



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

**Hearing on**  
*The State of Religious Freedom Around the Globe*

July 13, 2021 at 2:00 p.m.  
Virtual, via WebEx

**Testimony by Nadine Maenza, Chair**  
**United States Commission on International Religious Freedom**

Good afternoon, Co-Chair Smith, Co-Chair McGovern, and Honorable Members of the Commission. Thank you for inviting the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, to testify at this important hearing today.

I will provide a broad overview of the current issues, themes, and U.S. policies impacting religious freedom, and then I am happy to take questions and provide information about any country specific situations you identify.

As we gather here today, people all around the world continue to be systematically and violently targeted for their faith, or for their choice to hold no faith at all, by both governments and non-state actors. Governments impose laws that discriminate against religious communities and restrict their right to express their faith and to worship how they see fit, imposing steep penalties, imprisonment and even death for blasphemy, apostasy, for failing to officially register their faith group, for worshiping in an unauthorized space, or just for their existence or identification as a religious community. Non-state groups and individuals often use these laws to justify violent attacks against religious minorities, worshippers, and houses of worship.

In USCIRF's most recent annual report covering 2020, we recommended the Department of State designate 14 countries as Countries of Particular Concern or CPCs, 10 of which they have already designated. Those are Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The other four countries yet to be designated as CPCs are India, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam. We also recommended the State Department maintain on the Special Watch List two countries—Cuba and Nicaragua—and add 10 countries to that list: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. In addition, we determined that three countries had made sufficient progress to no longer warrant USCIRF recommending inclusion on the Special Watch List. These countries are

Bahrain, the Central African Republic, and Sudan. However, religious freedom concerns remain in all three countries, and USCIRF will continue to closely monitor them.

In addition to these country conditions, we identified several key thematic trends. Governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with sweeping restrictions, many that were justified under public health exceptions to international law, but in other cases they used the pandemic to disproportionately target religious minorities, increasing discriminatory restrictions and blaming religious groups for the spread of the virus. Jewish communities were especially targeted in this manner as the spread of the pandemic sparked a new surge in global anti-Semitism already on the rise. The desecration of houses of worship continued to be a key trend in dozens of countries around the world, targeting these symbols of religious identity that are supposed to be places of refuge. Across the globe, 84 countries maintain blasphemy laws, many of which are enforced by the state and carry severe penalties. In several instances political unrest prompted the emergence of religious freedom violations, such as in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Yemen. In Iraq and Syria, we find Yazidis, Christians, and others displaced by genocide seven years ago still unable to return because of threats from Iranian aligned militias, Turkey, and a reemergence of ISIS cells. Religious freedom violations in China and the extension of its influence beyond its borders represented the most troubling development in 2020. In addition to the genocide against the Uyghurs and coordinated campaigns to “sinicize” Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity, the government exercised its broad economic and geopolitical influence to pressure countries to accept its demands without concern for human rights. USCIRF felt this over the last year when the Chinese government sanctioned three of our commissioners.

USCIRF gratefully acknowledges that the United States continues to be the global leader fighting on behalf of religious freedom and advocating for heavily persecuted religious communities that have no one else to plead their case. Countries who dare enact policies or even to speak out against China’s genocide of the Uyghurs, or Saudi Arabia’s systematic repression of Shi’a Muslim and non-Muslim communities, for example, face dire diplomatic backlash and economic consequences. Yet the United States continues to raise and institutionalize religious freedom in its foreign policy in a bipartisan way.

The Biden administration has signaled its commitment to champion human rights, including religious freedom, and centering the safety and dignity of religious communities as foreign policy priorities. President Biden signed a Presidential Determination in April that revised and reallocated the countries and regions from which the United States would accept refugees in the current fiscal year, and he signed a subsequent Presidential Determination in May that raised the refugee ceiling from 15,000 to 62,500 for the remainder of the fiscal year. We urge the administration to prioritize those refugees who are most vulnerable, including those who are survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution. The Biden administration is also conducting an interagency review to determine whether atrocities committed against the Rohingya by the Burmese military amount to genocide. We recommend that they definitively and publicly conclude that the atrocities, both committed and ongoing, constitute genocide, and act accordingly. We are pleased to have just received confirmation that the administration plans to fully implement President Trump’s executive order “Advancing International Religious Freedom,” that integrates this issue into U.S. diplomacy and development efforts.

As you know, religious freedom conditions overall continue to deteriorate around the world and there are always ways we can do better. So, in addition to the recommendations I have already mentioned, I will highlight other opportunities for Congress and the administration to further advance religious freedom.

There is pending legislation in Congress that contains several of USCIRF's policy recommendations that could create a strong response to severe religious freedom violations, including the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, the Ukraine Religious Freedom Support Act, and the Vietnam Human Rights Act. We urge you all to look closely at these and other relevant legislation.

USCIRF urges the Biden administration to continue to lead the multilateral initiatives that have been set up, such as the International Religious Freedom Ministerial, and also the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, officially launched in February 2020. This network of 32 like-minded countries is committed to opposing religious persecution and advancing freedom of religion or belief for all.

As the Biden Administration reviews its Syria Policy, USCIRF urges them to take actions to support the Autonomous Administrations of North and East Syria so it can continue as a refuge for religious minorities. We recommend giving them political recognition as a legitimate, local government, lifting sanctions from the area they govern, and including them in all discussions for a political solution.

Lastly, the Biden administration should move promptly to nominate and appoint well-qualified individuals to key religious freedom vacancies, particularly the ambassador-at-large and USCIRF commissioners, and the Senate should quickly confirm those requiring confirmation.

Thank you, Co-Chairs Smith and McGovern, and all members of this Commission, for continuing to show Congress and the administration that human rights, and international religious freedom in particular, are longstanding bipartisan priorities that we can all work together on regardless of other political differences. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.