

# Report urges changes to promote global religious freedom

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Naming the worst violators of international religious freedom has been a good way to condemn bad behavior but has been far less effective at bringing about changes in policy by foreign nations, a report from the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom concluded.

Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the U.S. Department of State is empowered to name a nation as a Country of Particular Concern if it engages in or tolerates “systemic, ongoing and egregious” violations of religious freedom.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom makes annual recommendations to the State Department about nations it believes should be given the CPC designation. The commission also recommends nations it thinks should be added to the Special Watch List, a second-tier designation for countries where there is evidence of religious freedom violations.

CPC designations often have not be accompanied by meaningful sanctions or bilateral agreement, the commission noted in “[Revisiting the CPC Designation: Improving Accountability and Engaging Productively to Advance Religious Freedom Abroad](#),” released Sept. 6.

“After 25 years of implementation of IRFA and more than 160 CPC designations, further adjustments could be made to ensure the act is optimized as a tool of U.S. foreign policy to condemn violations of religious freedom and to promote the fundamental right to freedom of religion for all people,” the report states.

In developing the document, the commission reviewed more than 260 annual reports and interviewed a dozen former or current officials, researchers and religious freedom advocates.

The report notes the State Department has issued 19 sets of CPC designations, naming 17 different nations as CPCs 164 times.

Only in Vietnam was a binding agreement secured and only in Uzbekistan was a binding agreement pursued following the CPC designations, the report noted. Only on three occasions—all in Eritrea—were new sanctions enforced directly because of a CPC designation.

## **‘Failed to produce genuine change’**

“Too often, the application of IRFA has failed to produce genuine change to advance religious freedom,” the report states. “The repeated use of sanctions waivers backed by vague justifications and the repurposed application of preexisting sanctions dilute the effectiveness of the CPC designation.

“The indefinite suspension of sanctions or other punitive measures for religious freedom violators, whether due to inertia or competing policy priorities, impedes accountability for religious freedom violators.

“When waivers must be issued, as the act permits, the State Department should provide clear justification and timelines.”



Knox Thames

Knox Thames, an international human rights lawyer who served as a U.S. Department of State envoy for religious minorities, agreed with the committee's assessment that the Country of Particular Concern designation has not been used "to its fullest potential."

"The United States is a global leader in promoting religious freedom worldwide. No other country compares to our efforts. However, good isn't good enough considering the pandemic of persecution sweeping the world," Thames said.

"Using sanctions more effectively would create diplomatic consequences for misdeeds, forcing persecuting governments to reconsider their harmful actions and hopefully reform. Taking no action is clearly not working."

Thames, a career diplomat and [author of \*Ending Persecution: Charting the Path to Global Religious Freedom\*](#), asserts in his book the United States should practice "consequential diplomacy"—making sure oppressors of religious freedom know they will suffer penalties if they persist in repression and persecution, while continuing to engage them in sustained dialogue.

## **Recommendations the commission offered to the State Department included:**

- Developing a clear action plan for engagement with any country designated as a CPC, including benchmarks and timelines for improvement.
- Strengthening the evidence-collection process and streamlining the imposition of targeted sanctions against specific violators.
- Mainstreaming religious freedom into U.S. foreign policy by

ensuring it is included in public diplomacy, educational and cultural affairs, and promotion of democracy and human rights.

The commission recommended that Congress update the list of required actions for CPC designation to include more modern targeted sanctions and hold regular hearings on the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act.