

BELARUS

KEY FINDINGS

USCIRF continues to monitor the situation in Belarus, where the government tightly regulates religious communities through an extensive security and religious affairs bureaucracy that has driven some groups underground. Officials are particularly hostile toward religious groups viewed as political opponents, such as Protestants. The government strictly controls foreign citizens who conduct religious activity, particularly Catholic priests. The rights of prisoners, even those on death row, to practice their religion or belief are routinely denied. In 2016, a new alternative service law came into force, but it does not fully protect the right to conscientious objection to military service.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government, in its limited engagement with the government of Belarus, continue to raise with Belarusian officials concerns about freedom of religion and belief and related human rights, as well as making sanctions relief contingent on progress on these issues. In addition, the U.S. government should raise publicly Belarusian religious freedom issues at appropriate international fora, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, particularly the need for reform of its religion law.

ETHIOPIA

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom violations are prevalent in a number of countries in the Horn of Africa region. The Ethiopian government engages in serious religious freedom violations in response to concerns about terrorism and religious extremism.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that in its policies toward Ethiopia, the U.S. government should (1) call for the release of religious prisoners of conscience; and (2) include religious freedom promotion in countering violent extremism programs

KENYA

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom violations are prevalent in a number of countries in the Horn of Africa region. The Kenyan government engages in serious religious freedom violations in response to concerns about terrorism and religious extremism. The U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Shabaab is responsible for many of the abuses in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that in its policies toward Kenya, the U.S. government should (1) speak out consistently against religious freedom and other human rights violations that occur in efforts to counter violent extremism; and (2) include religious freedom promotion in countering violent extremism programs.

KYRGYZSTAN

KEY FINDINGS

Although Kyrgyzstan is less repressive than other Central Asian states, discriminatory decision-making, hostility, and indifference are still a reality for many religious communities. Kyrgyzstan's ethnic Uzbeks have been targeted by official discrimination, especially in the aftermath of bloody inter-ethnic clashes in Osh in 2010. USCIRF has monitored religious freedom conditions in Kyrgyzstan for several years.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF continues to recommend that the U.S. government (1) urge Kyrgyzstan to seek expert advice from the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and relevant Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) entities on the still-pending draft religion law amendments, and (2) publicly raise Kyrgyzstan's religious freedom violations at appropriate international fora, such as the OSCE and the UN.

MEXICO

KEY FINDINGS

During the past year, reports continued that Mexican authorities in several states pressured followers of minority religions to convert to and/or practice the majority religion of the particular area and participate in affiliated ceremonies and activities. Religious minorities who refused were forcibly displaced, arbitrarily detained, had their properties destroyed, and/or had their utilities cut off. Mexican state and federal authorities frequently failed to intervene in these cases, creating a climate of impunity. Mexico's constitutional and legal system protects freedom of religion or belief, but a constitutional guarantee of autonomy, including in religious beliefs, to indigenous communities is interpreted to favor an area's

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The U.S. government should continue to raise concerns about the status of freedom of religion or belief with Mexican federal and state officials. The State Department should support Mexican religious freedom and human rights organizations to document religious freedom violations, as well as train Mexican authorities on international and Mexican standards for freedom of religion or belief

religious majority. These religious freedom violations occur in the context of Mexico's long history of challenges in balancing religion and state.

NEPAL

KEY FINDINGS

In November 2016, USCIRF staff travelled to Nepal for the first time to assess religious freedom conditions in the country. Historically, religious minority communities—including Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists—faced few governmental restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Nepal, and societal harassment was rare. However, the new constitution, promulgated in September 2015, criminalizes the act of converting a person to a different religion. It also declares the cow the national animal, which some officials have interpreted as enshrining in the constitution an existing penal code provision criminalizing the slaughter of cows or the consumption or sale of cow-derived items. Both constitutional provisions have raised significant concerns for Christian and Muslim communities. Additionally, Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists are increasingly concerned that political pressure from the governments of India and China is negatively influencing the government of Nepal's actions

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

In its engagement with Nepal, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should urge the government of Nepal to (1) repeal or amend its constitutional and legal provisions on religious conversions and the criminalization of the treatment of cows to bring them into compliance with international religious freedom standards, and (2) provide Tibetan Buddhists fleeing religious persecution in China a safe haven in Nepal, as well as allow Tibetan Buddhists to travel freely through Nepal en route to India for religious practice and worship.

concerning religious freedom and human rights. Moreover, religious minority communities, as well as Hindu Dalits, are concerned about growing Hindu nationalism in the country, which they perceive as a threat to religious and communal harmony.

SOMALIA

KEY FINDINGS

Religious freedom violations are prevalent in a number of countries in the Horn of Africa region. In Somalia, governmental and societal religious intolerance contributes to that country's poor religious freedom record. The U.S.-designated terrorist organization al-Shabaab is responsible for many of the abuses in Somalia.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

USCIRF recommends that in its policies toward Somalia, the U.S. government should (1) declare al-Shabaab an entity of particular concern for religious freedom violations; and (2) include religious freedom promotion in countering violent extremism programs.

WESTERN EUROPE

KEY FINDINGS

USCIRF continues to monitor religious freedom-related issues in Western Europe highlighted in previous Annual Reports. These include: government registration requirements and monitoring of disfavored groups pejoratively labeled as "cults" or "sects"; government restrictions on and efforts to restrict certain forms of religious expression (such as places of worship, dress and visible symbols, and parents' rights); the impact of hate speech and other laws on peaceful expressions of belief; and the impact of counterextremism policies on certain religious communities. Governmental restrictions on

religious freedom both arise from and encourage a societal atmosphere of intolerance against the targeted religious groups, and limit their social integration and educational and employment opportunities. Alongside these restrictions, in recent years there has been an alarming rise in societal hostility toward Jews and Muslims in Europe, including discrimination, harassment, and sometimes violence, which further isolates and marginalizes these populations. Organizations tracking anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents in a number of Western European countries reported increases in 2016.

APPENDIX

RELIGIOUS PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE

Through USCIRF's Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project Commissioners advocate in support of a prisoner of conscience (noted below). Through increased education, outreach, and advocacy, USCIRF hopes to raise awareness of these and others individuals being imprisoned for their religion or beliefs, reduce their number, and highlight the country conditions that led to their imprisonment.

As mandated in the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act,

USCIRF also will, to the extent practicable, compile online and in official publications lists of persons it determines are imprisoned, detained, disappeared, placed under house arrest, tortured, or subject to forced renunciations of faith for their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy by the government of a foreign country that the Commission recommends for designation as a CPC or a non-state actor that the Commission recommends for designation as an EPC.

Patriarch Abune Antonios



COUNTRY

Eritrea

KEY FACT

Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church

DETAINED SINCE

May 27, 2007

BIOGRAPHY

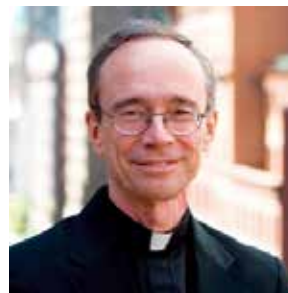
Patriarch Abune Antonios was born on July 12, 1927, in Himberti, a town north of the Eritrean capital, Asmara. His father was a priest. At the age of five, Patriarch Antonios entered the monastery of Debre Tsege Abuna Andrewes, where he was educated, ordained a deacon at the age of 12, and then served as a monk. Patriarch Antonios was ordained a priest in 1942 and was eventually elected abbot in 1955.

When the Eritrean Orthodox Church first sought its independence, Patriarch Antonios was one of the five abbots from monasteries sent to Egypt to be ordained a bishop so that the church would be able to constitute its own Holy Synod. Antonios was ordained as Bishop Antonios of Hamasien-Asmara on June 19, 1994, in Saint Mark's Cathedral in Cairo by His Holiness Shenouda III, Pope and Patriarch of Alexandria.

Following the death in 2003 of Abune Yacoub, then Patriarch of the Eritrean Church, Patriarch Antonios was elected as the third Patriarch of the Eritrean Orthodox Church by a joint vote of the Holy Synod and representatives of all dioceses in the presence of the delegates of the Holy Synod of the Egyptian Orthodox Church. Pope Shenouda III, assisted by Eritrean and Coptic Orthodox Metropolitan and Bishops, ordained and enthroned Antonios as Patriarch on April 23, 2004.

The Eritrean government notified Antonios on January 20, 2006, that he no longer would lead the country's largest religious denomination after he called for the release of political prisoners and refused to excommunicate 3,000 parishioners who

opposed the government. One year later, on January 20, 2007, authorities confiscated Patriarch Antonios' personal pontifical insignia. On May 27, 2007, the Eritrean government replaced Patriarch Antonios with Bishop Dioscoros of Mendefera, forcefully removed the Patriarch from his home, and placed him under house arrest at an undisclosed location. Patriarch Antonios, who is 89 years old, continues to be held incommunicado and reportedly is being denied medical care despite suffering from severe diabetes.



For more information on Eritrea, see p. 13.

RAIF BADAWI



COUNTRY

Saudi Arabia

KEY FACT

Blogger

DETAINED SINCE

June 27, 2012

CHARGES

Violating Islamic values and propagating liberal thought

SENTENCE

10 years imprisonment, 1,000 lashes, a fine of one million riyals (equal to about \$266,000), and is banned from any media work or foreign travel for 10 years after his release from prison

BIOGRAPHY

Raif Badawi was born January 13, 1984, in Khobar, Saudi Arabia. He is a blogger, activist, and the creator of the website Free Saudi Liberals, which encourages debate on religious and political matters in Saudi Arabia.

First detained on apostasy charges in 2008, Mr. Badawi was released after a day of questioning. He was arrested on June 17, 2012, on a charge of insulting Islam through electronic channels and brought to court on several charges including apostasy, a conviction which carries an automatic death sentence. Human Rights Watch stated that Badawi's website had hosted material criticizing "senior religious figures." Mr. Badawi had also suggested that Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University had become "a den for terrorists."

Mr. Badawi appeared before a district court in Jeddah on December 17, 2012, charged with "setting up a website that undermines general security," "ridiculing Islamic religious figures," and "going beyond the realm of obedience." On July 30, 2013, the Jeddah Criminal Court sentenced Mr. Badawi to seven years in prison and 600 lashes for founding an Internet forum that "violates Islamic values and propagates liberal thought." On May 7, 2014, an appeals court increased the punishment to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison. He also received a fine of one million riyals (equal to about \$266,000) and is banned from any media work or foreign travel for 10 years after his release from prison.

On January 9, 2015, Mr. Badawi was flogged 50 times before hundreds of spectators in front of a Jeddah mosque. He has not received additional floggings, due

partly to international reaction and partly to a medical doctor's finding that he could not physically endure more lashings. On June 7, 2015, Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court denied another appeal from Badawi and upheld the sentence of 1,000 lashes.

Mr. Badawi received the 2015 Sakharov Prize for his human rights work. Raif Badawi married Ensaf Haidar in 2002 in Saudi Arabia; they have three children. His wife and children obtained political asylum in Quebec, Canada in 2013.



Vice Chair Zogby



Commissioner Clifford D. May

For more information on Saudi Arabia, see p. 19. Vice Chair Zogby's term on the Commission expired in May 2017. Commissioner Clifford D. May agreed to be the USCIRF advocate for Raif Badawi in addition to Maryam Naghash Zargaran.

PASTOR NGUYEN CONG CHINH AND TRAN THI HONG



COUNTRY

Vietnam

KEY FACT

Evangelical pastor

DETAINED SINCE

April 28, 2011

CHARGES

Undermining National Solidarity

SENTENCE

11 years imprisonment (for Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh)

BIOGRAPHY

Nguyen Cong Chinh is an evangelical pastor originally from Quang Nam Province, and has lived in the Central Highland provinces of Kon Tum and Gia Lai since 1985. He is a long-time pro-democracy activist and critic of the Vietnamese government's ban on preaching in the Central Highlands. He is also the founder of the Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship, a charitable organization that ministers to ethnic minority communities in the central highlands, including ethnic minority prisoners and their families. He and his wife, Mrs. Tran Thi Hong, a Lutheran member of the Vietnamese Women for Human Rights organization, have five children.

In 2011, Pastor Chinh was imprisoned on false charges of undermining national solidarity. Prison authorities reportedly have physically and verbally abused him, and he spent approximately one month in solitary confinement. His health is rapidly declining: he suffers from high blood pressure, acute nasal sinusitis, arthritis, and stomach inflammation and is denied treatment or access to medication.

While the Vietnamese government has unjustly imprisoned Pastor Chinh, they have also engaged in acts of harassment against his wife, Mrs. Hong, including extended periods of surveillance, the sealing up of her house, and prevention of her attending scheduled meetings with her husband or procuring medicine for her sick

daughter. On March 30, 2016, local authorities prevented Mrs. Hong from meeting with then U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom David Saperstein. Although she eventually was able to meet with the ambassador, she suffered for this meeting: she endured a beating that left her with injuries to her head, knee, leg, hand, and foot. This visit was followed by several days of interrogation during which Mrs. Hong was pressured to sign a document stating that her meeting with the Ambassador was illegal and that she was a member of an illegal and subversive church due to her Lutheran faith. After refusing to sign, she was abused for four hours by female officers.



For more information on Vietnam, see p. 25.

GEDHUN CHOEKYI NYIMA – THE PANCHEN LAMA



COUNTRY

China

KEY FACT

11th Panchen Lama

DISAPPEARED SINCE

May 17, 1995

BIOGRAPHY

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was born on April 25, 1989, in Lhari County, Tibet. After the death of the 10th Panchen Lama, His Holiness the Dalai Lama chose Gedhun on May 15, 1995, to be the 11th Panchen Lama, which is the second-highest position in Tibetan Buddhism.

Three days after his selection as Panchen Lama, Chinese government authorities kidnapped then six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima and his family. On November 11, 1995, Chinese authorities announced their own pick to serve as the Panchen Lama: Gyancain Norbu.

Most Tibetans reject this choice, as well as the government's interference in their religious practices. The Chinese government maintains strict control over Tibetan Buddhists, suppressing their cultural and religious practices. Government-led raids on monasteries continue, and Chinese party officials in Tibet infiltrate monasteries with Communist Party propaganda.

In the more than 20 years since Gedhun's abduction, Chinese authorities have provided little information about his whereabouts, alleging that they need to protect him from being "kidnapped by separatists." In May 2007, Asma Jahangir, then United States Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, suggested that the Chinese government allow an independent expert to visit and confirm Gedhun's well-being. On July 17, 2007, the Chinese authorities said that he is a "perfectly ordinary Tibetan boy" attending school and leading a normal life, and that he "does not wish to be disturbed." Authorities say that the state employs both of his parents and that his brothers and sisters are either working or at university.



For more information on China, see p. 12.

GULMIRA IMIN



COUNTRY

China

KEY FACT

Website administrator and Uighur Muslim

DETAINED SINCE

July 14, 2009

CHARGES

Splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration

SENTENCE

Life imprisonment

BIOGRAPHY

Gulmira Imin is a Uighur Muslim and former web administrator for the Uighur-language website Salkin. Ms. Imin was also a government employee in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in northwest China. Xinjiang is home to the majority of the country's Uighur Muslim population.

Ms. Imin was born in 1978 in Aksu in Xinjiang and graduated in 2000 from the Chinese-Uighur translation department of Xinjiang University. In spring 2009, Ms. Imin became the moderator of Salkin, a Uighur-language culture and news website to which she had previously contributed poetry and short stories. Many of her online writings criticized government policies.

On July 5, 2009, Ms. Imin participated in a major demonstration protesting the deaths of Uighur migrant workers in Guangdong Province. Initially peaceful, the protests turned violent, with about 200 people, including ethnic Han Chinese, killed during the riots and confrontations with police. On July 14, 2009, Ms. Imin was arrested in Aksu after authorities alleged she had organized the protests, posted an announcement for them on Salkin, and leaked state secrets by phone to her husband in Norway. Her family was not notified of the arrest, and was unaware of her location until the October 2009 airing of a China Central Television documentary that depicted Imin in prison garb.

On April 1, 2010, the Urumqi Intermediate People's Court sentenced Ms. Imin to life in prison under articles 103, 111, and 296 of China's Criminal Law on charges of "splittism, leaking state secrets, and organizing an illegal demonstration." She alleges she was tortured and

forced to sign documents while in detention. She reportedly was not allowed to meet with her lawyer until the trial. Her appeal subsequently was rejected. Ms. Imin is currently detained in the Xinjiang Women's Prison (Xinjiang No. 2 Prison) located in Urumqi, where she is allowed one family visit every three months.



For more information on China, see p. 12.

BAGIR KAZIKHANOV



COUNTRY

Russia

KEY FACT

Said Nursi follower

DETAINED SINCE

April 2014

CHARGES

Organizing extremist activity

SENTENCE

Three and a half years imprisonment

BIOGRAPHY

Bagir Kazikhanov was born on September 9, 1983, in the Republic of Dagestan, an administrative entity of the Russian Federation.

Mr. Kazikhanov organized regular Islamic study sessions in rented flats between 2012 and 2014. During these sessions, he and his fellow Muslims studied the works of the Turkish Islamic revivalist theologian Said Nursi, along with watching football. Nursi, who died in 1960, was an ethnic Kurd who wrote a body of Qur'anic commentary advocating the modernization of Islamic education. Nursi also criticized the secular character of the post-Ottoman Turkish government, for which he was persecuted. Nursi's emphasis on the integration of modern science into Islamic learning is said to have been an inspiration to Fethullah Gülen, the prominent exiled Turkish Islamic preacher. Although Nursi's writings do not advocate hatred, violence, or the violation of human rights, many of Nursi's works are banned in Russia, reportedly due to state opposition to foreign spiritual and cultural influence.

Mr. Kazikhanov was arrested in the city of Ulyanovsk on April 9, 2014, after participating in one of these study sessions, which authorities deemed to be the "organization of extremist activity" under the Criminal Code Article 282.2, Part 1. He was accused of recruiting a terrorist cell of Nursi followers as part of a supposed "Nurdzhular" movement, which officially was banned in Russia in 2008 but is widely believed to be a legal fiction invented for the purpose of prosecuting Nursi adherents. Mr. Kazikhanov was held in a pre-trial detention center from April to October 2014, and then placed under house arrest until his February 25, 2015, conviction by

Judge Natalya Damayeva at the Lenin District Court in Ulyanovsk. The Judge sentenced him to three and a half years imprisonment.



For more information on Russia, see p. 18.

FARIBA KAMALABADI - THE BAHA'I SEVEN



COUNTRY

Iran

KEY FACT

Developmental psychologist and Baha'i member

DETAINED SINCE

May 14, 2008

CHARGES

Espionage, propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and establishment of an illegal administration

SENTENCE

20 years imprisonment

BIOGRAPHY

Fariba Kamalabadi was born on September 12, 1962, in Tehran, Iran. Ms. Kamalabadi graduated from high school with honors but was barred from attending university due to her Baha'i faith.

In her mid-30s, Ms. Kamalabadi embarked on an eight-year period of informal study and eventually received an advanced degree in developmental psychology from the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), an alternative institution the Baha'i community of Iran established to provide higher education for its young people. The Iranian government does not recognize the BIHE.

Ms. Kamalabadi is one of the seven Baha'i leaders known as "Yaran" or "Friends," who tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'i community in the absence of formally elected Baha'i leadership due to restrictions by the Iranian government. The other six members are Mahvash Sabet, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakoli, and Vahid Tizfahm.

Ms. Kamalabadi was arrested on May 14, 2008, after an early morning raid on her home. Ms. Kamalabadi and the other Baha'i Seven were held incommunicado for weeks, placed in solitary confinement for months, and spent a year behind bars without access to legal counsel. In 2010, the seven were tried and convicted of charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime." The Baha'i Seven were sentenced to 20 years in prison, the longest of any current prisoner of conscience in Iran.

Since her arrest in May 2008, Ms. Kamalabadi has been held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. Witness

reports describe the prison cell for Ms. Kamalabadi as four meters by five meters in size, with two small, metal-covered windows, and with no bed or pillows.

Ms. Kamalabadi married fellow Baha'i Ruhollah Taefi in 1982 and they have three children, Vargha, Alhan, and Taraneh. Ms. Kamalabadi's father was fired from his job in the government health service in the 1980s because he was a Baha'i; he was later imprisoned and tortured.



For more information on Iran, see p. 14.

MAHVASH SABET - THE BAHA'I SEVEN



COUNTRY

Iran

KEY FACT

Educator and Baha'i member

DETAINED SINCE

March 5, 2008

CHARGES

Espionage, propaganda against the Islamic Republic, and establishment of an illegal administration

SENTENCE

20 years imprisonment

BIOGRAPHY

Mahvash Sabet was born on February 4, 1953, in Ard-estan, Iran. Ms. Sabet moved to Tehran when she was in the fifth grade and eventually received a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Ms. Sabet began her career as a teacher and also worked as a principal at several schools. Like thousands of other Iranian Baha'i educators after the Islamic Revolution, she was fired from her job and barred from working in public education. She then became director at the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education, a university established by the Baha'i community in 1987 to meet the educational needs of young people who have been systematically denied access to higher education by the Iranian government.

Ms. Sabet was one of the seven Baha'i leaders who were part of the ad hoc group known as "Yaran" or "Friends." This group tended to the spiritual and social needs of the Iranian Baha'i community given the absence of formally elected Baha'i leadership. Ms. Sabet was the first of the Baha'i Seven to be arrested on March 5, 2008, after she was apprehended while visiting Mashhad. The Baha'i Seven were placed in solitary confinement for months, and spent a year behind bars without access to legal counsel. In 2010, the seven were tried and convicted of charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime." They each were sentenced to 20 years in prison, the longest of any current prisoner of conscience in Iran.

Since her arrest in March 2008, Ms. Sabet has been held in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. Witness reports describe the prison cell for Ms. Sabet as four meters by five meters in size, with two small, metal

covered-windows, and with no bed or pillows. Despite such conditions, Ms. Sabet has written poems about her experiences while in prison, which she composed on scraps of paper and sent out via friends and family. In 2013, they were published as a book, *Prison Poems*.

Ms. Sabet married Siyvash Sabet on May 21, 1973, and has a son and daughter.

For more information on Iran, see p. 14. Commissioner Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz has chosen to advocate in support of Mahvash Sabet along with Fariba Kamalabadi.

MARYAM NAGHASH ZARGARAN



COUNTRY

Iran

KEY FACT

Christian convert from Islam

DETAINED SINCE

January 6, 2013

CHARGES

Propagating against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security

SENTENCE

Four years imprisonment with an additional 42 days

BIOGRAPHY

Maryam Naghash Zargaran, a Christian convert from Islam and former children's music teacher, was arrested on January 6, 2013. On March 9, 2013, Judge Mohammad Moghisseh of Branch 28 of the Revolutionary Courts sentenced her to four years in prison for "propagating against the Islamic regime and collusion intended to harm national security" in connection with her work at an orphanage with Iranian-American Christian pastor Saeed Abedini, who had been imprisoned for "threatening the national security of Iran" due to his activity in the Iranian house church movement.

Ms. Zargaran began her sentence on July 15, 2013. On September 29, 2013, she was transferred from Evin Prison to Modares Hospital for treatment after an apparent heart attack, and then returned to prison at an unknown date. On May 26, 2016, she launched a hunger strike to protest the authorities' lack of attention to her medical needs and refusal to grant her conditional release or medical leave. Following her hunger strike, she was granted temporary medical leave and forced to pay a deposit bond of 350 million toman (approximately \$100,000) in order to leave the prison. The court later ordered she return to prison. Since she was still sick, her family applied for an extension of her leave, which was denied.

On July 15, 2016, Ms. Zargaran launched an indefinite hunger strike to demand her immediate and unconditional release from prison because of the insufficient treatment of her medical issues. Prison officials examined her five days later and issued a report confirming the seriousness of her condition. Although she

again demanded to be released for medical treatment, the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence denied her request and she ended her hunger strike at the beginning of August 2016.

Prison officials allowed Ms. Zargaran to return home at the end of August to receive medical treatment. However, because Ms. Zargaran reportedly objected to her furlough conditions, she was sent to Evin Prison. After another five-day medical leave in December 2016, officials informed Ms. Zargaran that her four-year sentence was extended 42 days to reflect time spent outside of prison for medical care during the summer of 2016.

Ms. Zargaran suffers from a severe heart condition, ASD (atrial septal defect), which required surgery prior to her arrest. Her condition necessitates ongoing monitoring and follow-up with a cardiologist, but since her detention, she has not had regular access to such care. She also suffers from diabetes, high cholesterol, and arthritis.



For more information on Iran, see p. 14.

PWINT PHYU LATT AND ZAW ZAW LATT



COUNTRY

Burma

KEY FACT

Interfaith peace advocates

DETAINED SINCE

July 14, 2015 (Zaw Zaw Latt)
July 19, 2015 (Pwint Phyu Latt)

CHARGES

Violating article 13(1) of the Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act, for purportedly crossing the Burma-India border

SENTENCE

Two years imprisonment

BIOGRAPHIES

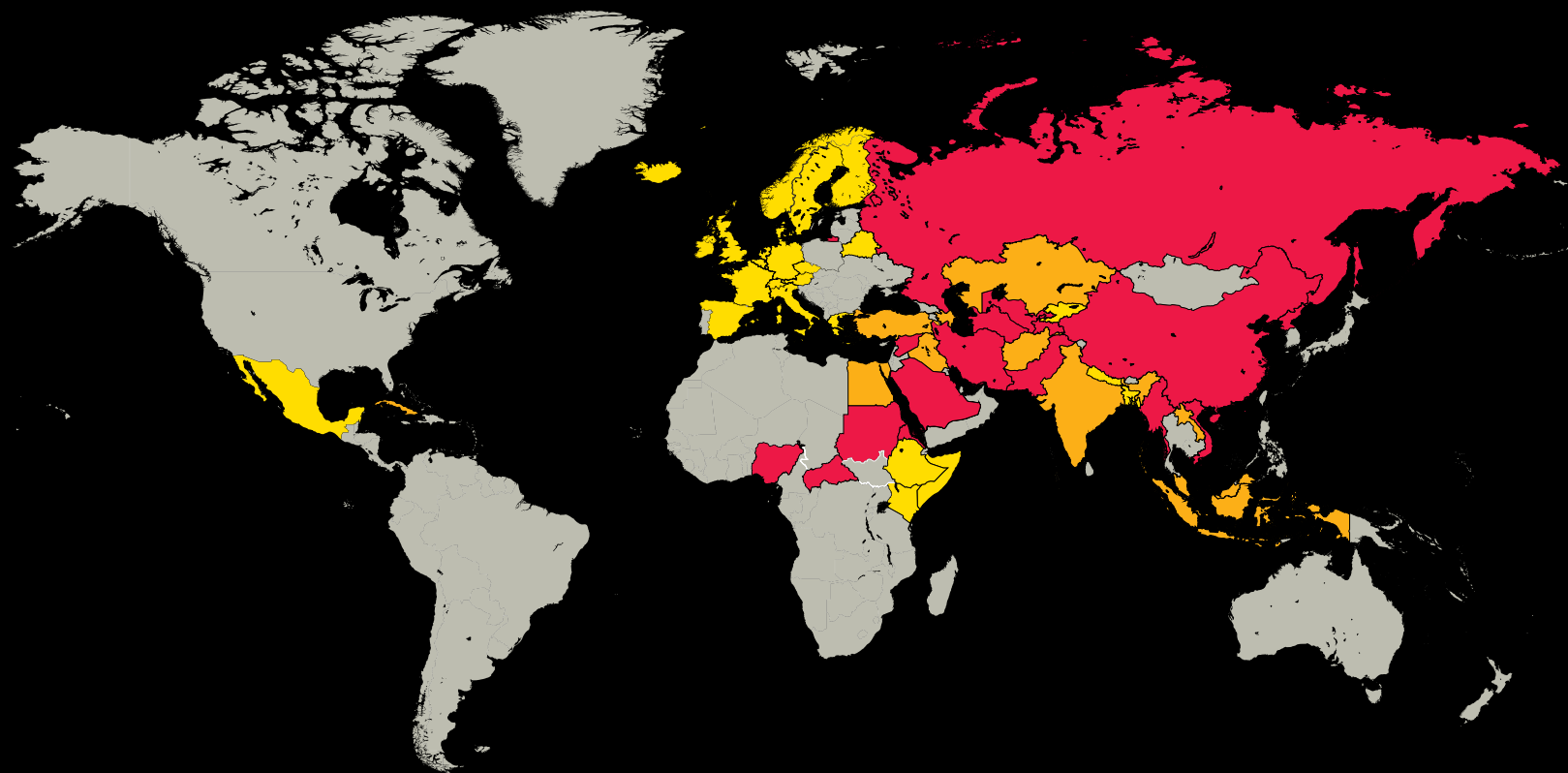
Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt are two Muslim interfaith peace advocates who have been imprisoned since 2015. The two participated in an interfaith peace trip in June 2013 to the headquarters of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), during which they delivered a Christian cross and a statue of Buddha as signs of peace. In April 2014, they traveled to Chin State on a humanitarian relief mission, taking pictures at the Burma-India border, a crossing that they stated immigration officers had approved. Nearly two years after their interfaith trip, the Buddhist nationalist group Ma Ba Tha began pressuring the Burmese government to detain them, alleging that both had promoted “inter-religious mating,” insulted Buddhism, and collaborated with the KIA.

The two were arrested in July 2015. After a six-month trial, both were convicted under article 13(1) of the since-repealed Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act for allegedly crossing the Burma-India border, and sentenced to two years in prison. On April 8, 2016, the day on which the government amnestied 199 prisoners, both advocates were charged with violating article 17(1) of the Unlawful Associations Act due to their 2013 visit to Kachin State, for which they were convicted and sentenced to two additional years in prison with hard labor.

Despite the repeal of the Emergency Provisions Act under which Zaw Zaw Latt and Pwint Phyu Latt were initially sentenced, neither have been released nor had their sentences reduced.



For more information on Burma, see p. 10.



■ **TIER 1 CPC RECOMMENDATIONS**

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

■ **TIER 2 COUNTRIES**

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

■ **OTHER COUNTRIES AND
 REGIONS MONITORED**

Bangladesh, Belarus, Ethiopia, Kenya,
 Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Nepal, Somalia,
 Western Europe

*Designated as CPCs by the State Department on October 31, 2016



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 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

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