



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET OVERVIEW OF REFUGEES FLEEING RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION GLOBALLY

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Introduction

The scale of the global refugee crisis is unprecedented. As of the end of 2021, over [82 million people](#) were displaced worldwide. [The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR) estimates that close to 27 million of those displaced are considered refugees. Two-thirds of these refugees are from five countries, which include three countries with systematic, ongoing, and egregious persecution of various religious communities: Afghanistan, Burma, and Syria. An additional 4.1 million of these 82 million individuals fled persecution and are seeking asylum. With 86 percent of the world's refugees hosted in developing countries, host countries often struggle to provide adequate resources to support refugee populations. During 2022, the number of individuals displaced continues to soar, particularly with the [increasing numbers](#) of individuals fleeing conflict in Ukraine.

Guided by provisions in the [International Religious Freedom Act \(IRFA\)](#) related to asylum seekers and refugees, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) monitors the conditions of refugees who have fled severe violations of religious freedom and the U.S. government's policy responses. As part of this work, USCIRF hosted a hearing in February 2021 on "[Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution](#)" and a February 2022 event "[USCIRF Conversation on the Global Refugee Compact](#)." IRFA further authorized USCIRF to examine whether asylum seekers subject to the Expedited Removal process are being detained under inappropriate conditions and whether they are being returned to countries where they might face persecution. USCIRF issued a series of reports on expedited removal, the most recent in [2016](#), which documented major problems and flaws that successive administrations have yet to address.

Building on USCIRF's previous work, this factsheet highlights the global scale of religious persecution by providing an overview of contexts where large populations have been displaced due to persecution or violence based on religion or belief. It further provides an overview of the U.S. policy related to these refugee populations, highlighting the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) as a critical pathway for refugees seeking safety in the United States and the U.S. government's treatment of asylum seekers in expedited removal. Lastly, the factsheet reiterates USCIRF's recommendations to the U.S. government to further support refugees, including those who have fled religious persecution.

International Legal Framework and Definitions

[The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol](#) are the cornerstones of refugee protection. One hundred forty nine states are [party](#) to these legal documents, which define a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. Article 33 of the 1951 Convention centers refugee protection around the principle of non-refoulement, which provides that a refugee shall not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom based on one of the five listed grounds. These instruments outline the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of states in protecting refugees. Further, the Refugee Convention and its Protocol underscore the necessity for international cooperation to address the needs of refugees and support host countries; this point was reiterated in the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#), which the General Assembly endorsed in 2018. Among its goals, the GCR seeks to promote equitable responsibility-sharing by donor countries, host countries, and countries that are not typically engaged in refugee issues by easing pressures on host countries, enhancing refugees' self-reliance, and expanding access to third-country solutions.

Examples of Populations Fleeing Continued Religious Persecution

This section provides an overview of select populations of refugees that have fled religious persecution, the persecution and violence that caused displacement, and highlights ongoing challenges faced by these religious communities in their host communities.

- **Afghanistan:** More than four decades of ongoing violent conflict, political instability, natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic challenges have caused Afghans to make up one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. According to UNHCR, there are 2.6 million [registered Afghan refugees](#), of whom 2.2 million are registered in Iran and Pakistan alone. The Taliban takeover and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in [August 2021](#) led to a mass exodus, heightened by a violent [crackdown on civil society](#), [targeted killings](#), [beatings and detentions](#), severe restrictions on [women's rights](#), diminished local [media](#) presence, and an increase in violent targeted attacks claimed by Islamic State Khorasan ([ISIS-K](#)). In the months following the takeover, [120,000](#) Afghans, including religious minorities, were evacuated out of Afghanistan, with many ultimately resettled to the [United States and ally countries](#).

As detailed in USCIRF's report on [Religious Minorities in Afghanistan](#), the Taliban continues to persecute religious minorities and punish residents in areas under its control in accordance with the Taliban's extreme interpretation of Islamic law or Shari'a. Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban's harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and adherents of other faiths or beliefs are at risk of grave danger. Hence, masses fearing persecution at the hands of the Taliban and separately at the hands of ISIS-K, continue to flee

to neighboring countries, including [Pakistan](#), [Turkey](#), [India](#), and [Iran](#), where they face uncertainty and often discrimination. Another [3.5 million people](#) are internally displaced, having fled their homes searching for refuge within the country.

- **Burma:** Over 1.2 million [refugees](#) have fled Burma. Most of these refugees are Rohingya, who are predominately Muslims, and have fled decades of systematic discrimination, statelessness, and targeted violence. In 2017, the Burmese military, known as the Tatmadaw, [perpetrated](#) mass killings and rapes against the Rohingya community in Rakhine State, [forcing](#) over 745,000 to flee to Bangladesh within days. Each year since 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya continued to flee due to [ongoing](#) violence, resulting in around a million registered refugees who fled violence in Rakhine State residing in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh at the end of 2021. Rohingya in refugee camps in Bangladesh remain vulnerable and [face](#) extremely challenging conditions, including [escalating](#) violence and the recent [closure](#) of schools. The Bangladeshi government has relocated some of these refugees, including Rohingya Christians, to the island Bhasan Char. Some observers worry they could be [exposed](#) to significant environmental risks, especially given worsening climate change.

Other Rohingya have [sought refuge](#) in other Southeast Asian states. Yet, authorities in these countries often refuse them entry, stranding Rohingya refugees at sea. For example, in December 2021, both Indonesia and Malaysia [refused](#) a boat of over 100 Rohingya refugees, with Indonesia ultimately changing course and taking them in.

Since the Tatmadaw took control of the Burmese government in February 2021, ongoing violence has [pushed](#) at least another 200,000 people from different communities to be internally displaced or seek refuge in neighboring countries. Some of these refugees have left due to renewed violence by the Tatmadaw targeting religious communities. This includes an estimated 30,000 predominantly Christian Chin who [fled](#) into neighboring India in December 2021.

- **Central African Republic (CAR):** Violence based on religion [featured prominently](#) in CAR's civil conflict that erupted in 2013. Christian and Muslim affiliated militias attacked civilian communities and houses of worship in a vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, fueling an intractable conflict that [destroyed almost all of the country's mosques](#) and displaced [more than one quarter](#) of the country's population. More than [600,000](#) of those have fled across borders to neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and other countries. Muslims, who are a religious minority in CAR, reportedly represented a [disproportionate number](#) of those displaced and faced elevated barriers to accessing services and assistance for returning to their homes.
- **China:** Under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping's rule, members of religious communities have fled China in recent years due to increased persecution. The Chinese government subjects many of these religious minorities seeking refuge in host countries to transnational repression, in what [Freedom House](#) has called the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of such repression in the world. The government has used its economic and geopolitical influence to pressure governments of foreign countries to forcibly repatriate refugees to China. In addition, through its Sky Net and Fox Hunt operations, the Chinese government has [employed](#) various methods of "involuntary returns" to force its victims to return to China where they face severe persecution, including threats against their family members in China and harassment by undercover Chinese agents sent abroad to intimidate, coerce, "persuade," and in some cases kidnap victims. The CCP also has used similar tactics to [silence](#) religious freedom and human rights activists and their activities abroad.

For example, the Chinese government has pressured countries, including majority Muslim countries such as [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Morocco](#), to [repatriate](#) Uyghurs who are predominately Muslim, sometimes through red notices issued by Interpol. The government likewise

has exercised its transnational influence to [persecute](#) Tibetan Buddhists who have escaped to neighboring Nepal, European countries, and the United States. Due to intensified government persecution of Christians in China, around 60 members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church fled en masse to Jeju island, South Korea, where they fear repatriation and have experienced ongoing [harassment and intimidation](#) by Chinese officials operating from China and in South Korea.

- **Eritrea:** Since Eritrea's independence in 1994, many Eritreans have fled the [human rights crisis](#) in the country, including to escape severe religious persecution and forced military inscription that applies even to conscientious objectors. The Eritrean government [deems](#) unregistered religious groups to be illegal and punishes them for practicing their faiths publicly. At least a thousand individuals are believed to be imprisoned due to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, including 20 Jehovah's Witnesses who refused military service based on their religious beliefs, some of whom have been imprisoned for more than 20 years. As of 2022, UNHCR reports thousands of Eritrean refugees in neighboring [Ethiopia](#) and [Sudan](#), which [together host](#) almost 300,000 Eritrean refugees.

Eritrean refugees in Sudan and Ethiopia face immense challenges, including the risk of refoulement. For example, in 2017, a Sudanese court [deported](#) more than 100 Eritrean refugees. Further, the 2020 Ethiopian civil war has had a direct [impact](#) on Eritrean refugees living in Ethiopia. Eritrean troops [participating](#) in the Ethiopian civil war in the Tigray region [detained hundreds of Eritrean refugees](#) and forcibly returned them to Eritrea to face "justice."

- **Iran:** Scores of members of religious minority communities, [including](#) Baha'is, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandeans, and Zoroastrians, have fled Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a trend that continues today amid increased [targeting](#) by Iran's government. Many religious minorities who leave the country continue to be pursued by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Individuals from several religious communities from Iran, including [Christians](#) and members of spiritualist movements, have sought refuge in Turkey, where authorities sometimes deny them adequate protection from Iran's extraterritorial persecution. The Iranian government also continues to target members of the Gonbadi Sufi community who reside outside Iran in Europe and South Asia. In 2019, the leader of the Erfan e-Halqeh

movement, [Mohammed Ali Taheri](#), fled Iran while under house arrest, following eight years in prison. He was granted [asylum](#) in Canada in March 2020. Iran also arrests those whose identities do not comport with the government's singular interpretation of Ja'fari Shi'a Islam. In October 2021, Revolutionary Guards arrested a lesbian woman, Zahra Sedighi-Hamadani, while she attempted to [cross](#) the border into Turkey to [seek](#) asylum. In January 2022, Branch 6 of the Office of the Revolutionary and Public Prosecutor in Urumieh [accused](#) her of the religious crimes of "spreading corruption on earth" and "promoting Christianity." She remains in detention.

- **Iraq:** When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged in 2014 and controlled a large swath of territories in Iraq, the terrorist group [forcibly displaced more than 6 million Iraqis](#). ISIS indiscriminately targeted both Muslims and non-Muslims, [committing](#) genocide against Yazidis, Syriac-Assyrian-Chaldean Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and war crimes and crimes against humanity against other religious and ethnic groups. The majority of those who fled the brutality of ISIS settled in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in northern Iraq or refugee camps in neighboring countries.

Although ISIS was defeated in 2017, a large number of displaced members of Iraqi religious and ethnic minority groups still languish in IDP and refugee camps, and the whereabouts of around 3,000 abducted Yazidi women and girls [remain unknown](#). As of 2021, reports [estimated](#) around 2.9 million Iraqis to be internally or externally displaced. These communities continue to face immense challenges that impede returning safely to their homes. Renewed ISIS [attacks](#) throughout Iraq in 2022 reactivated fear among religious and ethnic minorities seeking to return and rebuild their homes in formerly ISIS-controlled territories.

- **Nigeria:** For [more than a decade](#), militant Islamist groups in northeast Nigeria have used violence to pursue their aims of supplanting government authority and establishing a caliphate based on a particular interpretation of Islamic law. Groups like Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Ansaru have attacked, abducted, and executed those they consider "apostates" for disagreeing with their leaders' religious beliefs. They have also used violence and intimidation to gain territorial control and raise funds through illegal taxation.

These tactics yielded massive displacement in northeast Nigeria and throughout the Lake Chad Basin. Today, an estimated [300,000 Nigerians](#) are refugees, most in neighboring Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. A further 2 million are internally displaced. Militant Islamist violence is a significant driver of this displacement.

Militant Islamist groups in Nigeria have [specifically targeted](#) displaced persons' camps with violence. Nigerian refugees and IDPs have also faced state-sponsored refolement campaigns. Between 2015 and 2017, the Cameroonian government [forcibly returned](#) an estimated 100,000 Nigerian refugees to their country despite continued violence there, drawing [public condemnation](#) from UNHCR. In 2021, the governor of Borno state began closing displacement camps in northeast Nigeria, [garnering criticism](#) from human rights organizations.

- **Syria:** Since 2011, Syria's ongoing [political conflict](#) and attendant humanitarian crisis have significantly affected the country's religious and ethnic demography, with refugees and IDPs from both the Sunni Muslim majority and ethnoreligious minorities fleeing their homes. By 2021, [more than half](#) of the country's pre-war population of just over 21 million had suffered displacement either internally or across national borders, cementing the Syrian crisis as one of the [world's largest](#) refugee and displacement disaster in [recent times](#). Varying estimates to date suggest the conflict has generated at least 6.9 million IDPs [within](#) Syria—one of the [largest](#) IDP populations in the world—and 6.6 million refugees [dispersed](#) globally.

Within Syria, militant Islamist organizations including Turkish-backed Syrian groups (TSOs), al-Qaeda offshoot Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and remnants of ISIS have targeted minorities such as [Yazidis](#) and Syriac and Assyrian Christians, subjecting these communities to [ethnic and religious cleansing](#). Since the defeat of the caliphate, [ancient Christian communities](#) in the northeast, already decimated by ISIS, fled additional targeted attacks by TSOs and the Turkish military, either [migrating](#) out of Syria or seeking refuge in abandoned buildings in other towns and in [camps](#) set up by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

Sunni Muslims’ approximately 74 percent share of the Syrian population is reflected in their *high proportion* among Syrian refugees in other countries. Turkey, a Sunni-majority country, has accepted more than 4 million refugees, of whom at least 3.6 million are Syrians, making Turkey the *world leader* in hosting refugees from both Syria and across the globe. The World Bank and European Union have *bolstered* Turkey’s refugee-hosting efforts via financial assistance and municipal services upgrades; however, many Turkish towns and regions already limited in resources continue to struggle with the infrastructure, employment, and housing needed to host a refugee population of great size and extended duration. Jordan, *Lebanon*, Iraq, and Egypt *also host* large numbers of Syrian refugees.

- **Ukraine:** Since the start of Russia’s brutal invasion into Ukraine in February 2022, over *5 million refugees* have fled the country, largely finding refuge in neighboring countries such as Poland, Romania, and Hungary. Russian forces have *committed* war crimes and other atrocities. The conflict *poses* a risk to religious communities across Ukraine, with the potential to drive even more displacement. In the areas of Ukraine already occupied by Russia since 2014, the Russian government *uses* baseless charges of religious extremism and terrorism to silence dissent, justify endless raids and mass arrests, and close religious institutions that do not conform to its narrow interpretation of “traditional” religion. Indigenous Crimean Tatar Muslims are routinely charged with terrorism based on their ethno-religious identity rather than any substantive evidence, receiving prison sentences of up to 20 years.
- **Vietnam:** Due to government persecution, religious minorities from Vietnam have escaped to and sought refuge in Thailand and Cambodia where they face precarious situations. There are approximately *1,500* Vietnamese refugees in Thailand, split more or less evenly between those who have been granted refugee status by the UNHCR and those who do not have such status, including refugees whose applications have been rejected. The majority of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand are members of independent *Hmong and Montagnard* Christian communities, who are persecuted for refusing to renounce their faith and join state-controlled religious organizations. Other religious groups whose members have been displaced include independent Hoa Hao and Cao Dai communities, as well as independent Buddhists, including Khmer-Krom Buddhists.

Thailand is not a *state party* to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, and the country lacks a *national legal framework* to protect refugees and asylum-seekers. As a result, those who have been granted refugee status by the UNHCR office in Thailand can be considered illegal immigrants by Thai authorities and face risk of detention and repatriation. Due to their illegal status, refugees in Thailand have no access to healthcare, education, and legal employment. Furthermore, there have been reports of Thai and Vietnamese authorities working in concert to repatriate Vietnamese refugees, including a prominent Montagnard Christian pastor *A Ga*.

Montagnard Christians who have *fled* to Cambodia face similar challenges. While Cambodia is a *state party* to the UN Refugee Convention, the Cambodian government has refused to allow the UNHCR to permanently *resettle* Montagnard Christian refugees to third countries, likely due to pressure from the Vietnamese government. Some of the Montagnard Christians subsequently have chosen to *escape to* Thailand, while some others were repatriated to Vietnam where they could face severe persecution.

U.S. Policy to Support Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees, including those fleeing religious persecution. The United States resettles refugees annually through the USRAP. As part of this program, each fiscal year, presidential administrations determine a numerical ceiling for refugees accepted from abroad. Under IRFA, religious persecution should be considered in this determination. Since the USRAP began in 1980, the ceiling for refugees accepted into the United States has averaged 95,000 per year. However, the Trump Administration reduced the ceiling dramatically from its average level of 95,000 annually to a historic low of 15,000. Of those slots, 5,000 were dedicated to refugees fleeing religious persecution, including refugees eligible for U.S. resettlement under the *Lautenberg Amendment*—a special program for certain persecuted religious minority groups. This includes a special resettlement pathway for religious minorities fleeing Iran, although over 8,000 Iranians remain in the pipeline waiting for resettlement, and 80 such individuals whose resettlement was approved have for years remained in Vienna, Austria awaiting final permission to travel to the United States.

In February 2021, consistent with USCIRF's recommendation, President Biden [announced](#) his intent to raise the refugee ceiling to 125,000 for FY 2022 and issued an [executive order](#) to take steps to position the administration to be able to do so. In May 2021, the administration [announced](#) it was raising the refugee ceiling for FY 2021 from 15,000 to 62,500 and that it intended to develop new priority access categories for several especially vulnerable groups, including Turkic Muslim refugees who are nationals or last habitual residents of China, Rohingya Muslim refugees who are nationals or last habitual residents of Burma, and Iraqi and Syrian nationals who are members of a religious or ethnic minority.

Despite the increased ceiling, the United States [admitted](#) only 11,814 refugees during FY 2021 and [8,758](#) refugees during the first half of FY 2022. These [numbers](#) do not [include](#) Afghans [brought](#) to the United States, mostly as parolees, following the Taliban's takeover of the country in August 2021. According to information USCIRF received from the Department of Homeland Security's [Operation Allies Welcome](#), more than 86,000 Afghans have been relocated to the United States since the takeover. Shortly before the takeover, the State Department [expanded](#) its Priority-2 (P-2) designation to grant USRAP access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members, but this P-2 designation did not include religious minorities. In December 2021, the Biden Administration announced several [pledges](#) at the UNHCR's High-Level Officials Meeting, including committing to launching a private sponsorship pilot program in 2022 to increase resettlement and support the rapid resettlement of Afghans.

In March 2022, President Biden [announced](#) that the United States would accept up to 100,000 Ukrainians and others fleeing the conflict in Ukraine through a range of legal pathways, including the USRAP and humanitarian

parole. In April 2022, the Biden Administration launched "[Uniting for Ukraine](#)," a program designed to streamline processing for Ukrainian refugees and permit those with a U.S.-based sponsor to come to the United States for a two-year period. The Biden Administration further announced that it would expand USRAP operations in Europe to facilitate greater access to the Lautenberg program and identify particularly vulnerable Ukrainian citizens and others fleeing the conflict to be resettled through USRAP, including ethnic and religious minorities. As of April 2022, there were an estimated 18,000 Ukrainians being [processed](#) through the Lautenberg program.

In addition to refugee resettlement, the United States government processes individuals fleeing persecution through the asylum process. In February 2021, President Biden signed an [executive order](#) that, among other actions, initiated a review of the Expedited Removal process, the implementation of which [USCIRF has monitored](#) under IRFA. Pursuant to USCIRF's [recommendation](#), in March 2022, the Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security [announced](#) a new rule to improve the process for adjudicating the claims of asylum seekers in expedited removal.

Beyond efforts to resettle refugees and process asylum seekers, the United States government also provides humanitarian assistance to refugee populations and host communities, including announcing additional contributions to refugee populations in 2022 for those displaced from [Afghanistan](#), [Burma](#), [the Horn of Africa](#), and [Ukraine](#). The United States government also provides significant humanitarian assistance to support displaced populations in other contexts such as [Iraq](#), [Nigeria](#), and [Syria](#). The United States is also the largest [donor](#) to UNHCR and provider of [emergency food assistance](#) to refugee populations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As outlined in this factsheet, members of a wide range of religious communities around the globe have been forced to flee their homes due to persecution, and many of these displaced populations continue to face challenges and even transnational repression in host countries. USCIRF provides several recommendations in its [2022 Annual Report](#) regarding how the United States government can support these refugee communities. First, as the Biden Administration works towards the goal of admitting 125,000 refugees this fiscal year, USCIRF urges the Administration to prioritize for resettlement survivors of the most egregious forms of religious persecution, including Iranian religious minorities eligible for processing under the Lautenberg Amendment, members of other severely persecuted religious or belief communities, and survivors of genocide or other atrocity crimes.

To further support the resettlement of the most vulnerable religious communities, USCIRF [calls](#) on the State Department to expand its [P-2 designation](#) granting USRAP access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members to explicitly include members of Afghan religious minorities, in recognition of the severe risk of persecution they face from the Taliban. Another avenue to [provide](#) vulnerable Afghan religious minorities access to USRAP is through Congress expanding the P-2 category by law. USCIRF has also [recommended](#) that Congress reauthorize and exercise oversight to ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment and extend this Amendment to religious minorities in Iran who are citizens of Afghanistan.

As ultimately only a small number of refugees will be resettled to the United States, the United States must also support refugees in host countries or who arrive at the U.S. border. The Biden Administration should continue to provide overseas assistance to displaced populations and the communities hosting them and work to create conditions that would ultimately allow the refugees to return home.

USCIRF also [recommends](#) that the Administration address longstanding flaws in the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal. This includes [enhancing](#) the quality and oversight of the initial processing of noncitizens, [improving](#) detention conditions, and [appointing](#) a high-level official at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to coordinate and oversee reforms.



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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.