

118<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESS  
2<sup>D</sup> SESSION

# S. RES. II

Recognizing religious freedom as a fundamental right, expressing support for international religious freedom as a cornerstone of United States foreign policy, and expressing concern over increased threats to and attacks on religious freedom around the world.

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IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

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Mr. COONS (for himself, Mr. LANKFORD, Mr. KAINE, and Mr. TILLIS) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on

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## RESOLUTION

Recognizing religious freedom as a fundamental right, expressing support for international religious freedom as a cornerstone of United States foreign policy, and expressing concern over increased threats to and attacks on religious freedom around the world.

Whereas freedom of religion is a fundamental right;

Whereas the First Amendment of the Constitution stipulates that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”;

Whereas, in pushing for religious freedom in the Commonwealth of Virginia, James Madison argued that the right to freedom of religion “is precedent, both in order of time

and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society”;

Whereas freedom of religion is a foundational element of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in the United States and abroad, as well as a guiding principle for United States foreign policy;

Whereas Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance”;

Whereas the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (referred to in this preamble as “USCIRF”) stipulates that “freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly”;

Whereas the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (22 U.S.C. 6401 et seq.) recognizes religious freedom as a “universal human right”;

Whereas the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (22 U.S.C. 6401 et seq.) requires the President to annually designate as a “country of particular concern” each country the government of which has engaged in or tolerated “particularly severe” religious freedom violations, including—

(1) systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations such as torture;

- (2) cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment;
- (3) prolonged detention without charges; and
- (4) forced disappearances;

Whereas, on December 29, 2023, the Biden administration designated Burma, the People’s Republic of China, Cuba, Eritrea, Iran, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Nicaragua, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as countries of particular concern;

Whereas the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (Public Law 114–281;130 Stat. 1426) requires the President to annually designate countries with severe religious freedom violations that do not reach the threshold of “systematic, ongoing, and egregious” violations to a “Special Watch List”;

Whereas, on December 29, 2023, the Biden administration designated Algeria, Azerbaijan, the Central African Republic, Comoros, and Vietnam as Special Watch List countries;

Whereas, to enhance accountability for global human rights violations, including violations of religious freedom, President Joseph R. Biden signed the permanent authorization of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (22 U.S.C. 2656 note) into law on April 8, 2022;

Whereas the Senate passed a resolution calling for the global repeal of blasphemy, heresy, and apostasy laws in 2020 (Senate Resolution 458, 116th Congress, agreed to December 19, 2020);

Whereas, in 2023, threats to religious freedom worsened around the world, including incidents targeting the exer-

cise of religion in public or private, participation in religious advocacy, conversion from one religion to another, engagement in religious practices broadly, and those choosing to have no faith at all;

Whereas, according to USCIRF, there were thousands of incidents wherein religious freedom was violated in 2023, including—

- (1) the targeting of 2,228 individuals by 27 countries and entities;
  - (2) the imprisonment of 1,491 individuals;
  - (3) the ongoing imprisonment of 1,311 individuals;
- and
- (4) the death of 9 individuals while in custody;

Whereas USCIRF has identified 95 countries with legislation criminalizing blasphemy used to enforce arbitrary limitations on religious freedom of expression;

Whereas the Department of State has determined that religious minorities continue to be victims of genocides that relate to matters of religious freedom, including in—

- (1) Burma, where security forces have committed crimes against humanity and genocide against Rohingya Muslims since 2017, including the systematic killing, torture, and confinement of Rohingyas to small, overcrowded camps without freedom of movement or access to adequate food, health care, and education; and
- (2) China, where since 2017 the Chinese government has committed crimes against humanity and genocide against Uyghurs, including by—
  - (A) imprisoning more than 1,000,000 Uyghurs in “re-education camps”;
  - (B) subjecting Uyghur women to forced sterilizations and abortions;

- (C) deliberately separating Uyghur families;
- (D) instituting government surveillance through intrusive homestay programs; and
- (E) eliminating the Uyghur language from educational materials;

Whereas religious minorities face harassment, intimidation, violence, and imprisonment from state and non-state actors around the world, including in—

(1) Afghanistan, where the Taliban has rigorously enforced its harsh interpretation of Shari'a law that violates the freedom of religion or belief of religious minorities, including Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha'is, and nonbelievers who face imprisonment or death if discovered;

(2) Burma, where in addition to violence targeted at religious minorities, strict laws in favor of the Buddhist majority regulate religious conversion, marriages, and births of non-Buddhists such as Muslims and Christians;

(3) China, where the government utilizes targeted surveillance to monitor, harass, and detain Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghur Muslims, and other religious minorities for exercising their beliefs;

(4) Cuba, where the government subjects religious leaders and groups that are unregistered through its Office of Religious Affairs to detention, interrogation, imprisonment, and confiscation of property;

(5) India, where laws promoting religiously discriminatory policies, including laws that target religious conversion, interfaith relationships, the wearing of hijabs, and cow slaughter, have been implemented at the national, state, and local levels and negatively impact the

livelihoods of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and Adivasis;

(6) Iran, where the government disproportionately subjects members of religious minorities such as Baha'is, Christians, Gonabadi Dervishes, and Sunni Muslims to amputations, floggings, detention, harassment, surveillance, executions, and exile;

(7) Nicaragua, where the government arbitrarily detains and exiles religious clerics and leaders who advocate for the rights of religious minorities and criticize the government's persecution of the Roman Catholic Church;

(8) Nigeria, where the government's enforcement of blasphemy laws embedded in Nigeria's criminal and Shari'a codes results in the arbitrary detainment and imprisonment of those who express their religious identity;

(9) North Korea, where any religion contrary to the ruling ideology known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is deemed an existential threat to the state;

(10) Pakistan, where religious minorities face killings, lynchings, mob violence, forced conversions, and sexual violence for their religious identities;

(11) Russia, where laws on terrorism and extremism are used to target religious minorities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, and members of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church for their beliefs;

(12) Tajikistan, where the government represses the display of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and institutes strict restrictions against Muslims, including a ban on beards and hijabs;

(13) Turkmenistan, where the government controls all aspects of religious life and expression, monitors religious practice, and punishes nonconformity through administrative harassment, imprisonment, and torture; and

(14) Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine, where the Russian military has reportedly perpetrated 43 cases of targeted persecution of the clergy and more than 109 acts pressuring churches and religious figures representing Orthodox Christians, Ukrainian Greek-Catholics, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses since the launch of its full-scale invasion in February 2022;

Whereas violent extremists and non-state actors continue to capitalize upon violence and instability in countries to perpetrate serious human rights violations against religious minorities, including in—

(1) Latin America, where criminal gangs and paramilitary groups threaten and displace indigenous communities, destroy places of worship, and forcibly require conversion or renunciation of ancestral practices;

(2) Nigeria, where violent, non-state militant groups such as Boko Haram target Christians, as well as persons engaged in “un-Islamic” activities, including Muslim critics and elders;

(3) the Sahel region of Africa, where violent extremist organizations threaten violence against Christians who do not convert to Islam;

(4) Syria, where violent extremist organizations restrict the religious freedom of non-confirming Sunni Muslims and threaten the property, safety, and existence of religious minority groups such as Alawites, Christians, and Druze; and

(5) Yemen, where the Houthi rebels harass, defame, and incite hatred against vulnerable faith communities including the Christians, Baha'is, Jews, and non-religious persons who continue to be forced to flee to the south of the country or leave Yemen entirely; and

Whereas religious sites continue to be damaged or destroyed, especially in areas of conflict, including in—

(1) Burma, where the military junta has destroyed approximately 200 houses of worship and religious sites such as Buddhist monasteries, churches, and mosques, and has occupied religious compounds for use as military bases;

(2) China, where the government has destroyed mosques, shrines, gravesites, and other religious and cultural sites throughout Xinjiang and the country;

(3) Ethiopia, where ongoing violence between the government and non-state actors has led to drone strikes and attacks on church compounds such as the Full Gospel Church in the Oromiya region in which 8 people were killed;

(4) India, where places of worship such as Christian churches and Muslim madrasas continue to be destroyed, especially those in predominantly Christian and Muslim neighborhoods;

(5) Nigeria, where violent, non-state groups, such as Boko Haram, attack population centers and religious targets, including churches and mosques;

(6) Sudan, where members of the Rapid Support Forces attacked a Coptic Christian monastery and raided the Sudanese Episcopal Church in Khartoum, using both as bases for military operations; and

(7) Ukraine, where approximately 500 houses of worship have been damaged or destroyed since Russia's full-scale invasion of the country began in February 2022: Now, therefore, be it



1           (1) recognizes religious freedom as a funda-  
2           mental human right;

3           (2) recognizes the critical importance of reli-  
4           gious freedom in—

5                   (A) supporting democracy, good govern-  
6                   ance, and the rule of law;

7                   (B) encouraging pluralism and robust po-  
8                   litical participation; and

9                   (C) fostering global stability and peace;

10          (3) expresses grave concern over threats to reli-  
11          gious freedom around the world, such as through  
12          harassment, violence, and imprisonment;

13          (4) condemns all efforts to suppress religious  
14          freedom, including through the criminalization of—

15                   (A) religious exercise in public or private;

16                   (B) the choice to have no faith;

17                   (C) conversion from one religion to an-  
18                   other;

19                   (D) advocacy for religious freedom;

20                   (E) sharing and spreading religious mes-  
21                   sages and educational materials; and

22                   (F) construction and maintenance of reli-  
23                   gious holy sites;

1           (5) supports the invaluable work of religious  
2 freedom advocates in fighting for greater religious  
3 freedom around the world; and

4           (6) urges the Department of State to—

5                 (A) continue robust bilateral and multilat-  
6 eral engagement with allies and partners on re-  
7 ligious freedom;

8                 (B) maintain and expand support for  
9 human rights activists, journalists, and civil so-  
10 ciety leaders working to protect religious free-  
11 dom in countries of particular concern and Spe-  
12 cial Watch List countries;

13                 (C) leverage all diplomatic and sanctions  
14 tools available to the United States Government  
15 to hold religious freedom violators accountable  
16 for their actions, including those authorized by  
17 the International Religious Freedom Act of  
18 1998 (22 U.S.C. 6401 et seq.);

19                 (D) continue to impose sanctions on those  
20 responsible for violations of religious freedom  
21 pursuant to the Global Magnitsky Human  
22 Rights Act (22 U.S.C. 2656 note);

23                 (E) consider human rights abuses and reli-  
24 gious freedom violations in prioritizing partners  
25 for free trade agreements; and

1                   (F) promote religious freedom as an ut-  
2                   most priority for the United States in imple-  
3                   mentation of United States foreign policy.