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# Global Human Rights: International Religious Freedom Policy

## Introduction

For decades, U.S. policymakers have sought to promote religious freedom abroad, reflecting both support for human rights in U.S. foreign policy as well as the particular emphasis on freedom of religion in U.S. domestic law and political culture. Protection of religious freedom is also affirmed in international law through the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other instruments. Congress has been an advocate for international religious freedom issues and has sought to ensure continued support for religious freedom as a focus of U.S. foreign policy, most prominently through passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

## Legislative Background

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-292) is the foundational legislation for U.S. international religious freedom (IRF) policy. Recognizing religious freedom as a “universal human right,” IRFA created various government mechanisms aimed at cementing IRF as a foreign policy priority of the United States. Most significantly, the law

- created an Office on International Religious Freedom within the State Department headed by an Ambassador at Large (AAL) for IRF;
- required that the Secretary of State issue an annual report on the status of religious freedom around the world;
- mandated that the President identify “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) and prescribed punitive actions in response to violations of religious freedom, subject to presidential waiver authority;
- created the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF); and
- amended the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) to make inadmissible into the United States foreign government officials who have committed particularly severe religious freedom violations.

Congress has subsequently strengthened IRFA via amendment, notably through the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (Wolf IRFA; P.L. 114-281), which became law in December 2016. The major provisions of the law

- called for the AAL for IRF to have a greater role within interagency policy processes and to report directly to the Secretary of State;
- mandated designation of a “special watch list” of countries with severe violations of religious freedom but that did not meet CPC criteria; and
- mandated designation of nonstate entities of particular concern (EPCs).

## The State Department’s Role

The State Department leads the federal government’s efforts to promote international religious freedom. The AAL for IRF heads the Office on International Religious Freedom (IRF Office). Per IRFA, the AAL integrates IRF policies into U.S. foreign policy efforts and is to participate in any interagency processes in which the promotion of IRF “can advance United States national security interests.” The AAL and the IRF Office lead the drafting of the annual international religious freedom report and advise the Secretary of State on U.S. policy actions in response to religious freedom violations. Sam Brownback, confirmed by the Senate in January 2018, serves as the current AAL. Other senior State Department positions related to religious freedom include the congressionally mandated position of Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating anti-Semitism (currently held by Elan S. Carr), and the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South/Central Asia (currently vacant).

In June 2019, Secretary of State Pompeo announced that the State Department was elevating the IRF Office and the Office of the Special Envoy for Monitoring and Combating anti-Semitism by designating that these offices report directly to the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. The offices had previously been situated within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Pursuant to IRFA, the AAL for IRF continues to report to the Secretary of State.

## International Religious Freedom Report

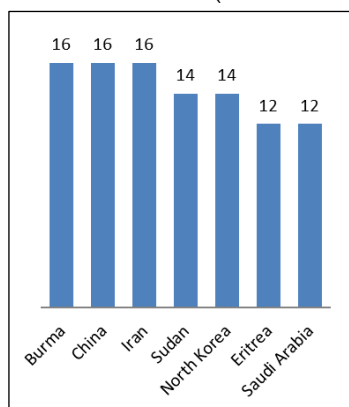
The IRF report, which is statutorily required by May 1 each year, covers developments in each foreign country during the prior calendar year and includes information on the status of religious freedom, violations of religious freedom, and relevant U.S. policies. The IRF report is the official U.S. government account of religious freedom conditions abroad, and is a primary information source for the Secretary of State’s “country of particular concern” designations. The report covering calendar year 2019 was submitted to Congress on June 10, 2020, and is available on the Department of State website.

## Countries (and Entities) of Particular Concern

IRFA mandates that the President, using information from the IRF report and other sources, designate “particularly severe” religious freedom violators as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) (see **Figure 1**). The law defines particularly severe violations as those that are systematic, ongoing, and egregious. The Wolf IRFA mandated an additional “special watch list” of countries with severe religious freedom violations but that do not reach the threshold of systematic, ongoing, and egregious. In recognition of religious freedom abuses carried out by the Islamic State and other nonstate actors, Wolf IRFA also

added a new requirement that the President designate entities of particular concern (EPCs) and, “when practicable,” take actions to address severe violations of religious freedom committed by EPCs.

**Figure 1. Countries Most Often Designated as CPCs**  
By Number of Times on CPC List (out of 16 lists since 1999)



Source: Compiled by CRS based on U.S. State Department releases.

## Actions in Response to Religious Freedom Violations

IRFA prescribes a list of U.S. government actions that may be exercised in response to religious freedom violations. Permitted actions include diplomatic measures such as demarches and public condemnations. For CPC countries, sanctions of varying severity are suggested, including suspension of foreign assistance, trade restrictions, or loan prohibitions. However, the law provides the executive branch significant discretion in determining which, if any, punitive actions to take. Administrations can apply “commensurate substitute action” in lieu of IRFA’s suggested measures, exempt a country from new sanctions by referring to already existing human rights-related sanctions against that country, or waive sanctions by citing U.S. national interest. In practice, Administrations have generally either referred to sanctions already in place against CPC countries or issued waivers instead of implementing new sanctions under IRFA. The most recent CPC designations and accompanying government actions were determined in December 2020 (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1. CPCs and U.S. Actions (Dec. 2020)**

Country	Action
Burma (Myanmar)	Referred to preexisting sanctions
China	Referred to preexisting sanctions
Eritrea	Referred to preexisting sanctions
Iran	Referred to preexisting sanctions
Nigeria	Issued national interest waiver
North Korea	Referred to preexisting sanctions
Pakistan	Issued national interest waiver
Saudi Arabia	Issued national interest waiver
Tajikistan	Issued national interest waiver
Turkmenistan	Issued national interest waiver

Source: 86 *Federal Register* 2718.

In addition, the State Department placed Comoros, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia on the special watch list. Sudan and Uzbekistan were removed from their prior listing as special watch list countries “based on significant, concrete progress undertaken by their respective governments over the past year.” EPC designations included al-Shabaab, Al Qaeda,

Boko Haram, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Houthis, the Islamic State, Islamic State-Greater Sahara, Islamic State-West Africa, Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, and the Taliban.

### Executive Order (E.O.) on IRF

On June 2, 2020, President Trump issued E.O. 13926, which declares IRF to be a “moral and national security imperative” and directed the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development to prioritize IRF in foreign policy and foreign assistance. Regarding CPCs, EPCs, special watch list countries, and any other countries that have engaged in or tolerated violations of religious freedom, the E.O. directed that the relevant U.S. Chiefs of Mission develop action plans to support IRF in these countries, among other directives.

### U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)

IRFA established USCIRF, an independent federal commission tasked with monitoring IRF conditions, reviewing U.S. government policy, and making policy recommendations. The President and House and Senate leadership appoint USCIRF commissioners, and IRFA’s provisions ensure its composition reflects recommendations of both the majority and minority party. Commissioners are appointed to one-year or two-year terms and are to be composed of distinguished individuals in fields relevant to religious freedom. The AAL for IRF also serves as a nonvoting member. USCIRF in June 2020 elected Gayle Manchin as USCIRF’s Chair for 2020-2021. Division J, Title VII of P.L. 116-94 reauthorized USCIRF through September 2022 and amended some of USCIRF’s statutorily required duties and personnel matters.

Pursuant to IRFA, USCIRF produces its own annual report, which it has utilized to analyze the executive branch’s implementation of IRFA during the preceding year, make general policy recommendations, and recommend CPC, special watch list, and EPC designations. USCIRF’s recommendations for designations are typically more expansive than the official designations by the State Department. The joint explanatory statement for the FY2021 State Department, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act (Division K of P.L. 116-260) directed that the Secretary of State inform the House and Senate Appropriations and Foreign Affairs/Foreign Relations Committees “of the rationale if the USCIRF recommends the designation of a country as a [CPC] in its annual report, and the Department of State does not designate such country within 30 days of such a decision.”

In its report covering calendar year 2019 (released in April 2020), USCIRF recommended that five countries be added to the official CPC list in addition to those already on it: India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam (as indicated in **Table 1**, the State Department subsequently designated Nigeria as a CPC). USCIRF similarly recommended that additional countries be added to the special watch list, and that an additional entity be added to the EPC list.

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