RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD REPORT 2025

Executive Summary

Aid to the Church in Need

ACN INTERNATIONAL

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The 2025 report is the 17th edition of Aid to the Church in Need's Religious Freedom in the World Report, produced every two years. It is published in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.

This edition is dedicated to the memory of Attilio Tamburrini (1946–2022), former Director of Aid to the Church in Need Italy and founder of the Religious Freedom in the World Report in 1999.

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Disclaimers

Every effort has been made to ensure that the highest possible editorial standards have been met in the production of the Religious Freedom in the World Report. However, in presenting the report, Aid to the Church in Need acknowledges that it could not independently verify all information contained therein without exception. The report draws on multiple sources and presents case studies with the objective of shedding light on the nature and severity of religious freedom violations. Care should be taken not to attach undue significance to instances selected for consideration; these are offered as examples illustrating the nature of the situation regarding religious freedom. In many cases, other examples would equally suffice. Views or opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Aid to the Church in Need but of those involved in compiling the various documents contained in the report.

Unless otherwise specified, all country data and religious demography come from the latest available information by: Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim, eds. World Religion Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020). The GINI index figures are the latest available at www.databank.worldbank.org. The economic data are all from the World Bank Database, including GDP per capita (PPP adjusted, to allow for comparison between countries). A GINI indicator measures inequality of income and consumption distribution, a Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality.

For the full version of the Report's methodology, please visit the following link:

INTRODUCTION

25 years defending Religious Freedom

Regina Lynch, Executive President,
Aid to the Church in Need International

The right to live according to one's conscience and faith is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. More than a legal guarantee, it is the heartbeat of human dignity, reminding us that **every person is called to seek the truth, to embrace it, and to shape life around it**. Where this right is respected, peace and justice can flourish; where it is denied, the human spirit is diminished and society loses its very foundation.

For 25 years, the Religious Freedom in the World Report has assessed the health of this fundamental right in 196 countries. It is the only global study of its kind not produced by a governmental organisation, and from its first edition in 1999, it has adopted a deliberately universal perspective. Although produced by a Catholic foundation, this report documents abuses, violations and restrictions on religious freedom affecting all religious groups. Because if religious freedom is denied to one group, there is no true religious freedom for anyone.

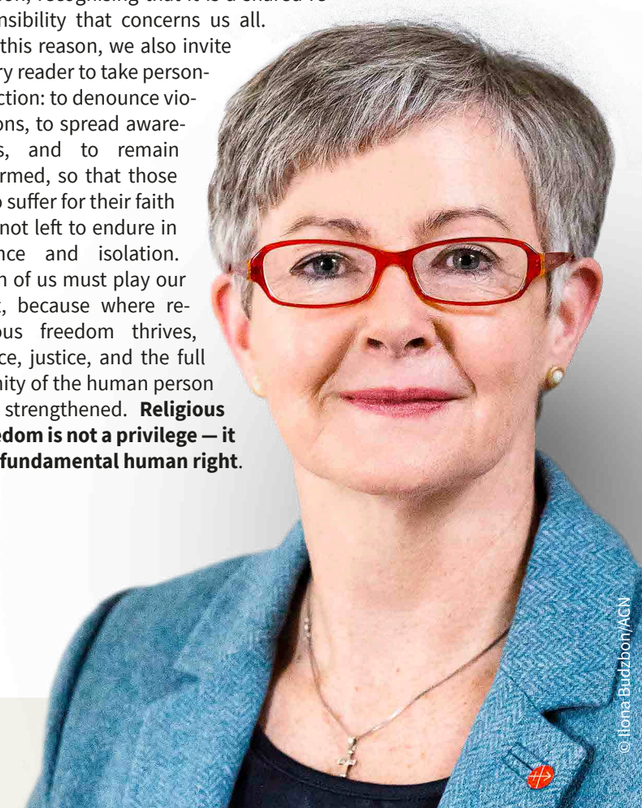
This report records a broad spectrum of violations against religious freedom, reflecting the diversity and complexity of the global context. In several countries, such violations manifest as overt violence, including killings, imprisonment, and the destruction or confiscation of places of worship. In others, they appear in more discreet but equally damaging forms, such as bureaucratic hurdles, censorship, bans on religious education, and various types of social discrimination. These abuses arise from different sources. Religious extremism continues to drive violence and coercion, particularly in Africa. Similar persecution by extremists persists in parts of the Middle East and Asia, often reinforced by authoritarian regimes, as in North Korea, where all forms of religious practice are severely restricted. Ethno-religious nationalism is also on the rise, notably in India, where minority faith communities face mounting pressure and hostility.

Latin America has seen a marked deterioration, with Nicaragua emerging as a particularly concerning case due to its systematic targeting of religious leaders and institutions, including the expulsion of bishops, priests, and missionaries.

Aid to the Church in Need is a Pontifical Foundation founded in 1947 to support Christians who suffer and are persecuted around the world, enduring hardship and deprivation both in their pastoral life and in their material needs. For over 75 years, thanks to the generosity of our benefactors, our projects have helped keep the faith alive where the Catholic Church faces discrimination, oppression, and persecution. Each year, ACN funds more than 5,000 projects in around 140 countries—rebuilding churches, training seminarians and catechists, providing transport for pastoral workers, delivering emergency aid to displaced families, and ensuring the Church's presence in the most difficult environments. Our mission rests on three pillars: material support, prayer, and information in the shape of the collection and dissemination of reliable information on the situation of Christians worldwide—an effort embodied in this very report.

Exposing the truth about violations is the first step toward change. It is not enough to lament injustice; we must bring it to light. This report is therefore both a testimony and a call to action. It reminds us that the struggle for religious freedom is not an abstract principle, but a lived reality for millions. Alongside pastoral and emergency assistance, this year's edition also offers readers other concrete ways to support those whose freedom of belief is under threat, because solidarity must be expressed in action.

As we present this edition, we renew our commitment to defending the right to religious freedom for every person, recognising that it is a shared responsibility that concerns us all. For this reason, we also invite every reader to take personal action: to denounce violations, to spread awareness, and to remain informed, so that those who suffer for their faith are not left to endure in silence and isolation. Each of us must play our part, because where religious freedom thrives, peace, justice, and the full dignity of the human person are strengthened. **Religious freedom is not a privilege — it is a fundamental human right**.



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FOREWORD

'Miriam', a christian experiencing persecution in Pakistan*

It was 6am when it all began. My family and me were at home and we were suddenly woken by a mob in front of our house. They were shouting. 'We will burn you.' 'Come out of the house'. We were terrified. The noise of the mob got louder and louder. They accused my grandfather of blasphemy. My grandfather and all of us said we didn't know what they were talking about. They refused to accept what we said and began smashing down the doors and breaking the walls and windows. They set fire to the shoe factory next door which my grandfather owned. They burst into my room. I was engaged and planned to get married soon. My parents kept items in my room like furniture, clothes and other gifts as dowry ahead for my wedding day. Most of these items they stole, others they broke.

We ran for our lives. We hid in the washroom for six or seven hours until the police told us to come out. By then the whole place had been ruined. Everything broken, no running water, no electricity. We were desperate to find my grandfather. We came across this man lying on the ground. He was covered in blood, his teeth were broken, so was his nose and every bone in his body seemed to be smashed. We were told this man lying there was my grandfather but just could not believe it. He was so badly injured he did not respond when we called his name. Shortly after, my grandfather died of his injuries and within a few days my grandmother died too, such was her grief.

My grandfather, all of the family, were targeted for our faith. We are a minority and we don't harm others but they harm us. Being a Christian in Pakistan is not safe anymore.

Lack of religious freedom is a huge problem that deeply damages so many families and societies. Religious freedom is essential to the identity of a person, of a family, of a community. If religious freedom is trampled underfoot, it is a denial of human rights. In our country and others too, the constitution recognises the right to religious freedom but in practice the minority faith communities are not given this right. We face discrimination, intolerance, and violence, as we saw in the case of my grandfather and our family. In my country, we Christians respect others, we respect their religion, but so often we are not shown respect ourselves.

And that's why my family and I are so grateful to Aid to the Church in Need for producing this *Religious Freedom in the World Report*. This report not only highlights the state of religious freedom throughout the world but shows how governments and groups restrict or deny this freedom. It is a forgotten human right. If we are to have peace and justice, we must have religious freedom – culprits need to be brought to justice, the law must be upheld; people must be given the right to express their faith in public, in private, in conscience and with respect for the rule of law.

The day we lost my grandfather is etched in my heart. We can get our belongings back; we can rebuild our home but we can't bring back my grandfather nor my grandmother. In honouring their memory and in seeking justice for their deaths, we pray that this report may help people to realise the terrible price so many pay for the lack of religious liberty, a freedom which as we can testify is the difference between life and death.

Miriam, name changed for safety reasons, looking at a photo of her grandparents.

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* Name changed for safety reasons

MAIN FINDINGS

In a world marked by growing instability—from the war in Ukraine to conflict in the Holy Land, and the global rise of authoritarianism—religious freedom is under mounting threat.

Aid to the Church in Need's *Religious Freedom in the World Report 2025* concludes that there have been grave violations of religious freedom in **62 countries**: 24 classified as 'persecution' (the worst category) and 38 as 'discrimination' (the second most serious category), together affecting **nearly 5.4 billion people**. These infringements signal a broader assault on the rights enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Today, this fundamental right is not merely under pressure, it is increasingly disappearing.

Below are the main findings from the reporting period (1 January 2023 - 31 December 2024). Three of them, which set out key themes shaping religious freedom today, are explored further in the articles, *The evolution of jihadism*, *Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination,* and *The Cuban model and its export to Venezuela and Nicaragua.*

1. **Almost two-thirds of humanity - almost 5.4 billion people - live in countries where serious religious freedom violations take place**. The 62 countries classified as under persecution or discrimination are home to nearly 64.7 percent of the global population. During the reporting period, only two of these countries – Kazakhstan and Sri Lanka – showed improvement.

2. **24 countries are ranked in the worst category - persecution**. Grave and systemic violations, including violence, arrest, and repression, affect more than 4.1 billion people in nations such as China, India, Nigeria, and North Korea. In 75 percent of these countries (18 out of these 24), the situation has worsened.

3. **38 countries are categorised as experiencing religious discrimination, potentially affecting nearly 1.3 billion people** —17.3 percent of the world's population. In these countries, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Mexico, Türkiye, and Vietnam, religious groups face systematic restrictions on worship, expression, and legal equality. While not subject to violent repression, discrimination often results in marginalisation and legal inequality.

4. **24 countries are classified as 'under observation' amid a surge in warning signs threatening religious freedom**. These include rising intolerance, the erosion of legal protections, religious extremism, and increasing state interference in religious life. This means that 750 million people could be at risk of religious discrimination. In the Regional Analysis maps these countries are marked with a magnifying glass symbol.

5. **Authoritarianism is the greatest threat to religious freedom**. Authoritarian regimes have systematically enforced legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to suppress religious life. In countries such as China, Eritrea, Iran and Nicaragua, the government represses religion through pervasive surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the repression of dissenting beliefs. Authoritarian rule is among the main drivers of persecution in 19 countries and underpins patterns of discrimination in 33 others.

6. **Jihadist violence escalates, adapts, and destabilises on an unprecedented scale.** In 15 countries, religious extremism is a main driver of persecution; in 10 others, it contributes to discrimination. From the Sahel to Pakistan, jihadist groups expand through decentralised networks, targeting Christians and Muslims who cannot accept the extremist ideology. Exploiting local grievances and weak governance, terrorist groups like JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) and ISSP (Islamic State – Sahel Province) expand control in the Sahel, while Ansar al-Sunna (ISCAP) in Mozambique and ADF in the Democratic Republic of the Congo seek to establish a "caliphate" to legitimise their authority and ideology.

7. **Religious nationalism is on the increase, fuelling exclusion and repression of minorities**. National identity is increasingly shaped by ethno-religious nationalism, eroding minority rights. In India and Myanmar, it drives persecution; in Palestine, Israel, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, it fuels discrimination. India exemplifies "hybrid persecution", i.e. legal suppression combined with mob violence. Majoritarian narratives are weaponised to consolidate power, while legal and administrative systems often entrench second-class status for minorities.

8. **Religious persecution increasingly fuels forced migration and displacement.** Millions have fled violence, discrimination, and the absence of state protection whose causes are rooted in religious intolerance. In Nigeria, attacks by radicalised Fulani militants have ravaged churches, villages, and clergy, triggering mass displacement. Across the Sahel—Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali—and amid Sudan's civil war, entire faith communities have been uprooted, their places of worship destroyed, and religious heritage erased. Religious persecution is a major and often overlooked driver of today's global displacement crisis.

9. **Organised crime systematically targets religious leaders and communities.** In weakened or failed States and conflict zones, criminal groups target religious leaders and institutions to assert control. In three countries—Nigeria, Haiti, and Mexico—organised crime is a key driver of persecution or discrimination. In regions with weak governance, particularly in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, churches are looted, pastors kidnapped or killed, and religious organisations pressurised into silence or complicity.

10. **Religious freedom has become a global casualty of war amid a spike in conflict situations around the world**. There has been an exponential growth in religious communities suffering the consequences of war amid a surge in conflicts around the world – civil wars, wars between nations and regional conflicts. Armed conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, and Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in mass displacements, church closures, and targeted attacks on religious communities.

11. **There has been a sharp rise in antisemitic and anti-Muslim hate crimes.** Following the 7th October 2023 Hamas attack in Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza, antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents surged across Europe, North America, and Latin America. In France, antisemitic acts increased by 1,000 percent, while anti-Muslim hate crimes rose by 29 percent. Germany recorded 4,369 offences linked to the conflict—up from just 61 in 2022. Synagogues and mosques were attacked, individuals harassed, and hate speech proliferated online. In many cases, government responses proved inadequate, fuelling fear and insecurity among religious communities.

12. **Anti-Christian incidents are on the rise across Western countries**. Europe and North America witnessed a significant rise in attacks against Christian sites and believers. In 2023 alone, France recorded approximately 1,000 anti-Christian incidents, while Greece reported over 600 cases of church vandalism. In Canada, 24 churches were targeted by arson between 2021 and early 2024. Similar spikes were observed in Spain, Italy, the United States, and Croatia, including desecrations of places of worship, physical assaults on clergy, and disruptions of religious services—often driven by ideological hostility, militant activism, or anti-religious extremism.

13. **Conscientious objection is under increased threat**. Across the OSCE region, the right to conscientious objection is facing increasing restrictions. In countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Russia, individuals refusing military service on religious or ethical grounds have been imprisoned. Meanwhile, in Western democracies like Belgium, faith-based institutions are under growing legal pressure to provide services such as abortion and assisted suicide.

14. **AI and digital tools are being weaponised to repress religious groups.** From artificial intelligence to surveillance networks, new technologies are increasingly used to monitor, profile, and penalise religious expression. In countries such as China, North Korea, and Pakistan, both governments and non-state actors deploy digital tools to censor, intimidate, and criminalise believers—transforming religious faith into a perceived security threat.

15. **Doubly vulnerable: Religious minority women and girls - some as young as 10 - suffer systematic abuse.** During the reporting period, grave violations against women and girls from religious minorities continued to be documented. In countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Mozambique, victims—some as young as ten—were subjected to abduction, forced conversion, and coerced marriage. These abuses, occurring in the hundreds each year, are in the vast majority of cases carried out with impunity.

16. **Despite the worsening religious freedom context, religious communities have shown unswerving resilience as agents of peace as well as emergency and pastoral aid.** Despite persecution, religious communities continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, actively engaging in peacebuilding and delivering essential humanitarian assistance. From Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region to Burkina Faso, interfaith initiatives have shown that religious freedom can serve as a foundation for unity and a safeguard for human dignity. Education plays a critical role in this process—fostering social cohesion, affirming the equal worth of all individuals, and empowering minority groups both culturally and economically.

MAIN TOPIC

The evolution of jihadism

Dr Francesco Marone

In recent years, global jihadism has entered a distinct, new phase of transnational evolution. The collapse of the territorial "caliphate" of the Islamic State (IS, or Daesh) in Iraq and Syria in 2019 did not represent a decisive defeat of this complex threat. Major organisations, such as IS and al-Qaeda, despite currently lacking clear central leadership, have continued to pursue their objectives.

Moreover, in several regions, their affiliates have demonstrated, albeit to varying degrees, a capacity to adapt by recalibrating their agendas to address specific grievances and local conditions. The Islamic State has combined a degree of regional autonomy with elements of central coordination.[1] In the West, the jihadist threat is primarily posed by small autonomous cells and lone actors.

Jihadist actors have sought to exploit emerging opportunities, such as the conflict that erupted between Hamas and Israel in 2023,[2] for both propaganda and strategic purposes.

The transformations of jihadism are particularly evident in the Middle East and in Africa, where jihadist groups have often adapted to new circumstances, with severe consequences for civilian populations, including Christian communities.

The Middle East remains a crucial theatre for jihadism. Following the collapse of its self-proclaimed "caliphate", IS has frequently opted for low-intensity insurgency tactics. The group has established clandestine cells, particularly active in rural areas of central Syria and northern Iraq.

In addition, following the sudden fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024, jihadist groups have apparently expressed an interest in disrupting Syria's new government, even though it is itself an offshoot of al-Qaeda. For instance, a little-known jihadist formation, Saraya Ansar al-Sunnah, claimed responsibility for a devastating suicide attack on the Mar Elias Church in Damascus on Sunday 22 June 2025.[3]

In neighbouring Turkey, on Sunday 28 January 2024, an IS armed assault on the Santa Maria Catholic church in Istanbul ended a prolonged period in which the organisation had been unable to carry out successful operations in the country. Such attacks on Christian worshippers are emblematic of the enduring jihadist hostility towards religious minorities, even in locations not typically considered active conflict zones.

The deadly attack in Istanbul, claimed by IS, was almost certainly carried out by its Afghan branch, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). In recent years, this sophisticated "province" has greatly expanded its transnational reach far beyond its original base, not only through multilingual propaganda campaigns, but also through violent operations in several countries, including the high-level terrorist attack at a concert venue near Moscow on 22 March 2024.

Africa, meanwhile, has emerged as the arena of the deadliest jihadist activity. In the Sahel, the prevailing trend is an expansion of operations by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a powerful al-Qaeda affiliate, alongside a resurgence of activity by the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP).[4]

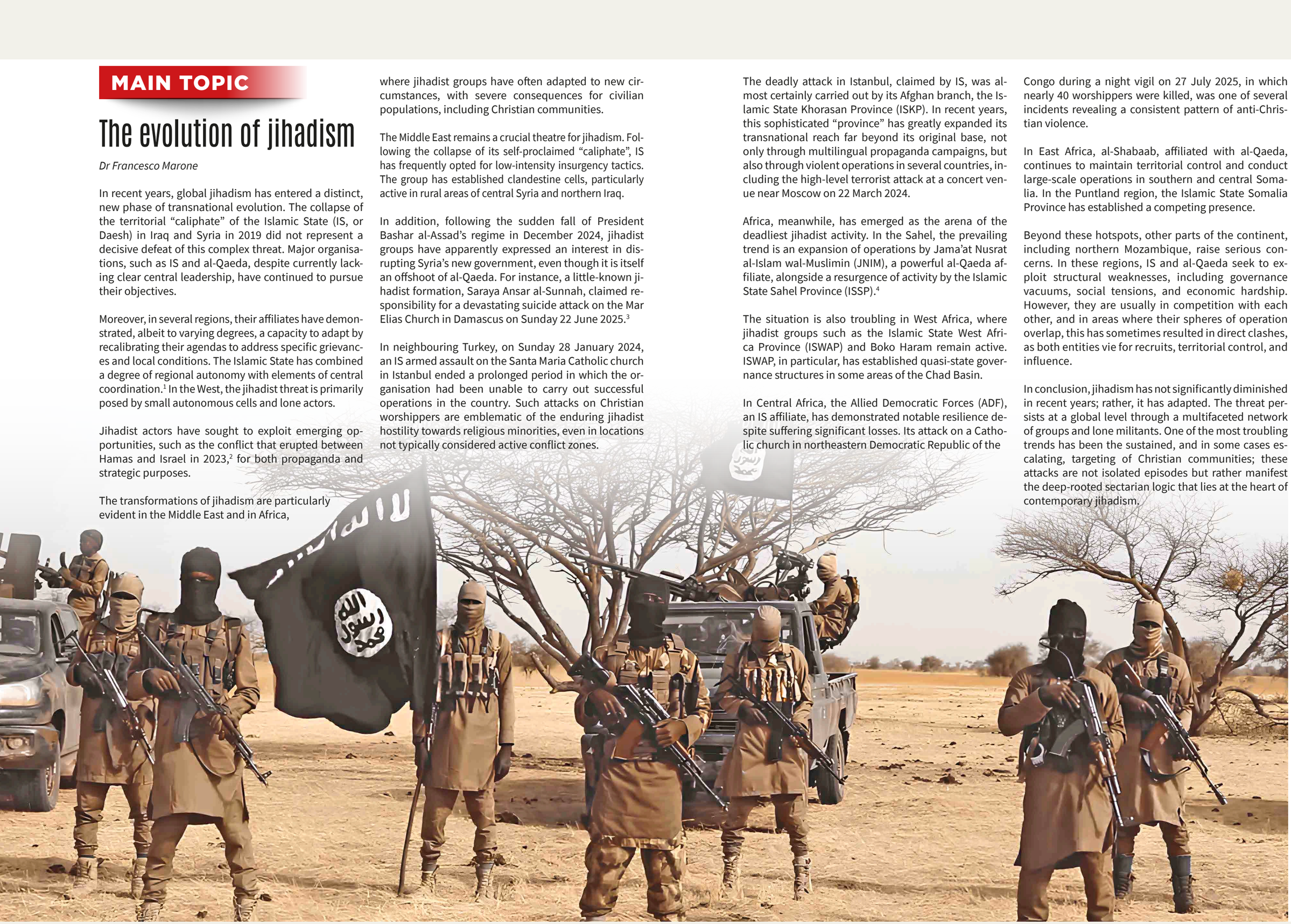
The situation is also troubling in West Africa, where jihadist groups such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram remain active. ISWAP, in particular, has established quasi-state governance structures in some areas of the Chad Basin.

In Central Africa, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an IS affiliate, has demonstrated notable resilience despite suffering significant losses. Its attack on a Catholic church in northeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo during a night vigil on 27 July 2025, in which nearly 40 worshippers were killed, was one of several incidents revealing a consistent pattern of anti-Christian violence.

In East Africa, al-Shabaab, affiliated with al-Qaeda, continues to maintain territorial control and conduct large-scale operations in southern and central Somalia. In the Puntland region, the Islamic State Somalia Province has established a competing presence.

Beyond these hotspots, other parts of the continent, including northern Mozambique, raise serious concerns. In these regions, IS and al-Qaeda seek to exploit structural weaknesses, including governance vacuums, social tensions, and economic hardship. However, they are usually in competition with each other, and in areas where their spheres of operation overlap, this has sometimes resulted in direct clashes, as both entities vie for recruits, territorial control, and influence.

In conclusion, jihadism has not significantly diminished in recent years; rather, it has adapted. The threat persists at a global level through a multifaceted network of groups and lone militants. One of the most troubling trends has been the sustained, and in some cases escalating, targeting of Christian communities; these attacks are not isolated episodes but rather manifest the deep-rooted sectarian logic that lies at the heart of contemporary jihadism.



Frame from a video released by ISIS West Africa

Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination

José Luis Bazán, PhD

More than 123 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, either within the borders of their home countries (73.5 million IDPs) or seeking international protection in another country as refugees.[5] Religious persecution and discrimination are persistent forces driving this massive process.

Over 1.3 million predominantly Muslim Rohingya have fled Myanmar due to targeted violence.[6] Before Syria plunged into a 13-year civil war, Christians made up about 10 percent of the population, while now they represent only about 2 to 3 percent.[7] The same fate has befallen Christians in other Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, where the Christian community has been decimated, going from 1.5 million before the 2003 international coalition intervention to about 150-250,000 today,[8] many of whom were displaced to the Kurdistan region or elsewhere.[9] In the 1970s, some 700,000 Hindus and Sikhs lived in Afghanistan, but the number dropped to 220,000 in 1992, and to less than 100 in 2021 after the Taliban returned to power.[10]

In sub-Saharan Africa, millions of people have been forcibly displaced following attacks by different jihadist groups. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, over three million people have been internally displaced, and more than two million have fled, mostly to neighbouring countries.[11] Terrorist attacks by jihadist groups are the main cause of this mass displacement.[12] In Burkina Faso, those affected most by militant Islamists include the majority of the country's Muslims, who do not share the goals and aggressive tactics of the extremists, as well as the former French colony's large Christian population.[13]

In Pakistan, religious minorities face not only targeted violence but also structural discrimination, which makes life untenable and compels many to migrate.[14]

The causes of asylum-seeking vary depending on the region and the religious communities concerned, although there are three main sources of religiously motivated persecution: jihadism, authoritarian regimes, and radical ethno-religious nationalism.

When an individual has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their religion and is unable or unwilling to remain in their own country, or to return there, they become a refugee under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Article 1, A, 2).[15] When not directly persecuted but subject to onerous and discriminatory restrictions or intolerance from authorities and society, the victim may, in some cases, also be considered a refugee.[16] The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court considers the forced displacement of the people concerned by expulsion or other coercive acts as a crime against humanity (Article 72, d), while "Ordering the displacement of the civilian population for reasons related to the conflict" is classified as a war crime (Article 8, 2, e, viii).[17]

Faith-based persecution and discrimination by state or non-state actors leads the victims from a religious community to leave their homelands, erasing their historical contribution to the identity of that country where they were present, in many cases for centuries. This erodes religious diversity and paves the way for religious sectarianism, widening the gap with other regions of the world where religious pluralism exists.

Sometimes, those seeking asylum on religious grounds become victims of intolerance and discrimination in host countries, whether by other asylum seekers or members of other ethnic and religious communities. This is especially the case for converts to Christianity and Christians from predominantly Muslim countries who have been harassed in reception centres by Muslims for practising Christianity or for not observing, for example, Ramadan.[18]

Requests for asylum by Christian converts are frequently rejected because the authorities assess their applications based on their poor knowledge of Christian theology rather than on the sincerity of their convictions, often leading to a return to their home country, which could mean the death penalty for them.[19]

© AFD via Gettyimages

Rohingya men, women and children forced to flee Myanmar and seek protection in Bangladesh

The Cuban model and its export to Venezuela and Nicaragua

Authoritarian regimes worldwide have increasingly placed the suppression of religion at the centre of their strategies to consolidate power. Through surveillance, restrictive legislation, and the silencing of dissenting voices, faith communities are subordinated to state authority and stripped of their autonomy. This dynamic constitutes a primary driver of persecution in 19 countries and sustains patterns of discrimination in 33 others. It has also become entrenched in Latin America, where authoritarian projects in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua display striking parallels in their regulation and repression of religious life.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 established the longest-lasting authoritarian regime in the Americas. Based on the concentration of power in a single party and the suppression of political pluralism, the Cuban model has had as its central axis the total control of society. This has translated into decades of repression, surveillance, and the exclusion of the Church from the public sphere, as it has been considered a threat to the socialist State.

Far from being confined to Cuba, this model has been replicated, with variations, in Venezuela and Nicaragua, where similar patterns of repression, institutional co-option, and erosion of fundamental freedoms can be observed, as well as an intensification of persecution against leaders and communities that have a critical or prophetic voice.

The Cuban model:
subordination of religion to the party

In Cuba, religious freedom has historically been subordinated to the interests of the Communist Party. The constitution declares Marxism-Leninism to be the state ideology, and any expression of faith must align with this framework. Although in recent decades there have been certain gestures of openness, control remains rigorous and religious communities continue to be under strict surveillance.[20]

After the revolution, confessional education was abolished, the participation of Churches in social life was suppressed, and their leaders were marginalised or monitored by the state apparatus. The strategy combines co-option, surveillance, and criminalisation, reducing religious communities to a subordinate role within the state structure. Repression is not only coercive but also symbolic: the State arrogates to itself the role of representing the common good, delegitimising all dissenting voices, including religious ones, creating a closed ecosystem where pluralism is perceived as a threat.[21]

Export of the Model:
control, surveillance and deterrence

The international projection of the Cuban model has been especially evident in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Beyond ideological affinity, there has been a deliberate transfer of methods of political, legal, and religious control.[22] The Organisation of American States (OAS) has denounced the presence of Cuban agents involved in intelligence and repression in both countries, as well as the adoption of institutional practices inspired by the Cuban system.[23]

The three regimes share common structural elements: concentration of power in political-family elites, co-option of the judiciary, censorship of the media, and systematic criminalisation of dissent.[24] In this context, religious freedom has been subjected to a parallel process of erosion, especially among ecclesial sectors that maintain a critical voice against the abuse of power.

The three regimes share a series of common methods to limit the autonomy of religious communities.[25] First, they require the mandatory registration of religious organisations, allowing the State to supervise and condition their functioning. Then they monitor churches, liturgical events, leaders, and social activities of religious groups, especially when these may influence public opinion or engage in the defence of human rights.

In addition, the regimes often resort to defamation campaigns and media pressure on critical religious leaders, often through state or para-state outlets. At the same time, they co-opt sympathetic leaders and promote the creation of a "pro-government Church" that supports the regime's narrative, while independent leaders face criminalisation, legal harassment, or even expulsion. On the level of narrative control, propaganda is used to portray faith communities as threats to national order and the common good. Finally, the movement of religious personnel is restricted through obstacles to granting visas to foreign clergy, bans on the entry of missionaries, and the expulsion of priests or pastors, thereby consolidating comprehensive control over religious life and its social influence.[26]

Venezuela:
covert repression despite constitutional freedom

Since the rise of Hugo Chávez in 1999, and with greater intensity under Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has shifted toward an authoritarian regime with strong ties to Cuba. The constitutional recognition of religious freedom, and the frequent profession of Christian faith by President Chávez himself, has coexisted with systematic practices of harassment, surveillance, legal obstacles, restrictions on public events, and smear campaigns through state media.


© Ed Yourdon

Mural in Havana showing three revolutionary figures in profile: Julio Antonio Mella, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Che Guevara

The State has promoted the creation of a "pro-government Church" aligned with its ideological discourse, while restricting the pastoral activity of ecclesial sectors that accompany marginalised communities or speak out against repression. This instrumentalisation of religion seeks to deactivate the prophetic function of Churches, neutralising them as autonomous social actors. The presence of Cuban advisors in Venezuelan security agencies has contributed to replicating the mechanisms of ideological-religious control observed in Havana.[27]

Nicaragua:
open persecution and criminalisation of the Church[28]

Nicaragua represents an intensification of this dynamic. Since his return to power in 2007, President Daniel Ortega has established a single-party regime that has adopted an openly hostile attitude toward the Catholic Church and other critical denominations.

The government has expelled clergy, confiscated church property, banned processions and public liturgical acts, and imprisoned clerics who have spoken out against state repression. The official narrative portrays the Church as an enemy of the State and sovereignty, thereby displacing faith communities from the public sphere and reducing their pastoral scope to the purely ceremonial, if not clandestine.

Religious repression in Nicaragua is not only ideological but also structural: control of the registration of religious organisations, censorship, police surveillance, the expulsion of foreign clergy, and the use of anti-terrorism laws against church leaders constitute a deliberate system of criminalisation of active faith, similar to that employed in Cuba.

Migration:
impact on Churches and community disruption

The export of the Cuban model has generated unprecedented migration crises. Between 2022 and 2023, Cuba experienced a massive emigration of 1.8 million people (18 percent of its population), reducing its population to 8.6 million.[29] Nicaragua registered an exodus of more than 719,000 people between 2018 and 2023, equivalent to 22 percent of its total population.[30] Venezuela faces the largest migration crisis in Latin America, with more than 7.7 million emigrants since 2014, approximately 25 percent of its population.[31]

There are common causes behind the mass migration from these three countries, including deep economic crises, political repression, and severe restrictions on fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. This emigration worsens the deterioration of religious freedom by draining communities of their most active and critical members, weakening internal religious structures and consolidating an environment increasingly controlled by authoritarian regimes.

BACKGROUNDER

Educating for freedom: teaching tolerance, empowering minorities

Marielle Boutros

Education is a decisive factor in shaping the values, perceptions, and social capacities of future adult citizens. In their formative years, children experience school as a microcosm of society, encountering cooperation and competition, inclusion and exclusion, fairness and injustice. Beyond acquiring academic knowledge, they learn how to interact with diversity, negotiate differences, and understand the responsibilities of living in a community.

These early experiences influence their worldview, their future participation in civic life, and their approach to people of different beliefs. Education, therefore, is not merely an academic enterprise, it can be a primary driver of social cohesion and human dignity. It can also be one of the most effective instruments for promoting religious freedom and ensuring the recognition of every person's equal dignity, conscience, and worth. This recognition is not innate; it must be taught and modelled.

In a world polarised by fear, education can be a place where a culture of peace and mutual respect begins to take root. And the classroom, when shaped by values of openness, responsibility, and care, becomes not just a place of learning, but also of character formation.

Education and the protection of religious freedom

Religious freedom flourishes where individuals learn to engage respectfully with those who hold different beliefs. Schools that cultivate critical thinking and empathy prepare students to reject intolerance and resist extremist narratives. This is particularly relevant for the protection of minority communities, which often face discrimination and marginalisation.

When minorities have access to quality education—especially in inclusive, pluralistic environments—they are better equipped to defend their rights, contribute to the socio-economic development of their communities and preserve their cultural and religious identity. Education serves a dual purpose: safeguarding fundamental freedoms and enabling equitable development.

In fragile States and conflict-affected societies, schools can also mitigate the drivers of religious discrimination by fostering shared experiences among children from different backgrounds. Early exposure to diversity helps dismantle stereotypes before they become too strong, creating generations more willing to cooperate across religious lines.

Lebanon: an illustrative case

Lebanon, one of the most religiously diverse countries in the Middle East, provides an instructive example. With 18 officially recognised faith communities, the country has historically maintained a model of coexistence that is rare in the region. At the heart of this coexistence lie the country's Catholic schools, which have, for decades, served as safe spaces for shared learning, cultural exchange, and interreligious friendship.

In these schools, Christian and Muslim students not only share the same academic curriculum but also build daily experiences of mutual respect and friendship. They grow up together, discovering each other's traditions, values and beliefs—not from textbooks, but through genuine human relationships. This daily interaction fosters mutual respect and challenges prejudices.

Due to the current crisis in Lebanon, these schools risk closure, endangering the spiritual formation of a generation, eroding community life, and accelerating the demographic decline of the Christian community. Their absence could create a vacuum which might then be filled by institutions lacking moral foundations or by radical actors, undermining decades of interreligious coexistence and fuelling mistrust, polarisation, and extremism.

A global challenge

The imperative to protect and expand inclusive education is global. From South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, from the Middle East to Latin America, minority communities often face structural barriers to education: lack of schools in minority areas, curricula that exclude or misrepresent their history, or social pressures that discourage attendance—especially for girls. In some contexts, legal restrictions explicitly limit religious education or the public expression of minority faiths, undermining the right of children to learn about their traditions.

Inclusive, rights-based education prepares students to defend not only their own rights but also the rights of others—a critical safeguard against the escalation from prejudice to persecution.

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Education and socio-economic empowerment of minorities

For minority communities, access to quality education is also a pathway to socio-economic advancement, reducing poverty and increasing representation in professions, governance, and public life. Education facilitates economic independence, which in turn strengthens the capacity of minorities to advocate for their rights without fear of retribution or dependence on dominant groups.

Investing in hope

Supporting schools with an explicit commitment to inclusivity, moral formation, and interreligious engagement is a strategic investment in social stability. For minorities, access to such is both a shield against discrimination and a gateway to socio-economic empowerment.

Preserving and expanding such educational spaces is not simply an academic or developmental concern—it is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for building pluralistic, resilient, and just societies. This is the hope in which we invest.

Pupils at St. Michael's Secondary School in Karachi, Pakistan.

In the upper image, children in a group session at the Antonine Sisters' primary school in Dekwaneh, Beirut

BACKGROUNDER

Marta Petrosillo

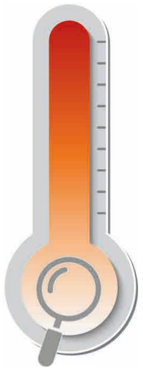
Religious freedom is a human right, enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. If religious freedom is denied to one, it is potentially denied to all. This principle lies at the heart of our shared humanity—and yet, as this Report reveals, it is more often a luxury than a guarantee.

The 2023–2024 biennium has been marked by deepening global turmoil—geopolitical conflicts, authoritarian retrenchment, rising inequality, and the slow erosion of democratic norms. The outbreak of the war between Hamas and Israel in October 2023 ignited a new wave of violence across the Middle East, with significant repercussions for international diplomacy and regional power dynamics. At the same time, the ongoing war in Ukraine showed no signs of resolution, further straining East–West relations and exacerbating the global energy and food crises. In Africa, a succession of military coups—combined with the withdrawal of international peacekeeping forces from countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic—facilitated the further expansion of jihadist violence throughout the Sahel and beyond. Meanwhile, mounting tensions in the Indo-Pacific, particularly around Taiwan and the South China Sea, underscored the intensifying strategic rivalry between the United States and China.

Religious freedom has not escaped this upheaval. Across continents, from dense urban centres to forgotten rural landscapes, individuals and communities continue to face threats for practising, professing or even merely identifying with certain beliefs.

In this 2025 edition of the *Religious Freedom in the World Report*, we investigate the complex, interwoven narratives that define current threats to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The Report classifies countries into four categories based on the severity of religious freedom violations. Persecution refers to grave and repeated acts of violence or harassment, often carried out with impunity. Discrimination involves legal or social restrictions that unfairly target specific religious groups. Under Observation includes countries showing early warning signs of serious violations, requiring close monitoring. All remaining countries are deemed compliant, showing no significant breaches and generally respect international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

This edition's categorisation highlights the severity of the situation:



- **24 countries** are under **Persecution**, suffering oppression or violent suppression.
- **38 countries** suffer **Discrimination**, with legal and social pressures curbing the exercise of faith.
- **24 countries** are **Under Observation**, revealing early signs of emerging threats.

According to the 2025 report, **62 countries are classified as experiencing either religious persecution or discrimination**. Together, they are home to approximately **5.4 billion people,** representing **64.7 percent of the global population**. This means that almost **two out of every three** people worldwide live in countries where religious freedom is seriously restricted.

Persecution

According to the Report, 24 countries are classified as experiencing religious persecution, including populous nations like India and China, and conflict-ridden or authoritarian States such as Afghanistan, Nigeria, North Korea, and Eritrea. Together, these countries are home to around **4.1 billion people—over half of the global population—who live under serious violations of religious freedom.**

The nature of persecution varies across different contexts. In **eight countries** — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Libya, Maldives, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan and Yemen — it results from a combination of **authoritarian governance and religious extremism**. In **seven others** — China, Eritrea, Iran, Nicaragua, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan — persecution is primarily driven by **authoritarian state control**. Another **seven countries** — Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Somalia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — are affected mainly by **religious extremism**. Finally, in India and Myanmar, **a combination of authoritarianism and ethno-religious nationalism** underpins the prevailing forms of persecution.

Discrimination

The 2025 Report identifies **38 countries as experiencing religious discrimination**. These include nations such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Mexico, Türkiye and Vietnam, where religious minorities face legal, political, or social restrictions that limit their freedom of belief and worship. Together, these countries account for approximately 1.3 billion people—around 17.3 percent of the global population. While not facing outright persecution, many individuals endure systematic discrimination, such as limited access to places of worship, constraints on religious expression, or unequal legal treatment.

The root causes of discrimination vary. In 28 countries, a single dominant factor prevails. **Authoritarianism is the most frequent**, affecting 24 countries including Algeria, Malaysia, Venezuela, and Türkiye, where state control curtails religious pluralism. In Chad, discrimination is driven by religious extremism, while in Haiti and Mexico it is linked to organised crime. Ethno-religious nationalism is the primary driver in Nepal.

In 10 other countries, discrimination results from a combination of factors. In Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Syria and Thailand, a mix of authoritarian governance and religious extremism is present. In Israel and Palestine, ethno-religious nationalism and extremism intersect to undermine religious freedom. In Sri Lanka, discrimination stems from both authoritarianism and ethno-religious nationalism.

Under Observation

Twenty-four countries are classified as "under observation" due to emerging threats to religious freedom. These include Chile, Indonesia, Kenya and Belarus, and represent more than 750 million people—roughly 9.3 percent of the global population. Though not currently experiencing significant persecution or discrimination, these nations show early warning signs such as growing authoritarianism, weakening legal safeguards, or rising religious intolerance. Their inclusion highlights the need for close monitoring and preventive action. Notably, **Mexico, Russia, and Ukraine**, previously under observation in 2023, has now **shifted to the Discrimination category**, underscoring a worsening trend regarding violations of religious freedom.

Authoritarian control and legal repression

A striking regional pattern emerges in **Latin America**, where many of the countries currently classified under Discrimination or Persecution—including **Cuba, Haiti, Messico, Nicaragua,** and **Venezuela**—as well as **Bolivia**, **Chile**, **Colombia** and **Honduras**, all placed under Observation, share political or ideological alignment with the São Paulo Forum. This transnational coalition of leftist parties and movements has often been associated with authoritarian tendencies, restrictions on civil liberties, and ideological control over public institutions. In such contexts, religious freedom is frequently undermined by the politicisation of religion, pressure on Churches perceived as critical of government actions, and constraints on faith-based organisations engaged in education, humanitarian work or social advocacy. The correlation suggests that the erosion of democratic safeguards and the rise of ideological rigidity may be factors contributing to the deterioration of religious freedom across the region (see main topic *The Cuban model and its export to Venezuela and Nicaragua*).

Allegorical statue of Lady Justice holding scales and sword representing fairness and law

In other regions too, governments continue to weaponise law and bureaucracy to control or suppress religious expression. In Asia, **China**'s intensified sinicisation campaigns subjugate Uyghur Muslims and Christian congregations under ideological conformity. New 2024 regulations mandate that all religious venues align explicitly with socialist values, while Tibetan and Muslim communities suffer renaming of villages, detentions, and destruction of worship spaces. Particularly concerning are laws that prohibit religious education for minors and restrict their participation in religious services (see case study on *China: Legal Restrictions on Religious Education for Minors*). **North Korea** maintains an absolute ban on religious expression. In **Vietnam** and **Laos**, Christian minorities, especially among indigenous groups, endure forced renunciation, destroyed churches, and even assassinations of pastors—with no legal protection. In both **Iran** and **Turkmenistan**, religious groups operate under constant state surveillance, while unregistered communities face the persistent risk of arrest, harassment or forced closure.

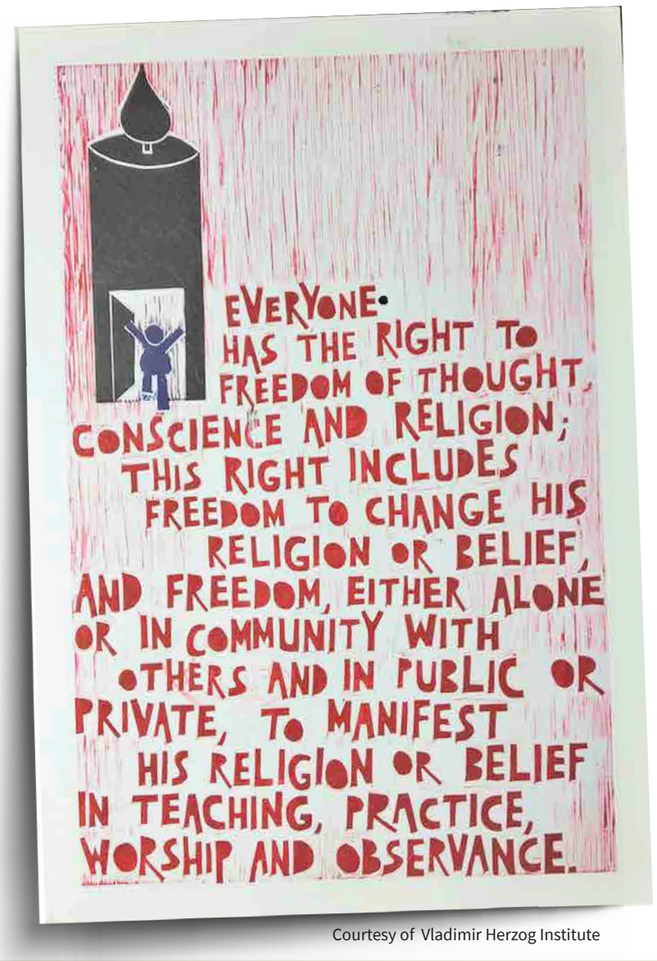
New and different faces of jihadism

Religious extremism remains one of the primary drivers of persecution worldwide. In recent years, jihadist movements have expanded their reach and diversified their strategies, increasingly adapting to local contexts and grievances. While **Africa** and the **Middle East** continue to serve as the main epicentres of jihadist activity, significant developments have also been observed in **Asia**, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Jihadist groups increasingly adapt to local contexts, combining regional autonomy with varying levels of central coordination, as seen in the Islamic State's evolving operations (see main topic on *The evolution of jihadism*). Groups have also exploited crises for mobilisation, notably the 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict. In early 2025, the Institute for the Study of War warned of ISIS's resurgence in Syria, where shifting counterterrorism priorities and security vacuums are enabling its re-emergence in the post-Assad landscape. In Western countries, the threat now stems from decentralised networks and lone actors.

Religious freedom as a casualty of war

In many regions affected by armed conflict—such as the **Sahel**, **Syria**, **Myanmar** or **Ukraine**—religious communities often suffer targeted violence. Terrorist groups, including Boko Haram, Islamic State affiliates, and al-Shabaab, continue to use religion as a pretext for violence, particularly against Christians and Muslims who reject the extremist ideology. In these areas, religious freedom cannot be separated from broader violations of human rights, displacement, and the collapse of state institutions.

Conflict zones reveal religious freedom's fragility. In the **Sahel**, jihadist groups—affiliates of ISIS and al-Qaeda—have escalated attacks on all faith groups. In **Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger** and **Nigeria,** violent attacks uproot entire communities, provoking mass displacement and dismantling communal worship (see main topic on *Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination* and the case study *Rollo, Burkina Faso – Forced displacement of a Christian community*). **Nigeria** has experienced a sharp rise in religiously motivated violence, especially in the North and the Middle Belt. Armed groups like Boko Haram, ISWAP, and radicalised Fulani herdsmen have targeted churches, villages and religious leaders, leading to widespread displacement, land seizures, and attacks on Christian communities (*see the backgrounder on Who are the Fulani*). In the **Horn of Africa**, war in **Sudan** is unleashing one of history's largest displacement crises; places of



Courtesy of Vladimir Herzog Institute

Xylograph by Otávio Roth of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights shown at the Human Rights Council in Geneva

worship are repurposed for combat, clergy detained and forced conversions reported. In **Somalia** death is imposed for apostasy and **Ethiopia** sees religious sites destroyed amid ethnic conflict, pushing faith leaders into hiding.

Meanwhile, the **Israel–Hamas conflict** has devastated Gaza's religious infrastructure and deepened fissures within Israeli society. Both sides face accusations of war crimes, while religious tourism—vital for local Christian communities—has collapsed. Jewish-Muslim communal tensions are being exacerbated by incendiary nationalist rhetoric and religious symbolism.

The **Ukraine war** has worsened religious freedom violations on both sides: Russia has repressed pro-Ukrainian groups, Ukraine has targeted Moscow-linked churches, and both have punished conscientious objectors. In Azerbaijan, the 2023 takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh ethnically cleansed 120,000 Armenian Christians and was followed by the widespread destruction of Christian heritage.

Organised crime: faith at gunpoint

In environments lacking effective state control, criminal groups often regulate religious life. In various unstable regions of **Latin America**, churches are looted, religious leaders kidnapped, and worship services scheduled or mediated by drug cartels. In **Haiti**'s failed State, priests and religious sisters are primary targets for ransom kidnappings, while churches have become outposts of survival in lawless territories. In **Mexico**, an increasing number of priests are being killed (see the case study on *Between bullets and blessings*). In **Ecuador** and **Guatemala**, cults symbiotically linked to criminal gangs further entangle religious practice with violence.

Similarly, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa—including, **Burkina Faso**, **Nigeria** and the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**—religious leaders and faith communities have suffered deadly violence and continue to face serious threats from organised crime and non-state militias.

One Nation, One Faith? Religion as a Marker of National Identity

In several countries today, religion is increasingly used to define national identity, fuelling the exclusion and marginalisation of minority groups. **India** exemplifies a model of "hybrid persecution", combining state-led legal suppression with social violence. Hindu nationalist policies under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have steadily eroded constitutional protections. In 2024 alone, Christians suffered 834 attacks, NGOs were targeted under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, and arrests under anti-conversion laws rose sharply—further restricting religious freedom (see the case study on *Anti-conversion laws in India*).

Nepal's emerging anti-conversion narrative has also led to the harassment of pastors and arrests for evangelism. In **Myanmar**, political repression, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation are deeply interwoven. The State's Bamar-Buddhist framework positions itself as the defender of national unity, while ethnic and religious minorities are subject to systematic repression and often accused of separatism. This dynamic creates a cycle of mistrust, marginalisation and violence that continues to fracture Burmese society. (See the backgrounder on *The Myanmar Triangle: Political, Ethnic and Religious Groups*.)

In several Muslim-majority countries, religious freedom remains heavily restricted due to the interpretation and enforcement of Islamic law. Where **Shari'a** is applied in ways that marginalise religious minorities, fundamental rights are severely curtailed. In **Iran**, Christians have been arrested for attending private house church gatherings. In **Pakistan**, blasphemy accusations—frequently aimed at non-Muslims—have led to mob violence and judicial prosecution. In **Afghanistan**, apostasy is still punishable by death (see the backgrounder *Law, Power, and Practice in the Muslim World: The Many Faces of Shari'a*).

Twice vulnerable: women of religious minorities

Grave violations continue to be perpetrated against women from religious minorities, who face compounded vulnerabilities due to both their gender and their faith. In **Pakistan**, cases of abduction, forced conversion, and coerced marriage involving Hindu and Christian girls remain alarmingly widespread. In January 2023, UN experts urged the Pakistani government to take action, highlighting the severe impact of these practices on religious freedom and children's rights. Yet such abuses persist. In 2025, 12-year-old Ariha Gulzar and 10-year-old Laiba Suhail were kidnapped, converted, and married, with falsified documents and ongoing threats against their families. Only sustained legal pressure eventually led to arrests.

In **Egypt** the number of disappearances involving underage Christian girls has risen sharply. Families report abductions, conversions, and customary marriages. More than 30 such cases were documented in 2024, pointing to a deeply troubling and escalating trend.

Clashing freedoms: religion in the age of ideological conformity

In some democratic countries, legal rulings and public policies have increasingly placed religious freedom in tension with other fundamental rights or purported rights. This dynamic is particularly evident in **Western and Latin American contexts**, where secular ideologies often clash with traditional religious norms. The 2024 report of the Inter-American Commission on

Human Rights (IACHR) drew criticism for portraying religious freedom as potentially conflicting with anti-discrimination rights.

Even in societies with strong constitutional safeguards—such as those in the OSCE region—**conscientious objection** has come under increasing pressure, especially in relation to military service and abortion (see the case study on *The Diminishing Right of Conscientious Objection*). Legal frameworks and prevailing cultural expectations are progressively prioritising competing real or alleged rights over religious liberty.

Hostility toward religion has intensified across several regions: in **Canada**, Catholic churches have been targeted by arson attacks, in **Spain**, **Greece**, and **Croatia**, religious symbols and processions have come under ideological assault and in **Belgium**, religious leaders have faced penalties for refusing female ordination. Following the Gaza conflict, hate incidents against Jews and Muslims surged across **Europe**, while attacks on Christians continued.

In Western OSCE States, hostility against Christians is often underreported due to lacking documentation. This gap weakens policy responses, normalises hostility, fosters unequal treatment, and increases the vulnerability of Christian communities (see the backgrounder on *Polite Persecution: The Sin of Omission*). Yet notable exceptions remain. Courts in the **United Kingdom** and the **United States** have upheld religious rights in key cases involving freedom of speech and employment protections, demonstrating that democratic systems can still offer meaningful safeguards for freedom of religion when judicial independence is maintained.

Beyond the screen: digital persecution and the future of religious freedom

The digital sphere has introduced powerful tools of repression. In many countries, religious content is censored online, and individuals face arrest for social media posts. Authoritarian regimes use surveillance technologies to monitor religious expression, often labelling minorities as extremists. In **China** and **Russia**, online dissent is filtered and punished, while religious platforms are blocked. Extremist groups also exploit digital tools to incite violence and spread propaganda. Social media is weaponised to silence minorities, spread hate speech, and fuel polarisation. In **Pakistan**, blasphemy accusations, often baseless, are increasingly tied to online posts. Organised networks track digital activity and call for government intervention or incite mob violence. A 2023 report by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, using data from Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency, recorded over 400,000 complaints, highlighting how digital surveillance facilitates religious repression.

The potential for **Artificial Intelligence** to be used in the manipulation and repression of believers is both vast and deeply troubling. In **North Korea**, reports indicate that authorities enforce a surveillance system that captures a screenshot from every phone every five minutes, storing the images for state monitoring. The immense capabilities of AI must be governed by meaningful human oversight and ethical safeguards, so that its deployment upholds human dignity and contributes to the protection of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in all its dimensions (See the backgrounder on *A change of era: Religious freedom in the age of artificial intelligence*).

Seeds of hope: standing for religious freedom

Despite escalating threats, religious communities continue to play a vital role in advancing peace, dialogue, and human dignity. Faith-based organisations often lead humanitarian responses, defend human rights, and support displaced populations. In conflict-affected regions—across the **Middle East**, **Africa**, **Asia**, and **Latin America**—religious leaders offer both moral guidance and concrete assistance. In **Mozambique**'s Cabo Delgado, the Church has become a pillar of support and interreligious dialogue amid jihadist violence (see the case study *The Church's Active Role in Cabo Delgado*). In countries like **Burkina Faso**, local initiatives are fostering interreligious dialogue even in the face of extremist threats (see the case study *Burkina Faso: The Peace Match*).

Education too plays a decisive role in this effort, promoting social cohesion, affirming dignity, and empowering minorities both culturally and socio-economically (see the backgrounder *Educating for Freedom: Teaching Tolerance, Empowering Minorities*).

Finally, **Pope Francis** was one of the most authoritative voices globally in the defence of dialogue and religious freedom (see the backgrounder *Pope Francis and Religious Freedom: A Right for Peace*).

Yet for these signs of hope to translate into lasting change, a collective and sustained commitment is essential. The defence and promotion of religious freedom cannot rest solely on the shoulders of religious leaders or civil society actors—it must involve governments, institutions, educators, and individuals alike. Religious freedom is a shared responsibility. We must all raise our voices to demand the urgent protection of freedom of religion and conscience around the world, as guaranteed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Religious freedom must be guaranteed for all. **Religious freedom is a human right, not a privilege**.

CASE STUDY

Rollo, Burkina Faso - Forced displacement of a Christian community[32]

Maria Lozano

On 8 May 2023, Islamist extremists attacked the town of Rollo in northern Burkina Faso, forcing the entire population—about 2,000 people—to flee.

Following a pattern of targeted violence in the Sahel, the militants entered the town, killed several residents at random to instil fear, and looted and burnt homes, demanding that all inhabitants leave before nightfall. The next morning, civilians trying to recover belongings were killed along the road.

The displaced community, including women, children, elderly people, and Church leaders such as the Catholic parish priest, Fr Étienne Sawadogo, fled overnight on foot towards Kongoussi and Séguénéga, around 40 kilometres away. The escape route was mined by the attackers. A mine exploded during the night, killing livestock only seconds before the group passed.

For many, displacement meant not only losing their homes but also their livelihoods, security, and sense of identity. Fr Sawadogo later described the experience as an "Exodus", comparing it to the biblical story of forced departure and hardship.

The refugees arrived exhausted, traumatised, and without possessions. The host towns were unprepared to receive so many people. The local Church, especially the parish of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus in Kongoussi, responded quickly by providing food, clothing, and shelter. Government aid took several days to arrive due to registration procedures and coordination problems, making the Church's response essential.

A similar case occurred in October 2023 in the village of Débé, in northwest Burkina Faso, where terrorists gave the Christian population a 72-hour ultimatum to leave. Before this, militants killed two young scouts in the village church for resisting orders. Bishop Prosper B. Ky of the Diocese of Dédougou called the event unprecedented, noting that, unlike earlier attacks on mixed communities, this was the first time that the entire Christian community was expelled solely because of their faith.[33]

The violence in Rollo and Débé is part of a wider strategy by extremist groups to control rural areas by forcing out those who do not share their ideology or religion. By targeting Christian communities, their aim is not only to spread fear but also to change the demographic and religious makeup to secure control over the territory.

In this case, as in many areas of the Sahel and other parts of the world, the forced displacement is a direct consequence of persecution, creating a humanitarian crisis as displaced people move to overcrowded towns and areas unable to support them. This pattern shows the links between religious persecution, the territorial aims of armed groups, and community destabilisation.

Displaced Christians from the parishes of Rollo, seeking refuge in Kongoussi and Séguenega

BURKINA FASO

BACKGROUNDER

Fulani and jihadism in Africa: between legacy and manipulation

Maria Lozano

Jihadist violence in the Sahel and West Africa has become an increasingly complex phenomenon, particularly in countries such as Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso. One of the most debated issues concerns the Fulani, or Peul, who are often portrayed as if they were a jihadist movement in themselves. While it is important to stress that not all Fulani are jihadists,[34] victims and observers often point out that a significant number of recruits to certain armed groups in the Sahel and West Africa are Fulani. This reality calls for explanations that go beyond simplistic narratives, considering the relevant geopolitical, historical, and social dimensions.

Who are the Fulani?

The Fulani, also known as Peul or Fula, are one of the largest and most widely dispersed ethnic groups in Africa, with an estimated population of between 25 and 40 million[35] spread across at least 20 countries in the Sahel and West Africa. They are traditionally nomadic herders, though many have taken to living in agropastoral or urban settings, and their common language is Fulfulde, also known as Fula or Peul.[36]

The group has a complex social structure, divided into castes, including nobility, clergy, artisans and lower-caste nomadic herders,[37] their identity is deeply influenced by **Sunni Islam**[38] and they are historically connected to the Islamisation of the region. It is important, though, to stress that they are not a socially, politically or ideologically homogenous group.[39]

Castes and internal divisions: the hidden social dimension[40]

The **internal caste structure of the Fulani** is frequently ignored in public discussion but plays a role in jihadist recruitment. The **high caste,** including the religious or noble aristocracy connected to the ancient emirs and caliphates, dominate land and politics and are mostly opposed to jihadism. The **lower caste** including young landless herders are descendants of former serfs or slaves with no access to education or basic services. This is the most vulnerable segment and the one most exposed to recruitment.

This social division explains why so many radicalised low-caste Fulani youth act not only against other communities, but also against their own traditional elites, perceived as part of an unjust political system.[41] Although most Fulani are not implicated in jihadism—and in many cases are victims—certain radical groups have managed to recruit sectors of the lower castes of this community. This jihadism works as a means of symbolic social ascent and intra-ethnic social revenge.

Contemporary factors of radicalisation[42]

External factors increasingly play a role driving Fulani jihadist activities. These include: a systemic social exclusion and marginalisation due to the nomadic lifestyle; territorial encroachment and a reduction of traditional herding routes due to demographic growth and climate change; agrarian conflicts with settled groups, including over land and water access; and ethnic stigmatisation and violence by state forces or local militia.

In countries such as Burkina Faso, the Fulani have been stigmatised as "potential terrorists" leading to extrajudicial killings by the army or local militias. In Mali, Wagner mercenaries have attacked and killed Fulani for suspected terrorist involvement.[43] Meanwhile, jihadist groups like the Katiba Macina, an al-Qaeda–linked jihadist militia active in central Mali, offer the marginalised communities protection, thus boosting their legitimacy.[44]

Manipulation by external groups

Contemporary jihadism instrumentalises Fulani identity in several ways. The following facts indicate that **the violence comes not only from within, but is also whipped up from outside**:[45]

1. **Transnational jihadist groups** (such as the Islamic State Sahara Province, or JNIM) take advantage of the mobility and spread of the Fulani to establish logistics and recruitment networks.

2. Traditional Fulani herding and trade routes facilitate the **smuggling of arms and people, and the spread of extremist ideas** through porous borders.

3. Some regional **geopolitical actors**—including States or regional interests—can manipulate Fulani violence as a tool for territorial destabilisation or control.

Nigeria and the contemporary interpretation of the historical jihadist legacy

In Nigeria's Middle Belt, conflicts between Muslim Fulani herders and Christian Berom, Tiv and Idoma farmers have degenerated into systematic violence that transcends the traditional rural struggle over access to land and water. The state of Benue, known as the "granary of Nigeria", is an example of this development, with patterns of violence that many analysts no longer consider merely "intercommunal".[46]

The historical dimension is key to understanding the current situation. Usman dan Fodio's jihad (see box) did not conquer Nigeria's Christian centre and south, but it did leave deep trauma.[47] In Benue, Tiv tradition tells of a crucial victory over the Fulani in Ushongo Hills, which has become a symbol of resistance and refusal of political Islam.[48]

Historical legacy has also been **reappropriated by jihadist groups** such as **Boko Haram, ISWAP** and the **Katiba Macina** in Mali.[49] Many Fulani militants—especially young low-caste nomads without access to education or resources—are recruited by these groups, which instrumentalise both Islam and historical and socio-economic grievances.

Current ethnic and religious dimension

According to traditional leaders[50] and international organisations,[51] the Middle Belt incidents are **not random attacks**, but rather part of a campaign of **ethnic and religious cleansing**. Most victims of the Fulani conflict in the Middle Belt are Christian, and the affected areas tend to coincide with regions that resisted the Islamic expansion of the nineteenth century.[52]

Although the federal government has recognised the crisis, its response has been **slow, reactive and without legal consequences** for perpetrators. Despite laws against open grazing, promises of dialogue, and security deployments, massacres continue and tens of thousands of displaced survive in difficult conditions.[53]

What is at stake?

The crisis in the Sahel and the **Middle Belt** cannot be read simply as a local clash between herders and farmers. This is a **never-ending war for land, religious identity and economic and political power**. The collective trauma of the historical jihads,[54] aggravated by state inaction and manipulation by extremist groups, feeds a cycle of violence that threatens to spread throughout the entire region. Christian communities—especially in Nigeria—face systematic persecution, but many Fulani are also victims of structural violence and ideological manipulation. Building a lasting peace in the Sahel requires truth, justice and a thorough analysis capable of going beyond polarising discourse.

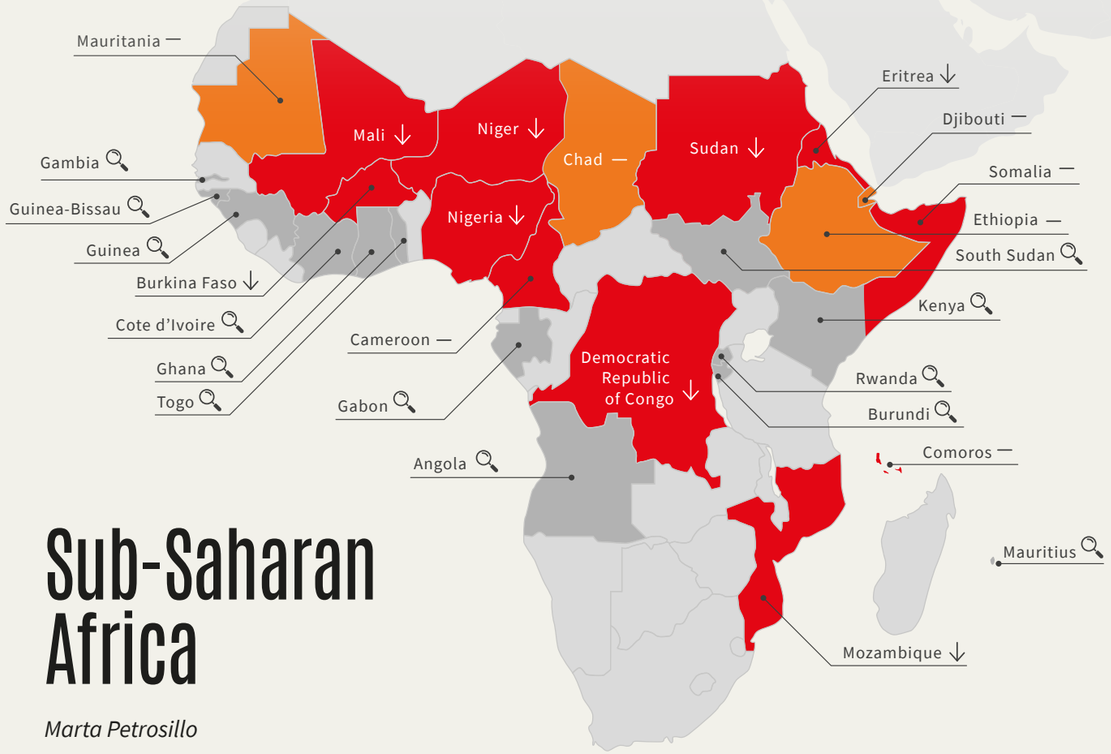
© Eric Lafforgue

A Fulani herder grazing his cattle in Africa

Historical roots: the jihads of the Sahel[55]

The relationship between the Fulani and jihadism has deep roots.

- **Usman dan Fodio** (1804-1808) unified varied peoples under the Sokoto Caliphate based on Shari'a and Fulani dominance, giving rise to policies of exclusion that continue to cause tension and reawaken trauma among non-Muslim and non-Fulani communities.[56]
- **Seku Amadu** (1818-1845) led a movement around the Inner Niger Delta, founding the theocratic Fulani State of Macina that lasted almost a century and remains a reference for some armed groups,[57] such as the Katiba Macina, in its struggle against the State and other communities.
- **Omar Saidou Tall** (1848-1864) unified the territories of Mali, Senegal and Guinea under an Islamic system, leaving a deep mark on the ethnic and religious configuration.



Sub-Saharan Africa

Marta Petrosillo

During the period under review, Africa remained the region most affected by jihadist activity. The violence stems not from a single entity but from a decentralised network of affiliated movements operating autonomously but sharing ideology, tactics, and resources. These movements exploit porous borders and weak governance to expand across regions, forming a loosely coordinated structure. Despite their independence, they exchange weapons, fighters, and propaganda, enhancing their resilience and reach. Their adaptability has had devastating consequences for civilians, including Christian communities. This transnational and flexible model allows jihadist actors to thrive amid ongoing instability (see main topic on *The Evolution of Jihadism*).

According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, militant Islamist groups remain a major source of instability across five regions of the continent. In 2024 alone, these groups were responsible for 22,307 deaths.[58]

Escalation of jihadist violence in the Sahel

The Sahel remains the region of the world most affected by terrorism and jihadist violence, accounting for over half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2024. As reported in the Global Terrorism Index 2025, five of the ten countries most impacted by terrorism are in this region—Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon—highlighting its central place in the current wave of extremist violence.[59]

Burkina Faso remained the hardest-hit country globally in 2024, accounting for 20 percent of all terrorism-related deaths despite a 21 percent decline from the previous year. Since 2015, jihadist violence has surged, turning the country—once a model of religious harmony—into the epicentre of extremist activity in the Sahel.[60] Groups like JNIM, Islamic State affiliates, and Ansarul Islam target both Muslim and Christian communities, often attacking places of worship. Religious leaders have been abducted or killed, and Christian communities displaced or banned from practising publicly. In mid-2024, nearly 100 Christians were killed in the Zekuy-Doumbala region.[61]

Mali has experienced a steady decline in security and fundamental rights, becoming one of the world's most terrorism-affected countries. The crisis began in 2012, when the infiltration of extremist groups into northern Mali reignited the Tuareg rebellion. Representing about ten percent of the population, the Tuareg, through the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), sought northern autonomy and temporarily allied with Islamist groups such as AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine to expel government forces.[62]

The 2015 peace agreement has since collapsed. The withdrawal of UN peacekeepers in 2023 and the deployment of Russian Wagner mercenaries further deepened the crisis. Jihadist violence has intensified across the country, with civilians—including Christians—suffering abductions, abuse, and the imposition of religious rules. In 2024, the junta suspended political activity and cracked down on dissent. The situation remains critical, with fears of civil conflict and continued human rights violations.

Niger has faced a sharp decline in security, governance, and human rights under the military junta led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani. A Transitional Charter adopted in March 2025 launched a 60-month transition, formally protecting religious freedom but in an increasingly volatile context. The country has become a major jihadist hotspot, with ISSP, al-Qaeda affiliates, and Boko Haram active nationwide. The Tillabéri region, near Mali and Burkina Faso, remains the epicentre of attacks. In 2024, Niger saw a 94 percent rise in terrorism-related deaths—the world's highest increase.[63] Both Muslim and Christian communities have suffered, with attacks on churches, mosques and religious gatherings, and abductions of leaders. There have been some efforts at interfaith dialogue, but radical networks, institutional fragility, and authoritarianism have eroded civil space and resilience. Christian minorities remain especially at risk, facing threats, forced conversions, and worship restrictions.

In July 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formalised their alliance by establishing the Confederation of Sahel States (CSS), following their coordinated withdrawal from ECOWAS.[64] This development signals a broader realignment away from Western institutions, as these military-led regimes strengthen their partnerships with Russia and China.

Coups, elections and constitutional changes: a shift in governance

Between 2023 and 2025, Sub-Saharan Africa experienced a wave of coups and constitutional overhauls that reflected deeper governance crises and often had direct consequences for religious freedom. **Two successful coups** (Niger[65] and Gabon[66]) and a number of **failed attempts** (Burkina Faso,[67] Guinea-Bissau[68] and DRC[69]) occurred in this period.

Other countries adopted or proposed significant constitutional reforms, many of which sparked controversy or had adverse consequences. In the **Central African Republic**, a 2023 referendum abolished term limits and created a vice-presidency, enabling President Touadéra to run for a third term in December 2025.[70] **Chad**'s December 2023 referendum reintroduced a semi-presidential system, a Prime Minister, a Senate, and a human rights commission, though accountability remains uncertain. In late 2024, a new constitution was promulgated in **Gabon**[71] and the government launched a national dialogue to revitalise its democratic institutions after 54 years under the Bongo dynasty.[72] In March 2024, **Togo**'s Parliament approved a new constitution that critics argue undermines democracy, transitioning the country to a parliamentary system and effectively removing term limits for President Gnassingbé, who has been in power since 2005.[73]

In 2024, elections were scheduled in 19 African countries, but many were postponed, manipulated or held under authoritarian conditions. Military regimes in **Burkina Faso**,[74] **Mali**,[75] **Guinea**[76] and **Guinea-Bissau**[77] failed to deliver on their pledges for a democratic transition, while major national elections were held in **Mauritania**,[78] **Chad**,[79] **Senegal**,[80] and **Togo.**[81] In **South Africa**, Catholic bishops described the electoral process as "overwhelmingly free and fair".[82]

The Horn of Africa: civil wars, religious violence and regional spillover

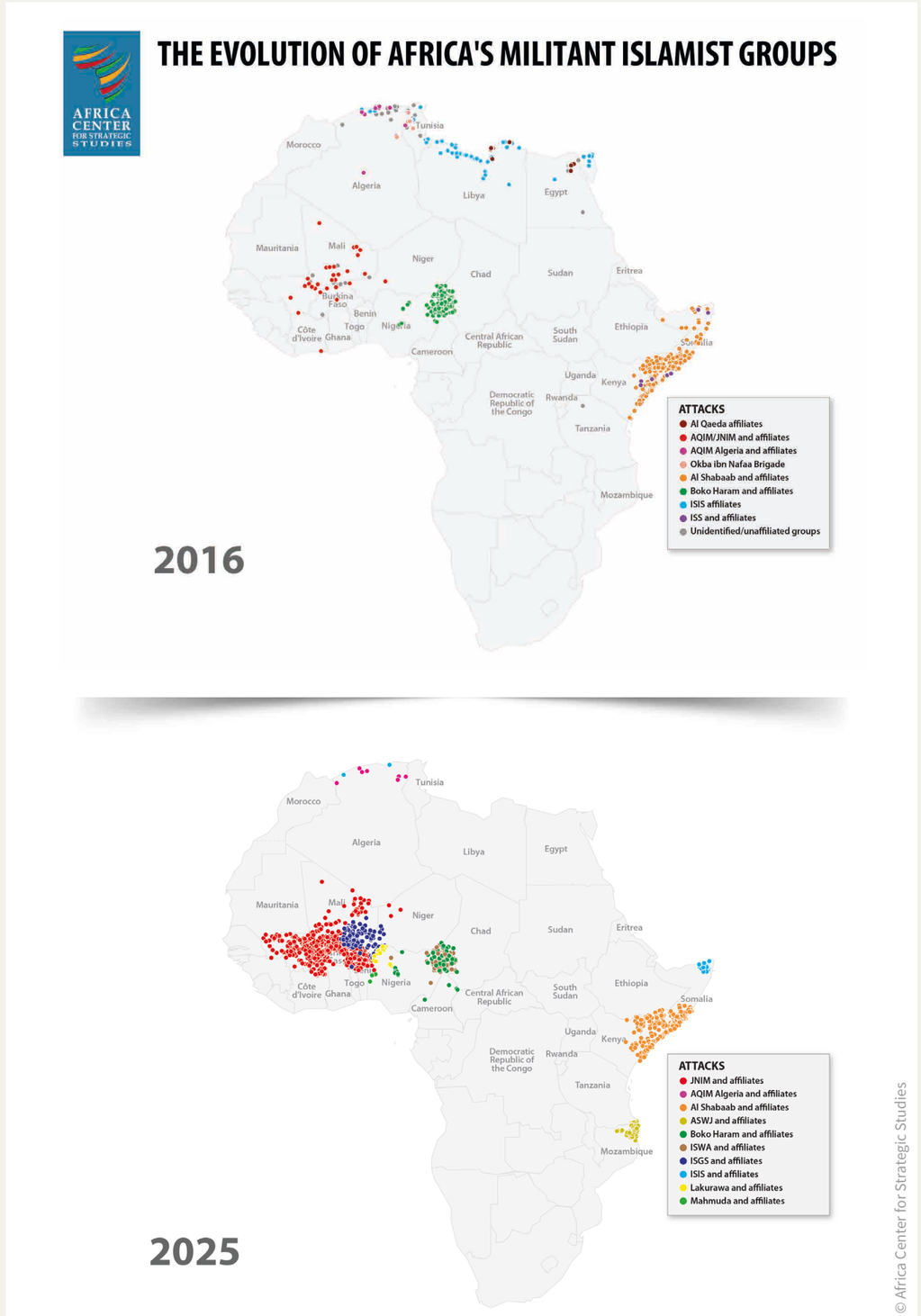
The Horn of Africa remains deeply unstable, with overlapping civil wars, extremist threats, and cross-border tensions.

Since April 2023, **Sudan** has experienced civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, triggering the world's largest displacement crisis with nearly 13 million people uprooted.[83] Both factions have bombed religious sites, tortured clergy, and turned churches and mosques into military bases. Christians have suffered forced conversions, arbitrary detention, and violent attacks as religious freedom sharply deteriorates.

The violence has affected **South Sudan**, where the influx of refugees and retaliatory ethnic violence have destabilised the country's fragile peace process. The transitional government has postponed elections and is struggling to draft a permanent constitution.[84]

The situation in **Somalia** remains critical. Al-Shabaab controls large rural areas and enforces an extreme version of Shari'a, forbidding Christian worship, punishing apostasy with death, and targeting anyone deemed "un-Islamic". Christian converts must practise in secret, risking violence, imprisonment or death. ISIS-Somalia is also expanding, particularly in Puntland, adding to instability. Tensions with Ethiopia and Somaliland, combined with arms inflows and internal clan conflict, further undermine efforts to curb jihadist violence.[85]

After Somalia, **Kenya** has been the country most affected by violence linked to al-Shabaab.[86] Long regarded as a regional stabiliser, Kenya has come under pressure from cross-border attacks and internal religious tensions. In 2023 and 2024, dozens of attacks were recorded in Mandera, Lamu, and Garissa counties, targeting civilians, including Christians. At the same time, discrimination against Muslims has remained a source of tension. A positive development came in February 2025, when President William Ruto abolished the vetting system imposed on Muslims applying for national identification cards[87]—a move welcomed by civil society as a step toward reducing marginalisation. Despite these challenges, interfaith relations across the country have largely remained peaceful.



Note: Compiled by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, each map shows violent events involving the listed groups for a year ending June 30. Group designations are intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered official. Due to the fluid nature of many groups, affiliations may change.
Sources: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); Centro Para Democracia e Direitos Humanos; Hiraal Institute; HumAngle; International Crisis Group; Institute for Security Studies; MENASTREAM; the Washington Institute; and the United Nations.

Comparative maps illustrating the geographical distribution of jihadist movements in Africa in 2016 and 2025

Religious freedom in **Ethiopia** remains precarious amid persistent conflict and political instability. Ongoing violence in Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara has severely affected religious communities, leading to the destruction of places of worship, the killing of clergy, and the disruption of religious activities. The intersection of religious and ethnic identities has further undermined interfaith cohesion. At the regional level, counterterrorism cooperation has come under strain due to tensions with the Somali government—tensions exacerbated by Ethiopia's agreement with Somaliland.

Across the Horn of Africa, religious freedom is threatened not only by jihadist violence but also by state-led repression. In **Eritrea**, government policy effectively criminalises unauthorised religious practice, with dissenters facing arbitrary arrest, torture, and prolonged detention. Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Muslims—including minors and clergy—are routinely targeted. Religious gatherings are banned, and detainees are held in inhumane, overcrowded conditions without due process. Under Eritrea's authoritarian regime, conditions for religious freedom remain critically poor.

Nigeria: Religious communities under assault

Nigeria witnessed a surge in religiously motivated violence between January 2023 and December 2024, particularly in the North and the Middle Belt. Armed groups such as Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and various militias carried out large-scale attacks on churches, villages and religious leaders. In Plateau and Benue States, thousands were displaced and hundreds killed, including more than 1,100 Christians—among them 20 clergy—in just one month following the 2023 presidential inauguration.[88] During Christmas 2023, coordinated attacks by local and foreign militants left nearly 300 dead.[89] In June 2025, around 200 displaced Christians were massacred in Benue.[90]

Radicalised Fulani herdsmen continue to be implicated in attacks against Christian communities, often involving land seizures and displacement. While some analysts frame the conflict in environmental terms, local Church leaders described it as a deliberate strategy to expel Christian populations (see the backgrounder on *Fulani and Jihadism in Africa: between legacy and manipulation*). In May 2024, a Christian high school was attacked in Makurdi[91]—an unprecedented escalation. Blasphemy accusations and witchcraft-related killings added to the toll, including public lynchings.

Religious leaders and clergy were frequent targets, with dozens kidnapped or murdered. Islamist groups also clashed with authorities, such as during the deadly police crackdown on a Shi'a procession in Abuja. Meanwhile, religious police (*hisbah*) continued to enforce Shari'a-based restrictions in several northern states, despite federal constitutional prohibitions.

Central and Southern Africa: emerging Fronts

The **Democratic Republic of the Congo** is experiencing one of the most severe and multifaceted crises in Sub-Saharan Africa. Armed groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), affiliated with the Islamic State, have systematically attacked Christian communities, killing civilians, destroying places of worship and abducting clergy. In the eastern provinces, more than 120 militias[92] compete for control of mineral-rich areas, while the collapse of public services and the weak presence of the State leave religious communities particularly exposed. The conflict transcends national borders: the M23 rebel group, backed by Rwanda, and Uganda's military operations against the ADF demonstrate the extent of regional involvement. In January 2025, M23 captured Goma, resulting in mass civilian casualties and large-scale displacement. At the same time, Churches engaged in peace advocacy have faced retaliation from state authorities.[93] As violence escalates and religious communities lose access to safe spaces and basic protections, the conditions for religious freedom in eastern DRC continue to deteriorate, threatening broader stability across the Great Lakes region.

Mozambique has witnessed a renewed surge in jihadist violence in Cabo Delgado, where Islamic State-affiliated militants have continued to attack Christian communities, burn churches and kill civilians. Despite the presence of international military forces, the insurgents have expanded into new districts, taking advantage of weak state control and governance vacuums. Despite this context, religious communities—particularly the Catholic Church—have remained actively engaged in promoting peace and interreligious dialogue. The Interfaith Declaration of Pemba, signed in 2022 by Christian and Muslim leaders, reaffirmed their shared commitment to preventing the instrumentalisation of religion. In 2024, the Islamic Council of Mozambique signalled its willingness to mediate with jihadist elements. These efforts underscore the resilience of religious actors in the face of growing insecurity (see case study on *The Church's active role in Cabo Delgado*).

Migrations

Another critical issue affecting Sub-Saharan Africa is the sharp rise in displacement and migration, both within and across national borders. By the end of 2024, the region hosted 38.8 million internally displaced persons—nearly half of the global total.[94] In **East Africa**, the **Horn of Africa**, and the **Great Lakes** regions, 5.4 million refugees and asylum seekers were recorded.[95] Cross-border migration within the continent has also increased, with the number of Africans residing in other African countries rising from 12 million in 2015 to 15 million in 2024—a 25 percent increase.[96] Much of this displacement has been fuelled by escalating jihadist violence (see main topic on *Fleeing from religiously motivated persecution and discrimination*).

MOZAMBIQUE

CASE STUDY

The Church's active role in Cabo Delgado

Paulo Aido

Since 2011, the resource-rich region of Cabo Delgado in northern Mozambique has suffered violence, with local people forced to abandon homes and livelihoods. It began with the security forces of multinational companies, in search of rubies and fossil fuels, driving communities off their lands and these, in the absence of state protection, turning to the jihadists for help.

Since the outbreak of jihadist violence with the attack on Mocímboa da Praia on 5 October 2017, the region has faced an unrelenting humanitarian crisis. More than 5,000 people have been killed, and over one million have been displaced.

Amid this devastation, the Catholic Church has not only remained a faithful presence alongside the victims but has emerged as a proactive force for peace, reconciliation, and support. As well as giving spiritual consolation, religious congregations, diocesan institutions, and Catholic NGOs have coordinated emergency relief, built shelters, provided food and clean water, and reopened schools in displaced communities. Church-based actors have offered trauma counselling and legal assistance to survivors—particularly women and children affected by abductions and gender-based violence.

Friar Boaventura, a Brazilian missionary with the Institute of the Poor of Jesus Christ, said: "I saw people being cruelly sacrificed; I saw the destruction of villages and of dreams." He spoke of a people who had lost everything, yet who, even amid profound destitution, still held on to something no one could take from them: "faith and hope in God."[97]

Sister Núbia Zapata Castaño, a Colombian Carmelite, was displaced when terrorists attacked the town of Macomia in 2020 where she was leading an educational project. "They fired into the air and people fled. Anyone caught was killed or abducted," she said. Despite the trauma, she and her community resumed their mission shortly after the attack, focusing on helping displaced children return to school.[98]

The Church has played an active role in peacebuilding, humanitarian response, and community reconstruction. In areas where the State is absent or distrusted, the Church has become a bridge—offering both moral leadership and practical solutions in the face of trauma, division, and loss. Catholic schools have reopened to offer education in refugee camps, and interreligious roundtables have been initiated to foster dialogue and mutual trust between Muslims and Christians.

The neighbourhood of Mahate is considered the heart of Islam in the city of Pemba. The Spanish priest Fr. Eduardo Roca has carried out remarkable work in this community—which is also his parish—promoting interreligious dialogue. "Over the years, in this Muslim neighbourhood with a strong fundamentalist identity, we have built a church that today stands as a testimony of peace and a place of welcome for all," he said. "I am aware that we were only able to achieve this thanks to the appreciation of the local community—something that, on my part, required patience, listening and learning, understanding the deep values of different cultures and Islam, and going a step further: loving them."[99]

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An internally displaced person in an IDP camp in Metuge district, Cabo Delgado Province, northern Mozambique

CASE STUDY

Burkina Faso: the peace match

Amélie Berthelin

The thermometer hovers around 40°C on a December afternoon in Bissinghin, a suburb of Ouagadougou. The whistle blows for kick-off. The ball darts between the legs of both young and older players, sending up a cloud of laterite dust with every strike. More than a thousand spectators have gathered for the third edition of a match unlike any other: on one side, a team of Catholics and Protestants; on the other, Muslims and followers of the traditional religion. The goalkeepers are none other than the parish priest and the sheikh of the neighbouring mosque. And the referee? The chief of the traditional religion. The game ends with the ideal score—one goal each—amid applause and shouts of joy.

"It was magnificent, a truly powerful moment," says Fr. André Kabre, parish priest of St Augustine. For this priest — whose brother was killed by jihadists two years ago — interreligious dialogue initiatives like this are essential. Plagued by terrorism since 2015, the "land of upright people" is suffering from daily attacks that now reach every part of the country. While it is true that not all terrorists are jihadists, the many massacres carried out to the cry of *Allahu akbar* have inevitably linked Muslims with jihadists in the public mind. "Tensions did exist," Fr. André acknowledges, "but with this match and all the other initiatives we have implemented, the situation has clearly calmed."

Sheikh Chaman shares this view: "It is one thing for leaders to preach unity and social cohesion in their respective places of worship, but when our faithful see us playing together on the same field, it becomes an even stronger call for peace and harmony to return to Burkina Faso." A commitment shared by the Federation of Islamic Associations (FAIB), which trains hundreds of imams to counter hate speech and the glorification of violence.[100]

Yet, the leaders admit, such a level of dialogue is not always possible. The sheikh of another nearby, more hardline Sunni mosque, for example, has never agreed to take part in activities of this kind.

Burkina Faso draws great strength from its tradition of religious coexistence in resisting radicalism. Almost every Burkinabé has a family member of another faith, without this generally posing a major problem, as family ties generally take precedence over everything else. In recent years, however, almost everyone also has — like Fr. André — a brother, father or relative who has been murdered, often brutally. To prevent such suffering from turning into hatred, education and tangible examples of interreligious dialogue such as this football match are indispensable.

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A moment at the end of the match with players gathered alongside their religious leaders.

BURKINA FASO

BACKGROUNDER

A change of era: religious freedom in the age of artificial intelligence

José Luis Bazán, PhD

The sudden insertion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into the daily lives of societies has generated a revolution with consequences for humanity that are changing each day. The enjoyment of fundamental human rights, including freedom of thought, conscience and religion, is confronted with new challenges for which there are still no clear answers.[101] As Pope Francis said, "We cannot presume a priori that its development will make a beneficial contribution to the future of humanity and to peace among peoples."[102]

While the enormous benefits of AI are obvious, some undesirable effects are already evident, and others are just beginning to be felt.[103] AI might facilitate religious education (e.g. Qur'anic recitation,[104] or connection with Jewish traditions)[105] and intensify interreligious understanding;[106] or it might denaturalise religious experience,[107] spread religious extremism,[108] and normalise harmful ideologies such as Holocaust denialism.[109] AI can prevent the vandalism of religious sites and provide security for temples and the faithful but it can also be used to attack them; for example, with AI-guided armed drones.[110] Jihadists in Africa are already using open-source AI tools and modified drones for their assaults.[111]

AI has the potential to protect religious minorities but can also become a powerful technology used for authoritarian control and the repression of believers**.** China's AI-powered surveillance system identifies, tracks down (through online activities too) and oppresses religious groups and individuals labelled as "undesirable". It also implements AI preventive policing against some religious communities based on Big Data, flagging them as a security risk.[112] North Korean authorities operate a system embedded in each mobile phone that takes a screenshot every five minutes for state control purposes and stores it in a folder that is inaccessible to the user.[113] AI's capacities for manipulative purposes are enormous.[114]

"Algorithmic persuasion," reads a declaration by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, "may have significant effects on the cognitive autonomy of individuals and their right to form opinions and take independent decisions,"[115] leading to an unacceptable level of manipulation that would severely restrict freedom of thought, conscience and religion.[116] Furthermore, "agentic misalignment" — in which AI begins to act in a harmful way — could potentially become a threat to its users — leading for example to the blackmailing of religious leaders and the leaking of sensitive information.[117]

A bias-driven AI used in automated decisions may lead to direct or indirect discrimination on religious grounds in areas such as social benefits, housing, public service jobs, asylum, medical care, education, bank credit, insurance,[118] labour recruitment or professional careers. The Rome Call for Ethics, promoted by the Holy See, stresses the importance of the core principle of impartiality to safeguard fairness and human dignity and avoid AI systems that follow or create biases.[119]

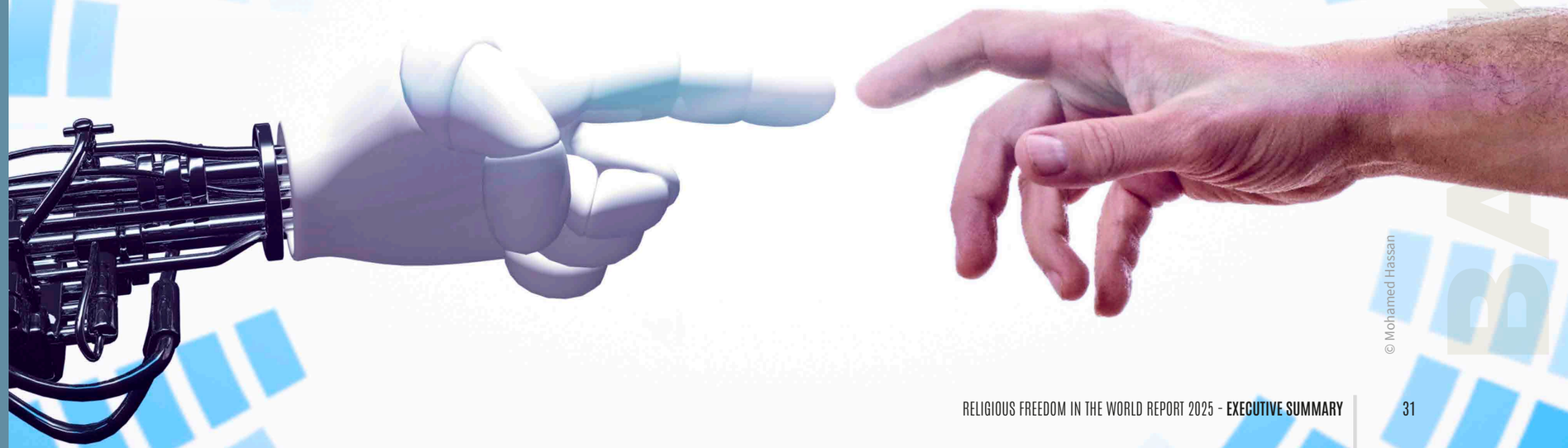
As the UN Rapporteur on freedom of expression has pointed out, AI-automated processes of content moderation may fail "to accurately identify, for example, 'extremist' content or hate speech and are thus more likely to default to content blocking and restriction, undermining the rights of individual users to be heard as well as their right to access information without restriction or censorship."[120] Legitimate religious beliefs, in particular those dissenting from mainstream principles or practices, risk invisibility online and offline or punishment by an inadvertently or deliberately abusive AI that wrongly flags them as "extremist" or "hate speech".[121]

Creating and promoting convincing but fake narratives on certain religious communities and leaders, and spreading misinformation or disinformation about them through AI, will make them highly vulnerable and easily targeted. Impersonation of religious leaders with AI is not a hypothesis: Pope Leo XIV was portrayed in an AI generated YouTube video, which falsely attributed to him a message for the President of Burkina Faso.[122] Several Spanish Catholic bishops have been impersonated in videos and audio recordings in which they seemingly ask for money or investments.[123]

AI has the power to reinforce a religious community's sense of belonging or undermine its cohesion. It is a formidable instrument to translate religious texts, challenging or confirming the interpretations given by religious authorities; at the same time, it can reconstruct or restore the content of deteriorated ancient religious texts as well as identify the different authors who contributed to them ("author clustering").[124]

AI may generate sermons and religious speeches and assist in religious decisions and edicts, such as fatwas.[125] Religious AI-powered apps are used by the faithful of several religions to observe their rituals and practices, search for accurate responses from their religion on matters of faith and morality, and deepen their understanding of their beliefs.[126] AI may however "hallucinate"[127] and provide wrong or prefabricated answers on faith and morality; for this reason, "the reliance of generative AI on training data introduces the risk of cognitive bias, which can affect the accuracy and impartiality of religious content."[128] To prevent this, some technology companies are designing and training their own AI based on established religious sources, such as the Magisterium AI, dubbed an "answer engine for the Catholic Church".[129] At the same time, some observers think that AI could inspire new synthetic religions.[130]

Idolising AI is dangerous[131] but but seeking to restrict it or living as if it did not exist is not an option.[132] There should not be fear or apprehension, but preparedness. There is no other way forward than to recognise and embrace its immense and dynamic possibilities as a "a machine-based system"[133] (not an agent),[134] under meaningful human control,[135] while guaranteeing its ethical use in accordance with human dignity and the common good,[136] to ensure that freedom of thought, conscience and religion is real and effective in all its dimensions.



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Mainland Asia

Armed conflict, kidnapping, arbitrary detention, and new laws curtailing rights continue to erode the rapidly shrinking space for religious freedom in Mainland Asia. Encompassing North Korea, China, Laos, India, Bangladesh, and Vietnam, the region includes some of the world's largest and most populous countries, home to numerous religious and ethnic communities, and experiences some of the world's worst violations of religious freedom.

Totalitarian repression and systematic control

Religious freedom in **China** has continued to suffer under President Xi Jinping, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intensifies its policy of "Sinicisation", aiming to align all religious traditions with socialist ideology. The 2023 Measures on the Administration of Religious Activity Venues and the Patriotic Education Law imposed stringent requirements on religious communities to promote core socialist values.[137] All religious venues are now subject to state evaluations and are prohibited from hosting activities deemed contrary to national interests. The repression of unregistered religious groups has escalated, with widespread reports of arrests, detentions, and closures of places of worship. Clergy have been sentenced on vague charges such as "fraud" or "subversion", and religious content on the internet remains heavily censored.[138] In Xinjiang, measures introduced in 2024 required that all new religious buildings reflected "Chinese characteristics", a sign of accelerating efforts to erase Uyghur religious and cultural identity.[139] Over 600 Uyghur villages were renamed, and people continued to face intense surveillance, arbitrary detention, and punishment for engaging in religious practices.[140]

North Korea remains one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of belief, this is nullified by a state ideology that demands absolute loyalty to the Kim dynasty. Any expression of religious belief is regarded as a direct threat to state authority. Individuals discovered with religious materials or accused of participating in unauthorised religious activities face severe punishment, including torture, life imprisonment, or execution. China's policy of forced repatriation has further worsened the plight of North Korean defectors. Those returned to North Korea are frequently subjected to harsh punishment, including forced labour, or even executed.[141]

In **Vietnam**, religious minorities such as Montagnard and Hmong Christians and Khmer-Krom Buddhists experience continuous pressure, especially in the Central Highlands. Authorities have disrupted worship, demolished gathering places, and pressurised individuals to renounce their faith.[142] Members of unregistered groups are frequently detained under vague national security charges.

Similarly, in **Laos**, religious persecution persists despite constitutional protections. In 2023–2024, Christians were expelled from villages such as Mai and Sa Mouay for refusing to abandon their beliefs. Churches were demolished, and pastors detained—sometimes for weeks—without charges. In July 2024, Pastor Thongkham Philavanh was assassinated, highlighting the risks faced by Christian leaders in rural areas.[143]

State-endorsed nationalism and religious freedom restrictions

In **Myanmar**, political power, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation are deeply interwoven, influencing both the dynamics of the ongoing civil conflict and the progressive erosion of fundamental rights. Although the current war is not inherently religious, it has significantly worsened the conditions for religious freedom. The military junta has been associated with a Buddhist nationalist agenda[144] which is intolerant of non-Bamar ethnic groups and non-Buddhist religious groups, often associating them with ethnic resistance movements or civil society actors. Religious sites are frequently attacked, as they often serve as centres for both community life and humanitarian assistance. Since the 2021 coup, hundreds of churches, including Catholic ones, have been bombed or burned.[145] Religious leaders have been killed, arrested or subjected to intimidation. The 2008 Constitution remains in force, assigning Buddhism a "special position" and codifying discriminatory laws on conversion and interfaith marriage.[146] The Rohingya continue to suffer atrocities and forced displacement.

In **Sri Lanka**, the influence of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, particularly in the Eastern Province, has led to increased surveillance, harassment, and legal pressure on religious minorities. The ICCPR Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act have been used to target dissenting voices.[147] Tamil Hindus report land seizures, while Christians and Muslims are regularly intimidated. Although the country has experienced political stabilisation, the government's resistance to human rights monitoring undermines accountability and trust.

Hybrid persecution and legalised intolerance

In **India,** constitutional guarantees of religious freedom are undermined by Hindu nationalist policies promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Since 2014, increasing restrictions have been placed on Muslim and Christian communities. The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) has been used to suspend or cancel the licences of NGOs linked to religious minorities. By 2024, only 15,947 NGOs remained authorised to receive foreign funding, down from more than 35,000.[148] Anti-conversion laws now exist in 12 states,[149] including Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, where provisions allow any citizen to file complaints—raising the risk of false accusations.

Religious violence has surged, with Christians experiencing a record 834 attacks in 2024, particularly in Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, involving mob assaults.[150] In Manipur, intercommunal clashes between Christian Kuki-Zo tribes and Hindu Meitei groups led to dozens of deaths and widespread destruction.[151] India now exemplifies a model of "hybrid persecution", combining legal suppression with mob violence.

In neighbouring **Nepal**, anti-conversion provisions in the constitution have led to harassment of Christian communities. Pastors and laypeople have been arrested or publicly humiliated, especially when accused of converting Dalits.[152] In September 2023, Hindu activists disrupted a Christian gathering in Kharhni, dismissed the attendees, and smeared the faces of two pastors with black ink.[153] A week earlier, an Indian missionary couple was handed over to the authorities. In August 2024, a church in Dhanusha was sealed over allegations of "mass conversions".[154]

Post-transition instability and religious tensions

Bangladesh maintains ambiguous principles, naming Islam as the state religion while upholding secularism as a constitutional value. In practice, this duality has fostered instability and discrimination. The Cyber Security Act[155]—adopted in 2023—has continued to suppress dissent and target minority groups.

Following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's departure in 2024 and the installation of an interim government under Muhammad Yunus, minority communities have reported increased violence and discrimination. The lifting of the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami has sparked concern over growing Islamist influence.[156] In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Christian communities have been subject to targeted harassment, while the plight of Rohingya refugees remains unresolved and precarious.

BACKGROUNDER

The Myanmar Triangle: political, ethnic and religious groups

Maria Lozano

Myanmar is one of Asia's most complex and diverse nations, characterised by a rich tapestry of ethnic and religious identities that significantly influence its politics.[157]

The country recognises over 135 distinct ethnic groups, with the Bamar majority comprising approximately 68 percent of the population and predominantly inhabiting central regions.[158] Minorities such as the Kachin, Chin, Karen, Shan, Rakhine, Mon and others coexist alongside them, while some groups—notably the Rohingya—are excluded from official recognition and citizenship.

Theravada Buddhism is practised by the Bamar majority and some minorities, together accounting for about 88 percent of the population. Significant Christian communities—mainly Kachin, Chin, Kayah (Karenni) and Karen—represent around six percent, while Muslims make up around four percent, and smaller communities practise Animism and Hinduism.[159]

Political groups: the State, the military, the opposition, and their dynamics

Myanmar's political fabric is equally complex, shaped by several actors and institutions. The State is centralised, built around a Bamar-Buddhist identity.

The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces have been the primary political actor since after the independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, legitimising itself by asserting the need to defend "national unity" against alleged ethnic and sectarian separatism.[160] It has consistently privileged the Bamar-Buddhist identity and viewed other ethnic and religious expressions with suspicion.

Pro-democracy movements such as the National League for Democracy (NLD) have challenged military rule but often avoided confronting sensitive issues such as ethnic self-determination, minority rights, or military abuses against groups like the Rohingya and the Kachin.

The February 2021 coup, in which the Tatmadaw overthrew the NLD-led civilian government, reversed democratic gains and triggered a nationwide uprising that combined civil protest and armed resistance. As an alternative centre to the military junta, various ethnic and political actors formed the Government of National Unity, while civilians formed new militias—the People's Defence Forces—and began cooperating with long-standing ethnic armed groups.[161]

Ethno-religious groups: identity, marginalisation, and rebellion

Many ethnic minorities have developed their own structures as a form of resistance to political and cultural exclusion and systematic discrimination. The Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), which represent diverse communities and include political leadership, were created to provide self-governance in their territories.[162]

Examples include the Kachin Independence Army, the Chin National Front, the Karen National Union, and the Arakan Army, all engaged in long conflicts for autonomy and recognition, and the preservation of their distinct identities—encompassing language, religion, and cultural traditions. In some cases, religious identity is central—for instance, many Kachin are Christians, and their struggle reflects both ethnic grievances and religious oppression.

Buddhism remains a cornerstone of Bamar national identity and has historically been linked to state authority. The Sangha (Buddhist clergy) is largely under state control, and ultranationalist groups such as Ma Ba Tha—though officially disbanded—retain influence, often fuelling anti-Muslim sentiments and hostility toward minorities.[163] Their presence has contributed significantly to religious tensions and violence.

The military junta has used religion to consolidate power, enacting the "Race and Religion Protection Laws" to restrict conversion and interfaith marriage.[164]

Christianity, conversely, has been a source of resilience for minorities like the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, functioning as a symbol of resistance, dedication and service, with Churches often providing humanitarian aid to the entire population, thus offering an alternative to the dominant narrative.[165]

Muslims, especially the Rohingya, suffer marginalisation, disenfranchisement, social discrimination and violence driven by historical factors.[166]

Intersections and tensions within the triangle

In Myanmar, ethnic and religious identities are often inseparable and have direct political expression. Kachin leadership often reflects Christian identity and encompasses a military-political role, while among the Rohingya, ethnic belonging is closely linked to Islam. In August 2024, at least 200 Rohingya civilians were killed in the Naf River Massacre in the context of fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw.[167]

Religious and ethnic minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, are regularly repressed and accused of separatism. State violence is often justified through nationalist rhetoric. Even Buddhist monks critical of the regime—such as Venerable Bhaddanta Muninda Bhivamsa, killed in June 2024[168] —have suffered persecution, showing that state control extends over the majority religion. Over 200 religious buildings have been destroyed since the coup,[169] including St Patrick's Cathedral and the St Michael's Catholic pastoral centre in Banmaw in 2025.[170]

Alliances between opposition forces remain fragile, with mistrust and prejudice exploited by the regime to deepen divisions.

The impact on religious freedom of the ongoing conflict is severe. Despite constitutional guarantees, minorities perceived as threats face systematic discrimination. Violence, repression, and mutual distrust prevent the development of a citizenry based on equal rights.

Sister Ann Nu Tawng (Sisters of St. Francis Xavier) kneeling before security forces in Myitkyina, Myanmar, to plead for peace on 28 February 2021

Maritime Asia-Pacific

The Maritime Asia-Pacific region encompasses the Malay Peninsula, the Malay Archipelago, Australia, New Zealand, and the island nations of the Indo-Pacific. This vast and strategically important region includes some of the world's most religiously diverse societies, as well as areas where militant Islam and state-enforced religious orthodoxy continue to severely restrict freedom of religion or belief.

Malaysia and the Maldives: insitutionalised Islamic repression

Malaysia and the Maldives, where exclusive Sunni Islamic ideologies are embedded in law and governance, remain the region's most repressive countries in terms of religious freedom.

In **Malaysia**, numerous incidents during the reporting period illustrated persistent restrictions and intercommunal tensions. Individuals, including a stand-up comedian and a Johor trader, were charged for allegedly insulting Islam,[171] while a single mother was sentenced for *khalwat*, the offence of being in close physical proximity to a man who was neither her husband nor a close male relative.[172] In 2024, the Catholic MP Teresa Kok was questioned after criticising the cost of halal certification.[173] In Sabah, Christians were arbitrarily registered as Muslims on ID cards,[174] while Rohingya refugees experienced ethnic and doctrinal discrimination.[175] Public debate in Sarawak over Bible classes and xenophobia revealed the fragility of religious coexistence.[176] Despite a few court rulings upholding minority rights, the climate remained marked by legal ambiguity, state surveillance and growing intolerance.

In the **Maldives**, laws banning non-Islamic religious expression continued to be strictly enforced. Two German tourists were arrested in 2024 for distributing Bibles;[177] an Indian spiritual leader and his assistant were deported in 2023.[178] The Maldives also served as a recruiting ground for extremist groups, and 20 individuals were sanctioned by the United States in 2023 for funding ISIS and al-Qaeda. Prisons reportedly function as hubs for radicalisation.[179]

Indonesia: contradictions between blasphemy and unity

Since gaining independence in 1945, **Indonesia** has officially been a secular State and has recognised the right to religious freedom. However, its longstanding tradition of pluralism has come under strain. The only province governed by Shari'a is Aceh, and in January 2023, in its capital Banda Aceh, a woman was publicly given 22 lashes for meeting with a man who was not her husband.[180] Blasphemy laws and restrictions on free speech continue to disproportionately affect non-Muslims, particularly Christians. A 74-year-old convert to Catholicism remained in detention for blasphemy in December 2023, three years after publishing a book critical of Islam.[181] In September 2024, Pope Francis visited Indonesia at the start of his four-nation tour of Southeast Asia. He urged the country to uphold its motto, Unity in Diversity, and to be a model for interfaith coexistence.[182]

The Pope ended his Asia-Pacific tour with a three-day visit to **Singapore**, praising the country's commitment to religious harmony and its protection of religious freedom for all faiths. [183]

The Philippines and Brunei: localised extremism and Shari'a governance

Jihadist violence persisted in Mindanao, the southern **Philippines** island with a large Muslim population. In December 2023, a bomb was detonated during a Catholic Mass at Mindanao State University, killing four;[184] in May 2024, a grenade attack on a chapel in Cotabato City injured two.[185] Armed clashes between Islamic militants and government forces in Maguindanao del Sur left 11 dead.[186] These events highlight the ongoing threat posed by jihadist actors in the Bangsamoro region. At the same time, concerns have been raised about the way the government has used the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act to provide a cover for human rights abuses, including the targeting of activists, religious leaders and indigenous communities seeking to protect their land from mining interests.

Despite international criticism, **Brunei** continues to retain the Syariah Penal Code Order (SPCO), which went fully into effect in April 2019. This legal framework criminalises apostasy, blasphemy, and the propagation of non-Islamic religions, prescribing punishments such as amputation, flogging, stoning, and the death penalty—although a de facto moratorium on executions remains in place.[187] Non-Muslims face significant restrictions, particularly regarding proselytism, the distribution of religious materials, and making critical statements about Islam, despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion.

The Pacific and Australia: religious freedom amid new tensions

Unlike many of their neighbours, Pacific-island nations—including **Australia**, **New Zealand**, **Timor-Leste**, and **Papua New Guinea**—generally maintain strong protections for religious freedom. The same applies to Pacific micro-states like **Samoa**, **Tonga**, **Fiji**, and **Kiribati**.

In **Australia**, religious freedom has been legally protected in the past, but recent developments have raised concerns. Some states require faith-based healthcare providers to offer or refer services that may conflict with their beliefs, and one state confiscated a Catholic hospital which would not provide abortion services. Australia's continued use of offshore detention centres, particularly in **Nauru**, has drawn international criticism. Human rights groups and Catholic bishops have condemned the conditions there as inhumane. Many asylum seekers—often fleeing religious persecution—remain in prolonged detention. As of November 2024, over 100 people were held in Nauru, the highest number since 2013.[188]

In **Papua New Guinea**, internal unrest and geopolitical pressure have stirred debate over religion's role in public life. After deadly riots in February 2024, Prime Minister James Marape promoted a Christian national identity. Parliament soon passed a bill declaring PNG a Christian nation, prompting warnings from religious leaders about undermining cultural diversity. During his September 2024 visit, Pope Francis urged respect for human dignity and denounced violence, including witchcraft-related abuses. The growing politicisation of religion and external influences may threaten religious freedom and pluralism in the country.[189]


© Vatican Media

On the opposite page: People wearing traditional headdress during Pope Francis' Holy Mass at Sir John Guise Stadium in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, 8 September 2024

CHINA

CASE STUDY

China: legal restrictions on religious education for minors

André Stiefenhofer

In recent years, stricter national laws and regional regulations have rendered a normal religious life for children and young people in China almost impossible. Since 2014, a growing body of national legislation and regional regulations has sought both to incorporate religious practice into official state-sanctioned frameworks and to eliminate it altogether from unregistered spaces.[190] This has resulted in the exclusion of children and young people from most forms of public and community religious life.

China's constitution only protects "normal" religious activities[191]—a very broadly worded restriction that has been interpreted as a call for the "Sinicisation" of religions, which means "less inculturation than the standardisation of the respective religion, that is, the adaptation of all religious belief systems to the values of socialism with Chinese characteristics."[192]

Pursuing this policy of "adapting religion", the Patriotic Education Law of 2023 speaks in Article 22 of "improving the compatibility of religions with socialist society".[193] The Education Law of 2021 stipulates in Article 8 that "no organisation or individual may make use of religion to conduct activities that interfere with the educational system of the State."[194] While this formulation is suitable for declaring any religious or catechetical instruction an "interference", the national Law on the Protection of Minors of 2020 gives authorities further leverage to prevent religious activities for minors by lumping participation in religious "cults" together with "superstitious activities", terrorism, separatism, and extremism, thus making religion subject to general suspicion of hostility to the State.[195]

This restrictive line is continued in the regional legislation of individual provinces. The Regulations on Religious Affairs for the several provinces contain explicit restrictions on the religious education of minors and provide authorities with justification for taking action against the participation of children and young people in communal religious life. This includes not only religious services, but also faith-based summer camps, Sunday schools, spiritual retreats and family-oriented religious activities. Children are often banned from entering places of worship, and in several cases, schools have required parents and students to sign declarations committing them not to engage in any form of religious practice. Some regulations include the sentence: "No organisation or individual shall organise, entice, or coerce minors into participating in religious activities."[196] "Activities" include religious services as well as "study trips, summer camps, or retreats".[197] In some schools, letters were sent to parents urging them to keep their children away from religion, arguing that religious belief hinders moral development and undermines academic competitiveness.

All this has led to a de facto ban on all religious practice and education for anyone under 18 years of age in China, thus depriving religious communities of their youth development efforts and posing an existential threat to their future.

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Sunday morning Mass at a church. This 2008 image shows a young girl attending—a practice no longer allowed, as current regulations prevent minors from participating

INDIA

CASE STUDY

India: anti-conversion laws

André Stiefenhofer

Anti-conversion laws have now been enacted in 12 Indian states with the stated purpose of preventing religious conversions through coercion, fraud or inducement. These laws often require individuals to notify authorities before converting and criminalise conversions achieved through force, fraud, or allurement. Although the latest wave of anti-conversion laws has been driven by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), they date back to 1936, and the British Raj had allowed 12 Princely States to enact such laws by the time of independence.[198]

In practice, these laws have been systematically misused against religious minorities, creating a climate of fear, encouraging false accusations, and legitimising harassment. Religious minorities are frequently denounced by radical Hindu groups, and their humanitarian or educational activities are often misrepresented as attempts at conversion.

On 16 February 2025, in the city of Indore (Madhya Pradesh), the Catholic nun Sheela Savari Muthu and three of her colleagues were detained by police, despite no coercion or religious conversions having taken place. The arrests followed the organisation of a health and hygiene awareness camp for the children of domestic workers in a public garden—an event that had received prior official approval. The intervention by the police occurred after a mob of Hindu nationalists gathered at the site, threatening the organisers and accusing the nun of attempting to convert the children in attendance. "The police took us to the police station," said Sr Muthu. "We wanted to file a case against the Hindu mob, but they refused to accept it and filed a criminal case against us."[199] The Indore Municipal Corporation later demolished the four-storey building housing her office, ignoring pleas to wait for a court decision.[200]

The case of Pastor Jose Pappachan and his wife Sheeja in Uttar Pradesh's Ambedkar Nagar district reveals how anti-conversion laws can be used as a tool of state persecution. The couple were convicted by a court in January 2025, sentenced to five years imprisonment and each fined 25,000 rupees (US$300) on the charge of attempting to convert people from tribal and Dalit backgrounds. The couple denied the charge, arguing that they were merely providing education to children and helping people to stop drinking alcohol and quarrelling.[201] In February 2025, following a decision by the Allahabad High Court, the couple were released on bail.[202] Since approximately 20 percent of Christians in India come from tribal backgrounds, and around 70 percent are Dalits, the prospect of conversion from either of these groups can arouse a particularly hostile response from Hindu nationalists.[203]

The anti-conversion laws embolden radical Hindu nationalists to practices of vigilantism and lynching that create a climate of fear amongst religious minorities. On 22 June 2025, a mob of 150 people stormed the house of Pastor Gokhariya Solanky in Nepa Nagar village in Burhanpur district (Madhya Pradesh). They attacked him and three other Christians, all Dalits, undressed them and paraded them in their underwear along a public road. They were then taken to the local Hindu temple and made to bow before the deity there. Afterwards, the crowd accused the Christians of converting Dalit Hindus to Christianity and handed them over to the police, who remanded them in custody. Pastor Solanky's conclusion aptly captures the current situation in India: "Fake conversion charges are routinely made against Christians by Hindu groups, who were working to turn India into a nation of Hindu dominance."[204]

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A man in prayer in a small tribal village in Jharkhand State, India

BACKGROUNDER

Law, power, and practice in the Muslim world: the many faces of Shari'a

Dennis Peters

Shari'a, or Islamic law, occupies a central position in shaping the contours of religious freedom across the Muslim world. For some, it functions primarily as a spiritual and moral compass; for others, it serves as the foundation of state law, with deep implications for citizenship, minority rights, and legal equality. Yet Shari'a is not a fixed or uniform system. Its interpretation and implementation vary markedly across—and even within—countries, reflecting complex interactions between tradition, modernity and political authority.

Contrary to the notion of a single, uniform code, there is no such thing as *the* Shari'a. Across Muslim-majority States, Islamic law ranges from a symbolic invocation of divine values to a fully codified and state-enforced legal order. In some constitutions, Shari'a is designated as the primary source of legislation. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the Qur'an and the Sunna are declared the sole sources of law.[205] In Iran, the Guardian Council reviews all legislation for conformity with Shi'a doctrine.[206] In both cases, Islamic jurisprudence holds ultimate authority. Elsewhere, Shari'a coexists with secular legal systems and covers personal-status matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Shari'a, though, is about much more than politics and domestic arrangements. The word literally means "the well-trodden path to water" and for a desert people it is the way to life itself.

The gap between law and practice

As the legal scholar Ebrahim Afsah – on whose course on constitutional struggles in the Muslim world this article is based – has observed, legal implementation often diverges from constitutional claims. This gap can be decisive for religious freedom. In Egypt, the discriminatory application of blasphemy laws has had a chilling effect on the exercise of the fundamental right to freedom of religion.[207] Other countries, with stricter codes, apply them inconsistently. In northern Nigeria, Shari'a-based penal codes are implemented unevenly, depending on local political will and public pressure.[208] Although the Shari'a courts in northern Nigeria no longer deal out the cruel punishment of amputation, they are not exempt from the normal problem of corruption. And while some Christians say they prefer Shari'a courts, others have reported discrimination on religious grounds.[209] States such as Pakistan and Iran espouse strong Islamic legal identities.[210] In Indonesia's Aceh province, regional autonomy has enabled the application of Shari'a—including corporal punishment—despite the country's secular national constitution.[211] These disparities, varying in scope, produce tangible consequences for religious communities.

Historical roots

The pluralistic nature of Islamic law has deep historical roots. Early Muslim empires generally accommodated local customs and allowed non-Muslim communities[212]—particularly Jews and Christians under *dhimmi* status—to retain their own legal traditions, albeit within limits. Public religious expression was typically constrained, and conversion away from Islam was not permitted.

For non-Abrahamic minorities, conditions could be considerably harsher, as illustrated by the persecution of the Yazidis in Iraq by Daesh in 2014.[213]

Modern transformations

The 19th and 20th centuries brought sustained pressure to adapt to Western legal, military and educational models. Responses varied: Turkey embraced secularisation; Egypt pursued partial legal reforms; Saudi Arabia resisted such changes, framing them as incompatible with Islamic authenticity. Today, four broad currents of thought inform Muslim debates over Shari'a:[214]

1. **Secularism**, aiming at the removal of religion from public governance;
2. **Modernism**, believing Shari'a can be reinterpreted to align with modern values;
3. **Traditionalism**, maintaining that Islamic law is already sufficient and complete;
4. **Fundamentalism**, calling for a return to the earliest Islamic sources with strict textual adherence.

Implications for religious freedom

Where Shari'a is interpreted in ways that subordinate non-Muslims, prohibit conversion, or criminalise perceived insults to Islam, religious freedom is significantly constrained. In Pakistan, blasphemy accusations have precipitated mob violence and judicial persecution. Under the Taliban in Afghanistan, apostasy is punishable by death. Yet developments are not uniformly negative. In Tunisia and Morocco, religiously framed reforms have expanded women's rights and strengthened protections for minorities. In parts of Central Asia, secular constitutions have prevented the imposition of sectarian legal codes—though often at the expense of broader political and religious freedoms. Notably, in 2022, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman initiated a project to identify and compile what are regarded as the Prophet's most authentic Hadith, reportedly to prevent their exploitation by extremist actors.[215]

Conclusion

Shari'a manifests in diverse forms, from constitutional references to comprehensive systems enforced through state power. Its role in Muslim-majority countries depends on history, political influence, and how strong or weak institutions are. For advocates of religious freedom, this complexity demands a nuanced and context-specific approach. The challenges are real, but so are the signs of change and open discussion. As countries continue to search for their identity and legal direction, how Shari'a is used will remain a key issue in the global fight for religious freedom.

A Muslim woman receives 23 lashes after being found in close proximity to her boyfriend in Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

© AFP via Getty Images

Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains one of the most complex and volatile areas globally. Although some positive developments were observed during the two-year reporting period, they were largely overshadowed by troubling trends and by the conflict between Israel and Hamas, which triggered unprecedented levels of violence and broader regional destabilisation.

Several major trends can be identified that, naturally, do not apply to all countries in the MENA region and the adjacent Muslim-majority States Türkiye, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Government gestures toward religious minorities

While comprehensive religious liberty is nowhere to be found in Muslim-majority States, some have shown greater inclination to recognise that religious pluralism is still a necessary part of the social mosaic. Islamic monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco, in particular, have a long-standing tradition of interreligious dialogue and repeatedly call for religious moderation.

For several years now, other Islamic-majority States in the region have joined them by pursuing tolerant religious policies. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular, have continued to show tolerance towards Jews and Christians. An example is the inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi in 2023. This multireligious centre encompasses a church, a synagogue and a mosque. In April 2023, the Jewish community of the UAE was able to celebrate Passover.[216] And in February 2024, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, inaugurated Abu Dhabi's first Hindu temple.[217]

Morocco also took steps towards the Jewish community. In November 2022, Mohammed VI Polytechnic University in Marrakesh inaugurated the first campus synagogue in the Arab world. It was built alongside a new campus mosque, with the two structures sharing a wall as a symbol of religious unity.[218] However, there were no Jewish students enrolled in the university when the synagogue was opened, and by July 2025 there had still been none. A few months after the inauguration, Israel recognised Morocco's annexation of the Western Sahara. The first Trump administration had recognised the annexation in 2020 as part of facilitating talks about Morocco normalising relations with Israel.[219]

In February 2023, Oman and the Holy See established full diplomatic relations.[220] In Bahrain the King donated a plot of land to the Orthodox Church and paid a return visit to Pope Francis after the latter's journey to the country.[221]

These steps are undoubtedly positive since they begin to reduce deep-seated reservations about non-Muslims. However, they are usually associated with political intentions with the respective States wanting to present themselves abroad as tolerant, while at the same time they often act in a repressive manner domestically and do not grant comprehensive religious freedom.

Political Islam

A survey by Arab Barometer in 2023 showed that in most countries, citizens both young and old had a clear preference for giving religion a greater role in politics.[222]

This is reflected in voting patterns. The political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood achieved major success in the parliamentary elections in Jordan in September 2024. With 31 out of 138 seats, the Islamist party became the biggest faction in Parliament and achieved its best result in 35 years. Jordanian authorities banned the Muslim Brotherhood in April 2025, accusing it of planning acts of violence. The political arm was allowed to continue, but its offices were searched.[223]

Much more significant, both domestically and in terms of international ramifications, was the seizure of power in Syria by the Islamist militia Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) at the end of 2024. At the beginning of 2025, the HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa was named President for the "transitional period". He succeeded long-time President Bashar al-Assad, who was overthrown by a lightning rebel offensive which ended decades of Alawite minority rule. President al-Sharaa is the founder of the al-Qaeda offshoot al-Nusrah,[224] which has been responsible for dozens of attacks on civilians involving the massacre of Christians[225] and Druze. Notwithstanding more recent comments favouring religious freedom, in a 2014 interview, al-Sharaa (formerly al-Julani) is also on record stating stated that his aim was to see Syria governed by Islamic law, and that there was no place for the Alawite, Shia, Druze and Christian minorities in the country.[226]

It is still unclear what effect HTS's seizure of power will have in Syria on religious freedom. Some Western States view the new rulers as legitimate contacts, although the UK government says that Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is "an alternative name for al-Nusrah", and lists HTS as part of al-Qaeda and therefore a proscribed terrorist organisation.[227] The UN Security Council also lists HTS as an al-Qaeda offshoot and a terrorist organisation.[228] Nevertheless, Interim President Sharaa was received in Paris by President Emmanuel Macron at the beginning of May 2025. US President Donald Trump met him in May in Saudi Arabia, and in July 2025, the US removed HTS from its list of terrorist organisations.[229]

Presidents Macron and Trump did both call for inclusive policies towards minorities in Syria, and the inclusion of one Christian and one Druze member in the transitional government is a positive sign. The government assured Christian leaders that minority rights would be respected. However, in July 2025, Christian leaders said that they could not trust President al-Sharaa to protect either them or the Druze,[230] and the HTS remains ideologically aligned with hardline Islamism.

In this context, the massacre of hundreds of members of the Alawite community in March 2025 is deeply disturbing. Christians were affected too.[231] At the end of April, there were also clashes between members of the Druze minority and pro-government troops which left nearly a hundred people dead.[232]

Given Syria's Sunni majority, it cannot be assumed that a secular government will be formed after the five-year transition period. There are certainly no signs of this so far. On the contrary, the changes made in the interim constitution indicate a greater Islamisation of political and public life. They include a March 2025 declaration that the President must be a Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation.[233]

Islamisation

Islamisation of public life, which aims to secure the approval of the population and increase the legitimacy of political actors, is a growing trend in several parts of the region. In Libya the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) is internationally recognised although it controls only about one-third of the country's North and none of the South. In November 2024, its Interior Minister announced that he planned to reactivate the "morality" police. He added that women would not be allowed to leave the house without wearing the Islamic veil nor travel alone without a male guardian.[234]

That same month, the Iraqi Parliament extended a ban of alcohol to hotels and social clubs, moving the country closer to total prohibition.[235] The Kurdish-controlled North of the country, however, which is home to many Yazidis and has a large Christian population in its capital Erbil, has largely ignored the ban.[236] Selling alcohol is of major economic importance to minorities like Christians and Yazidis.

The same trend of Islamisation can be seen in Türkiye where in 2024, the fourth-century Church of St Saviour in Chora was officially inaugurated as a mosque. The country's ÇEDES project ran into strong opposition[237] when imams were appointed as "spiritual counsellors" in schools. The General Secretary of the teachers' union described the move as reactionary and said that teachers would not bring children to the sessions the government was planning.[238]

Islamist terrorism reemerges

Jihadist terrorism in the region has not reached the level that it assumed in 2014 with the territorial expansion of ISIS. However, in January 2025, the Institute for the Study of War said that ISIS was re-emerging in Syria where recent shifts in international counterterrorism strategy created security vacuums that it could exploit.[239] They have enabled its slow reconstitution in the centre of the country.[240]

Jihadism has also spread to new places. In July 2024, six people, including a policeman, were killed and 28 others injured in an unprecedented shooting at a Shi'a mosque in Oman's capital, Muscat. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack for the first time in the country's history.[241]

In Pakistan, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is among many terrorist groups which are destabilising the country.[242] It frequently targets civilians and religious minorities, particularly Shi'a Muslims and rival Sunni factions such as the Taliban. As the Taliban intensified its crackdown on ISKP in Afghanistan, many fighters relocated to Pakistan, where they have been building networks in both urban and rural areas. This has led to a sharp rise in violence, marked by increasingly sophisticated attacks on religious minorities.[243] The same goes for Afghanistan itself where religious freedom has completely disappeared since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. As well as heavily discriminating against religious minorities like Sufi and Shi'a Muslims, the de facto rulers fail to protect them against ISKP.

Conflict in the Holy Land

The Israel-Hamas conflict has caused unprecedented levels of violence. The terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas on 7 October 2023 resulted in the largest massacre of Jews since the Second World War. Israel's military response has rendered large parts of the Gaza Strip uninhabitable; the death toll as of July 2025 is more than 60,000[244] lives with even more injured or starving. Israel has set a deadly precedent in killing more than 400 humanitarian aid workers and 1,300 medical workers,[245] disregarding the Geneva Conventions of which it is a signatory. Gaza's mosques and church buildings have been heavily affected. Prosecutors at the International Criminal Court accuse both sides of war crimes.[246]

In Israel, the rift between the Jewish and Arab populations has deepened as a result of the war. The far-right coalition led by Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has exacerbated division along ethnic and religious lines. The government's National Security Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has added fuel to the fire by demonstratively visiting the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The result has been clashes between Muslims and Israeli security forces. Meanwhile, the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, during a speech to the United Nations in New York, denied that the Jewish Temple was ever even in Jerusalem.[247]

Christians in Israel, in turn, have suffered an unprecedented level of violence and contempt as fanatical Jews have targeted both Christian institutions and leaders. The impact of the war on religious tourism has added to the economic weakening of Christians in the Holy Land.

The Israel-Hamas conflict has triggered a wave of antisemitism in the region. In October 2023, an Egyptian police officer shot dead two Israeli tourists in Alexandria; and jihadism, which has taken up the cause of Palestinians against Israel, is gaining momentum.

The rapprochement between Arab States such as Saudi Arabia and Israel has been, at least temporarily, halted by the war in Gaza. The conflict between Iran and Israel has also intensified, with direct confrontation between the two States.

Geopolitical trends shift to the disadvantage of Shi'a powers

The balance of power in the region has shifted to the disadvantage of Shi'a Islam. This is particularly evident in Syria with the rise to power of the Islamist Sunni HTS and the overthrow of President Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam. In both Syria and neighbouring Lebanon, the Shi'a militia Hezbollah was severely weakened by Israel's military strikes, and it was beheaded by the killing of its charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. In Iraq powerful Iranian-backed militia groups announced they would consider disarming for the first time to avert escalating conflict with the Trump administration.[248] The change of leadership in Syria and the weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon have in turn severely limited Shi'a Iran's regional influence. The regime there responded by increasing repression at home; in addition to women who refuse to wear the mandatory headscarf, victims include religious minorities such as Sunnis, Bahá'ís and Christian converts from Islam. In the last decade the number of Christians in Iran has more than doubled,[249] bucking the trend in the MENA region and reaching more than a million.[250]

Socio-economic living conditions worsen

According to the World Food Programme, the MENA region has experienced "an unprecedented level of crises, with millions caught in the grip of relentless conflict, political turmoil, staggering refugee crises and a deepening economic downturn."[251] The countries of the Maghreb have taken an increasingly hard line towards sub-Saharan migrants attempting to reach Europe, with Tunisia making more than 10,000 homeless by burning down their makeshift settlements.[252] High food prices have added to the pressure, with inflation soaring in several countries of the region—passing 250 percent in Gaza at the end of 2024[253] and 79 percent in Syria. One sign of economic hope, however, has been the lifting of US sanctions on Syria by President Trump in May 2025.[254] The UK and the European Union have likewise eased or lifted sanctions imposed on the country, as local Churches have for years been calling them to do.[255]

Despite optimistic projections, Iraq has been struggling with falling oil prices. In May 2025, the International Monetary Fund warned that these were taking their toll on the Iraqi economy, exacerbating the country's vulnerabilities.[256] Falling prices have been compounded by attacks on oilfields in the Kurdish North of the country by what the regional Prime Minister has called "criminal militias on the Iraqi government payroll", which have taken out 70 percent of the region's oil production.[257] Since the Iraqi state budget depends heavily on oil revenue, all this adds to an already fragile economy and could have severe social and political repercussions including accelerating the ongoing exodus of Christians and other religious minorities from the country.

Conclusion

The MENA region has proved once more to be a highly unstable region politically, economically and in terms of security. There has been more than a twofold increase in conflict episodes and a sixfold increase in MENA's share of global fatalities since the 1990s.[258] This is especially due to the escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict. Socio-economic conditions show little to no signs of improving—indeed these have worsened, leaving religious minorities vulnerable. One encouraging sign during the period was the election of General Joseph Aoun as President of Lebanon in January 2025—ending more than two years of vacancy—which marked a positive step toward restoring institutional stability.[259]

There have been a few encouraging developments with regard to religious freedom such as the proposed personal status law for Christians in Egypt.[260] The inauguration of the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, a fruit of the vision of Pope Francis, has also highlighted that religious freedom is possible in a stable Islamic country and is inherent in the shared values of the Abrahamic religions: the belief in the right to life and the right of parents to instil moral values in their children, the complementarity of the sexes and the desire to safeguard sacred buildings and honour religious leaders. However, the region in general is not taking substantial steps towards comprehensive religious freedom for all of its inhabitants.

Street celebrations in Saadallah Al-Jabri Square, Aleppo, on the first Friday following the political transition to the new regime, December 2024

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BACKGROUNDER

Polite persecution: the sin of omission

Acts of hostility against Christians in western OSCE Participating States are often overlooked and understudied due to a lack of systematic documentation. At a debate in the UK Parliament's House of Lords, Lord Moylan stated that in France, Germany and Spain attacks on churches, religious symbols and Christian institutions had risen in recent years, including a 44per-cent increase in arson against Christian places of worship in western Europe.[261]

In 2016, Pope Francis identified two distinct forms of persecution: explicit persecution and what he termed "polite persecution" —a more subtle form often manifesting itself through legal, cultural or institutional pressures.[262] This latter form has also been a source of concern for the OSCE[263] and other international bodies.

Political correctness may play a role in this type of persecution when it is not properly addressed at the governmental level.[264] While polite persecution is distinct from criminal activities with a Christian animus, such as attacks on believers or churches, the failure to take action against such behaviour, when other forms of hate crimes are tackled, is a symptom of polite persecution.

The OSCE

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) stand out among intergovernmental organisations for their action against hate crimes, including those with an anti-Christian bias, by working with governments and civil society groups in collecting hate crime information. Since 2009, the OSCE hate crimes database has published information received from Participating States on the number of hate incidents recorded in each country, the type of hate crime, and the minority group targeted. Data collection, the OSCE argues, is the first step in addressing hate crimes and allows for targeted policies and customised victim support.[265]

The OSCE was the first intergovernmental body, in 2009, to label the trend towards the marginalisation of Christians as "intolerance and discrimination against Christians".[266] In July 2018, the OSCE published a fact sheet on anti-Christian hate crimes in the OSCE region.[267]

The Achilles' heel of the hate crimes database is that it is only as good as the data provided by Participating States. Regrettably, there is a tremendous disparity in how seriously countries take their reporting commitments to the OSCE.

Good and bad practices

Although the OSCE has identified this problem, little has been done to address it. Acts evidencing animus against Christians, including criminality, continue to affect the OSCE region with data suggesting that things are getting worse.[268] Yet many OSCE Participating States have done little to quantify just how bad the issues are within their borders. Of the four Scandinavian countries, for example, only Finland has reported on hate incidents against Christians since 2023. What is more, there is a significant lag in reporting by the OSCE itself. The ODIHR has yet, for example, to publish statistics for 2024.

The United States is an example of a country where there has been a noticeable increase in the vandalism of churches and other Christian sites, and where the government has not published any official data. Civil society groups, however, have undertaken this task and uncovered a hard truth that attacks on Christians and Christian places of worship are getting much more common.[269] The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is an example of best practice as it meticulously tracks attacks on assets owned by the Catholic Church.[270] It recorded 56 incidents in 2024, and 19 from January to June 2025. Among the most notable attacks was the setting off of an explosive device at the altar of a church in Pennsylvania on 6 May 2025, and multiple acts of arson in churches in October 2024 in Massachusetts, Arizona, and Florida.

The United Kingdom collects data from individual territorial police forces, but does not routinely release the information to the public. The Countryside Alliance, a British organisation defending rural interests, submitted several Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to the UK's 45 territorial police forces about crimes committed at churches. Forty-four responded, and the replies evidenced that 34 police forces


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responded to 9,648 criminal acts involving churches between 2022 and 2024.[271] Most of these were not anti-Christian hate crimes — for example, the report identified 181 lead and metal thefts.However, finding that "on average, at least eight crimes took place at churches every single day over the three-year period", the Countryside Alliance asked that the government "extend and guarantee future funding and promotion of the Places of Worship Protective Security Scheme" to cover crimes committed at vulnerable churches in rural areas.[272] The current scheme only protects place of worship or community centres that have experienced hate crime.[273]

France has kept exemplary records[274] and this, coupled with other forms of intelligence collection, has better enabled it to anticipate danger. For Holy Week 2023 for example, the Ministry of the Interior deployed 10,000, police officers and raised the domestic threat level to maximum alert.[275] The Greek government is also an example of best practice in its record keeping of anti-Christian hate incidents; the Religious Affairs Ministry is tasked with keeping statistics related to attacks on places of worship.[276]

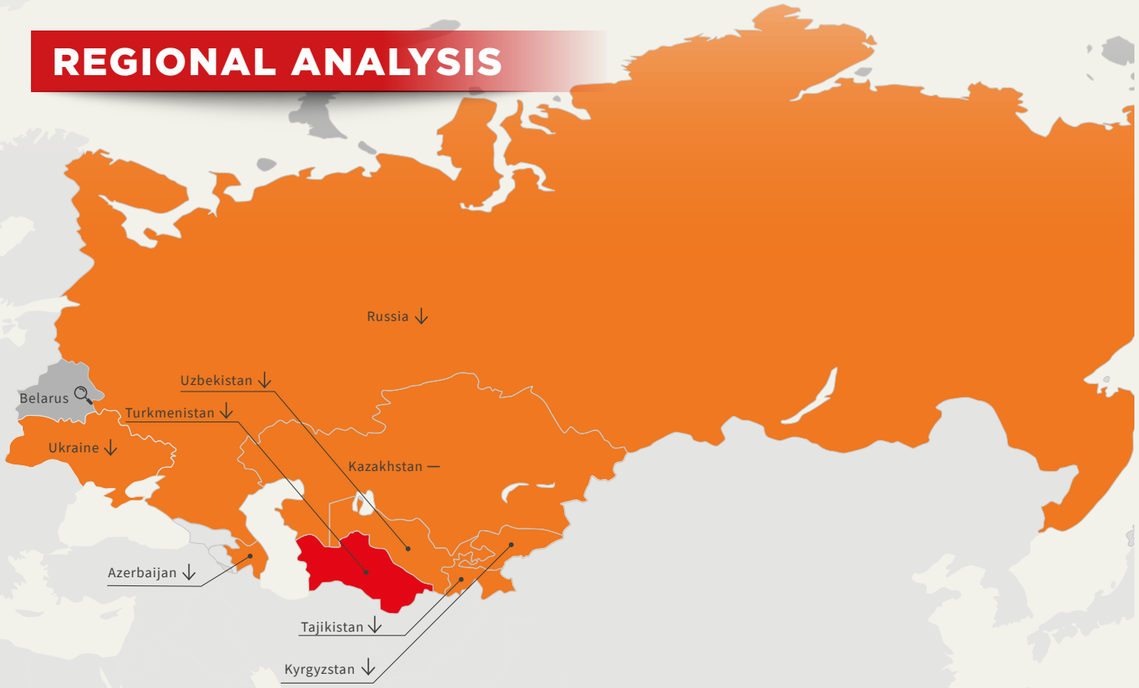
The consequences of inadequate documentation

The absence of systematic reporting of anti-Christian incidents leads to ineffective policies, the normalisation of hostility, unequal treatment between religious groups, and the increased vulnerability of Christian communities. In the EU there have been positive steps as European Commission's coordinator on combating anti-Muslim hatred looked at ways to address problems including the launch of the report *Being Muslim in the EU* (On 24th -25th October 2024). The European Commission and the Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations also co-organised a workshop in The Hague on 21st November 2024 entitled "Combatting Anti-Muslim Hatred: Showcasing Efforts and Sharing Best Practices of EU Ministries of Interior".[277] However, with rising attacks against Christian churches and ministers, there were calls by Alessandro Calcagno, an adviser to the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE), to also appoint an EU coordinator on combating anti-Christian hatred in Europe.[278]

There is currently no comparable support for Christian groups in the EU.

Failing to track the problem leaves the animus against Christians to simmer in many parts of the OSCE region.

In the upper image: The Church of the Immaculate Conception in Saint-Omer, partially destroyed after a fire during the night of 2 September 2024.



OSCE countries

Roger Kiska

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) describes itself as the world's largest regional security organisation.[279] Its 57 member countries are often divided into those "East of Vienna" and those "West of Vienna". The OSCE includes Russia, the United States, Canada, Europe (EU, EEA, UK, and Switzerland), and all the countries of the former Soviet Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Each Participating State of the OSCE has some form of constitutional protection for religious freedom; however, the manner in which religious freedom and human rights are respected in practice varies substantially.

Rise in antisemitism and anti-Muslim incidents

The OSCE region, especially "West of Vienna", has seen a dramatic increase in antisemitic and anti-Muslim activity since the 7 October 2023 attack against Isreal and the resulting war. France saw a more than 1,000 percent increase in antisemitic incidents, with 1,676 taking place in 2023 alone.[280] The following year saw no less than 106 reported physical attacks, including the rape of a 12-year-old Jewish girl in Courbevoie.[281] In 2023, the number of anti-Muslim hate incidents in France rose by 29 percent to 242.[282]

In the United States, college campuses saw an eruption of anti-Israel protests and around-the-clock encampments across the country. They led to hundreds of students being arrested or suspended, university buildings being taken over, and university presidents resigning.[283] The targeting of Jewish students led to some feeling unsafe to attend classes or exams on campus and forced some universities to go online to continue lessons.[284]

The United Kingdom witnessed record numbers of antisemitic[285] and anti-Muslim[286] hate crimes in the wake of 7 October. Mosques and Islamic centres were attacked as part of a series of protests and riots in late July and early August 2024, sparked by false claims on social media that the stabbing of three girls at a dance class in Southport was carried out by an immigrant, who was later ascribed a Muslim-sounding name.[287]

A 2023 report in Germany recorded 4,369 crimes related to the Israel-Hamas conflict, a sharp rise from 61 in 2022.[288] The Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (RIAS) documented 4,782 cases of antisemitism, a rise of over 80 percent from the previous year.[289] The CLAIM network reported 1,926 anti-Muslim incidents in 2023, more than double the previous year's figure of 898.[290]

Areas affected by armed conflict

The continuing war in Ukraine has led to religious freedom violations on both sides. In Russian-occupied Ukraine, the authorities have systematically repressed any religious denomination or member of the clergy it has suspected of being pro-Ukrainian. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church have been particularly affected, but so too have independent Muslim communities, Evangelicals and other religious minorities.[291] For its part, Ukraine has repressed religious and secular organisations it has suspected of having sympathies with Moscow. On 23 September 2024, the Law on the Protection of the Constitutional Order in the Sphere of Activity of Religious Organisations came into effect,[292] banning religious organisations with ties to Russia. While not directly mentioned, the primary target of the law was evidently the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOCMP), a self-governing Church over which the Russian Orthodox Church has continued to claim jurisdiction. As of May 2024, the UOCMP had 10,587 parishes in Ukraine, compared to the 8,075 parishes of the OCU.[293]

Since the end of 2024, Ukraine has seen a dramatic increase in the number of criminal proceedings against conscientious objectors to military service, with possible jail sentences of up to three years. As of late October 2024, around 300 conscientious objectors, 95 percent of them Jehovah's Witnesses, were under criminal investigation.[294] A similar phenomenon with similar jail sentencing guidelines occurred in the Russian Federation, where no legal provision exists for alternative civilian service during a period of mobilisation.[295]

In 2023, the army of Azerbaijan initiated a major offensive and took total control of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, leading to the ethnic cleansing of 120,000 Armenians.[296] The area had historically been inhabited by Armenian Christians and after its takeover the Azeri government carried out extensive destruction of ancient church buildings.[297]

Anti-Christian incidents

The OSCE region has also seen ongoing vandalism of churches. In Canada, according to a *CBC News*, at least 33 churches were destroyed by fire between May 2021 and December 2023, and 24 incidents were confirmed as arson.[298]

Attacks on churches in Spain have also been frequent. On 8 March 2023, feminists plastered posters on the main entrance of the Church of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Sabadell and painted it purple in a Women's Day protest.[299] Spain has also witnessed numerous attacks on clergy and laypeople. On 25 January 2023, a suspected jihadist murdered a sacristan and injured a priest and a Moroccan convert in Algeciras.[300] In Valencia a priest was killed and several others injured at their monastery by a man shouting, "I am Jesus Christ."[301]

In Italy, 41 of 42 attacks on places of worship targeted church buildings.[302]

A monthly Rosary prayer by Catholic men in the main square of Zagreb and 12 other locations in Croatia suffered repeated attacks from left-wing activists after the pro-life convictions of the participants became known. Since the men began gathering for these non-political prayers in January 2023, they have become the target of aggressive demonstrations.[303]

According to authorities in Greece, in 2024, a total of 608 acts of vandalism, and arson were committed against religious places of worship, with Orthodox chapels and churches being most targeted. The highest number of incidents occurred in Athens-Piraeus.[304]

France recorded some 1,000 anti-Christian incidents in 2023, 90 percent of them being attacks on Christian religious properties.[305]

In the United States, attacks on churches doubled from 2022 to 2023,[306] some of them relating to protests connected to abortion following the *Dobbs* Supreme Court decision in 2022.[307] which eliminated federal permission for abortion and devolved its regulation to individual states.

Polite persecution

Polite persecution refers to non-violent but coercive forms of oppression manifested through government or bureaucratic practices, social norms and laws. Their effect is to marginalise Christians, preventing them from manifesting their religious beliefs in public life, including in their places of employment. It is becoming more common, for example, that public funds are available only if the recipient body does not hold beliefs which are viewed as discriminating against the LGBT community. In a municipality in southwest Norway, one such bylaw led to complaints from five different Christian groups who had been denied funding allegedly because of their doctrinal views.[308]

Harassment related to alleged hate speech also continues. In Finland Päivi Räsänen, a Christian parliamentarian and a former, Minister of the Interior, has been the subject of criminal prosecution since 2019 for expressing conservative Christian views about homosexuality in a pamphlet she helped to produce in 2004, and in relation to public comments she made in 2019 and 2020. Although she has been acquitted by both the lower criminal court and the appeal court, the government has appealed the case to the Supreme Court.[309]

In 2024 in Belgium, a court ruled that Archbishop Luc Terlinden and former Archbishop Jozef De Kesel discriminated against a woman by twice denying her

access to diaconal formation because she was female and ordered them to pay a fine.[310] The ruling raises serious questions about the autonomy of the Church to govern its own doctrine.

There have, however, been positive developments, with some of the highest courts in the OSCE region pushing back against polite persecution in favour of religious freedom. In *Higgs v Farmor's School,*[311] the highest appellate court in England and Wales ruled in favour of a pastoral administrator who was dismissed by her employer, a primary school, for making two Facebook posts which were critical of LGBT education for young children. The posts, which were steeped in Christian messaging, were speaking to an ongoing debate in England about education on sexual relationships and gender ideology being mandatory in primary schools.

The United States Supreme Court also issued two rulings pushing back against polite persecution. In *Groff v DeJoy,*[312] it clarified a longstanding debate about the extent to which employers must provide reasonable accommodations for those with relevant protected characteristics, including religion. The plaintiff, a postal worker, sued his employer for changing its policies and requiring him to work on Sundays. The Supreme Court ruled that failing to accommodate his deeply held Christian beliefs violated his First Amendment right to religious freedom, as the Post Office was unable to establish that his not working Sundays would lead to a substantial detriment to their business.

Central Asia and Islam

In the countries of this region—and perhaps most acutely in Turkmenistan—violations of religious freedom must be assessed within the framework of national security concerns, particularly in light of the perceived threat posed by Islamic extremism. Islam has been present in the region since the eighth century, shaped by a strong Sufi influence and consolidated under various Khanates, including those of Genghis Khan. This spiritual and cultural tradition largely survived the Soviet period intact. In sharp contrast, the emergence of Salafism—as promoted by groups such as the Islamic State—has become a growing concern over the past 25 years.

Against this backdrop, the measures adopted by governments in the region counter radicalisation require careful, case-by-case assessment, taking into account the proportionality of the response in relation to the credibility of the threat. Discerning the underlying intent behind restrictions on religious practice is key to distinguishing between legitimate security imperatives and unjustified repression. In April 2023, the regime in Azerbaijan arrested hundreds of Shi'a Muslims purported to have ties to Iran.[313] The Muslim Unity Movement (Müsəlman Birliyi Hərəkatı, MBH), a Shi'a group opposing state control over religious practices, also suffered continuous persecution including police detention, beatings and torture.[314] In January 2024, Azerbaijan withdrew from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe after it signalled that it would refuse to ratify the Azerbaijani delegation's credentials for because of record of its alleged human rights violations.[315]

In 2023, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), following an in-country visit, recommended that Kazakhstan be placed on a Special Watch List for its "severe" violations of religious freedom.[316] Sunni Muslims continue in detention despite a call made two years prior by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to release them.[317]

Kyrgyzstan continued to suppress expressions of Islamic faith that differed from the state-endorsed version of Islam. Between January and June 2023, the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) arrested at least 23 Hizb ut-Tahrir and 16 Yakyn Inkar members. These arrests were often justified by the possession of "extremist" materials.[318] In August 2023, the SCNS closed 39 mosques and 21 madrasas (Islamic schools) in the Osh region, citing non-compliance with laws on religious freedom, construction standards, hygiene, and fire safety.[319] In November 2023, a proposal to ban face coverings and large beards for "public safety reasons" was made in the Kyrgyz Parliament.[320]

In Tajikistan, a Sunni majority country, Muslims who simply opposed government policies were arbitrarily classified as extremist. Tajik officials kept up their surveillance and punishment of religious practices using the "traditions law" which prohibits religious rituals considered excessive.[321] Several mosques were destroyed or closed in 2023 for banal reasons.[322]

In Turkmenistan, the regime of the Berdimuhamedow family has dealt aggressively with "non-traditional" and conservative Muslim practices. Muslims who deviate from the state-sanctioned interpretation of Islam have experienced persecution, including long prison sentences.[323] In August 2023, Forum 18 reported that police in Türkmenbaşy conducted raids on the homes of devout Muslims, seizing religious literature.[324] In April 2024, security services intensified surveillance of young people visiting mosques, detaining and questioning young men praying there, particularly after the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack near Moscow.[325] Shops selling religious clothing and items were also raided.[326]Uzbekistan exhibits traits common to other post-Soviet Central Asian republics. In June 2024, about 100 Muslim men were arrested in the southern Qashqadaryo Region as part of a nationwide campaign targeting individuals sharing and discussing their faith.[327] In September 2023, Uzbek authorities shut down at least 10 halal restaurants in Tashkent for not selling alcohol.[328] In February 2024, Tashkent's police detained at least 10 men with long beards and brought them to a police station, where they were compelled to shave their beards under the threat of imprisonment.[329]

CASE STUDY

The diminishing right to conscientious objection

On 8 March 2022, the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Human Reproduction Programme published *The Abortion Care Guideline*. The objective of this 170-page guideline is, according to the UN, "to present the complete set of all WHO recommendations and best practice statements relating to abortion".[330]

Among the 50 recommendations, Recommendation 22 states there is a "human rights obligation to ensure that conscientious objection does not hinder access to quality abortion care".[331] The report declares that conscientious objection "continues to operate as a barrier to access to quality abortion care".[332]

The OSCE region is made up of 57 Participating States, and 46 of these States (Council of Europe members) have ratified Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which explicitly recognises that everyone "has the freedom of thought, **conscience**, and religion".[333] It is a right, that if violated, may be subject to legal proceedings before the European Court of Human Rights.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has also spoken authoritatively on rights of conscience, specifically regarding research and provision of services which would destroy human life. Resolution 1763 (2010)[334] states in pertinent part:

"1. No person, hospital or institution shall be coerced, held liable or discriminated against in any manner because of a refusal to perform, accommodate, assist or submit to an abortion, the performance of a human miscarriage, or euthanasia or any act which could cause the death of a human foetus or embryo, for any reason…."

As a further means to ensure abortion access, Recommendation 22 of *The Abortion Care Guideline* suggests "prohibiting institutional claims of conscience". Failing to provide for institutional conscientious objection for faith-based medical providers in areas like abortion and assisted suicide, where performing these acts is viewed as the intentional taking of life and/or contrary to of religious doctrine, is as serious a violation of conscience as withholding the right from individuals.[335]

The largest non-governmental healthcare provider in the world is the Catholic Church. Responsible for an estimated 25 percent of healthcare facilities worldwide (though in parts of Sub-Saharan African this climbs as high as 40 percent to 70 percent, particularly in isolated rural areas),[336] Catholic medical facilities hold a clear understanding of the right to protect life from conception to natural end. *The Abortion Care Guideline* is a frontal attack on the right to conscientious objection by Catholic, and other faith-based medical institutions and staff.

The challenges at a supranational level mirror developments – relating to both abortion and euthanasia – at local levels. In Sweden, despite a widely recognised shortage of midwives, Ellinor Grimark was denied employment by multiple health care providers on the basis that she had a conscientious objection to abortion. The European Court of Human Rights ultimately refused to take up her case.[337]

The Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, in a highly publicised judgment, ruled against two midwives in Scotland who refused to participate in auxiliary matters relating to the provision of abortions, holding that the conscientious objection clause of the Abortion Act 1967 only applied to direct participation.[338]

In May 2023, the Joint College of the Joint Community in the Brussels-Capital Region issued new standards requiring institutions, including those with Catholic or another religious ethos, to either perform abortions or euthanasia within their hospitals, or where exceptional circumstances existed, to make provisions for the acts to be carried out by a cooperating hospital.[339]

Conclusion

Despite the explicit protections afforded to freedom of conscience in all OSCE Participating States, including private law causes of action through the courts, individual and institutional rights of conscientious objection have been under threat where legal systems have deemed other competing interests, such as military conscription or abortion services, more important than religious freedom.

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BACKGROUNDER

Authoritarian regimes and Latin America's ideological leftist alliance

Dr Marcela Szymanski

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In the upper image: Countries in Latin America that are members of the São Paulo Forum (in green).

On the facing page: The first meeting of the São Paulo Forum July 1990. Source: São Paulo Forum

Across the world, an increasing number of **authoritarian regimes are restricting religious freedom** as part of broader strategies to consolidate power and eliminate competing centres of influence. Whether through state institutions or criminal networks, these regimes dismantle independent structures such as labour unions, media outlets, business associations, and religious communities that do not conform to official narratives.[340] In environments where the rule of law is weak or selectively applied, violations of religious freedom are frequent and often go undocumented.[341]

This global trend is especially visible in **Latin America**, where an alliance of ideological leftist parties, known as the **São Paulo Forum** (FSP), has gained significant ground. Although the Forum allegedly promotes regional integration and social justice, it regularly overlooks — or endorses — authoritarian practices among its members.

Founded in 1990 in São Paulo, Brazil, the **Forum includes political parties from 24 countries**, 13 of which held power during the period under review. Its stated aim is to strengthen the unity of the left, promote alternatives to neoliberalism, and pursue regional integration, as declared in its 1990 foundational document and reaffirmed in its most recent July 2023 meeting and resolution.[342]

Originally established as a platform for post-Cold War ideological realignment, the São Paulo Forum has evolved into tight-knit support network among left-leaning authoritarian regimes in Latin America, irrespective of their democratic credentials. Analysts have noted that the Forum often **functions as a mechanism for mutual political support**, particularly for regimes facing international criticism, framing such solidarity in terms of anti-imperialism and national sovereignty.[343]

Excluding all right-wing parties, the FSP serves as a platform to implement socialist models in Latin American countries. Emulating the examples of **Cuba**, **Nicaragua**, and **Venezuela**, member parties reject the universality of fundamental rights in favour of a "people's welfare" defined by state authority[344] and, in the name of distributive justice, prefer that assets be publicly owned.[345] The Forum champions mutual support to build a "multilateral, just, and egalitarian world"[346] aligned with socialist ideals but rooted in Latin American identity.

Under this model, **religion has little value, and indeed is a threat**, unless it aligns with the State's objectives. As religious groups often possess strong organizational capacity, transnational networks, and moral authority — the opposed faith group is a direct challenge to the centralized authority of the State.

For authoritarian regimes, the first strategy is co-option and, failing this, repression. During social unrest in Nicaragua and Venezuela, the governments first attempted to co-opt[347] and then to harass the Churches[348] — initially by denying residence permits and visas to clergy, monitoring religious services, and ultimately accusing the Churches of treason, which led to the expropriation of schools and hospitals,[349] expulsion from the country, or imprisonment.[350] In its 2023 meeting, the Forum rejected proposals to condemn the regimes of Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela) and Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua) for ignoring electoral outcomes[351] — demonstrating its loyalty to ideological allies in precedence to democratic principles and human rights.

As of 2025, **FSP member parties govern at least 524 million citizens across Latin America**. In many of these countries, religious freedom and other human rights are in decline.[352]

Leaders of faith-based organizations are often subject to scrutiny in political environments that prioritize uniform loyalty to the State. When religious leaders are officially designated as oppositional or subversive, their work becomes not only difficult but dangerous. The goal is not just to neutralise opposition, but to redefine religion itself as a tool of state propaganda.

Despite these constraints, religious groups remain vital in providing education, healthcare, and moral leadership. The **tension between religious freedom and socialist authoritarianism** in Latin America is not theoretical. It is a daily reality for countless clergy and believers, whose commitment to justice and human dignity places them in direct conflict with regimes intent on absolute control.

The São Paulo Forum represents more than a regional ideological political alliance; it illustrates how modern autocracies are evolving in the name of justice, equality, and national sovereignty. In doing so, they erode the very values they claim to defend — including the right to conscience, thought, belief, worship, and expression. In Latin America, religious freedom is increasingly being sacrificed to ideological conformity. The world should be watching.

Latin America and The Caribbean

During the period 2023-2024, freedom of religion or belief in Latin America and the Caribbean was marked by tensions between constitutional guarantees and the region's political, social and cultural realities. Christianity is the predominant religion, but despite an apparent homogeneity, several factors—including organised crime, weak institutions, restrictive regulatory frameworks and ideological tensions —continued to threaten the enjoyment of religious freedom.

Violence against religious leaders and vandalism

In 2023 and 2024 **at least 13 religious leaders were murdered** in Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. A further **16 missionaries and laypeople were murdered** in pastoral settings in Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras and Mexico. To these must be added the **deaths of another nine laypeople** in Mexico in early 2025. There is no evidence that all these crimes were motivated by hatred of the faith, however they do reflect the insecurity surrounding ministry in high-conflict and volatile areas. Religious leaders occupy a significant place in their communities, and their influence makes them targets for attacks and intimidation. The same applies to those who dare to criticise authoritarian regimes. They are seen as a threat and can be subject to reprisals. In **Haiti**, at least 19 priests and religious were kidnapped for ransom, and two religious sisters were killed in 2025.

There were attacks, desecrations and cases of symbolic violence against places of worship in **Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela**. Other countries, however, saw a drop in the frequency of incidents of this nature, and a lower number of offences against religious feelings.

Some countries have observers or whistleblowing channels which make it easier to quantify and detail incidents. According to the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights, there were 996 acts against religious freedom in that country during the reporting period. In Brazil, citizens can report human rights violations through the Dial 100 hotline. In 2023, 2,124 complaints related to religious intolerance were recorded—mostly filed by followers of Afro-Brazilian religions. In Nicaragua, the Nunca Más Collective, the lawyer Martha Patricia Molina Montenegro and the NGO Monitoreo Azul y Blanco keep track of religious persecution. In Mexico, the Centro Católico Multimedial tracks violence against priests, religious and institutions of the Catholic Church.

Since the beginning of the conflict between Israel and Hamas in October 2023, several countries in the region have seen the **proliferation of antisemitic expressions**, including graffiti of swastikas, threats to Jewish communities and attacks on Jewish monuments or institutions, particularly in large urban centres and on social media.

In Brazil, followers of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda and Candomblé, have denounced discrimination and religious intolerance as well as attacks on places of worship.

Drug trafficking and organised crime

The drug trade has become one of the most significant threats to religious freedom. Against a backdrop of conflicts between rival cartels over territory, **the void left by the State has effectively turned religious leaders into the stewards of their communities**, leaving them to face the violence and play the role of protectors and mediators in areas ruled by criminal gangs. Although there is no evidence of systematic persecution for reasons of faith, Churches and religious leaders have become victims of structural violence, limiting their action in favour of the community and jeopardising their safety.

The period under review saw the application by criminal organisations of control mechanisms over religious leaders and Churches, such as the extortion of protection money or the issuing of orders. In **Mexico** this extortion of Churches and religious leaders took place under the guise of payments for supposed "protection" from rival gangs. In **Venezuela**, a Colombian guerrilla group established *de facto* control over several communities along the border, forcing religious leaders to request permission to celebrate Masses, hold processions and carry out other pastoral activities, as well as to comply with restrictions regarding schedules, travel and the use of places of worship. These practices represent a serious breach of religious freedom, since they condition its exercise to the impositions of illegal armed groups that act outside the scope of a lawful State.

The so-called "cult of holy death", which is linked to the activities of criminal gangs, has generated concern in **Ecuador, Guatemala and Mexico**. In Ecuador, soldiers dismantled an altar to holy death at an illegal gathering during a state of emergency. In Guatemala the cult is accused of having ties to gangs involved in murder and extortion. In Mexico, the Catholic Church has denounced it as an expression of the culture of violence promoted by the drug trade.

Legal restrictions on religious activities

During the period under review **Cuba, Nicaragua** and **Venezuela** adopted new rules that increased state control over religious activities and elevated the risk of criminalisation, especially for communities that are not officially registered.

In **Cuba,** the criminal code that has been in force since December 2022 penalises participation in unauthorised associations, affecting non-recognised Evangelical churches. The code also introduced the idea of "abuse of religious freedom" and restricted the freedom of parents to educate their children in a religious setting. Additional norms, such as the Citizenship Law and the Foreigners Law, permit the application of sanctions for ideological reasons. Government resolutions strictly regulate the use of places of worship, including those located on private property.

In **Nicaragua**, new laws have allowed the State to revoke the nationality of people deemed "traitors", including religious leaders. Other laws have imposed severe restrictions on charities and religious groups, subjecting them to political vigilance, obligatory registration and control over international cooperation, which has eroded their autonomy.

In **Venezuela,** a 2024 law forced non-governmental organisations to declare their sources of funding, which impacted those that depend on finance from abroad.

Secularism, state neutrality and ideological tension

Tension over the secular nature of the State has grown in several countries in the region, with opposing court decisions. In **Colombia**, the Constitutional Court ordered the removal of an image of the Virgin Mary from a public building, invoking the religious neutrality of the State. **Costa Rica**'s Constitutional Court, in contrast, allowed a crucifix to be reinstalled in a hospital room, arguing that its presence represented a legitimate expression of religious freedom.

In **Mexico**, the Supreme Court heard complaints which alleged that the placing of nativity scenes in public spaces in Yucatán breached the principle of secularism. The subject has not yet been resolved.

The IACHR and the discussion on inter-American standards

In February 2024, the **Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)** published a study on freedom of religion and belief. It generated controversy, as it presented religious freedom as a potential obstacle to other alleged rights, particularly those related to non-discrimination, reproductive and sexual health, and gender diversity. The IACHR posited that religious expressions that contradicted its agenda could be interpreted as hate speech.

Two of the seven commissioners voted against the report, criticising what they considered to be an ideological focus that went beyond the purview of the IACHR. Several religious organisations, such as the Nuestra Señora de la Asunción Catholic University in Paraguay, expressed their concern over the document's secularist prejudice and the risk of criminalisation of traditional religious beliefs.

On the other hand, the **IACHR** has continued to track serious violations of religious freedom in the region. In January 2023, it granted precautionary measures to eleven members of the Jesuit community of Cerocahui, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, considering that they were in a serious and urgent situation due to threats and harassment by organised criminal groups. In Nicaragua, the IACHR decried the large-scale closure of civil organisations, including religious entities, and expressed its concern regarding religious persecution, arbitrary arrests, acts of repression and the conditions to which those deprived of freedom were subjected. Furthermore, the Commission granted new precautionary measures to ten members of the Mountain Gateway Church, who were being held in particularly harsh conditions.

However, the IACHR's precautionary measures proved ineffective in the case of Fr Marcelo Pérez, who was shot dead in Chiapas, Mexico in October 2024. The authorities have yet to bring the perpetrators to justice.[353]

Nicaragua

During the period under review there was a significant escalation of government hostility towards Churches and religious communities. This persecution has taken the form of arbitrary arrests, expulsions, forced exiles, stripping of nationality as well as prohibition of celebrating religious services in public spaces and the *en masse* revocation of the legal status of confessional institutions. At the same time, constitutional reforms and new norms have endowed the regime with legal tools to control religious organisations. Several international organisations have classified the country as one of the worst in terms of religious persecution in the region.

Cuba

Although the Cuban State does recognise religious denominations, its control over their activities continues to be intense, including restrictions on social aid provided by Evangelical churches and the toughening of legislation. The Cuban Catholic Bishops' Conference has described the situation as the most serious of the past decades, pointing out that the country is going through "one of the most difficult periods in its history", adding that "our communities and pastoral agents partake of the general exhaustion of daily life in Cuba. The value for our nation of plurality of thought, opinion and ideas, which are increasingly present among us, has not been sufficiently recognised".

Venezuela

The political crisis in Venezuela has grown worse, with serious human rights violations and a growing instrumentalisation of religious belief by the State. Initiatives such as "My Well-Equipped Church", and other benefits given to religious communities, are presented as support for spiritual life. However, they may be electorally motivated and compromise the independence of religious communities. This situation is aggravated by a legal framework that grants the

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Friends and family of Nicaraguan poet and Roman Catholic cleric Ernesto Cardenal carry his coffin after a funeral mass that was boycotted by pro-sandinista government supporters, at the Cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua in 2020

regime ample discretionary powers to sanction those who criticise it. During the 2024 election period, there were reports of surveillance or intimidation by state agents of religious leaders. One pastor said that the government offered benefits to Churches that supported it but punished those who refused them.

Mexico

Mexico continues to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world in which to be a religious leader. Five of the 13 murders of religious leaders that took place in the region between 2023 and 2024 occurred in Mexico, and other religious leaders are exposed to extortion and threats from organised crime in communities where the Church carries out social or humanitarian work. Pastoral work in regions such as Chihuahua has even been granted precautionary measures by the IACHR.

Haiti

Haiti is in a state of institutional collapse and can now be described as a failed State. Chronic insecurity, the collapse of the health system and a food emergency have led to extreme vulnerability. Armed criminal gangs control wide swathes of territory, imposing a regime of violence and intimidation that keeps the population in a state of constant fear. Churches, religious communities and religious leaders have become frequent targets of kidnapping and extortion.

Forced migration

Large-scale migration in the region has also had an impact on religious freedom. Many displaced people have lost contact with their faith communities and often do not have the conditions to freely exercise their beliefs in transit countries. Events such as the Assembly of the Clamor Network[354] (Bogota, 2024), have highlighted the responsibility of Churches to minister to migrants and give warnings about religious discrimination upon their arrival. In Mexico the Catholic Church has focused on providing pastoral help in hostels and border regions, often in very difficult and insecure conditions.

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People gathered around the coffin of slain Catholic priest and activist Marcelo Pérez during a Mass in the main square of San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas, Mexico, on 21 October 2024.

On the opposite page: Father Marcelo Pérez displays a monstrance to a resident of Simojovel, Chiapas state, Mexico, on 13 June 2020.

CASE STUDY

Between bullets and blessings

Centro Católico Multimedial (Mexico)

A harrowing experience of the Bishop of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, José de Jesús González Hernández, at the beginning of his episcopal ministry, reveals the harshness of a violence that respects neither cassocks nor crosses.

Appointed Bishop of the Prelature of Jesús María, El Nayar, in 2010, the Franciscan bishop recounted how, during a pastoral visit shortly after taking office, he became the victim of an armed attack in the mountains. He was mistaken for a rival drug lord — "El Bigotón"— and his vehicle was riddled with gunfire. His attackers aimed at his head, with a clear intent to kill. Miraculously, not a single bullet hit him. Upon seeing the bishop in his religious habit, the assailants apologised, offered to pay for the damages, and even lined up to ask for his blessing, recognising that the prelate bore "the Almighty" on his episcopal pectoral cross.

This anecdote, told with a touch of dark humour — including the bishop joking about resisting the urge to hit the assassin who piously bent down to request a blessing — is not only a testimony of providential survival, but also highlights the vulnerability of many social actors working for peace, among them Catholic priests and pastoral agents.

Unfortunately, Mexico has become the most dangerous country in Latin America to be a priest. Although the number of killings has declined, emblematic cases such as the murder of Jesuits Fr Javier Campos and Fr Joaquín Mora in Chihuahua in 2022 show how clergy become targets when they shelter victims or refuse to pay criminal cartels. The most recent example is Fr Marcelo Pérez from the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, targeted for his work defending human rights.

Other developments are equally alarming. The number of extortions, short-term kidnappings (locally known as *levantones*), instances of crossfire, and assaults inside churches and evangelisation centres has increased drastically. Laypeople have been murdered within religious premises and communities.

These crimes are not mere statistics; they reflect the harsh reality of a Mexico plagued by violence, where priests and evangelisers become symbols of hope amid terror.

In Guerrero — home to the Diocese of Chilpancingo-Chilapa — the situation is dire. Violence has spread across rural areas, marked by mass graves, disappearances, and criminal control of highways. According to the 2025 Mexico Peace Index, the homicide rate is 54.7 percent higher than in 2015, with Guerrero among the least peaceful states. Communities are under siege, with cartels imposing their rule and extorting civilians. In some cases, priests have left the altar to confront violence directly, seeking peace through dialogue.

In this context, the Catholic Church has stepped in as mediator. Bishops have brokered truces between criminal leaders, while national initiatives from the Church have demanded police and judicial reforms. Yet these efforts raise difficult questions: Should clergy negotiate with criminals when the State fails to act — or even becomes complicit? This mediation role places the Church in tension with authorities, navigating a perilous path between faith and survival.

The story of Bishop González Hernández underscores this tragic paradox. Reverence for the sacred persists — but faith should never have to dodge bullets.

Courtesy David Agren

Pope Francis and religious freedom: a right for peace

Alessandro Gisotti
Deputy Editorial Director of the Dicastery for Communication and former Interim Director of the Holy See Press Office

"There can be no peace without freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and respect for the views of others."[355] It is significant that these were among the final words of Pope Francis' Magisterium. Words not spoken aloud, but contained in his last *Urbi et Orbi* Easter Message of 2025, when just hours before his death, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was only able to announce that *Christ is Risen*, leaving the full reading of the message to the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations. This is meaningful because throughout his entire Pontificate — literally to the very end — Francis was a courageous and passionate advocate for the inseparable rights of freedom of thought, conscience and religion. He championed them through words, gestures, and important documents. Perhaps most notably, he did so through journeys of extraordinary significance, often to places where political or security reasons had led many to advise the Pope not to go.

Pope Francis promoted a positive, non-confrontational vision of religious freedom, in the pursuit of peace, fraternity, and the "culture of encounter" which became a cornerstone of his work for the common good of humanity. He defended Christians — all Christians, not only Catholics — coining the powerfully evocative phrase "ecumenism of blood". But he also stood up for the rights of Jews, Muslims, Yazidis, and others, convinced that peaceful coexistence among peoples and cultures was the only viable path forward, especially in an age increasingly marked by overt or covert "clashes of civilisations".

Like St John Paul II, Pope Francis regarded religious freedom as a fundamental human right — the foundation of all other freedoms — because it is rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person. From the very beginning of his Petrine ministry, he called on legal systems, whether national or international, to "recognise, guarantee and protect religious freedom, which is an intrinsic right inherent to human nature, to the dignity of being free, and is also a sign of a healthy democracy."[356] This heartfelt appeal was reiterated many times before the international community and national governments, particularly in his traditional New Year addresses to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See.

There is no doubt that some of the most enduring signs of Pope Francis' commitment to religious freedom were etched into several of his 47 international apostolic journeys. One of the most moving and prophetic visits was to Iraq in March 2021. Among the most powerful images of his Pontificate are surely those from Mosul, a city devastated by ISIS occupation. Standing amid the ruins of homes and churches destroyed by Islamist fundamentalist violence, Pope Francis declared: "Today we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war."[357]

Religious freedom was also at the core of his "impossible" trip to the Central African Republic, to many Asian countries, and to Albania — a nation that, under its communist regime, was declared an atheist State with the denial of God and all religious expression a foundational principle. Pope Francis also spoke often about religious freedom during his visit to the United States, where, at the heart of the world's most powerful democracy, he reminded people that religious liberty was one of America's greatest achievements — one that must not be jeopardised by attempts to relegate faith to the private sphere.[358]

Alongside Iraq, another journey that was a milestone for religious freedom was his February 2019 visit to Abu Dhabi. There, alongside the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyib, Pope Francis signed the *Declaration on Human Fraternity* — a document that affirms that religious pluralism arises from a wise divine will, by which God created human beings.

This divine wisdom, the document continues — now endorsed by many religious leaders over the years — is "the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected."[359] I had the privilege of accompanying Pope Francis on that journey as Director of the Holy See Press Office. I remember that the day after the signing, the Holy Father asked me how international media had responded to the document and what the most significant reactions were, both in the Christian and in the Muslim world.

Pope Francis's Magisterium on this issue also features prominently in the key documents of his Pontificate. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,*[360] he dedicated an entire paragraph to religious freedom and in the Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti,*[361] he reiterated that "One fundamental human right must not be forgotten in the journey towards fraternity and peace. It is religious freedom for believers of all religions." — clarifying that this includes not just freedom of worship, but also the right to publicly live out one's faith. Underlying this vision is a constant reference to the Second Vatican Council, particularly the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae.*[362] The 60th anniversary of this publication will be celebrated in December 2025.

In conclusion, it can rightly be said that Pope Francis made religious freedom one of the pillars of his mission as the Successor of Peter, closely tying it to the promotion of peace, dialogue, and human dignity. It is a legacy now entrusted to Pope Leo, who continues to challenge us all to build a freer and more fraternal humanity.

Pope Francis releases a dove symbolising peace at the ruins of the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Mosul, Iraq, during his apostolic journey in 2021

GLOBAL TRENDS IN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The countries listed in the table below are categorised based on the type and severity of violations against freedom of religion and belief. The classification follows three main categories:

Persecution: This category includes countries where people face serious and repeated acts of violence or harassment because of their faith. Persecution can come from governments, armed groups or individuals and may involve hate crimes, attacks, threats or efforts to drive away or silence religious communities. These actions often happen with impunity, and authorities may ignore or even support them.

Discrimination: Countries in this category have laws or practices that unfairly target certain religious groups, limiting their rights and opportunities. Discrimination may include restrictions on worship, unequal access to jobs, education, or justice, and indirect barriers such as biased requirements in public or private institutions. It can be imposed by the State or non-state actors and often goes unchallenged by those in power.

Under Observation: This category includes countries exhibiting warning signs of serious violations of religious freedom, though current evidence remains insufficient to classify them definitively as discriminatory or persecutory. These situations warrant close monitoring. In the Regional Analysis maps, such countries are marked with a magnifying glass symbol.

All other countries are considered "Compliant", as they show no significant evidence of violations of freedom of religion or belief and generally adhere to international standards protecting this right.

↑ Improved since 2023 ↓ Worsened since 2023 — Unchanged since 2023

Name of Country	Trend	Persecution / Discrimination Main Author(s) and Driver(s)	Summary
Afghanistan	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Since the Taliban's return to power, religious minorities suffered escalating violence and systemic repression with attacks frequently targeting places of worship. The Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) intensified its attacks. Taliban authorities imposed discriminatory policies against Shi'a Muslims.
Bangladesh	—	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis, and Sufis suffered violence and discrimination. Over 1,000 violations were reported in one year. Dozens of worship sites were attacked, while Christian tribes suffered repression and mass arrests. The lifting of the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami raised fears of growing Islamist influence.
Burkina Faso	↓	Non-state actors Religious extremism	Burkina Faso experienced escalating jihadist violence. In 2024, over 1,500 were killed, including civilians at churches and mosques. Dozens of religious leaders were abducted or executed, and more than 30 parishes shut down. Both Christians and Muslims remain under threat.
Cameroon	—	Non-state actors Religious extremism	In 2024, Cameroon saw a surge in kidnappings by Boko Haram and ISWAP, violence in Anglophone regions, and attacks on clergy and places of worship. The deteriorating security situation severely undermines religious freedom, leaving minorities vulnerable.
China	↓	State Authoritarianism	China introduced new laws restricting clergy, banning foreign religious activity, and enforcing patriotic education in religious venues. Persecution of Uyghurs, Tibetans, Falun Gong, house churches and the underground Catholic Church continued, with new arrests and prison sentences.
Democratic Republic of the Congo	↓	Non-state actors Religious extremism	Over 120 armed groups operate in the country, including M23 and the jihadist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), which intensified attacks on Christians and moderate Muslims with killings, abductions, and destruction of churches. The State's failure to ensure protection amid escalating violence deepened the crisis.
Eritrea	↓	State Authoritarianism	Eritrea intensified repression against religious minorities. Hundreds of Muslims and Christians were arrested, including minors. Raids, torture, and incommunicado detentions persisted. UN reports denounced systemic violations and state interference in religion.
India	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Ethno-religious nationalism	Religiously motivated violence and legal restrictions surged. Anti-conversion laws expanded, mob attacks intensified, and churches and Christians faced mounting hostility. Hindu nationalist rhetoric, especially around elections, fuelled tensions and impunity for aggressors.
Iran	—	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Iran remains gravely restricted. Converts, Bahá'ís, Sunnis, and dissenting clerics experienced arrests, torture, or executions. State surveillance and repression intensified, while crackdowns on dissent and violations of religious rights escalated sharply.
Libya	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Libya deteriorated due to instability and growing Islamisation. Sufis, Ibadis, and Christians suffered arrests, forced disappearances, and worship restrictions. Authorities cracked down on minorities, reactivated morality policing, and suppressed dissenting beliefs.
Maldives	—	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in the Maldives remains severely restricted. Non-Muslim worship is banned, proselytism criminalised, and constitutional protections are absent. Migrant workers and tourists experienced arrests and deportations. Islamist influences and repression of dissent persist.
Mali	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Mali was threatened by escalating jihadist violence, the collapse of the 2015 peace deal, and authoritarianism by the junta. Christian and Muslim leaders denounced extremism, while Christians in Mopti faced jizya demands from Islamist militants.
Mozambique	↓	Non-state actors Religious extremism	Islamist militants intensified anti-Christian attacks in Cabo Delgado, destroying churches and issuing threats of forced conversion or death. Post-election violence, targeted killings, and growing public mistrust further destabilised the country and weakened institutional safeguards.
Myanmar	↓	Authoritarianism and Ethno-religious nationalism	In Myanmar, political, ethnic, and religious factors are deeply intertwined. The civil war has caused a sharp decline in religious freedom, with churches destroyed, clergy attacked, and places of worship bombed, burned, or used as military posts.
Nicaragua	↓	State Authoritarianism	The Ortega regime intensified repression against the Church. Religious groups lost legal status, public worship was banned, and processions forbidden. Clergy and laypeople were arrested, exiled, or denationalised. The government closed charities and confiscated church assets.
Niger	↓	Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom remains protected under the Transitional Charter, but worsening security undermined its enjoyment. Jihadist groups like the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and al-Qaeda affiliates intensified attacks, killing hundreds, displacing thousands, and targeting churches, mosques, and worshippers.
Nigeria	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Nigeria is under assault from jihadist attacks, sectarian conflict, and poor state protection. Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) targeted Muslims and Christians and abducted clergy. In the Middle Belt, violence escalated, with churches burned and worshippers killed.
North Korea	—	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in North Korea is virtually non-existent. The regime criminalises all unauthorised belief, punishing worship with imprisonment, torture, or execution. Repression intensified through ideological laws, border closures, and China's forced repatriations of defectors.
Pakistan	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Jihadist attacks increased. Blasphemy laws were abused, leading to hundreds of imprisonments and several mob killings. Forced conversions and marriages of Christian and Hindu girls persisted. Ahmadis were arrested for Eid. Legal reforms brought little change amid pervasive violence.
Saudi Arabia	—	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom remained virtually absent. Shi'a citizens faced arrests, death sentences and record executions. Blasphemy laws were enforced, dissent silenced. Despite interfaith gestures and one public Coptic Mass, non-Muslim worship remained banned in public.
Somalia	—	Non-state actors Religious extremism	Religious freedom remained absent. Al-Shabaab and ISIS targeted converts and aid workers. Christians faced attacks and lived in hiding. Niqab bans were reinstated amid security fears. Federal tensions and jihadist control worsened the outlook for religious minorities.
Sudan	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Sudan's civil war sparked mass displacement. Churches and mosques were attacked, priests tortured, Christians pressured to convert. Earlier reforms collapsed as famine, atrocities and lawlessness surged. Religious minorities remain especially vulnerable.
Turkmenistan	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom remained tightly controlled under the Berdimuhamedow regime. Unregistered worship remained illegal, and registration often denied. Muslims and Christians experienced raids, surveillance, and threats. Converts endured family abuse, minorities were pressurised into adopting Islam.
Yemen	—	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	The Houthi regime imposed its version of Zaydi Islam, and persecuted Bahá'ís. Christian converts and foreigners faced pressure. Apostasy remained punishable by death. Al-Qaeda's resurgence and jihadist threats further undermined religious freedom.

Name of Country	Trend	Persecution / Discrimination Main Author(s) and Driver(s)	Summary
Algeria	↓	State Authoritarianism	Algeria continued to restrict religious freedom. Dozens of Protestant churches stayed closed, courts convicted converts and sentenced worshippers for unauthorised activity. Blasphemy laws were enforced, and critics of Islam faced arrest and harassment.
Azerbaijan	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Azerbaijan deteriorated due to the repression of Shi'a Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Armenian Christians. Authorities imposed surveillance, raids and arrests. Around 120,000 Armenians were ethnically cleansed from Nagorno-Karabakh with religious sites imposed surveillance and carried out destroyed after its takeover.
Bahrain	–	State Authoritarianism	Bahrain improved ties with the Catholic Church, but Shi'a citizens experienced arrests, ritual restrictions and discrimination. Critics of Islam were punished. Converts face serious legal and social consequences. A new law regulates worship sites, but some church permits remain pending.
Brunei	–	State Authoritarianism	Brunei's Syariah Penal Code continued to restrict religious freedom. Non-Muslims faced bans on proselytism, religious education and gatherings. Unregistered groups are illegal. Islamic law shapes public life, and criticism of religion is criminalised. Control remains strict and centralised.
Chad	–	Non-state actors Religious extremism	Chad suffered jihadist violence, with Boko Haram and ISWAP attacks killing dozens of soldiers in 2024. The post-election period saw political unrest, while Christian leaders reported arrests, marginalisation, and growing interreligious tensions amid worsening insecurity.
Comoros	–	State Authoritarianism	Between 2024 and 2025, President Assoumani's re-election and a controversial arrest of an imam raised concerns over religious expression. A police raid on a Malagasy church drew official condemnation. Christians remain marginalised amid broader tensions over identity and rights.
Cuba	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Cuba further deteriorated under tight Communist Party control. Clergy and believers faced growing intimidation, arrests, surveillance, and bans on worship. Unregistered groups were repressed. Churches were vandalised and looted by unidentified individuals, deepening fear and isolation.
Djibouti	–	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Djibouti remained constrained by Sunni Islam's dominance and State control. Non-Muslims faced worship limits, job discrimination, and administrative hurdles. Conversion from Islam was discouraged and could lead to ostracism or violence.
Egypt	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Church legalisations and a draft personal status law marked progress, but sectarian violence, blasphemy prosecutions, and discrimination against unrecognised groups persisted. Reports of abductions and forced conversions of Christian girls also continued.
Ethiopia	–	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Ethiopia remains fragile amid divisions in the Orthodox Church, hijab bans, and ethnic tensions. Despite a peace deal with Tigray, deep-rooted rivalries and the threat of extremism continue to undermine lasting religious coexistence.
Haiti	↓	Non-state actors Organised criminality	Religious freedom in Haiti is gravely undermined by widespread violence, state collapse, and impunity. Armed gangs routinely kidnap religious leaders, loot churches, and kill civilians. While interreligious dialogue persists, insecurity makes religious practice difficult.
Iraq	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Iraq remained fragile. Christians faced political marginalisation and emigration pressures, while Yazidis suffered continued displacement. Iran-backed militias and Islamic State resurgence further threatened minorities. Equal citizenship remains distant.
Israel	↓	State Ethno-religious nationalism	Religious freedom in Israel deteriorated, with attacks on churches and mosques, harassment of Christians, and tighter restrictions on Arab Muslims, especially in Jerusalem. Despite condemnations, impunity prevailed. The Hamas attack in October 2023 deepened polarisation and tensions.
Jordan	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom remained stable but limited. Christians benefited from state support, while unrecognised groups faced legal obstacles. Attacks on churches occurred, and social pressure against apostasy persisted, especially amid rising Islamist influence.
Kazakhstan	–	State Authoritarianism	Some positive steps were taken during the reporting period, including the official recognition of conscientious objection. These changes led to a slight but meaningful improvement in the overall environment for religious freedom. However, significant restrictions remained in place, notably strict registration requirements, fines for unregistered worship or online religious expression, and proposed amendments that could further tighten state control over religious activities.
Kuwait	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom remained limited to registered groups. Shi'as faced worship restrictions, while blasphemy laws and discrimination persisted. Registered Christians worship freely but still lack full legal recognition and face administrative obstacles.
Kyrgyzstan	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom declined as Kyrgyz authorities cracked down on unregistered groups, raided churches and mosques, and passed a new Religion Law with stricter registration rules. Minority groups faced fines, arrests, and growing pressure.
Laos	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Laos is heavily restricted despite legal protections. Dozens of churches were attacked, Christians arrested, and communities expelled. Local officials often side with hostile villagers. State control under Decree No. 315 stifles religious life, especially for Protestants.
Malaysia	–	State Authoritarianism	Despite constitutional protections, religious freedom in Malaysia remains limited. Apostasy is banned in most states, proselytism by non-Muslims is criminalised, and Shi'as face discrimination. Christians and indigenous groups encounter legal hurdles and administrative bias.
Mauritania	–	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Mauritania remains virtually non-existent. Apostasy is punishable by death and blasphemy is harshly prosecuted. Non-Muslim worship is restricted to foreigners, while the small Catholic community faces legal barriers and lacks indigenous leadership.
Mexico	↓	Non-state actors Organised criminality	Religious freedom in Mexico is constitutionally protected, but clergy and believers face grave threats from organised crime. Violence, extortion, and desecration of churches are rampant, with widespread impunity. Tensions also arise from Church-State secularism debates.
Morocco	–	State Authoritarianism	Morocco guarantees freedom of belief, but Islam remains the state religion. Conversion from Islam is not illegal yet socially penalised. Non-Muslim worship is tolerated, but Christians and Bahá'ís face legal limits. Official discourse promotes moderate Islam without legal reforms.
Nepal	↓	State/ Non-state actors Ethno-religious nationalism	Nepal guarantees religious freedom but anti-conversion laws are in place and proselytism is banned. Christians, especially Dalits, face attacks, arrests, and church closures. The law favours Hindu traditions, leaving minorities vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and legal penalties for evangelism.
Oman	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Oman remains restricted to state-approved worship. Proselytism is banned, and blasphemy laws impose severe penalties. Non-Muslims may worship in designated sites. An ISIS-linked attack on a Shi'a Mosque highlighted growing sectarian concerns.
Palestinian territories	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Despite constitutional guarantees, religious freedom in Palestine remains severely constrained by war and Israeli restrictions. Gaza's Christians suffered grave losses, while Christian and Muslim worshippers face insecurity, blocked access to Jerusalem, and destroyed places of worship.
Qatar	–	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Qatar remains limited to state-controlled worship by Abrahamic religions. While public Jewish services and Catholic events occurred, the Bahá'í faced deportations and job bans. Proselytism by non-Muslims and apostasy remain criminalised under Islamic law.
Russia	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Russia declined due to war-related repression. Broad laws on extremism, foreign agents, and missionary activity target minorities and dissent.
Sri Lanka	↑	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Sri Lanka remains fragile. The Buddhist majority holds privileged status, while Christians, Muslims, and Hindus suffer harassment, restrictions and hate speech. Misuse of the ICCPR Act enables arrests, and Buddhist nationalist rhetoric continues unchecked.
Syria	↓	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Syria remained severely limited amid insecurity and sectarian violence. Yazidi, Shi'a, and Christian sites were attacked, while Islamist factions vandalised churches and Christmas symbols. Legal discrimination persisted. Despite inclusive rhetoric, prospects remain uncertain.
Tajikistan	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Tajikistan remains tightly controlled. All groups must register, proselytism is restricted, and Islamic practices face bans. Christians and other minorities are also affected by surveillance and repression. Anti-extremism laws enable abuses.

Name of Country	Trend	Persecution / Discrimination Main Author(s) and Driver(s)	Summary
Thailand	–	State/ Non-state actors Authoritarianism and Religious extremism	Religious freedom in Thailand is generally respected, though Buddhism holds a privileged status. In the South, conflict affects Muslims' rights. Refugees fleeing religious persecution face detention and risk deportation. Minority faiths and unregistered groups face neglect or indirect pressure.
Tunisia	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Tunisia is limited despite constitutional guarantees. Non-Muslim communities face administrative restrictions, while social hostility increases, especially towards Christian migrants and Jews. The government's rhetoric and security response raise growing concerns.
Türkiye	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Türkiye is shrinking. Minorities face legal barriers, hate speech, and state interference. Protestant pastors were expelled, churches shut down, Christian celebrations banned. Terrorist attacks raised alarm.
Ukraine	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Ukraine has sharply deteriorated amid war and restrictive laws. A 2024 law targets groups tied to the Russian Orthodox Church.
United Arab Emirates	–	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in the UAE is limited by laws against proselytism and blasphemy, yet interfaith dialogue has expanded. The Abrahamic Family House, the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, and legal reforms signal progress. Tight controls and one antisemitic attack remain concerns.
Uzbekistan	↓	State Authoritarianism	Uzbekistan tightly controls religion, targeting Muslims under anti-extremism laws. Arrests, torture, and prison sentences have occurred for minor religious acts. Dozens of places of worship were shut or razed. Censorship and repression signal a worsening climate for religious freedom.
Venezuela	↓	State Authoritarianism	Religious freedom in Venezuela is compromised by government control, political instrumentalisation of faith, and vague laws enabling censorship and repression. Antisemitic rhetoric has intensified, and the autonomy of churches is under threat.
Vietnam	↓	State Authoritarianism	Vietnam continues to restrict religious freedom. Unregistered churches and minorities like the Montagnards and Khmer-Krom face arrests, harassment, and demolitions under vague laws. New decrees tightened control over religion and online speech. Most minorities remain unprotected.

Countries "under observation": Countries where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed, with the potential to cause the erosion of freedom of religion. These include legal measures against aspects of religious freedom, increasing cases of hate crime and occasional religiously-motivated violence. (These countries are marked with a magnifying glass on the Regional Analysis maps).

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
- Angola
- Burundi
- Cote d'Ivoire
- Gabon
- Gambia
- Ghana
- Guinea
- Guinea-Bissau
- Kenya
- Mauritius
- Rwanda
- South Sudan
- Togo

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN
- Bolivia
- Chile
- Colombia
- El Salvador
- Honduras

MAINLAND AND MARITIME ASIA
- Bhutan
- Cambodia
- Indonesia
- Philippines

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
- Lebanon

OSCE COUNTRIES
- Belarus

EXPLANATORY NOTES

The period under review: January 2023 to December 2024 (inclusive). To read the individual country reports please refer to https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport. In assessing the scale of oppression of religious groups, the Editorial Committee and Regional Editors considered factors described in the Methodology and Definitions section. ACN acknowledges that the qualitative nature of the categorisation means that there is necessarily a subjective element in such an analysis.

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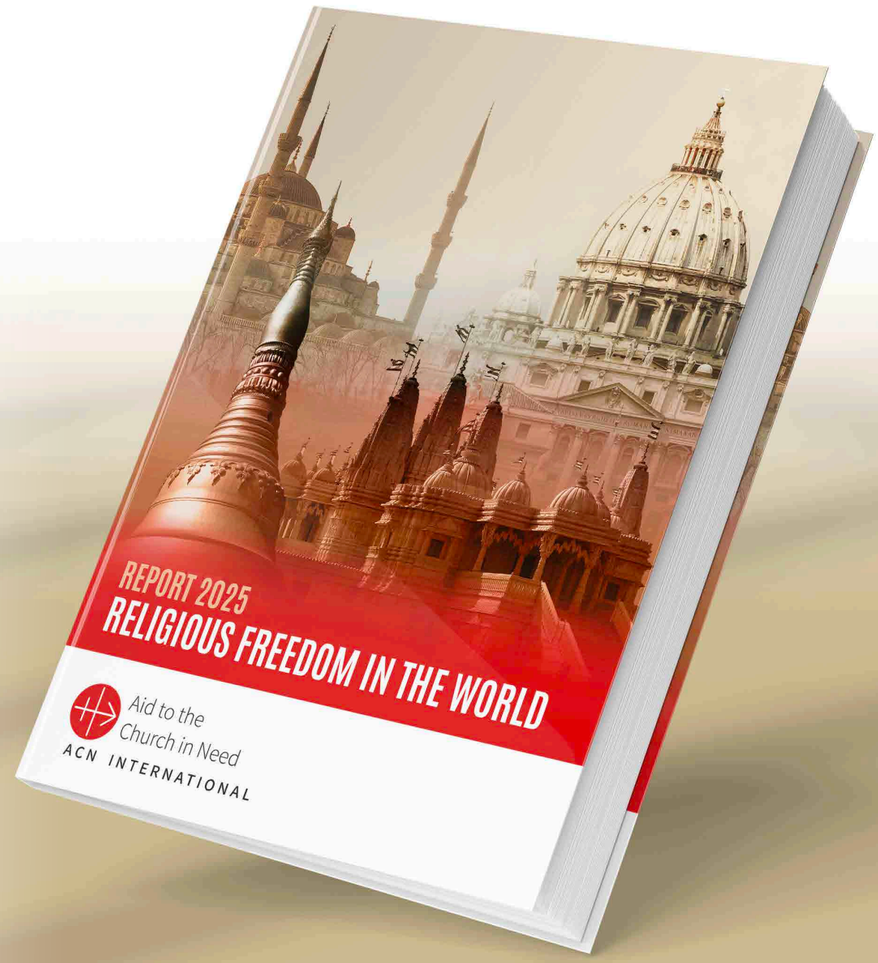

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