

# Religious freedom deteriorating around the world, report says

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Religious freedom remains under “serious and sustained assault” around the globe, a new annual report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom asserts.

“At best, in most of the countries we cover, religious freedom conditions have failed to improve,” said Robert P. George, chair of the commission. “At worst, they have spiraled further downward.”

The independent government advisory body recommended the State Department add the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria and Vietnam to the U.S. government’s list of the world’s worst abusers of human rights and religious freedom. Of the 17 countries the commission identifies as nations of “particular concern,” the State Department has recognized only 10.

## **Tajikistan added to list of offenders**

The official list remained unchanged nearly a decade until the recent addition of Tajikistan, a Sunni-majority country where a restrictive 2009 law allows the government to crack down on all independent religious activity, particularly by Muslims, Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Officials in Tajikistan use concerns of extremism to justify monitoring and suppressing acts of worship, and police there have forced thousands of women to remove their headscarves and detained hundreds of thousands of bearded men.

“The incarceration of prisoners of conscience, including religious prisoners, remains astonishingly widespread,” George said. He pointed to China,

which has imprisoned some opposed to a state campaign to remove crosses from churches, and Iran's majority-Shiite regime, where Sunnis, Christians and Baha'is have been persecuted, imprisoned and even sentenced to death on dubious unrelated charges.

In Pakistan—which USCIRF recommended for recognition as a country of particular concern but, for the 14th year in a row, has been not been listed officially—more people are on death row or serving life sentences for blasphemy charges than in any other nation in the world.

### **Tip of the iceberg**

As much attention as was given to the refugee crisis in Iraq and Syria, for which the USCIRF largely recycled its recommendations this year, it's only the tip of the iceberg.

"I don't think we can account for everything we've seen simply by reference to the refugee crisis in the Middle East," George said, noting oppressive conditions for minorities in East Asia, where a Vietnamese religious freedom activist was imprisoned the day after meeting with a USCIRF ambassador.

"The American public needs to understand that this is truly is a battle for ideas. Protecting our interests really does mean advancing our values, including our belief in religious freedom."

Other areas of focus included rising anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim bigotry throughout Europe, the continuation of a "brutal legacy of persecution against Burma's Rohingya Muslims" and the "negative trajectory" for Christians, Muslims and Sikhs living in India. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rhetoric has been positive in the Hindu-majority country, a USCIRF delegation was denied visas in March.

Good news was scarce, but there may be hope. Last year's report

commended Nigeria, Cyprus and Sri Lanka's new government for progress in promoting religious freedom and harmony. While Nigeria remains on the list of countries of particular concern, Cyprus and Sri Lanka were removed.