



# THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WORLDWIDE: AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE AXIS OF UPHEAVAL'S RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION AND HOW THE U.S. CAN COUNTERACT IT

BY THE MCCAIN INSTITUTE HUMAN RIGHTS & FREEDOM PROGRAM

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## Foreword

The late Senator John McCain repeatedly expressed his belief that religious freedom is essential. In 2008, at Oakland University in Michigan, he declared, “No society that denies religious freedom can ever rightly claim to be good in some other way. And no person can ever be true to any faith that believes in the dignity of all human life if they do not act out of concern for those whose dignity is assailed because of their faith.”

Those words ring true now more than ever. As societies around the world become less free, religious freedom is under global assault, which is also being increasingly coordinated among autocrats, who share their playbooks.

Concerned about this reality, the McCain Institute convened top regional and topical experts to provide their analysis on international religious freedom in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Also known as the Axis of Upheaval, all four governments repress religious freedom within their own borders, and, in some cases, through transnational repression. In addition, these nations collude to advance their agenda on the world stage - discriminating against religious practices and attacking those who participate “illegally.” The resulting violence leaves a multitude of believers suffering.

This report presents assessments on religious persecution by the hands of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, drawing on existing research and publicly available data, and draws conclusions on how the United States should respond. The authors represent leading voices from the foreign policy and human rights community, from different backgrounds, faiths, and politics. In addition to presenting the facts of the Axis of Upheaval’s religious persecution, they make a compelling case for robust U.S. leadership as key to countering these threats, safeguarding and promoting international religious freedom, and protecting human rights and dignity.

These recommendations for the U.S. government, listed on page 65, cover several recurring themes: 1) Integrate Religious Freedom into U.S. Foreign Policy and Diplomacy; 2) Expand Designations, Sanctions, and Legal Measures; 3) Enforce Corporate Responsibility and Apply Economic Pressure; 4) Strengthen Congressional and Oversight Actions; 5) Amplify Support for Civil Society, Religious Minorities, and Information Freedom; 6) Counter Authoritarian Propaganda and Influence; and 7) Deepen Strategic Religious Engagement and Partnerships.

At the aforementioned university speech, the late Senator asserted, “There is no right more fundamental to a free society than the free practice of religion.” The McCain Institute believes in this, and in the indispensable role of the United States in advocating worldwide for this fundamental human right. This report provides practical and timely recommendations for how we, as a country, can continue to be the voice for the voiceless abroad.

# Introduction: League of Tyrants: Religious Persecution by China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia

Knox Thames

In September 2025, China's Chairman Xi Jinping hosted Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un, and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing to commemorate the end of World War II.<sup>1</sup> While nominally celebrating the allied victory over fascism, their increasing collaboration as a league of tyrants challenges the rules-based international order created by the United States after World War II. Their policies are antithetical to fundamental freedoms and oppress millions, particularly those wishing to pursue the truth as their conscience dictates without fear of discrimination or violence.

If you were to ask passersby on the street to name the most oppressive countries in the world, they would likely name China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Not without reason, these four authoritarian regimes are globally renowned for their oppression: they brook no dissent and ruthlessly crack down on any political opposition. In addition to repressing their own citizens, they act aggressively internationally, with Russian and North Korean troops fighting in Ukraine, Iranian agents and proxies targeting regime opponents in the Middle East and beyond, while China steadily expands its debt-trap mercantilist empire and threatens Taiwan with invasion.

The late John McCain wrote, “The character of states can’t be separated from their conduct in the world.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, it is unsurprising these regimes are also world-class religious persecution machines. Each enforces certain forms of religious practice over its population and punishes those who deviate from the desired spiritual conformity. Despite current repression, these nations have deep historical and cultural connections with many faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, as well as other beliefs. However, their modern form of governance is notorious for religious persecution, not pluralism, fear and not freedom.

China's expanding power has enabled levels of repression unseen in the 21st century. The government's industrial-scale repression of Uyghur Muslims shocks the conscience with its repressive laws, reeducation camps, sterilization, disappearances, and deaths. Xi and the Chinese Communist Party have attempted to erase the entire Uyghur community from existence. But Uyghurs are not alone. Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, and others also face severe punishments if they question the Chinese Communist Party's Sinicization of faith or resist subordination to Chairman Xi's right to govern.<sup>3</sup>

While China nominally holds to a Communist ideology, the Iranian regime is theocratic. Under the Ayatollahs, the Bahá’í community has suffered extreme persecution. Officials prosecute them with a religious zeal. Others suffer too, including Christian converts, atheists, agnostics, and Sunni and Sufi Muslims. Shi’a Muslim women resisting hijab mandates and other religious edicts over their lives face jail and torture from the morality police. Iran’s state sponsorship of terrorism has victimized countless individuals through transnational repression and the targeting of Jewish sites in the West.<sup>4</sup>

Where Iran is theocratic, North Korea requires worship of the Kim family. Three generations of repressive Kim family policies have transformed North Korea into arguably the most repressive country in the world. Freedom simply does not exist for anyone, including those wishing for religious freedom. Tragically, North Korea was once a place of rich Christian life, with Pyongyang referred to as the Jerusalem of the East.<sup>5</sup> However, the Kim family allows no competing worldviews, especially religious. North Korea’s once large Christian community has withered under decades of persecution, and the remaining faithful must hide underground.<sup>6</sup>

Russia, while not as ideologically rigid as any of the prior three, exerts control over religious practice across the vast nation. Despite a brief springtime for religious groups after the fall of the Soviet Union, respect for religious freedom has steadily declined. While vibrant religious communities do worship in Russia, unlike in Soviet times, Putin has co-opted the Russian Orthodox Church, rendering it a de facto state entity. Russian laws and policies continue to ban and harass minority groups. Similarly, in the occupied areas of Ukraine, Russian forces have worked to purge any non-Russian Orthodox expressions of Christianity or other minority faiths.<sup>7</sup> Even in the regions of Ukraine free from Russian rule, believers must fear attacks, as Moscow purposely targets civilian areas, including religious and cultural sites.<sup>8</sup>

To address the severe challenge to religious freedom these regimes represent, new ideas for U.S. policy responses are needed. I therefore want to thank the McCain Institute for commissioning this report, which highlights an overlooked global challenge. While domestic religious liberty concerns are increasingly politically fraught, it is important to ensure issues of religious persecution abroad remain a nonpartisan area of agreement. I also appreciate Corban Teague, the Institute’s former director of the Human Rights & Freedom Program, inviting me into this effort. Further, it has been a pleasure to co-edit the report with Senior Program Manager and acting Director, Alexis Mrachek.

The report’s assembled expertise represents some of the sharpest analysis on religious persecution in these countries. The following chapters will delve further into the nature and scope of how each regime represses religious freedom. However, far from merely admiring the problem, authors provide ideas for how the United States can respond. In fact, a common recommendation is for the Trump Administration to more actively and forthrightly promote these American values in U.S. foreign policy. The authors’ ideas are worthy of consideration by the Administration and members of Congress, as only the United States has the power, influence, and commitment to press these countries to reform.

The U.S. government is familiar with the problem. The U.S. Department of State has repeatedly recognized the dismal records of these four countries, with each government currently designated a “country of particular concern” for their particularly severe religious freedom violations.<sup>9</sup> China and Iran were among the first designated in 1999, with North Korea added in 2001, while Russia was a more recent addition in 2020. In addition to persecution, each tries to leverage historical religious connections to manipulate faith as a form of soft power projection abroad.

For over 25 years, the United States has been the global leader in protecting and promoting religious freedom internationally, across Republican and Democratic administrations. During Trump’s first administration, U.S. efforts reached unprecedented levels, marked by hosting two ministerial-level events and the launch of an alliance of nations committed to freedom of religion or belief. However, the second Trump administration has not pursued religious freedom advocacy with the same vigor. Its decision to slash foreign assistance funding and curtail diplomatic expertise—while shrinking the religious freedom and human rights offices and delaying their reports—further limits the United States’ ability to advocate for religious freedom abroad.

However, a renewed commitment by the second Administration to the priorities of the first could help bring an end to these recurring instances of persecution, thereby preventing the expansion of global challenges and leading to a safer and more secure United States. In addition, President Trump’s personal diplomacy with Xi Jinping, Kim Jong Un, and Vladimir Putin provides unique opportunities to press concerns about religious persecution. The opposite is also true: the absence of presidential support will undermine other efforts, as his foreign policy reflects his personal interests to an exceptional degree. As diplomacy unfolds with each, the president and his envoys must include concerns about religious freedom in their engagements.

Some argue it is not for the United States to meddle in the internal affairs of other nations. But including human rights in U.S. foreign policy advances U.S. values and interests. The religious persecution by this league of tyrants will impact the bilateral relationship, regarding human rights and more. If governments fail to respect the fundamental freedoms of their people, why should we expect them to respect international agreements or trade pacts? It is folly to believe oppressors can be trusted. If people face violence on account of their faith, they will flee to other countries. Religious persecution is one of the key push factors leading to unprecedented levels of global migration.<sup>10</sup>

In this complex world, the U.S. government must not shy away from advancing U.S. values centered on religious freedom and human rights. It must not fall into the trap of moral relativism because these regimes have a different worldview, or be shamed into silence about human rights concerns with bogus charges of cultural imperialism. Instead, robust human rights diplomacy should remain a distinctive feature of U.S. foreign policy. The United States has every right to bring its values into foreign affairs, as they reflect the nation's identity and principles.

The United States is the indispensable actor in promoting religious freedom and related human rights. Its history—the good and the bad—positions it to share best practices while challenging repressive systems. Moreover, its prosperity might require nations to listen. How the United States responds to global religious persecution matters. John McCain said it well: “What matters most is that we remain confident in our principles, mindful that they are not ours alone, and that we recognize that to be on the right side of history is to support people denied their basic rights.”<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kanis Leung, “A Look at the World Leaders Joining China’s Military Parade in a Show of Solidarity with Beijing.” *Associated Press*, September 3, 2025.

<https://apnews.com/article/china-parade-guests-world-leaders-531525ac9f59036fe44e0495920a1798>. Accessed September 4, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> John McCain and Mark Salter, *The Restless Wave: Good Times, Just Causes, Great Fights, and Other Appreciations*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. *Annual Report 2025*. March 2025. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/2025%20USCIRF%20Annual%20Report.pdf>. Accessed September 4, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Christian History Institute. “The Jerusalem of the East.” *Christian History Magazine*. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/the-jerusalem-of-the-east>. Accessed September 4, 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO. “Damaged Cultural Sites in Ukraine Verified by UNESCO.” Published August 18, 2025. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>. Accessed September 4, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of State. “Secretary of State’s Determinations Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2016.” *Federal Register* 89, no. 14 (January 22, 2024): 3980 Doc. No. 2024-01084. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/01/22/2024-01084/secretary-of-states-determinations-under-the-international-religious-freedom-act-of-1998-and-frank-r>.

<sup>10</sup> World Relief and Open Doors U.S. “World Relief & Open Doors U.S. Release New Report on the Rise of Persecuted Christians & Global Displacement Around the World.” October 14, 2024. <https://worldrelief.org/pr-world-relief-amp-open-doors-us-release-new-report-on-the-rise-of-persecuted-christians-amp-global-displacement-around-the-world/>. Accessed September 4, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> McCain and Salter, *The Restless Wave*.

# Chapter 1: Faith and Influence: How Strategic Rivals are Advancing Global Agendas through Religion

Peter Mandaville

In discussions of global religious freedom, the focus is often—and understandably—on violations: repression of minority faiths, state interference in religious practice, or outright persecution. Yet a parallel development deserves equal attention: the strategic use of religion by authoritarian states to project influence and shape international norms. Russia, China, and Iran—three of the United States’ principal geopolitical rivals—are increasingly deploying religious engagement as a form of soft power. These regimes are not merely repressing religion at home; they are mobilizing religion abroad to advance foreign policy objectives and challenge the liberal international order. Understanding this phenomenon is critical to any serious reassessment of U.S. religious freedom diplomacy.

## Russia: Orthodoxy and the Projection of “Traditional Values”

Over the past two decades, the Russian state has cultivated a close alliance with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), positioning it as a key vehicle of cultural diplomacy. Under President Vladimir Putin, this partnership has facilitated the export of a civilizational narrative rooted in Orthodoxy and “traditional values,” explicitly positioned against what Moscow characterizes as the moral decadence of Western liberalism.<sup>1</sup> The ROC has expanded its presence in countries where Orthodoxy has historical roots, including the Balkans, Greece, and Cyprus, but also in Africa, where the Moscow Patriarchate has sought to supplant the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople following the 2019 schism over Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> These ecclesiastical maneuvers have geopolitical implications: ROC parishes abroad often become nodes of pro-Russian messaging and platforms for fostering relationships with political and civil society actors sympathetic to Moscow’s worldview.

At the multilateral level, Russia has used religious discourse to promote its conservative agenda. For example, Moscow has lobbied the United Nations to emphasize the defense of “traditional values” as a human rights concern, effectively reframing international religious freedom norms.<sup>3</sup> This approach enables Russia to pose as a defender of persecuted Christians globally, even as it restricts religious freedom domestically.

Additionally, the Kremlin’s religious outreach aligns with broader strategies of disinformation and hybrid warfare. ROC-affiliated non-governmental organizations and media outlets often promote anti-Western narratives couched in moral and spiritual terms, appealing to audiences disillusioned with liberalism. The ROC thus functions not merely as a religious institution but also as a key actor in a state-directed ecosystem of ideological influence. The ROC’s growing footprint in Africa is particularly notable. Following the decision by the Alexandria Patriarchate to recognize the independence (autocephaly) of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2019, Moscow responded by establishing its own exarchate on the continent—an unprecedented move that introduced parallel ecclesiastical jurisdictions and heightened intra-Orthodox tensions. This development is more than theological posturing; it reflects Russia’s broader ambitions to assert influence in regions where the West has a declining presence. Policy implications for the United States include the need to recognize religious institutions abroad may be co-opted into geopolitical contests. Efforts to promote religious freedom must be sensitive to the ways in which adversarial powers embed themselves in transnational religious networks under the guise of spiritual or cultural solidarity.

## China: Repression at Home, Export of Religious Governance Abroad

China’s domestic religious policy is defined by tight control and coercion. From the mass internment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang to crackdowns on house churches and restrictions on Tibetan Buddhist practices, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to subordinate all religious life to party authority.<sup>4</sup> But Beijing’s ambitions do not end at the country’s borders.

Through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is increasingly exporting its model of religious governance. In countries across Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa, Chinese officials promote “Sinicized” religion as a framework that integrates religious expression into national development agendas.<sup>5</sup> Chinese surveillance technologies developed for Xinjiang are now being marketed abroad as tools for monitoring religious extremism, often finding receptive audiences among governments wary of religious dissent.

Moreover, China is positioning itself as a spiritual leader in the Buddhist world. It has funded transnational Buddhist conferences and monasteries while promoting a version of Buddhism aligned with socialist values.<sup>6</sup> This strategy serves to counterbalance Indian influence in the region and expand Beijing's moral authority in Asia. The growing tensions between China and India over the Dalai Lama's successor represents an additional layer of religious geopolitics in the region. China has also partnered with multilateral organizations and regional fora to promote its religious governance model as a counterweight to liberal rights-based frameworks. At venues such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Chinese officials have framed religious extremism as a security threat best addressed through state-centered regulation and surveillance—a framing that resonates with authoritarian regimes wary of faith-based dissent.

In some cases, China's religious engagement abroad takes on an explicitly diplomatic dimension. For instance, Chinese embassies and Confucius Institutes have hosted interfaith dialogues where Buddhism is highlighted as a vehicle of peace and harmony in line with Chinese civilization. These efforts often downplay domestic religious repression of Tibetan Buddhism and instead showcase a carefully curated image of state-sanctioned spirituality. The challenge for the United States is to contest China's normative influence not only by highlighting abuses but also by offering alternative models of religious freedom that resonate with local concerns. This includes supporting civil society efforts in BRI-partner countries and building partnerships with religious communities that resist authoritarian co-optation.

## Iran: Revolutionary Theology and Transnational Shi'a Networks

Iran has long leveraged religious networks as instruments of state power. The Islamic Republic's clerical establishment sponsors seminaries in Qom that attract students from across the Muslim world, creating ideological linkages that extend Tehran's influence.<sup>7</sup> Iran also mobilizes pilgrimage networks, particularly to sites in Iraq and Syria, to cultivate loyalty and disseminate revolutionary narratives.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) plays a key role in this effort, often operating through affiliated clerics and institutions to channel support to aligned groups in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Iraq (Popular Mobilization Forces), Yemen (Houthis), and beyond. These connections fuse religious identity with geopolitical allegiance. Iran also positions itself as a defender of global Islam, particularly on issues such as Palestine and Kashmir, enabling it to appeal to Sunni audiences despite sectarian divides. By invoking the language of religious justice and anti-imperialism, Tehran crafts a soft power narrative that resonates across the Global South.<sup>8</sup>

Qom's seminaries remain central to Iran's influence strategy, producing generations of clerics who return to their home countries imbued with Tehran-aligned theology. In countries such as Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia, these clerics serve both religious and political functions, advocating for positions consistent with Iranian foreign policy while embedding themselves in local Shi'a communities. This long-term investment in ideological infrastructure gives Iran a durable base of influence that extends well beyond episodic geopolitical events. Iran's use of media to amplify its religious messaging is also significant. Outlets like Al-Alam, Press TV, and a host of Arabic-language satellite channels broadcast content designed to frame Iran's religious ideology as a just and anti-imperial alternative to Western-backed models of governance. This narrative is reinforced by cultural centers and clerical exchanges across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.

Iran's use of religion gives it soft-power influence with Muslim communities in many strategic contexts. For U.S. policymakers, engaging Muslim-majority societies should involve more than countering extremism or promoting religious freedom in isolation. It requires recognizing and supporting forms of religious leadership and theological education that foster pluralism and resist state instrumentalization by outside actors like Iran.

## Strategic Contestation in the Arena of Religion

What unites the religious strategies of Russia, China, and Iran is their shared effort to redefine the global discourse on religion in ways that challenge the liberal international order. They are not simply violating religious freedom; they are reimagining religion's role in global politics to advance illiberal visions of governance, identity, and sovereignty. This dynamic requires a shift in how the United States approaches religious freedom. Too often, U.S. efforts have focused narrowly on violations, without grappling with the broader geopolitical uses of religion by authoritarian states, or shied away out of an excessive concern of the First Amendment.<sup>9</sup> U.S. policy must evolve to incorporate a greater capacity for strategic religious engagement alongside its human rights advocacy, including new approaches to faith partnership that lean into the religious sector while still respecting necessary legal guardrails. This means equipping diplomats with religious literacy skills and fostering partnerships with independent religious actors abroad.<sup>10</sup> It also involves investing in civil society initiatives promoting inclusive religious narratives and resisting authoritarian religious models. The United States should support pluralistic religious education, fund research on transnational religious networks, and create platforms for interreligious dialogue which advance democratic values.

Finally, the United States should invest in building coalitions with like-minded partners who share concerns about the weaponization of religion by authoritarian states. Through forums such as the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) and the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion & Diplomacy (TPNRD), Washington can help shape a normative counterweight to illiberal religious influence—one centered on human dignity, interfaith cooperation, and the political autonomy of religious communities. This recognition should drive a rethinking of the institutional architecture for U.S. religious diplomacy. Agencies like the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom must coordinate more closely with strategic planners and regional bureaus to integrate religious dynamics into broader geopolitical assessments. Similarly, other avenues of U.S. support for democracy and governance should consider how support for pluralistic religious initiatives intersects with counter-authoritarian efforts.

Ultimately, the contest over religious freedom is not just about who can pray or what one can believe. It is about which visions of society and statehood will shape the 21st-century world. If the United States fails to engage religion as a site of geopolitical competition, it risks ceding a critical domain of influence to its strategic rivals.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Prodromou, “Diplomacy, Geopolitics, and Global Orthodox Christianity in the Twenty-First Century.” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University, 2023. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/diplomacy-geopolitics-and-global-orthodox-christianity-in-the-twenty-first-century>.

<sup>3</sup> Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Roche and James Leibold, “State Racism and Surveillance in Xinjiang (People’s Republic of China).” *Political Quarterly* 93, no. 3 (2022): 442–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13149>.

<sup>5</sup> Juyan Zhang, “China’s Religious Diplomacy for Its Belt and Road Initiative.” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University. 2023. <https://religionanddiplomacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/230203ZhangChinasReligiousDiplomacyItsBeltRoadInitiativePolicyBrief.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, “Chinese Buddhism and Soft Power and Sharp Power: Geopolitical Strategy and Modality of Religion,” in *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy*, ed. Peter Mandaville (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 2006. <https://washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/last-marja-sistani-and-end-traditional-religious-authority-shiism>.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Wastnidge, “The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War.” *Politics* 35, no. 3-4, (2015): 364-77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12084>.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, “Islam as Statecraft: How Governments Use Religion in Foreign Policy.” Brookings Institution, 2018. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP\\_20181116\\_islam\\_as\\_statecraft.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/FP_20181116_islam_as_statecraft.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Peter Mandaville, “Where Do We Go From Here? On the Future of SRE.” *Berkley Forum*, Georgetown University. April 15, 2025. <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/where-do-we-go-from-here-on-the-future-of-sre>.

## Chapter 2: The Chinese Communist Party’s Control, Coercion, and Co-optation of Religions in China

Benedict Rogers

China, under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is one of the most egregious violators of religious freedom in the world. The regime seeks to control, coerce, and co-opt religions throughout China. In the face of this persecution, the United States must not ignore China’s most egregious violators of religious freedom today, and respond with action.

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in 2025, “religious freedom conditions in China remained among the worst in the world.”<sup>1</sup> The U.S. State Department reported in 2023, “authorities continued to arrest...leaders and members of religious groups.”<sup>2</sup> It notes as of 2023, “estimates of those imprisoned...for their religious beliefs ranged from the low thousands to more than 10,000.”<sup>3</sup> As the Council on Foreign Relations put it in 2024, “China is home to one of the largest populations of religious prisoners.”<sup>4</sup>

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the CCP has been hostile toward religion. During Mao Zedong’s rule, the CCP attempted to eliminate religion altogether, but only succeeded in driving it underground. Over the past fifty years, as China has opened up, the CCP has recognized it cannot eradicate religion, has instead adopted a policy of control—applied with varying levels of severity.

Officially, China’s constitution states its citizens, “enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion, or discriminate against citizens for their beliefs.”<sup>5</sup> However, under CCP rule, the Chinese government severely restricts religious practice. It justifies this repression by invoking the constitutional provision, the state protects “normal religious activities,” while offering little definition of what constitutes “normal.” It further declares religious groups must not be “subject to any foreign domination.”

China officially only recognizes five religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism—and it controls them through state-approved “patriotic” associations. These bodies are under the control of the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), giving the Party direct oversight of religious affairs. At the same time, CCP members are prohibited from adopting a religion, and the government has banned citizens under 18 from participating in religious activities.<sup>6</sup> Any religious activity outside state-controlled groups is illegal and can result in severe punishment. Unregistered churches, for example, are often raided by the police, closed down, and their pastors and priests arrested and jailed.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, religious freedom across China varied widely, with decisions largely dependent on local municipal or provincial authorities. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the situation has deteriorated considerably. Control over religious affairs policy has been centralized and enforced more strictly. In April 2016, Chairman Xi stated “religious groups...must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party.”<sup>7</sup>

A series of draconian new laws has since been introduced, resulting in increased repression of religion. These include the revised *Regulations on Religious Affairs* implemented in 2018, which were the most restrictive new laws on religion in 13 years. They stipulate “religious groups, religious schools, and religious activity sites and religious affairs are not to be controlled by foreign forces” and impose additional restrictions on the communication of religious content, religious education, and charitable work.<sup>8</sup> Later that same year, a White Paper issued by the State Council declared religion must serve the Communist Party.<sup>9</sup>

Over the past four years, a range of additional repressive laws have been issued which have further curtailed religious freedom. These include new rules controlling the financing of religious groups and restricting the activities of clergy, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the dissemination of religious material on the internet. This crackdown is largely driven by Chairman Xi’s campaign of “sinicization” of religion, which, according to USCIRF, has “fundamentally transformed China’s religious environment.”<sup>10</sup> Aimed at “the complete subordination of religious groups to the CCP’s political agenda and Marxist vision,”<sup>11</sup> the campaign requires places of worship to display portraits of Xi and CCP propaganda, integrate CCP messaging into religious teachings, and accept CCP loyalists as religious leaders.

## Violations of Religious Freedom in Practice

Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Taoists all face increasing restrictions, repression, and persecution in China. Those who worship within the state-approved “patriotic” organizations may be able to go to places of worship, but they face surveillance, with cameras placed on the altar to record worshipers. Those who worship outside state-approved bodies or follow beliefs not among the five recognized religions face even more severe penalties. Practitioners of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, and followers of groups like the Church of Almighty God, categorized as “illegal cults” by the CCP, face intense persecution. In recent years, evidence has emerged documenting the practice of forced organ harvesting, in which prisoners of conscience—particularly Falun Gong practitioners—have been targeted. An independent tribunal chaired by British lawyer Sir Geoffrey Nice KC, a distinguished barrister who previously led the prosecution of Serbia’s dictator Slobodan Milosevic, concluded this practice continues on a widespread and systematic basis and constitutes a crime against humanity.<sup>12</sup>

The Uyghurs and other Muslims in Xinjiang face egregious mass atrocity crimes recognized as a genocide by the U.S. Department of State, an independent tribunal chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice KC,<sup>13</sup> and several parliaments around the world. Grave violations of religious freedom are a key part of this genocide. These include the destruction, closure or restriction of mosques, and the arrest and imprisonment of Uyghur Muslims engaged in normal religious activities such as praying, reading the Koran, wearing a hijab or a beard of a certain length, fasting during Ramadan, and abstaining from pork and alcohol. Testimonies documented by the Uyghur Tribunal in its 2021 inquiry, as well as reports by human rights organizations such as the Uyghur Human Rights Project, and multiple media investigations since 2018, record Uyghur prisoners being forced to eat pork or drink alcohol in a deliberate attempt to humiliate them and insult their religious beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

In Tibet, Buddhists face severe violations of religious freedom. In addition to the destruction or restriction of Buddhist temples and imprisonment of Buddhist monks, at least one million Tibetan children have been forced into boarding schools, where they are required to abandon their Buddhist religion, Tibetan language, and culture. Furthermore, these children are forced to become Han Chinese in language, culture, and identity.<sup>15</sup> Possession of the Dalai Lama’s picture, teachings, or materials results in arrest and imprisonment, and Chinese authorities indicate, rather than recognizing the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama according to traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice, they intend to direct the process of the Dalai Lama’s succession when the current Dalai Lama dies.

Throughout China, many Christians have been arrested and jailed, particularly Protestant pastors and Catholic bishops and priests from the unregistered churches. According to USCIRF, Protestant house church Christians faced “intensified” persecution as “the government continued its nationwide crackdown on house churches.”<sup>16</sup> Major cases include Pastor Wang Yi, founder and pastor of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, who was sentenced in 2019 to nine years in prison;<sup>17</sup> Protestant pastor Kan Xiaoyang, who was sentenced to fourteen years in jail in 2024;<sup>18</sup> and the underground Bishop of Wenzhou, Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin, who was arrested in January 2024 and had previously been arrested multiple times.<sup>19</sup>

According to the Hudson Institute, at least ten Catholic bishops in China have faced continued or increased persecution since the Sino-Vatican agreement was first signed in September 2018.<sup>20</sup> Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic agency focused on religious freedom, reports at least twenty members of the Catholic clergy were arrested in China in 2023.<sup>21</sup> As USCIRF noted in 2024, underground Catholic bishops, including Bishop Augustine Cui Tai and Bishop Joseph Yang Xiaoming, continue to be regularly arrested, convicted and forcibly disappeared for refusing to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.<sup>22</sup>

China Aid, an organization specializing in reporting on religious freedom in China, has documented the arrests of many Protestant pastors and church members in recent years. Such cases include the arrest and torture of pastors Lian Changnian and Lian Xiliang, as well as preacher Fu Juan and the staff of the Church of Abundance in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, in March 2023;<sup>23</sup> the arrest, torture and prosecution of the leaders of the Linfen Covenant House Church in the same province in July 2023;<sup>24</sup> and the arrest of 31 individuals following a police raid on Beijing Zion Church, the largest unregistered church in Beijing, in September 2023.<sup>25</sup> In October 2025, the CCP initiated its “largest coordinated, nationwide crackdown against an urban house church in 40 years” by detaining Ezra Jin Mingri, the lead pastor of Zion Church, and approximately 30 other Zion pastors and associates.<sup>26</sup>

In Hong Kong, where religious freedom was respected until recently, the crackdown on civil and political rights resulting from the draconian National Security Law enacted in 2020 and additional local security laws in 2024 has led to increasing threats to religious freedom. According to Hong Kong Watch’s report, “Sell Out My Soul: The Impending Threats to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Hong Kong,”<sup>27</sup> while freedom of worship still exists in Hong Kong, religious freedom there is being eroded through self-censorship by religious leaders in their sermons and surveillance of places of worship.<sup>28</sup>

High profile arrests further demonstrate the rapid erosion of religious freedoms. One of Hong Kong’s most prominent political prisoners, the pro-democracy media entrepreneur Jimmy Lai, is a devout Catholic and he has reportedly been denied the right to receive Holy Communion since the end of 2023.<sup>29</sup> Hong Kong’s bishop emeritus, 93-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen, was arrested and put on trial in 2022. While he has not been imprisoned, he has since maintained a much lower profile and has been less vocal. He has reportedly been required to surrender his passport and was only permitted to travel overseas to Rome for five days to attend the funeral of Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

It is vital the United States, both President Trump’s Administration and Congress, continue to recognize China as one of the most egregious violators of religious freedom in the world today. The United States should seriously consider appropriate policy responses.

First and foremost, in any dialogue between President Trump and Chairman Xi—or in bilateral dialogue involving other government officials and members of Congress—the issue of religious freedom should be raised as a priority, including demands for the release of religious prisoners of conscience.

Second, but no less important, the U.S. Secretary of State should continue to designate China as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC). Furthermore, the U.S. Department of State, USCIRF, and Congress should continue to monitor and publicly report on religious freedom in China—particularly the deterioration of the situation in Hong Kong—and the Chinese government’s attitude toward the process of reincarnation and succession of the Dalai Lama upon the passing of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama.

Finally, targeted economic and financial sanctions should be imposed on entities and individuals in China responsible for violating religious freedom, committing genocide against the Uyghurs, perpetrating atrocities in Tibet, engaging in forced organ harvesting, and dismantling freedom and autonomy in Hong Kong. These actions should be taken either through targeted sanctions following the CPC designation, or as standalone measures.

The former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, warned in a 2019 speech at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Hong Kong, the CCP “is at war with faith.” He added, it is “a war they will not win.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, victory is far from certain. To help bring it about, the international community—including the United States—must act robustly and urgently to protect religious freedom in China.

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# Chapter 3: “Voice of a Uyghur”: The Deeply Intertwined Fight to End Uyghur Forced Labor and Religious Persecution

Jewher Illham

I was born and raised as a Uyghur Muslim in Beijing, China. Yet, ironically, my first time holding a copy of the Quran and my first time stepping foot in a mosque was in Bloomington, Indiana. That was a few months after my father and I were forcibly separated at the Beijing International Airport in 2013. Chinese authorities prevented my father Ilham Tohti, a renowned Uyghur economist, from boarding the plane. Soon after, he was sentenced to life imprisonment for advocating for Uyghurs to have the same rights as Han Chinese. At the age of 18, knowing no English and having no plans, I landed in the United States with a J-2 visa all by myself. That was the last time I saw my family.

Although China formally recognizes five religions, it is officially an atheist state,<sup>1</sup> and its government members, who are of course affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, are not permitted to join or practice any religion. The constitution of the People’s Republic of China states that ordinary Chinese citizens have “freedom of religious beliefs.” However, since Xi Jinping officially took office as China’s Chairman in 2013, he has followed a series of new policies and strategies towards cultural and religious practices.

In 2015, Chairman Xi called for the “Sinicization” of religion,<sup>2</sup> urging all religious groups in China to adapt to socialism by integrating their doctrines, customs, and morality with Han Chinese culture, while emphasizing only “normal” religious activities are allowed and banning religious education among minors.

While the definition of “normal” religious activities is not specified, in 2021 the Chinese government issued a new regulation on online religious content<sup>3</sup> which banned unauthorized religious activities and unregistered religious groups from sharing religious content online. Local authorities in the Uyghur Region (officially referred to by the Chinese Government as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, but known to local people as East Turkistan) patrol cities daily. Uyghur women who are dressed modestly have reported<sup>4</sup> being abruptly stopped on the streets by these authorities, to cut their skirts short right then. Religious signs and landmarks have been destroyed, and traditional Uyghur villages and street names have been renamed to reflect party ideology—for example, “Unity County” or “Bright Road.”

Soon after Chairman Xi's visit to the Uyghur Region in 2014, the Chinese government launched a major new policy targeting Muslims, beginning with the mass arbitrary detention of an estimated 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic ethnic groups in the Uyghur Region, as well as a crackdown on religious and cultural practices under the guise of "poverty alleviation" and "de-extremification" programs.<sup>5</sup>

In the years following, the government of China developed a state-sponsored political program consisting of re-education and forced labor as a form of widespread and systematic persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples on the basis of religion and ethnicity. While claiming to "cleanse" ethnic groups of their "extremist" thoughts, the program actually sought to dilute and erase Uyghur culture and undermine Muslim religious practices. This involves multiple forms of involuntary labor at workplaces across the Uyghur Region and other parts of China interwoven increasingly with global supply chains.

The state-imposed forced labor programs have been implemented through three primary mechanisms:<sup>6</sup> forced labor of internment camp detainees, forced labor transfers in and outside of the region, and forced prison labor.

The government's persecution of the Uyghur population has been documented through a substantial body of credible evidence,<sup>7</sup> including witness testimony, Chinese state media and government records, satellite imagery, and reports from United Nations bodies, academic experts, non-governmental organizations, and survivors themselves. Investigations<sup>8</sup> have shown the breadth of the government's policies create a significant risk of forced labor at virtually any workplace—industrial or agricultural—in the Uyghur Region.

This system of forced labor has been enabled by other egregious human rights violations, such as mass surveillance, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence and harassment, rape, torture, political "re-education," and forced sterilization. The abuses are bolstered by a pervasive, technology-enabled system<sup>9</sup> of surveillance.<sup>10</sup>

In situations of state-imposed forced labor, where widespread, systemic, and egregious human rights violations are committed by state actors, and while the entire region is under a vice-grip of repression, surveillance, and terror, it is virtually impossible for a business to conduct credible, on-the-ground due diligence. Workers cannot speak candidly to independent investigators without fear of retaliation or reprisal. By continuing to source from the Uyghur Region, international brands and retailers are complicit in these abuses. Conversely, withdrawing their business cuts off export earnings the state relies on.

Many auditors have refused to conduct audits in the Uyghur Region,<sup>11</sup> pointing to the extreme surveillance, including facial recognition and the tracking of physical and digital movements of the auditors. Multiple reports show employees of auditing firms have been detained by local officials<sup>12</sup> upon arrival in the region, before even setting foot in a factory. Under such circumstances, certificates issued by any firm still auditing in the region cannot be trusted and must be considered invalid.

The Chinese government has also transported Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples to other parts of China—including Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, and Shandong—where they are assigned to work in export-oriented factories under conditions strongly indicative of forced labor. Recent research indicates<sup>13</sup> at least 3.17 million people have been transferred from their homes in the Uyghur Region through state-run labor transfer programs. This constitutes the largest mass detention of an ethno-religious community since World War II.

I have dedicated the last five years of my life to uncovering the use of Uyghur forced labor in global supply chains and advocating for international corporations to fully exit the Uyghur Region at every tier of their supply chains. This is the only way to ensure the products on our shelves—and in our closets and pantries—are free of forced labor.

Globally, one in five cotton garments,<sup>14</sup> 10 percent of PVC plastics building materials,<sup>15</sup> 10 percent of aluminum,<sup>16</sup> and 35 percent of the polysilicon used in solar panels<sup>17</sup> are sourced from the Uyghur Region.

Considering how Uyghur forced labor is woven into the fabric of at least 17 industries in global supply chains,<sup>18</sup> and the utter lack of credibility for supply chain due diligence tools in this context, companies must immediately exit the region. The United States has adopted a law (the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act) banning imports from the region, barring proof of the absence of forced labor. It is high time for more governments to follow suit with comparable policies.

Reforming global supply chains is a monumental task. As additional governments adopt import bans on forced-labor tainted goods and as consumers scrutinize their purchases and raise concerns, brands will increasingly shift their business model, and we will become closer to creating a global economy that does not exploit human lives. We will also be closer to Uyghur people being able to freely and openly practice our religion, and certainly, reuniting all the separated Uyghur families, including my own.

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## Chapter 4: Religious Freedom Continues to Shrink in the Russian Federation

Alexis Mrachek

The Russian government, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, aggressively persecutes religious groups and oppresses religions that threaten its imperial ambitions and authoritarian control. At first glance, the Russian government appears to value traditional conservatism and Christian values—and the Russian constitution technically guarantees freedom of religion—yet religious persecution remains widespread. In this context of eroding religious freedoms, the United States government has an important role to play in pressing for an end to these abuses.

Despite the past repression of the Soviet Union, and the erosion of religious freedom under Putin, the Russian people are religious. According to a 2023 poll conducted by the independent Levada Center, approximately 72 percent of Russia's 141 million citizens consider themselves to be Orthodox, seven percent Muslim, one percent Protestant, one percent Buddhist, and 18 percent of the population do not consider themselves to associate with any religion or are atheist.<sup>1</sup> In the same poll, 40 percent revealed religion plays an important role in their lives and 45 percent considered themselves to be “religious people.” However, only 10 percent of the respondents reported attending religious services at least once a month.<sup>2</sup>

Russian Orthodoxy is the historical and predominant religion in the Russian Federation. The 1997 Russian Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations describes Russian Orthodoxy as possessing a “special role,” even though Article 14 of the Russian Constitution states the Russian Federation is officially secular.<sup>3</sup> Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, is considered a Putin crony. Putin often cites the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in his speeches. However, these references to the church are hardly religious. Putin instead utilizes and manipulates the church to justify his imperialistic ambitions and Russian expansionism,<sup>4</sup> associated with the *Russkiy Mir*, or “Russian World.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Patriarch Kirill directly feeds into Putin’s propaganda machine. In February 2012, Kirill described the 12 years of Putin’s rule at that point, a “miracle of God.”<sup>6</sup> Kirill has also proven to be one of the key advocates for Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine since it began in February 2022, positively affirming what the Russian authorities deem their “special military operation.”<sup>7</sup> He has described the invasion as a “holy war” and declared that any Russian young man who lost his life in the war would be absolved of his sins.<sup>8</sup>

While the majority of the citizens of the Russian Federation are Orthodox, other expressions of Christianity are present across the massive country. Several Protestantism denominations are active—Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Adventist, and Pentecostal, among others—but the predominant Protestant denomination in Russia is the Baptist faith.<sup>9</sup> Although Russian officials declared Protestant Christians are part of Russia’s traditional religious communities and lauded the “important role” they have played in Russian society,<sup>10</sup> evangelical groups are inhibited by laws that ban any missionary activity and label some groups as “undesirable organizations.”<sup>11</sup>

Protestants experience a wide variety of persecution. In March 2019, Russian officials declared a Pentecostal meeting house in Novorossiysk an unauthorized construction and ordered it dismantled.<sup>12</sup> Seventh-Day Adventists were also barred from gathering for worship in Novorossiysk around the same time.<sup>13</sup> In 2023, Yuri Sipko, former president of the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, publicly denounced Russia’s war in Ukraine and suffered as a result. Russian authorities filed charges against him for disseminating “knowingly false information” against the military, raided his home, detained his son, and placed him on the wanted list.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to Protestants, Catholics also face challenges. Catholicism in Russia dates back to the 19th century, when the Russian Empire expanded westward into traditionally Catholic lands such as Poland and Lithuania.<sup>15</sup> Because Russia views the West as a threat, Putin resultingly views Catholics as a threat to his “empire” and his government persecutes them.

For instance, in July 2025, a Saint Petersburg court declared Aleksandr Khmelyov, a Catholic priest, guilty of “discrediting” the Russian Armed Forces in a sermon he gave more than three years prior and posted on his church’s YouTube channel.<sup>16</sup> A month prior, a Catholic woman from the Zabaykalsk region was prosecuted for posting in the “Sisters Servants of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception” group on VKontakte (one of the most popular social media websites in Russia), which Russian authorities defined as “unlawful missionary activity.”<sup>17</sup> In September 2024, a court in Sochi fined an 85-year-old Roman Catholic priest, Władysław Kloc, 30,000 rubles (approximately \$365 USD as of October 2025), and ordered him to be expelled from Russia. He had been charged with carrying out “unspecified missionary activity” (i.e., leading worship) on his parish’s own premises, allegedly because he did not hold a necessary permit document.<sup>18</sup>

Jews face persecution in Russia as well, just as they do worldwide. Today, the Putin regime can be described as antisemitic, as his critics claim.<sup>19</sup> In December 2024 at his annual end-of-year press conference, Putin accused ethnic Jews of “tearing apart” the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin has made similar statements since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine that have directly or indirectly targeted Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish.<sup>20</sup> In October 2023, an attempted pogrom occurred in Dagestan, a predominantly Muslim region of Russia, in which a mob stormed an airport trying to attack Jewish passengers. More than 20 people were injured—two critically—in the incident.<sup>21</sup>

In this climate, Jews are leaving. The Jewish Agency for Israel, which promotes Jewish cultural identity and aids Jews seeking to move to Israel, reported in August 2022, 20,500 of Russia’s estimated 165,000 Jews had moved to Israel since March 2022. Thousands more have moved to other countries as well.<sup>22</sup>

Islam is considered a traditional faith and is the second largest religion in the Russian Federation.<sup>23</sup> The majority of Muslims in Russia reside in the North Caucasus region, including in Chechnya and Dagestan; the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan; and in Moscow.<sup>24</sup> While Muslims have some freedom to practice their religion, over the past two decades, tens of thousands have been convicted of “terrorism,” or “extremism.”<sup>25</sup>

Tatars are one targeted Muslim group, particularly in occupied Crimea. In November 2023, Nariman Dzhelyal, a Crimean Tatar community leader, was placed in a Siberian prison after being sentenced to 17 years in jail for allegedly “blowing up a natural gas pipeline” and “smuggling explosives.” One of Ukraine’s oldest human rights organizations, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, reported that absolutely no proof existed to support the charges against him,<sup>26</sup> and Ukraine called the trial Kremlin-orchestrated.<sup>27</sup> Most of the meals served to Dzhelyal in prison contained pork, which is strictly forbidden in Islam, so he instead only took low-quality bread with tea.<sup>28</sup> Dzhelyal was released from captivity in June 2024 through a prisoner swap with Russia.<sup>29</sup>

Russian authorities have also targeted Muslims for their involvement in Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), a pan-Islamic Salafi movement. In 2003, the Russian Supreme Court declared the group a terrorist organization.<sup>30</sup> According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, members of HT can “face terrorism charges—despite no evidence or even allegations that defendants called for or committed violence—for possessing religious literature, discussing religion and politics, and recruiting members to the group.”<sup>31</sup> In September 2024, Russian human rights organization Memorial reported Russia had prosecuted at least 352 people, including Crimean Tatar Muslims, for their affiliation with HT.<sup>32</sup>

Over the past decade, the Russian government has cracked down on foreign-based religious groups, including members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as Mormons) and Jehovah’s Witnesses included. In July 2016, allegedly “as an effort to combat homegrown terrorism,” the Russian government passed the “Yarovaya Law,” which “confined missionary work to places of worship, clearing Russia’s streets and homes of proselytizing Mormons.”<sup>33</sup> Then in April 2017, the Russian Supreme Court declared Jehovah’s Witnesses an “extremist group,” banned all of its activity, and thus ordered all 395 local chapters and its Russian headquarters to shutter and authorized the Russian government to seize all of its property.<sup>34</sup>

Specific instances of persecution against Latter-day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses have occurred within the past few years. In March 2019, Russian officials detained two Latter-day Saint American volunteers in Novorossiisk on unspecified charges.<sup>35</sup> A district court declared them guilty of violating Russian immigration laws and later deported them.<sup>36</sup> In May 2021, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* reported that Russian intelligence services spied on and filmed Jehovah’s Witnesses in a bathhouse—27 members had met there to baptize new members. The government gave five of these Jehovah’s Witnesses suspended sentences for carrying out “illegal” religious activities.<sup>37</sup>

To hold Russia accountable for these violations of religious freedom, the United States must lead. U.S. policymakers should not turn a blind eye to Russia’s violations of religious freedom, nor should they give in to the propaganda portraying the Russian Federation as a “Christian nation” or defender of Christianity. The U.S. Secretary of State should redesignate Russia as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Although Russia has been designated as a CPC since 2021, no specific presidential actions under the Act<sup>38</sup> have been taken to address its religious freedom violations. To send a clear message of concern, the Trump administration should impose a targeted sanction for Russia’s persecution of religious groups. In addition, Congress should hold regular hearings to highlight personal testimonies of ongoing religious persecution in Russia. This will ensure policymakers remain informed and gain a renewed insider perspective of what is occurring within the country.

For the foreseeable future, Russia will continue to devalue and violate freedom of religion, especially as long as Vladimir Putin remains in power. But hopefully over time, with the United States and its allies prioritizing religious freedom and holding Russia accountable for its religious persecution, Russian citizens will be able to experience true religious freedom. But first, religious freedom must be a priority in U.S. government relations with Russia.

## Notes

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# Chapter 5: Russian Repression of Religious Freedom in Ukraine

Elizabeth A. Clark

Amidst Russia's ongoing assault of Ukraine, with the bombing of cities and occupying territory, Russia's repression of religion is also widespread. In the Russian-occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine, religious pluralism has been all but eliminated with believers either forced to leave the territories, or face disappearances, imprisonment, and torture. Ukrainians in Crimea face increased restrictions on religion under Russian law, such as limitations on proselytizing and more stringent requirements for registration. Even in unoccupied Ukraine, Russia propagates the nationalist "Russian World" doctrine and destroys religious buildings. The United States should lead efforts to sanction and hold responsible anyone criminally involved in these violations.

## Occupied Territories in Eastern Ukraine

Since Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Russians and the "separatist" forces they support in Eastern Ukraine have been brutal. Human rights abuses and war crimes in the occupied territories, such as the Luhansk and Donetsk regions, occurring since the 2014 invasion have been well documented. From the beginning, disfavored religious leaders and believers in these territories have faced imprisonment, kidnapping, emotional abuse, torture, and murder.<sup>1</sup>

In the occupied areas of Ukraine, Russian or Russian-backed "separatists" also have engaged in intimidation of all non-Russian-affiliated denominations and have destroyed religious literature, seized property, and banished, disappeared, or killed religious leaders.<sup>2</sup> Since 2022, these separatists have damaged or destroyed more than 640 houses of worship and other religious sites in the occupied areas. Religious leaders have disappeared<sup>3</sup> and at least 74 religious leaders have been confirmed killed since 2014.<sup>4</sup> To the extent individuals can be identified who ordered or led these serious human rights abuses, they should face targeted sanctions and, as appropriate, war crimes tribunals.

Until 2014 Ukraine enjoyed one of the highest levels of religious freedom and pluralism in post-Soviet Europe.<sup>5</sup> This freedom led to a robust pluralism—in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, for example, before the invasion, one-third of all denominations were Evangelical Christian.<sup>6</sup> Now in the Donetsk region and other occupied territories, this pluralism has been eliminated.

All religious groups in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine have been required to re-register under Russian law. However, across these territories, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and various Protestant and Christian groups have been banned.<sup>7</sup> Minority groups are illegal and virtually invisible, with no places to meet and few leaders. Throughout the occupation, Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, have been prosecuted and jailed for practicing their religion.<sup>8</sup> Local authorities have regularly backed or even orchestrated social protests and rallies against “cults,” which target the most vulnerable minority groups.<sup>9</sup>

Russian pressure in occupied Ukraine against all minority and non-subordinate religious groups has decimated Ukrainian religious life. Between Russian-enforced bans, forced migration, and persecution, the number of Ukraine’s religious congregations in the occupied territories has fallen by over half between 2022 and 2025, dropping from 1,967 to 902.<sup>10</sup> The full-scale invasion has made this even worse.

While some leaders fled after the invasion, those who remained have been subject to arbitrary arrest, confinement, torture, and starvation.<sup>11</sup> Russian and Russian-supported forces have coerced religious leaders in majority religions in the occupied territories to cooperate with the regime and submit themselves to their Russian counterpart organizations.<sup>12</sup> Even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC), which has had ecclesiastical ties with Moscow, has been forced to close and completely reorganize its parishes under the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Priests are required to renounce Ukrainian identity and demonstrate loyalty to Russia.<sup>13</sup> They, along with Muslim leaders, have been tortured, detained, or deported if they refuse to bring their religious communities under the control of Russia.<sup>14</sup>

The Russian forces and leaders responsible for these severe violations of international commitments to freedom of religion or belief need to be targeted with global Magnitsky sanctions and held responsible in any post-war war crimes tribunals.

## Crimea

Russian repression in Crimea, while not as drastic and violent as in occupied Eastern Ukraine, still significantly limits freedom of religion or belief. Since Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, existing Russian laws on registration<sup>15</sup> that ban Jehovah’s Witnesses and prevent proselytizing have been enforced in Crimea,<sup>16</sup> significantly limiting religious freedom. These laws also violate international law, requiring the Russian occupiers to ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, “*while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country*,” as outlined in Article 43 of the 1907 Hague Convention IV.<sup>17</sup>

These new Russian laws have had significant impact in Crimea. Individual Jehovah’s Witnesses there, for example, have been indicted on criminal charges for practicing their religion or studying the Bible together as early as 2020.<sup>18</sup> Russia also engages in significant persecution of Muslim Crimean Tatars, who were deported under Joseph Stalin and returned to Crimea after the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup> Since Russia’s 2014 annexation, Russian authorities have prosecuted 256 Crimean Tatars, killed 29, and abducted 18.<sup>20</sup>

In a series of cases,<sup>21</sup> the European Court of Human Rights found “attempts by the Russian authorities to establish control over Ukrainian religious communities in Crimea.”<sup>22</sup> Using arson, harassment, unlawful searches, vandalism, and other tactics, Russia forced the UOC to disband by the end of 2023 and seized their property.<sup>23</sup> Russian officials forced parishes to join the Russian Orthodox Church and the local Muslim organization to switch subordination from Ukrainian to Russian entities.<sup>24</sup>

The U.S. government should sanction violators of freedom of religion or belief as well as the international law of war in Crimea.<sup>25</sup>

## Unoccupied Ukraine

Russia’s repressive influence on religion in the Ukrainian heartland has involved both attempts to spread propaganda and damaging or destroying religious buildings.

According to an August 2025 report by UNESCO, there have been 151 verified damaged religious sites in Ukraine. Other estimates put the number higher, such as a 2024 Institute for Religious Freedom report stating at least 630 Ukrainian religious sites have been destroyed, damaged, looted, or converted to other uses by occupying forces.<sup>26</sup> Russian bombing, damage from fighting, and expropriation continue to damage Ukrainian religious life in ways that will have an impact well into the future. Local government and organizations in Ukraine should develop new and improved methods to document and seek compensation from Russia for these losses, as well as an exploration of how Russia’s frozen assets could be used for compensation.

Another aspect of Russian repression in Ukraine comes from Russia encouraging the spread of treasonous material and information. This is true across Ukrainian society, with broad Russian disinformation campaigns to discredit Ukrainian leadership and civil society, and encourage doubt and internal conflict in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> In the religious sphere, Russia manipulates the public narrative through the “Russian World” ideology.

The “Russian World” ideology, which claims Ukraine historically and culturally belongs to Russia, which Russia is obliged to unify, is espoused by the Russian Orthodox Church, headed by Patriarch Kirill.<sup>28</sup> In 2024, Kirill addressed the XXV World Russian Peoples’ Council, an international public forum established by Russia, describing the war against Ukraine as a “Holy War.”<sup>29</sup> Patriarch Kirill has also said death in the war is a sacrifice that washes away all sins.<sup>30</sup>

Historically and ecclesiastically, the Russian Orthodox Church has been connected with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). Some Ukrainians argue that the UOC serves as “one of the last instruments of Moscow’s colonial influence on Ukrainian society.”<sup>31</sup> Those opposing the UOC see it as a form of Russian repression through religion. They allege the UOC is disloyal to Ukraine, pointing to the church’s failure to discipline Ukrainian priests who have been convicted of national security offenses and denounce clerical statements or actions that fail to oppose Russia’s war effort against Ukraine, and its cooperation with Russia in protesting Ukrainian discrimination of the UOC at international fora.<sup>32</sup>

These allegations are complex, as the UOC has denounced the war and declared independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, but has not always spoken with one voice.<sup>33</sup> As of August 2025, the Ukrainian Security Service reported that approximately 100 of 10,000 UOC priests have been prosecuted or sentenced for national security crimes,<sup>34</sup> and a few others have fled to Russia<sup>35</sup> including two who were included in a prisoner swap with Russia.<sup>36</sup> To be fair, the term “national security crimes” not only includes privately or publicly justifying the Russian aggression, but also inciting religious hatred, which has been held to include criticism of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was created with the support of the Ukrainian government in 2018.<sup>37</sup>

For many, the mere fact that the UOC has any possible ecclesiastical ties with the Moscow Patriarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church is enough to consider it an arm of Russian oppression in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> Post-full-scale invasion, there have been calls from within and without the Church for a complete break with Moscow.<sup>39</sup> After the 2022 invasion, the UOC did declare “full self-sufficiency and independence” from the Russian Orthodox Church and condemned the war.<sup>40</sup> The word “independence,” however, is not a word with traditional or ecclesiastical meaning in Orthodoxy.<sup>41</sup> (In contrast, the word “autocephaly” usually is used for the creation of a new church, but includes conditions that would be difficult for the UOC to meet.)

The Ukrainian federal and local authorities have been trying to pressure the Ukrainian Orthodox Church to publicly break completely with Moscow. To this end, they have canceled leases of state- and municipally owned properties rented by the UOC, including the country's most sacred monastery complex, located in Kyiv.<sup>42</sup> The government has also adopted multiple laws discriminating against the UOC.<sup>43</sup> Most controversially, a law in 2024 permits the government to ban the UOC based on flimsy or religious grounds.<sup>44</sup>

Recognizing the harm caused by the Russian Orthodox Church's rhetoric should not mean penalizing religiously affiliated churches absent proof that the Russian Orthodox Church guides or uses them to commit crimes. The willingness to penalize a Church for its religious ties, for actions outside its control, and for the actions of individual members have been criticized<sup>45</sup> as significant violations of the rule of law and of international law protecting religious freedom, including by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>46</sup>

As a policy matter, U.S. diplomats should encourage Ukraine to not ban the UOC. The law is an unnecessary and illegitimate way to prevent any harm UOC clerics might do and might backfire. While banning the UOC would be an overbroad reaction, the harm done by "Russian World" propaganda is real. The U.S. government should support Ukrainian communications efforts to counter Russia.

The damage Russia has done in the occupied Eastern territories, Crimea, and in unoccupied Ukraine vary, but all represent significant repression. Russian occupation has led to harassment and restrictions on of minority religions, expropriation of property, restrictions on proselytizing, as well as arrests, murders, disappearances, and torture of prisoners of conscience. The U.S. government needs to use all tools available to sanction and hold responsible the Russian government. This includes adopting the Sanctioning Russia Act of 2025, implementing the Magnitsky Act against officials criminally involved in these actions, and supporting documentation of crimes committed and eventual prosecution of war crimes where appropriate.

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# Chapter 6: Religious Freedom in Iran: Systematic Repression and Rising Threats

Marjan Keypour Greenblatt

The 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed Iran's political and social order into an ideological one. The post-revolution Constitution designates Twelver Shi'a Islam as the official state religion. Citizens outside this framework include recognized and unrecognized minorities, some with limited rights and others with none.<sup>1</sup> This chapter provides a general overview of these communities in Iran, and how the regime's actions violate international standards guaranteeing freedom of religion or belief. The severe persecution by the Islamic Republic of Iran (IR) and its ongoing noncompliance with human rights standards makes clear the need for stronger U.S. policy action.

## Official Religious Minorities

Articles 12–14 of the new Constitution recognize Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as “People of the Book,” granting them restricted rights to practice their faith, provided these practices do not “violate Islamic principles.”<sup>2</sup> This vague clause leaves room for wide interpretation, exposing People of the Book to accusations of proselytizing and keeping them in constant state of legal and social uncertainty. In turn, People of the Book are granted token parliamentary representation—currently five seats—but the system arguably coerces their communities to political conformity.<sup>3</sup>

While technically allowed to worship, People of the Book encounter barriers which isolate them from the broader population and suppress evangelism—a critical component of Christianity. Iran's Christians, predominantly ethnic minority Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans, are permitted to worship only in their ancestral languages, not in Persian. Whether by design or default, this excludes outsiders and limits accessibility for young Christians who identify with the Persian-language environment.<sup>4</sup>

People of the Book face inequities in the court of law. Under Article 207 of the Penal Code, if a Muslim kills a non-Muslim, (retributive justice), *qiṣāṣ*, is not mandatory and the perpetrator may go unpunished.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, if a Person of the Book kills a Muslim individual, the punishment can be severe—an explicit legal inequality.<sup>6</sup> Until recently, *diyah* (blood money) laws valued People of the Book at half of the worth of Muslims, providing them with partial compensation. Incremental modifications to the laws rendered benefits to male members of People of the Book, and later to women of Muslim faith and People of the Book who had experienced decades of inequity.<sup>7</sup> The progress is notable, but falls short of equalities which preceded the revolution.

Religion also affects wealth. Article 881 of the Civil Code grants inheritance benefits to Muslims. Even if one member converts to Islam, that individual can inherit the entire estate, disregarding the will of the deceased. This law de-facto creates a financial incentive for conversions and alienation from their own faiths.<sup>8</sup>

Despite recognition, People of the Book remain constrained in accessing high profile positions. Although unwritten provisions precluding religious minorities from high positions in government and academia existed before 1979, the post-revolution systems officially limit their participation. Famously, in 2017 Sepanta Niknam, a Zoroastrian candidate for the city council of Yazd, was forced to relinquish his seat on the principle “non-Muslims cannot rule over Muslims,” a stance upheld by Iran’s Guardian Council.<sup>9</sup> This underscores the entrenched view that even constitutionally recognized minorities have limited representation rights.

Beyond laws and politics, religious minorities across the board experience cultural erasure. Cemeteries,<sup>10</sup> places of worship, and cultural landmarks are destroyed, neglected, or seized by the government under the pretext of developments,<sup>11</sup> erasing centuries of history.

Despite their long presence in Iran, predating Muslims, the People of the Book remain subject to overreaching Islamic laws that restrict their lives. Like other Iranians, many quietly emigrate, seeking freedom and opportunities abroad. As they migrate, they struggle to preserve their history and cultural legacies.<sup>12</sup>

## Muslim Minorities

Although the Islamic Republic defines itself as a Shi‘a Muslim state, it systematically discriminates against Muslims outside the dominant tradition, notably Sunni Muslims and the Gonabadi Dervishes, adherents of the Sufi path within Shi‘ism. The Sunni population is estimated at 4.4 to 8.8 million people, approximately five to 10 percent of the population. The Gonabadi population, concealed within the broader Shia demographic, is estimated to be at least two million people.<sup>13</sup> Despite their shared Islamic identity, these groups face repression and inequities.<sup>14</sup>

Systematic exclusions have led these groups to be relegated to their lower social and economic status. Since 1979, Sunnis have been absent from senior posts and marginal in the parliament.<sup>15</sup> Gonabadi Muslims have been excluded from all government positions and this has weakened the ability of community leaders to fulfill minorities’ needs.<sup>16</sup> President Masoud Pezeshkian acknowledged this problem and pledged reforms, but his efforts were blocked.<sup>17</sup>

Even routine religious practices are controlled. Sermons are monitored and deviation from the state-sanctioned narrative risks harassment, arrests, or worse.<sup>18</sup> For Sunnis from ethnic minority groups such as the Baluch, Kurds, and Arabs, marginalization is compounded by economic deprivation.<sup>19</sup> This persecution affects the economy, environmental conditions, and basic human needs.<sup>20</sup>

Gonabadi Dervishes face similarly harsh repression. Derided by Ayatollah Khomeini and branded by the government as a “deviant sect” and “security threats,” they have endured arbitrary arrests, the destruction of their religious centers, and violent raids on their gatherings. Their spiritual leader, Dr. Nourali Tabandeh, was put under house arrest in 2018 without trial.<sup>21</sup> When followers protested his detention, authorities responded violently with mass arrests. Months later, in 2019, Mohammad Salas, a Gonabadi Dervish present at the protests, was executed following a trial widely condemned for lacking due process.<sup>22</sup>

Sunni clerics also face repression. Kurdish leaders have been arrested and executed on national security charges, and influential Baluch leaders such as Imam Mowlavi Abdulhamid have faced threats to their lives and legitimacy, particularly after expressing solidarity with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement in 2022. A leaked conversation attributed to high-level government officials exposed the regime’s assessment of options to assassinate or delegitimize Abdulhamid in an effort to diminish his influence.<sup>23</sup> The Islamic Republic has a history of chain assassinations targeting Muslim clerics from minority communities, although they maintain plausible deniability through their opaque investigation processes.

The 2022 protests marked a watershed moment in rejecting the regime’s religious impositions, most visibly the compulsory hijab. The crackdown<sup>24</sup> of protesters was especially brutal in Zahedan, where security forces opened fire on Baluch Sunni worshippers.<sup>25</sup> The massacre, remembered as “Bloody Friday,” killed nearly one hundred, including nine children.<sup>26</sup>

Repression of Muslim minorities extends to places of worship. Sunni and Gonabadi Muslims are prohibited from constructing new mosques, while the government invests heavily in mosques and seminaries that promote the regime’s views of Islam.<sup>27</sup> Existing places of worship are often destroyed<sup>28</sup> or deteriorated due to lack of funds – a further erasure of their religious culture and influence.

Iran's judiciary enforces these policies against minorities using broad national security charges to criminalize religious identity and peaceful religious expressions. After thousands of documented cases of arbitrary arrest, torture, and executions in the last four decades, there is a new staggering spike in cases.<sup>29</sup> According to the United Nations, Iran executed 975 people in 2024—a 17 percent increase from the previous year—many of whom were ethnic and religious minorities. Executions have increased another 75 percent since January 2025, underscoring the regime's mounting assault on vulnerable communities.<sup>30</sup>

## Unrecognized Communities

While Iran's constitution recognizes some religious or belief minorities, millions—such as Bahá'ís, Yarsanis, Mandeans, converts from Islam, and atheists—lack legal rights or status. These underrepresented groups face systematic persecution in nearly every sphere. Many endure imprisonment under fabricated charges of “espionage” or “spreading corruption on earth.”<sup>31</sup>

Iran's largest indigenous religious minority, the Bahá'í community, lacks official recognition and endures what has been described as “cradle-to-grave” discrimination. Early in his ascent to power, in a series of fatwas, (religious orders), Ayatollah Khomeini shunned Bahá'ís as “impure” and ostracized them from society. Bahá'ís are denied access to universities and government employment regardless of qualifications. Their businesses are frequently shut down or boycotted. Rejected by universities, the community has innovated underground education programs. But these convenings are often raided, participants arrested, and their belongings confiscated.<sup>32</sup> Bahá'í families struggle to register their newborns,<sup>33</sup> fearing exposure of their religious identity. Even burials are challenging for this community as the authorities control burial permissions<sup>34</sup> and periodically destroy Bahá'í gravesites.<sup>35</sup>

Other unrecognized groups experience similar problems. Yarsanis, a mystical Kurdish religious group, face pressure to identify as Muslims, denying their own distinct identity. Mandaean, one of the world's oldest Gnostic sects, struggle to maintain their religious practices amid discrimination and neglect.<sup>36</sup> Converts from Islam and atheists live underground in constant fear, as apostasy and blasphemy laws are harshly enforced.

## The 12-Day War and Enhanced Pressures

Since the 12-Day War with Israel in 2025, the repression of minorities has escalated. To protect themselves, People of the Book leaders rushed to condemn the Israeli strikes, some organized visible protests demonstrating their loyalty to the regime. Nonetheless their communities experienced disproportionate rates of arbitrary arrests and detentions. The enhanced repression is justified by the regime's narrative against minorities, particularly Jews, Bahá'ís, Sunnis, and Christians, accusing them of being "Zionist agents" or "Western proxies." Officials have arrested dozens of Bahá'ís, Christians, and Jews; confiscated Bahá'í properties;<sup>37</sup> and even expedited Muslim executions, justifying on state media that judicial proceedings are not necessary during times of war.<sup>38</sup> In September 2025 alone, at least 171 individuals were executed on various charges, including espionage for Israel. Those executed include at least 18 Kurds, 14 Baluch, and four Arabs, all presumed Sunni Muslims.<sup>39</sup>

Since the war, reporting conditions have worsened in an environment where the government systematically controls the flow of information, censoring minority-run platforms and arresting journalists. Lack of transparency and communication obscure accurate data on the detainees. Over the years, minority communities have been warned to not communicate externally, or risk espionage charges. Scores of human rights and community news and networks have been dismantled, eroding transparency.<sup>40</sup>

## Rebellion Against Religion

Although the Iranian government identifies itself as a Shia majority country with over 90 percent of its population represented by this sect, there is a quiet movement to reject religion or the regime's enforcement of it. In a 2020 survey conducted by GAMAAN, an independent research institute based in the Netherlands at least half of respondents expressed they are "losing their faith." Only 35 percent of the population identified as Shia, a sharp contrast to the government's official statistics.<sup>41</sup>

Another Iranian government survey in 2023, though only partially released, confirms the unexpected backlash against religion. Over 80 percent of respondents from diverse backgrounds reported they feel less religious than they did five years earlier. A comparable share of the respondents anticipated an even greater decline in religious commitment in the future.<sup>42</sup>

Religious disaffiliation and silent conversions to minority faiths are on the rise, despite the risks. For some, rejecting Islamic law is a form of political defiance. Since the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, even devout Muslim women have protested the hijab mandate. Notably, Gohar Eshghi, mother of murdered blogger Sattar Beheshti, declared: “After 80 years I am removing my hijab because of this religion that kills people.”<sup>43</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

Despite these systematic religious freedom and human rights violations, Iran remains a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>44</sup> Iran’s continued noncompliance with human rights standards underscores the need for the new policy actions by the United States. The United States should maintain the designation of Iran as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the International Religious Freedom Act and continue to hold Iran accountable through an expansion of the U.S. Department of State’s Human Rights Reports and the Global Magnitsky sanctions targeting officials who are implicated in religious persecution. In parallel, Washington should support the minorities and civil society by facilitating internet access and civil society efforts to document abuses by reinstating the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor programs and leveraging Voice of America and other U.S.-backed platforms to promote religious tolerance and understanding. Finally, United States diplomacy should advance accountability at the UN Human Rights Council including through documentation of abuses and ultimately referrals to the International Criminal Court.

## Notes

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# Chapter 7: The Plight of Religious Believers in North Korea

Olivia Enos

Hyeona Ji attempted to escape North Korea four times. Ms. Ji was sent back to North Korea three times by Chinese authorities before finally reaching safety in South Korea. Each forced repatriation—a crime under international law<sup>1</sup>—brought immense hardship, including imprisonment in so-called “ordinary prison camps,” hard labor, torture, and worst of all, the forced abortion of her unborn child.<sup>2</sup> A North Korean Christian, Ms. Ji endured these hardships in her quest for freedom and faced unique persecution for her faith. Unlike many North Koreans, she had read the Bible before she fled North Korea, and her faith formed the foundation of her hope for a brighter future beyond the 38th parallel. Her story serves as a reminder of Pyongyang’s fear of those who believe in an authority higher than the Kim regime—and its determination to extinguish that faith.

## The State of Religious Freedom in North Korea

North Korean leadership is inherently threatened by religion and religious practice. The regime’s power rests, in part, on deity-like worship of three generations of the Kim family, upheld through an ideology known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.<sup>3</sup> The ideology demands absolute loyalty to the regime. Every North Korean household is required to keep portraits of the Kim family dusted and prominently displayed and ordinary citizens are required to regularly confess their “political sins” as part of daily life in North Korea.

Although North Korea’s constitution technically guarantees religious freedom, in practice the North Korean people enjoy no such freedoms.<sup>4</sup> According to the U.S. Department of State’s 2023 International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report, “[T]he government continued to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals engaged in almost any religious activities.”<sup>5</sup> Since the inception of the IRF report in 2001, North Korea has been designated a “Country of Particular Concern,” the worst designation a country can receive for its religious freedom violations.<sup>6</sup> The most prominent religions in North Korea—aside from worship of the Kim regime—are Buddhism, Chondoism, Shamanism and traditional folk religions, and Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

## The Plight of Christians in North Korea

There are an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 Christians in North Korea, though the exact number is difficult to determine as Christians must practice their faith discreetly.<sup>8</sup> They face uniquely severe persecution. According to Open Doors' World Watch List 2025, North Korea is the worst persecutor of Christians in the world – a designation the country has received for nearly 25 years.<sup>9</sup> The regime is especially suspicious of Christians because of their prior role in Soviet and now post-Soviet bloc countries,<sup>10</sup> where Christians and Catholics have spear-headed peaceful movements to overthrow communist leaders.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, North Korean Christians face some of the most extreme forms of persecution, including imprisonment, torture, killings, and systemic discrimination.

Researchers estimate 50,000 to 70,000 North Korean Christians have been imprisoned for their faith.<sup>12</sup> They are routinely sent to political prison camps where they are subjected to starvation-like conditions, torture, forced labor, rape and various forms of sexual violence, among other abuses. Being sent to a political prison camp is often a death sentence. In one particularly disturbing instance, parents with their two-year-old baby girl were sent to a political prison camp simply for practicing Christianity.<sup>13</sup>

Christians in North Korea face severe forms of persecution, including execution, for their faith. Over the years, various reports have documented mass public executions for merely possessing a Bible.<sup>14</sup> Not even members of the elite are spared. As recently as 2022, the U.S. Department of State documented the execution of a Korean Workers' Party member before an audience of 3,000 people for possessing a Bible.<sup>15</sup>

North Korean Christians face severe discrimination because they are classified by society as members of the “hostile class,” the lowest class in the regime’s Songbun caste system. Members of this class suffer more discrimination than any other group in North Korea.<sup>16</sup> They face difficulties in obtaining and retaining state-provided jobs, are more likely to be sent to political prison camps, and are viewed as politically suspect.

## The Need for an Atrocity Determination

The United Nations, in 2014, released its groundbreaking Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea, which determined the North Korean people face ongoing crimes against humanity committed by three generations of the Kim regime.<sup>17</sup> The finding the North Korean people face ongoing crimes against humanity was reaffirmed in an update to the COI issued by the UN in 2025.<sup>18</sup> The Chair of the COI, former Justice of the High Court of Australia Michael Kirby, said one of the most overlooked findings of the report was the severe persecution of Christians, a subject that received far too little attention in the UN's 2025 update.<sup>19</sup> The COI stopped short of evaluating whether individuals in North Korea faced other atrocity crimes, but since 2014 various reports have found evidence Christians, half-Chinese North Koreans, and members of the “hostile class” in North Korea, may face genocide as well.<sup>20</sup>

Genocide, according to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, includes “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”<sup>21</sup> North Korean Christians already face two of the five genocidal acts, including killing and serious bodily or mental harm. A determination of genocide only requires one of these acts be committed, and contrary to common understanding, does not require mass killings to meet the definition. In fact, a determination of genocide hinges on “intent to destroy” a group on the basis of, in this case, religion.

Based on publicly available evidence, it is clear North Korean Christians face ongoing crimes against humanity. There may also be sufficient evidence to find North Korean Christians face genocide, as well. Issuing an atrocity determination has the potential to raise the profile of ongoing religious persecution in North Korea and could lead to much-needed policy action.

## The Pathway Forward

Given the gravity of religious freedom violations committed by the Kim regime, the United States and the international community can and should do more to offer relief. Under President Trump's first administration, then-U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, elevated the cause of religious freedom in over-arching U.S. foreign policy. His efforts resulted not only in the prioritization of religious freedom, but of human rights, more generally. As the United States crafts future policies to address North Korea, it should find ways to advance religious freedom.

One way to strengthen the U.S. response to religious persecution in North Korea would be to issue an atrocity determination stating whether the regime is committing ongoing crimes against humanity and genocide. Atrocity determinations historically lead to follow-on action, and there are many tools the U.S. government has at its disposal to respond to the Kim regime's religious freedom violations.

To that end, Congress and the executive branch should first consider issuing an atrocity determination saying whether the Kim regime has committed genocide or crimes against humanity. Few policy actions generate more energy and attention than an atrocity determination. A determination can be made at the discretion of the Secretary of State. Given the 2014 UN's Commission of Inquiry report findings the North Korean people face ongoing crimes against humanity, which were reaffirmed in 2025, there are solid evidentiary grounds for the Secretary to issue a finding of crimes against humanity. It would also be powerful if the Secretary found evidence for additional atrocity crimes and explored whether North Koreans, particularly Christians, face ongoing genocide.

Second, the United States should reaffirm North Korea's continued designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) in the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report. In fact, the United States should take a step further by issuing sanctions against perpetrators of religious freedom violations in North Korea. A CPC designation in theory should trigger sanctions. In reality, most of these sanctions are either waived on national security grounds or subsumed under pre-existing sanctions. North Korea has received no new sanctions for violating religious freedom; instead, these sanctions have been subsumed under pre-existing Jackson-Vanik sanctions.<sup>22</sup> So-called "double-hatting" of sanctions should end.

Instead, the U.S. government should issue new sanctions as a result of the CPC designation, and/or invoke new sanctions under Global Magnitsky sanctions authorities against individuals and entities that violate religious freedom. One of the targets of these sanctions could be Chinese officials who forcibly repatriate North Koreans.

Third, the United States should swiftly appoint a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues and confirm an Ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom (IRF). In May 2025, Secretary of State Marco Rubio confirmed his intent to appoint a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues.<sup>23</sup> So far, however, no one has been nominated. The administration should nominate and Congress should confirm a Special Envoy as soon as possible. Former Representative Mark Walker has been nominated as the future IRF Ambassador;<sup>24</sup> he should be confirmed swiftly to ensure the prioritization of religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy.

Fourth, the United States should preserve funding and support for information access efforts into North Korea. The Trump administration's targeting of Radio Free Asia resulted in the suspension of its Korean service in April 2025, and intended cuts to grants provided by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor will affect grants to NGOs providing access to information. Both actions will severely undermine efforts to get information into the country. Most North Korean defectors say access to information about the outside world was a literal lifeline that helped them as they decided whether to flee North Korea or facilitate change from within. The United States should continue to fund and support access to information as a means of advancing many forms of freedom, including freedom of religion or belief.

Fifth and finally, Congress should take up the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA). The NKHRA, which provides critical funding and support for information access in North Korea, refugee relief to the North Korean people, and the official authorization for the appointment of the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights, has been lapsed since 2022.<sup>25</sup> Congress should turn its energy and attention to ensuring the Act's continuation as a part of efforts to advance human rights and religious freedom in North Korea.

## Conclusion

The North Korean people suffer immense hardship at the hands of the Kim regime. Prioritizing religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy can offer them much-needed support. In recognition of their persecution, the United States should issue an atrocity determination and take additional actions to offer the North Korean people relief.

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# Chapter 8: China and Russia's Influence within International Organizations

Rana Siu Inboden

Human rights and religious freedom organizations have consistently labeled China and Russia as among the worst violators of religious freedom. The Chinese and Russian governments utilize false rhetoric and distorted narratives in international organizations to conceal their pervasive repression of religious adherents, and disseminate regressive positions on religious freedom.<sup>1</sup> Rather than treating the United Nations (UN) as a place for genuine monitoring and accountability, China and Russia misuse this body to whitewash their deeply marred records and disseminate propaganda. The United States should engage, and not cede, this important space to these oppressive regimes.

During the March 2025 session of the Human Rights Council, following the presentation of the annual report by the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, diplomats from China and Russia used their statements to broadcast narratives favoring their authoritarian regimes. The Russian representative criticized the Special Rapporteur for failing to address the persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox church by the government in Kyiv, a distorted falsehood the Russian government has deployed.<sup>2</sup> Immediately following Russia's statement, the People's Republic of China (PRC) representative voiced feigned concern about religious freedom abuses against Muslims despite its genocidal campaign against the Uyghur community, a predominantly Muslim ethnic group hailing from China's northwestern Xinjiang region. The PRC representative stated, "...violent crime based on religious discrimination continues to escalate, and scandals such as torture and abuse inflicted against religious minorities, such as Muslims [continue to escalate as well] ..." <sup>3</sup> Yet, both President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin engage in gross human rights violations that include imprisonment, torture, and persecution.

These deceptive Chinese and Russian efforts are widespread throughout various parts of the UN system. For example, the Chinese government's national report submitted as part of its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the UN Human Rights Council in 2023 claimed: "We uphold the equality of all ethnicities, respect the religious beliefs of the people and protect the lawful rights and interests of all ethnic groups," even though the PRC's persecution of house church Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and ethnic Uyghurs is well documented by academic, media, and non-governmental reporting.<sup>4</sup> By numerous estimates, more than one million Uyghurs—nearly 10 percent of the ethnic Uyghur population in China—have been forcibly detained in "re-education through labor" camps.<sup>5</sup>

The Chinese government similarly attempts to tightly control Christian churches and Christian pastors who resist state control through prosecution and jail sentences. Pastor Wang Yi, who is serving a nine-year sentence, is emblematic of the Chinese government's harsh treatment and use of trumped-up charges to punish Christians who choose to worship outside the state-controlled churches.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Russia "criminalizes the activities of several peaceful religious groups by designating them as 'terrorist,' 'extremist,' or 'undesirable,' despite no evidence of their promotion of or participation in violence."<sup>7</sup> For example, the Russian government has declared Jehovah's Witnesses an "extremist group" and the New Generation Evangelical Christian Church an "undesirable" group.<sup>8</sup> In occupied parts of Ukraine, the Russian government is guilty of cracking down on evangelical churches. The Russian government has targeted evangelical Christian pastors, such as Reverend Mykhailo Brytsyn, who was forced to leave Ukraine after soldiers interrupted a worship service, and Azat Azatyan, a Baptist pastor who was jailed and tortured by the Russian government.<sup>9</sup> According to 21Wilberforce, a Christian organization committed to religious freedom around the world, "Persecution of religious minorities... [by] Russia has escalated since the invasion of Ukraine, where Russia's military has destroyed houses of worship and tortured religious leaders."<sup>10</sup> These abuses were echoed in a *TIME Magazine* article in 2024 entitled "Russia's War Against Evangelicals," which noted that "[e]vangelicals are targeted by the Russians disproportionately" for religious persecution.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these horrific abuses, China and Russia spread deceptive narratives in international organizations to conceal religious persecution and pretend to endorse religious freedom. After initially denying the existence of detention camps, the PRC switched to professing its actions were to combat extremism and provide job training to Uyghurs. In its 2023 UPR report, the Chinese government claimed: "We are cracking down on all types of illegal and criminal behaviour in order to maintain the long-term stability of society."<sup>12</sup> In a similar vein, in order to mislead and hide its repression of Christians, Russia has masqueraded as a defender of "traditional values" by pointing to its opposition to sexual orientation and gender rights.<sup>13</sup> Yet Russia's actions against Christian groups and leaders demonstrate Putin's hostility toward evangelical Protestants. When Russian authorities kidnapped and accused Pastor Dmitry Bodyu, they told him, "We hate... Americans... and evangelicals."<sup>14</sup>

China and Russia's religious freedom abuses should be viewed against the backdrop of Xi's and Putin's widespread repression of any independent segments of society, such as the imprisonment of deceased human rights defenders Liu Xiaobo and Alexei Navalny. Thus, United States officials should use public statements and speeches in UN venues and globally to highlight the Chinese and Russian government's repression of religious groups as part of their effort to maintain their monopolistic political control. The Chinese government's persecution of religious groups is a part of a wholesale rejection of international human rights norms, which as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, includes rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion.

In addition to issuing statements by high-level government officials, other parts of the U.S. government can spearhead diplomatic and political support to champion religious freedom across the UN system. Given China's and Russia's false narratives and use of UN reporting to spread authoritarian propaganda, the U.S. government should also encourage and support parallel or shadow civil society UN reports that challenge the whitewashed claims from Chinese and Russian officials. Further, as soon as Mark Walker is confirmed as the U.S. Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, he can use his post to highlight the cases of repression in China and Russia, including meeting with victims of religious persecution and their families. Walker's background as a former pastor positions him to spotlight the cases of religious leaders in China and Russia who have been targeted for their peaceful religious beliefs and activities. For example, he and other U.S. Department of State officials should counter Russia's use of propaganda characterizing evangelicals in Ukraine as extremists.<sup>15</sup>

Because China and Russia actively use the UN and other international venues as platforms to disseminate propaganda, the United States can take actions to counter these efforts, including hosting UN side events in Geneva and New York spotlighting some of the most egregious cases of abuse as well as the impact on vulnerable groups, such as women and children. For example, Uyghur women in China have been subjected to forced sterilization and systemic rape, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has put orphans at particular risk.<sup>16</sup>

A series of U.S.-sponsored side events could emphasize themes such as religious persecution in authoritarian countries, the PRC's efforts to "sinicize" religion, Putin's abuses of religious freedom in Ukraine, and the impact of transnational repression targeting Chinese and Russian religious freedom advocates. The United States can also employ international venues to amplify the U.S. State Department's annual reports on religious freedom violations, which are among the most authoritative sources of information on these issues.

Although international bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council, the International Labour Organization, and other UN organs, like the Third Committee of the General Assembly, are meant to advance human rights globally, they are far from perfect. The significant resources China and Russia devote to active diplomacy and peddling their pro-authoritarian narratives underscore the prominence of these bodies and the importance dictators attach to the international stage. China and Russia are on the offensive in these bodies because they realize they are key venues where ideas and norms on torture, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion are shaped; the views of other countries, particularly in the Global South, can be swayed and authoritarian governments can be condemned and their abuses exposed.<sup>17</sup> To control the trajectory of these institutions, Beijing and Moscow seek to dominate narratives, invest heavily in diplomatic representation, and manipulate discussions.

Just as China has weaponized Interpol using it to target those perceived as threats to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, China and Russia are working to co-opt other international bodies. Without a robust U.S. presence in these organizations—and without reversing the previous decision to withdraw and cede ground—the trend toward growing authoritarian dominance will only become more amplified. For example, while the United States has reduced the staff dedicated to these institutions and issues, both the Chinese and Russian missions in Geneva are larger than the U.S. mission, giving their diplomats an edge. China maintains 74 positions, Russia 68, and the United States only 63.<sup>18</sup>

In tandem, the Chinese government has supported and backed government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) to participate in the UN, drowning out the voices of authentic civil society as a result.<sup>19</sup> The United States would be wise not to ignore this venue and the policy recommendations advanced in this report are a sound starting point. These actions will position the United States as a global “City on a Hill.”<sup>20</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. “National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: China.” November 3, 2023. UN Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/45/CHN/1\*.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, “Russia’s War Against Evangelicals.” *TIME*, April 20, 2024. <https://time.com/6969273/russias-war-against-evangelicals/>.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. “National Report Submitted in Accordance with Human Rights Council Resolutions 5/1 and 16/21: China.” November 3, 2023. UN Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/45/CHN/1\*.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Karatnycky, “Russia Is No Conservative Haven.” *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2024. <https://www.foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/06/russia-putin-trump-maga-conservative-religion-church-traditional-values-populist/>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. “Written Statement Submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples.” June 9, 2022. UN Doc. A/HRC/50/NGO/18.; PBS NewsHour. “Ukrainian Evangelical Pastors Show Resilience While Facing Persecution from Russian Forces.” PBS NewsHour. April 24, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/ukrainian-evangelical-pastors-show-resilience-while-facing-persecution-from-russian-forces>.

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# Recommendations

While each chapter of the report includes recommendations tailored to that country's unique religious freedom landscape and regional context, the report reveals several recurring themes that transcend geographic boundaries.

## 1. Integrate Religious Freedom into U.S. Foreign Policy and Diplomacy

- Integrate religious freedom and human rights into all diplomatic engagements with Xi Jinping (China), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Ali Khamenei (Iran), and Kim Jong Un (North Korea).
- Reject moral relativism and maintain robust human rights diplomacy.
- Raise religious freedom consistently in high-level meetings and dialogues.
- Advance accountability through the UN Human Rights Council and other multilateral forums.
- Appoint and/or confirm and empower officials such as the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues.

## 2. Expand Designations, Sanctions, and Legal Measures

- Maintain or expand "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) designations for China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea in the U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Report.
- Impose targeted sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act or similar authorities against individuals and entities in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea responsible for religious persecution.
- Use atrocity determinations and international legal mechanisms (including International Criminal Court [ICC] referrals) to hold perpetrators accountable.

## 3. Enforce Corporate Responsibility and Apply Economic Pressure

- Urge companies to exit the Uyghur Region and eliminate forced labor from supply chains.
- Encourage other governments to adopt import bans and policies similar to the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA).

# Recommendations

## 4. Strengthen Congressional and Oversight Actions

- Hold regular hearings on religious persecution caused by the Axis of Upheaval nations.
- Pass, implement, and/or enforce relevant laws (e.g., the Sanctioning Russia Act of 2025 and UFLPA).
- Reauthorize and implement key legislation like the North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA).
- Ensure ongoing bipartisan oversight of U.S. actions promoting international religious freedom.

## 5. Amplify Support for Civil Society, Religious Minorities, and Information Freedom

- Support minority groups, civil society organizations, and victims of religious persecution through U.S. programs and grants.
- Expand internet access and information freedom initiatives, particularly for populations under authoritarian regimes.
- Leverage U.S.-backed media (e.g., Voice of America) to promote religious tolerance and understanding.

## 6. Counter Authoritarian Propaganda and Influence

- Counter China and Russia's manipulation of international organizations and media.
- Support "shadow reports" and alternative narratives at the UN to expose propaganda.
- Host U.S.-led side events spotlighting religious persecution and repression in authoritarian states.

## Recommendations

### 7. Deepen Strategic Religious Engagement and Partnerships

- Integrate religious literacy into U.S. diplomatic training.
- Foster partnerships with independent religious actors and faith groups.
- Support pluralistic religious education, fund research on transnational religious networks, and create platforms for interreligious dialogue advancing democratic values.
- Coordinate across U.S. agencies to ensure religious dynamics inform broader strategic and regional policy.

## Authors

**Elizabeth A. Clark** is an Associate Director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University.

Professor Clark has written and spoken extensively on religious freedom in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, on religion and security, and on other aspects of religious liberty. She has served on advisory boards on freedom of religion or belief (FORB) and on FORB and security for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (the world's largest regional security organization).

Professor Clark has analyzed legislation and draft legislation on religion from over a dozen countries for the U.S. State Department, USAID, national governments, and international NGOs. She has spoken at U.N. and OSCE forums and has briefed the U.S. State Department, EU offices, and other foreign affairs offices on religious liberty developments. Professor Clark has also testified before the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the Uzbekistan and U.K. parliaments.

**Olivia Enos** is a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute, where she writes on a wide range of human rights and national security issues in Asia. She is also an adjunct professor at Georgetown University, where she teaches on countering authoritarianism in Asia, and a contributor at Forbes. She previously worked as the Washington Director for the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, and before that as a Senior Policy Analyst for Asian Studies at The Heritage Foundation, where she wrote on human rights issues in Asia including human trafficking, transnational crime, religious freedom, and democratic freedoms, among other social issues in China, North Korea, Burma, and other parts of Asia. Enos received her MA in Asian Studies from Georgetown University and a BA in Government from Patrick Henry College.

**Jewher Ilham** is an author and an advocate for the Uyghur community and for her imprisoned father, Uyghur economist Ilham Tohti. She works at the Worker Rights Consortium as Forced Labor Project Manager and serves as a spokesperson for the Coalition to End Forced Labour in the Uyghur Region. Since arriving in the United States in 2013, Jewher has testified before Congress, served as a keynote speaker at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, the United Nations General Assembly, the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, and the Oslo Freedom Forum, and was invited to the Oval Office to shed light on human rights violations against Uyghurs. She has received, on behalf of her father, the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom and Thought, the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders, Liberal International's Prize for Freedom, and Freedom House's Freedom Award. Jewher herself received Freedom United's Campaigner of the Year Award in 2024 and was also awarded the Jeanne M. and Joseph P. Sullivan Award from the National Immigrant Justice Center for her outstanding advocacy work on Uyghur human rights in 2025.

Jewher has published op-eds in *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, CNN, *Teen Vogue*, and *the Guardian*. In 2015, she recounted her personal experiences in her first book, *Jewher Ilham: A Uyghur's Fight to Free Her Father*. Her second book, *Because I Have To: The Path to Survival, the Uyghur Struggle*, was released in 2022. She is also a co-producer and protagonist for the groundbreaking and award-winning documentary film *All Static and Noise* (2023) about the plight of Uyghurs.

**Dr. Rana Siu Inboden** is a Senior Fellow with the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas-Austin. She serves as a consultant on human rights, democracy and rule of law projects in Asia for a number of non-governmental organizations and conducts research related to international human rights, Chinese foreign policy, the Uyghur crisis, the effectiveness of international human rights and democracy projects and authoritarian collaboration in the United Nations. Her first book, *China and the International Human Rights Regime* (Cambridge, 2021), examines China's role in the international human rights regime between 1982 and 2017. Dr. Inboden has also done pro bono advocacy for the persecuted church in China.

Previously, Dr. Inboden served in the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor where her primary responsibilities included managing the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Fund China program and promoting U.S. human rights and democracy policy in China and North Korea. She also served at the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai, in the Office of Chinese and Mongolian Affairs, and in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research where she covered U.S.-China relations.

Dr. Inboden holds a DPhil from the Department of Politics and International Relations at Oxford University. She obtained an M.A. at Stanford University in East Asian Studies and a B.S. at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She was awarded a U.S. State Department Superior Honor Award for her work in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

**Marjan Keypour-Greenblatt** is an Iranian-American human rights activist who specializes in causes of women and minorities in Iran. She is the founder of the Alliance for Rights of All Minorities (ARAM), an international network of activists dedicated to promoting equal rights for persecuted people in Iran. Marjan is also the founder of StopFemicideIran (SFI), the first interactive map and database documenting acts of femicide in Iran, memorializing the victims and raising awareness about this critical issue.

Beyond her grassroots initiatives, Marjan has contributed to the cultural landscape as a producer of HUMANITY, a compilation album featuring music from banned and underground Iranian artists. An initiative to shed light on Iran's restrictions on artists and promote cultural freedom.

Marjan holds advisory roles with the Atlantic Council's Iran Strategy Project and the National Union for Democracy in Iran (NUFDI). She is also an affiliate at the Middle East Institute (MEI).

Her work has been featured in prominent publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, *The National Interest*, *The Hill*, *NBC News*, *Times of Israel*, *Fox News*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*. She is a frequent contributor to Persian language radio and television programs.

Fluent in Persian and French, Marjan holds a Bachelor's degree in Sociology from UCLA and a Master's in Education from Harvard University.

**Dr. Peter Mandaville** is Professor of International Affairs and Director of the AbuSulayman Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University, a Senior Research Fellow at Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council. His government experience includes serving as a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff (2011-12), Senior Advisor in the Secretary of State's Office of Religion and Global Affairs (2015-16), and Director of the Center for Faith-Based Partnerships at USAID (2024-25). His other affiliations have included the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Brookings Institution, the RAND Corporation, the Pew Research Center, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He is the author or editor of multiple books including *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy* and *Wahhabism and the World: Understanding's Saudi Arabia's Global Influence on Islam* (both Oxford University Press). He has contributed to *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *The Atlantic* online and testified before the U.S. Congress on political Islam, countering violent extremism, and human rights in Saudi Arabia.

**Alexis Mrachek**, the Lead on and Co-Editor of this report, is the Senior Program Manager of the Human Rights & Freedom Program at the McCain Institute at Arizona State University. In this role, she engages with policymakers and other stakeholders to advance values-driven American leadership on international human rights. Prior to joining the McCain Institute, Mrachek was a Program Officer at the International Republican Institute (IRI), where she focused on implementing democratic programming in Eastern Europe. Before working at IRI, she was a Policy Analyst for Russia and Eurasia at The Heritage Foundation. In her research and writing there, she focused on domestic politics and security issues within the Eurasia region, as well as the Putin regime's abuses of fundamental rights and freedom. Prior to Heritage, Mrachek was a Staff Assistant at the Rumsfeld Foundation.

Her analysis and commentary have been featured in outlets such as *Newsweek*, *The Guardian*, *The Hill*, *Washington Examiner*, *RealClearWorld*, *The National Interest*, *Dallas Morning News*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

Mrachek earned her MA in Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service (SFS), and her BA in Russian and International Studies at Texas A&M University.

**Benedict Rogers** is a human rights activist specializing in Asia. He is Senior Director of Fortify Rights, where he focuses on Burma/Myanmar, China and North Korea. He is a co-founder and trustee of Hong Kong Watch and served as its Chief Executive from 2020-2024, and previously worked as Senior Analyst for East Asia and East Asia Team Leader at Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). He is a member of the advisory group of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) and the Stop Uyghur Genocide Campaign, and has served on the boards of several other charities. He is the author of seven books, including *The China Nexus: Thirty Years In and Around the Chinese Communist Party's Tyranny* (Optimum Publishing International, 2022) and is a regular contributor to international media, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Spectator*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Diplomat*. Mr. Rogers has testified before the US Congress, the European Parliament and the UK Parliament, is a regular speaker at conferences around the world, and is the recipient of the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit's award for Champion of Effective Advocacy, and the International Catholic Legislators Network (ICLN)'s St Thomas More Award for advocacy for freedom of religion or belief.

**Knox Thames**, Advisor on and Co-Editor of this report, is a globally recognized human rights lawyer, advocate, and author who has worked for over two decades to promote human rights, defend religious minorities, and combat persecution worldwide.

During his 20 years of service in the U.S. government, Knox held several key positions advocating for freedom of religion or belief, including at the State Department and two different U.S. government foreign policy commissions. Known for his nonpartisan approach to advocacy, both the Obama and Trump administrations appointed Knox as the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South / Central Asia at the State Department.

In April 2023, Knox joined Pepperdine University as a Senior Fellow, directing the new Program on Global Faith and Inclusive Societies from the Washington, DC campus. His research is made possible thanks to a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust.

Over his 25-year career, Knox has also served at the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission), the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), AmeriCorps VISTA, and the U.S. Army War College as an Adjunct Research Professor. From 2020 to 2025, he was a non-resident Senior Visiting Expert at the United States Institute of Peace, advising the Institute on strategic religious engagement and peacemaking.

Knox has been a vocal advocate for human rights and the persecuted throughout his career. A recognized expert, Knox was a finalist to serve as the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. He has spoken before the U.S. Congress, the United Nations, the European Parliament, the Organization of American States, the Council on Foreign Relations, U.S. military war colleges, among others.

Knox has written widely, including for *USA Today*, *the Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy*, *TIME*, *CNN*, *Newsweek*, *The Dispatch*, *the Harvard Human Rights Journal*, *Christianity Today*, and others. His second book, *Ending Persecution: Charting the Path to Global Religious Freedom*, was released in 2024 by Notre Dame Press.

Originally from Kentucky, he received a Bachelor of Arts from Georgetown College, a Juris Doctorate (cum laude) from American University's Washington College of Law, and a Master's in International Affairs from the School of International Service at American University. In addition, he studied at Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland.

**The views expressed in this report are those of the authors in their individual capacities and not necessarily those of the McCain Institute.**