

Commission names worst religious freedom violators

May 1, 2024

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom added Azerbaijan to its list of 17 “worst of the worst” violators of freedom of religion or belief in 2023.

In its [annual report](#), released May 1, the commission recommended the U.S. Department of State designate Azerbaijan as a Country of Particular Concern—a category reserved for a nation in which the government has engaged in or tolerated systemic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom.

The report cites a nongovernmental organization that documented 183 individuals who were “wrongly imprisoned in connection with their religious beliefs, activities or activism.”



In an [online conference](#) announcing the report’s release, Commissioner Stephen Schneck added, “Authorities [in Azerbaijan] are regularly accused of torturing or threatening sexual violence to elicit false confessions from detainees, with those perpetuating such violence facing no accountability.”

Four members of the commission—Abraham Cooper, Susie Gelman,

Mohamed Magid and Nury Turkel—dissented from what they termed the “ill-advised recommendation” to designate Azerbaijan as a Country of Particular Concern.

The dissenting commissioners acknowledged religious freedom violations in Azerbaijan and noted the State Department added the country to its Special Watch List last year for the first time. That second-tier designation is reserved for nations that engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom but not in a “systemic, ongoing and egregious” manner.

The four dissenting commissioners agreed with officials at the State Department that “conditions in Azerbaijan are not at the level of a Country of Particular Concern.”

Other Countries of Particular Concern recommended

In addition to Azerbaijan, the commission again recommended the State Department add four nations—Afghanistan, India, Nigeria and Vietnam—to its Countries of Particular Concern list.

Last year, the commission recommended Vietnam be named as a Country of Particular Concern. It has recommended that status for Afghanistan since 2022, India since 2020 and Nigeria since 2009.

The commission also recommended the State Department continue to identify a dozen nations as Countries of Particular Concern—Burma, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The report singles out China and Russia as “among the world’s worst violators of their people’s religious freedom, as well as among the most active perpetrators of cross-border repression and other malign activities

abroad, including in the United States.”

The commission similarly points to India’s “acts of transnational repression” of religious minorities. Its report states India is guilty of “discriminatory nationalist policies” and “perpetual hateful rhetoric,” along with a failure to address violence against Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, Jews and indigenous people.

The report notes 687 incidents of violence against Christians in India, as well as the destruction of more than 500 churches and two synagogues in Manipur State, where more than 70,000 were displaced.

Additional offenders cited

The commission recommended the State Department include 11 countries on its Special Watch List—Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

It recommended Kyrgyzstan for the first time “due to its deteriorating religious freedom conditions,” particularly noting the government targeted Muslims “who practice a form of Islam that deviates from the state’s preferred interpretation.”

The commission also recommended seven “nonstate actors” as Entities of Particular Concern,” all of which the State Department designated as such in December 2023: Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Houthis, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Islamic State Sahel Province, Islamic State in West Africa Province and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam.

The commission called on Congress to:

- Request a Governmental Accounting Office report of all U.S. foreign assistance to nations the State Department designates as

Countries of Particular Concern or that are on the Special Watch List.

- Make U.S. security assistance to Countries of Particular Concern and nations on the Special Watch list conditioned on improvements in religious freedom.
- Permanently reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment to allow legal U.S. residents to facilitate the resettlement to the United States of persecuted religious minority groups from their countries of residence.
- Prohibit any person from receiving compensation for lobbying on behalf of foreign governments designated as Countries of Particular Concern or places on the Special Watch List.

Also in its report, the commission recommended the Biden administration impose asset freezes or visa bans on individuals and entities for severe religious freedom violations; advocate for the release of religious prisoners of conscience in multilateral and bilateral meetings with relevant governments; and appoint to the National Security Council a special adviser to the president on international religious freedom.

Frederick A. Davie, vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said U.S. officials can advance freedom of religion by “raising the names of victims persecuted for their faith each time the U.S. government engages with foreign governments.”

Anniversary of International Religious Freedom Act

The release of the commission’s annual report marked the 25th anniversary of enactment of the [International Religious Freedom Act](#).

A quarter-century after the act became law, “many individuals and

communities around the world still cannot freely practice their religion or belief,” said Abraham Cooper, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The commission is “disheartened by the deteriorating conditions in many countries,” he added.

“While 25 years has passed since USCIRF was created, it is more important now than ever to ensure that promoting freedom of religion or belief remains a key tenet of U.S. foreign policy,” he said.

“USCIRF’s independence and bipartisanship enables it to unflinchingly identify threats to religious freedom abroad, and despite there being dissent on certain issues included in the annual report, commissioners remain committed to advancing religious freedom for all.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Paragraphs 5, 6 and 7 were revised slightly after the article initially was posted.