

Federal Foreign Office

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S FOURTH REPORT ON THE

Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief

Reporting period 2023–2025



Dear readers,

All over the world, women and men are socially marginalised, legally harassed, arbitrarily detained or violently attacked because of their religion or belief. The human right to choose or change one's religion, or to not to belong to any religion, is not abstract. For many children, women and men, it is a matter of freedom or persecution, of life or death. These people are the focus of this report.

The global situation of freedom of religion or belief deteriorated during the reporting period. Particularly in authoritarian countries, religious minorities are put under pressure by discriminatory laws and bureaucracy and persecuted in a targeted manner.

Some states do not stop at their country's borders, but also monitor, threaten and attack members of allegedly undesirable religious minorities abroad. This growing phenomenon of transnational repression is addressed separately in this report for the first time.

In addition to state actors, non-state actors target religious groups in many places. Members of religious groups are threatened, attacked and murdered by extremist and criminal groups for their desire not to follow certain beliefs or their refusal to accept injustice and violence. In such cases, the state often does not live up to its responsibility to protect its citizens effectively, irrespective of their religion or belief.

Discrimination and violence against religious minorities are sometimes downplayed by claiming economic, ethnic or social factors as justification. In numerous meetings, particularly during my visits abroad, I was able to ascertain that this discrimination and violence also stem from or are linked with extremist religious ideas in many places.

The global environment for effective human rights policy has not become easier. Autocracies call international standards and international law into question, and downplay and undermine the universal validity of human rights, including freedom of religion or belief. In response, the Federal Government works resolutely to protect and promote freedom of religion or belief. In 2025, the Federal Government based the role of Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Federal Foreign Office for the first time. Since then, direct cooperation with Germany's missions abroad worldwide and the clear positioning of this role in foreign policy have strengthened endeavours on behalf of persecuted religious and belief groups and their members. These groups include Christians, the largest religious group in terms of numbers.

At the same time, the Federal Foreign Office is making the wide-ranging dimensions of religions a greater priority. We do not exclusively support specific faiths. Instead, our aim is to include religion as a concrete factor in foreign-policy analyses, talks and measures. Having a wider network provides a broader view of political and social developments for our foreign policy. Only in this way can many crises and conflicts be properly understood in their entire complexity. Religion can be exploited for political purposes and religious stakeholders can exacerbate conflicts. At the same time, religious stakeholders can create trust, facilitate dialogue, and help to prevent and resolve conflicts.

The aim of this report is to inform the German Bundestag and the German public and to generate support for greater endeavours on behalf of freedom of religion or belief worldwide for each and every individual.

I am particularly grateful to the staff of the Federal Foreign Office for their work in producing this report. I would also like to thank the GIGA German Institute for Global and Area Studies and the German Institute for Human Rights (DIMR) for their expert input to the report.

Best regards,



Thomas Rachel, Member of the
German Bundestag

Federal Government Commissioner for
Freedom of Religion or Belief

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Introduction

In publishing this report, the Federal Government is fulfilling the mandate given to it by the German Bundestag to report on the global status of freedom of religion or belief.

All over the world, freedom of religion or belief is increasingly under pressure. The growing number of violent conflicts, rising instability, the further consolidation of power by authoritarian regimes and power structures, and the prevalence of disinformation and populist rhetoric are leading to painful restrictions worldwide on the freedom of religion or belief. At the same time, the upholding of this human right is generally an important indicator of the protection of human dignity, freedom rights, and peace and stability in society.

Defending freedom of religion or belief worldwide remains a priority of German human rights policy. Since May 2025, the Federal Government has based the role of Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Federal Foreign Office.

The protection of religious and belief minorities is of particular importance to the Federal Government. In many countries where negative trends can be seen with regard to freedom of religion or belief, members of the Christian, Islamic and other faiths are equally affected by the deteriorating human rights situation.

The human right to freedom of religion or belief applies for everyone, including those without religious beliefs, and cannot be limited to individual faiths.

Religion remains a topic of the greatest importance worldwide for a large majority of people. The Federal Government and the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief aim to take the topic of religion into account in foreign policy to a greater extent. In this way, the Federal Government is acknowledging the importance of religion for individuals, but also the influence of religion on social and political processes. Many crises and conflicts cannot be fully understood without taking the dimension of religion into account.

In doing so, the Federal Government is also recognising the relevance of religious actors as important interlocutors in civil society, who also provide significant information for the Federal Government's foreign-policy work. We can work together with these players on solutions to the most pressing questions of our time, including climate-change mitigation, peacekeeping, equal rights

and topics such as artificial intelligence, the approach to digital technologies, and disinformation. At the same time, we must recognise that not all religious actors share the same aims as the Federal Government – indeed, some may even be diametrically opposed to our goals. Where cooperation is not advisable, dialogue nonetheless remains important, as it does with other political or civil-society actors who pursue different interests to those of the Federal Government.

The Federal Government's Fourth Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief contains a section on the link between religion and our foreign-policy priorities of security and freedom. In a further section, the report addresses the topic of transnational restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in the context of transnational repression (TNR), that is, the implementation of repression measures, in particular by authoritarian states, beyond national borders.

The examples provided in this section of the Federal Government's report serve to illustrate relevant developments, but should by no means be used to characterise certain religions or denominations as either constructive or destructive.

This section is followed by 30 country reports, which serve as examples of the latest key developments affecting the status of freedom of religion or belief in selected country contexts. The aim is that the selected countries will show the wide spectrum and varying forms of discrimination and persecution on the grounds of religion or belief, while also providing examples of positive developments. The country sections cover both those responsible for violations of freedom of religion or belief, including state, non-state, religious and political actors, and the situation of those affected, who may come from very different religious or belief groups depending on the specific country or region.

The report concludes with a section on the measures adopted by the Federal Government in response to the report findings.

Religion and foreign policy

Opportunities and challenges for security and freedom

1. Introduction

1.1 Why is religion of relevance to foreign policy?

Religion is rarely addressed as a key issue in foreign and security-policy contexts. However, it is highly relevant for foreign policy.

According to academic estimates, over 80% of the global population identifies with a religious faith.[1] Religious organisations thus have a significant influence on society, not least because they are often transnational. Not only do they have an influence on millions of believers, they are also active in social and political affairs.

This means that political actors, too, are often motivated by religious convictions – or use religious rhetoric in order to gain political support. In particular, conflicts are often religiously charged. In 2024, religion was an element in more than half of 61 violent national and international conflicts.[2] Measuring the actual influence of religion in foreign-policy contexts is a complex task, in part because genuine beliefs cannot readily be distinguished from their instrumentalisation and because religious affiliation is usually linked to further identification factors.

1 See World Religion Database / Pew Research Center. (2026) Religious Statistics: Market Data Report 2026. "Approximately 84% of the global population identifies with a religious faith." WorldMetrics.org.

2 See section 2.2.

1.2 Religion has a complex and ambivalent impact

Individuals and societies draw consequences from religion[3] for their actions in various spheres of life, including politics, with references to religious ideas, identities and institutions being particularly prevalent.[4]

When people share a faith, they form group identities. This can create cohesion beyond ethnic and other group boundaries. At the same time, this gives rise to demarcations from other religious groups which may foster conflicts under certain conditions. Group identities often operate in conjunction with religious ideas, but at times may be unconnected to such concepts. In such cases, they primarily mark group boundaries where an "us versus them" relationship predominates, manifesting as political or other forms of competition.

Faith and group affiliation ultimately find expression in institutions. These include both domestic and transnational organisations that regulate group matters internally and represent the group's interests externally. The latter often intensifies the impact of religious ideas and identities. Governmental and non-governmental regulations on interfaith coexistence and the role of religion in the state and society in general also play a part. Depending on how these regulations are structured, they can have either a positive or a negative effect on the relations between religions.

Furthermore, the impact of religion is always felt in a non-religious context. For example, religion may interact with political and economic factors or with non-religious ideologies and group identities. Such factors often have an impact that is independent of religion. However, there is usually an interplay between religion and context. Religious elites and believers often also have an interest in prosperity and political

3 See Basedau, Matthias. (2024) "Operationalisierung des Religionsbegriffs", in Werkner, Ines-Jacqueline (ed.) *Handbuch Religion in Konflikten und Friedensprozessen*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS. pp. 25-37.

4 The title of Basedau's essay translates as "Operationalisation of the term 'religion'". Strictly speaking, one should refer to "religious factors" rather than "religion". In the interests of readability, we will also use the term "religion" from now on when religious factors are meant.

ownership. Certain religious identities regularly go hand in hand with ethnic or other characteristics. This means that the issue is highly complex, thus making it more difficult to analyse what role religion plays in specific cases.

As a result, religion ultimately has an ambivalent[5] impact on actors' conduct. Depending on the situation, religious factors can be stronger or weaker in nature and thus have either a more constructive or a more destructive impact.[6]

2. Religion and security

The Federal Government regards security as the comprehensive protection of the state, the population, society and critical infrastructure from internal, external, digital and hybrid threats. Security includes military defence, internal security, cybersecurity, the protection of infrastructure, civil defence, disaster risk reduction, and social and economic resilience. Security thus does not only imply protection against violence, but also the ability of the state and society to withstand crises, attacks and systemic disruptions, while retaining the ability to act.

2.1 Religion as a resource for peace and security

A deeper understanding of the parameters for global security is an important starting point for effective foreign and security policy. Religion can also be a component of this. There are numerous examples of peace efforts by religious groups. Religion can promote peace in three phases: (a) before the outbreak of violence, (b) after escalation has already occurred and (c) preventing a post-conflict resurgence of violence, for example through reconciliation endeavours,

5 See Appleby, Scott. (2000) *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation.* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

6 See table 1 below.

in which religious actors often play an important role. In terms of serving as a "prevention paradox", religion can play an unrecognised part in all of these phases. Because no violence occurs, the question of why this is and the role played by religion is often not raised.

The preventative role of religion

Much indicates that religion plays a significant role in preventing conflict. All world religions have explicit peace norms and prohibitions on the use of force that can have a major impact on prevention[7]; strong religious beliefs thus often lead to a rejection of violence, as empirical studies show.[8] However, this depends on the specific religious beliefs, in particular the rejection of religious fundamentalism.[9] It is possible that a high level of religious literacy can foster this rejection if religious peace norms and similarities between faith groups are highlighted. In many places, religious group identities can foster a shared identity in multi-ethnic contexts, creating cohesion and preventing conflicts. Even if there are nominal differences between denominations or religions, referring to the community of Abrahamic religions can unite Christians, Jews and Muslims, particularly as regards the idea of "loving one's neighbour".[10]

There have been numerous organised endeavours to foster interfaith

7 See Abu-Nimer, Mohamed. (2001) "A Framework for Nonviolence and Peacebuilding in Islam." *Journal of Law and Religion* 15 (1/2): pp. 217–65; Abu-Nimer (2001); Appleby (2000).

8 See, for example, Awuni, Evans, Basedau, Matthias, Hoffmann, Lisa and Pieters, Arne. (2026) "Unanswered Prayers: Do the Ideas of Forgiveness and Justice Promote Pro-Peace Attitudes?" *Civil Wars*, pp. 1-32; p. 19.

9 See Awuni et al. (2026); Küchler, Armin, Öztürk, Cemal, Kurtenbach, Sebastian and Pickel, Susanne. (2025) "Vom Glauben zur Radikalisierung: Eine empirische Analyse des Zusammenspiels von Radikalisierungsanfälligkeit, religiösem Fundamentalismus und der Akzeptanz von Gesetzesverstößen und Gewalt." (From faith to radicalization: An empirical analysis of the interplay between susceptibility to radicalization, religious fundamentalism, and acceptance of lawbreaking and violence). *Z Religion Ges Polit* 9, pp. 327-354.

10 See, for example, Hoffmann, Lisa, Basedau, Matthias, Gobien, Simone and Prediger, Sebastian. (2020) "Universal love or one true religion? Experimental evidence of the ambivalent effect of religious ideas on altruism and discrimination", *American Journal of Political Science* 64 (3), pp. 603-620.

understanding. The "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" is a joint interfaith declaration signed in Abu Dhabi in February 2019 by Pope Francis and the Sunni Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyeb. A joint declaration signed in November 2025 by Pope Leo XIV and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Istanbul underlines the unity of the Christian faith and the rejection of the use of religion as a pretext for violence. Such initiatives sometimes address those who are already peaceful ("preaching to the converted") or respond to existing tensions. They thus do not represent a "silver bullet". However, the finding still holds true that religious peace messages have an impact on conflict prevention.[11]



Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul and Federal Government Commissioner Thomas Rachel with Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and International Organisations in the Holy See's Secretariat of State.

11 See Köbrich, Julia and Hoffmann, Lisa. (2023) "What Do We Know about Religion and Interreligious Peace? A Review of the Quantitative Literature." *Politics and Religion 16* (4), pp. 708-732.

Religion and conflict resolution

Once violence has escalated, it is often also religious actors who strive to restore peace and security.[12] There are numerous examples of active peace engagement by religious actors in manifest conflicts. Religious actors condemn violence and call for peace and reconciliation. As religious elites often enjoy particular trust and a high level of legitimacy, they can also mediate effectively between the parties to the conflict.

Such peace efforts exist in all faiths. For example, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism, warned in March 2026 that the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine in particular could only be resolved by negotiations and a willingness to compromise. In response to the post-2003 instability in Iraq, the Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued fatwas (rulings on Islamic law) calling for political restraint, the avoidance of violence and the preservation of social cohesion, particularly between the Shia and Sunni communities. The mediation by the Catholic lay organisation Sant'Egidio in Mozambique in the early 1990s is a successful example from the past; the organisation has specialised in mediation in violent conflicts and is currently mediating in numerous conflicts, for example in South Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic. In Colombia, the Catholic Church is involved in efforts to end the decades-long violence between various armed factions.

This peace engagement seems to be particularly suited to conflicts in which religion does not play a major role or in which no faith group is a party to the conflict. Neutrality provides additional legitimacy and effectiveness. However, religious peace engagement can also be helpful where religion seems to play a contentious role, such as in the conflict in the Middle East.

12 See, for example, Weingardt, Markus A. (2018) *Was Frieden schafft: Religiöse Friedensarbeit – Akteure, Beispiele, Methoden*. Bonn: Federal Agency for Civic Education.

Religious dimension	Peace and security	Risk: Conflict and violence
Religious ideas	Peace norms and prohibitions on the use of force; tolerance of other religions	Legitimisation of violence, religious intolerance, instrumentalisation by political elites
Religious group identities	Shared religious identities create cohesion; constructive relations between groups through interfaith tolerance and cooperation	Competition due to religious differences between groups, particularly when combined with ethnonational, political and economic differences and perceived threats
Religious organisations and institutions	Strong organisations and effective institutions that promote peace, tolerance and interfaith cooperation	Strong organisations that foment intolerance and tensions; institutions that do not treat groups equally

Table 1: The potential and risks of religion for security[13]

Religion as a constructive factor after a conflict has ended

After violent conflicts end, religious ideas and actors often play a key role in addressing the past conflict and thus preventing a return to violence. Religious norms encompass not only justice and responsibility, but also forgiveness and reconciliation. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu initiated and shaped the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the end of apartheid in South Africa. Immunity from prosecution was guaranteed to those who admitted to political crimes. Instruments of these kinds are not a panacea for satisfying victims and their relatives. Calls for forgiveness and justice can also have counterproductive effects.[14] However, the use and further development of such instruments remain an important approach in restoring and maintaining social peace.

13 Simplified version based on Basedau (2024).
14 See, for example, Awuni, Evans et al. (2026).

2.2 Religion as a catalyst for conflict in international policy?

In addition to its constructive impact, however, religion can also create risks for security.[15] Extremist religious ideology may preach intolerance and violence. The transcendent origin of commandments sometimes gives rise to an intransigence that exacerbates and prolongs conflicts.[16] Offending religious feelings may provoke violent reactions. Beyond ideological differences, religious groups may become violent when there is political and economic competition between them. The convergence of ethnonationalism and religion creates a highly volatile dynamic. Perceived threats are especially likely to fuel conflict, particularly when fomented by political or religious elites. Conflicts are aggravated when organisations engage in confrontational behaviour or when faith groups are not treated equally under institutional regulations.

At the same time, religion is not necessarily a dominant factor in conflicts. As a general rule, a conflict is not based on religion alone. When parties to a conflict are divided by religious affiliation or differing views on the role of religion, many other factors usually also need to be taken into account. However, the destructive aspect must be taken seriously. In order for there to be peace, everyone must be peaceable, whereas it takes only a few extremists, including religious ones, for there to be violence. Effective instrumentalisation also constitutes an impact of religion, albeit an indirect one.

Statistical analyses of domestic and international conflicts characterised by opposing religious ideas or identities typically reveal a combination of religious and secular determining factors.[17]

15 See table 1.

16 See, for example, Deitch, Mora. (2022) "Is Religion a Barrier to Peace? Religious Influence on Violent Intrastate Conflict Termination." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 (7): pp. 1454-1470; Svensson, Isak and Nilsson, Desirée. (2018) "Disputes over the Divine: Introducing the Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data, 1975 to 2015." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62 (5): pp. 1127-1148.

17 For further information on international conflicts, see, for example, Zellman, Ariel and Brown, Davis. (2022) "Uneasy Lies the Crown: External Threats to Religious Legitimacy and Interstate Dispute Militarization." *Security Studies* 31 (1), pp. 152-182; for further information on domestic conflicts, see, for example, Deitch (2022); Svensson and Nilsson (2018).

Conflicts with religious demands on at least one side last longer and prove more difficult to end.[18] In addition, they are affected by further factors. This can also be seen in current international conflicts.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, which began in the form of a military conflict in 2014, culminating in a full-scale invasion in February 2022, also has religious undertones.[19] Some analyses suggest that Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies are also influenced by religious motives. It is apparent that the Russian Orthodox Church and its leader, Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow, support not only Russia's leadership, but also the war against Ukraine. To this end, Kirill uses explicitly religious rhetoric in line with the Russian Orthodox Church's traditionally Russo-nationalist orientation. As early as 6 March 2022, he described the conflict in a sermon on Orthodox Forgiveness Sunday as a "metaphysical struggle" and "Holy War", not only against Ukraine, but against the West, asserting that the latter – unlike the Russian Orthodoxy he represents – had abandoned the Christian faith. He ascribed an alleged unity between Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians to a historic faith group and said that Russian soldiers killed in action could hope for forgiveness for their sins. The stance adopted by Kirill and the Russian Orthodox Church has also led to tensions and division in the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

Overall, however, the relevance of religion in this war seems to be limited. The main motive for Putin's policies is Russian nationalism in the form of a revisionist and in parts imperialistic foreign policy, particularly as regards the former Soviet republics. Such statements reflect the Russian President's

18 Religious ideology presumably functions here in a similar way to secular revolutionary ideas. See Keels, Eric and Wiegand, Krista. (2020) "Mutually Assured Distrust: Ideology and Commitment Problems in Civil Wars." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64 (10), pp. 2022-2048.

19 See, for example, Clark, Elizabeth and Vovk, Dmytro, (eds.) (2020) *Religion During the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict*. London: Routledge; Ottinger, Richard, (ed.) (2025) *Religiöse Elemente im russischen Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine: Propaganda, Religionspolitik und Seelsorge*, 2014–2024. Stuttgart: ibidem.

markedly anti-western stance and desire to see Russia assert its interests on the international stage. In general, religion, or rather Russian Orthodoxy, plays a role in legitimising the war of aggression in the Ukraine conflict.

The Middle East conflict and Iran

The conflict in the Middle East is one of the most politically and emotionally charged issues worldwide, including in public and academic debates. Alongside ethno-political differences, the conflict embodies many religious dimensions.

The transnational conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Israel should be regarded as a separate conflict. Since the Iranian Revolution and the overthrow of the Shah regime in 1979, Iran has officially pursued the annihilation of Israel under its revolutionist Islamist foreign policy. Iran thus also supports "axis of resistance" actors, whose members include Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis[20], Palestinian Islamic Jihad and groups in Iraq.

Iran's foreign policy and policy on Israel is underpinned by ideology and not least by religion.[21] The Islamic Republic's political system is organised as a theocracy. The powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which exists alongside the regular military, takes the lead on instructing allies in the "axis of resistance" and is a cornerstone of the theocratic system.

Religious rhetoric is omnipresent, and not only since the latest escalation. Victims of the conflicts are proclaimed as "martyrs", while the maintenance of Iran's missile arsenal is designated "a divine service to God".[22] Much indicates that religious ideology was not merely rhetoric or a tool, but was crucial in the denial of Israel's right to exist, particularly in the early years of the Islamic Republic, when this

20 The official name is Ansar Allah, which means "helpers of God".

21 See, for example, Wastnidge, Edward. (2023) "Shi'i Diplomacy: Religious Identity and Foreign Policy in the Axis of Resistance" in Mandaville, Peter (ed.) *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 113–129.

22 La Marca, Teseo. (2026) "Drohnen und Raketen für Imam Mahdi", NZZ, 28 May 2026.

policy was established as a fundamental pillar of the country's foreign-policy orientation.[23]

The Islamic Republic's positions are not only based on religion, but are combined with power-political and strategic and tactical motives, as well as with "anti-imperialist" and nationalist ideology.[24] Iran regards the foundation of Israel as a product of western imperialism. It believes that only the Palestinian people have a right to the territory. This anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian position mobilises support in the Arab and Muslim world and among the international public, thus also serving "secular" foreign and domestic-policy goals of the Iranian elites and security apparatus.

Furthermore, by virtue of the religious authority of its revolutionary leader, invariably a Shia legal scholar who holds at least the rank of Ayatollah and serves as the representative of the Hidden Twelfth Imam on earth, Iran perceives itself as the protector of Shiites beyond its own borders across the entire Middle East (and further afield). From this perceived role, it claims a right to intervene in the internal affairs of its neighbouring countries, especially in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Syria.

Violent Islamist groups in domestic and international conflicts

Violent Islamists must never be grouped with Muslims and Islam in general. Furthermore, non-violent Islamism should be distinguished from violent Islamists. Equating these groups is thus not merely incorrect and ethically wrong. It also prevents possible alliances against extremists if stigmatisation leads to solidarity.

The majority of armed conflicts occur within countries. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP)[25], only four out of 61 armed conflicts were predominantly

23 Kam, Ephraim. (2015) "The Demand for Iranian Recognition of Israel." *INSS Insight* no. 683, 13 April 2015; Wastnidge (2023).

24 Kam (2015).

25 See Davies, Shawn, Pettersson, Therése, Sollenberg, Margareta and Öberg, Magnus. (2025) "Organized Violence 1989–2024 and the Challenges of Identifying Civilian Victims." *Journal of Peace Research* 62 (4): pp. 1223-1240.

international in nature in 2024. In over half of the cases, Islamist rebel groups[26] were parties to the conflict, while in a few cases, Islamist governments, such as those in Iran and in Afghanistan since 2021, were involved.[27] The main geographical areas for such conflicts are the Middle East and North Africa, as well as several regions in Asia, particularly in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa has recently been more affected, with jihadist violence spreading far beyond the Sahel to the Chad Basin, the Horn of Africa, Central Africa and northern Mozambique.

There is a connection with the Islamist terrorism that also poses a direct threat to Germany. The "fourth wave of terrorism" from 1979 is defined as "religious"[28] and is predominantly of an Islamist-jihadist nature. Islamist terrorism is expressed in the form of individual acts of terror, but increasingly also in organised rebel movements.

Most of these actors identify as members of "Islamic State" (IS) or al-Qaida. In addition to these Sunni groups, several Shia groups such as Hezbollah (Lebanon) and the Houthis (Yemen) receive support from Shia Iran, as does the Sunni group Hamas (Gaza). There is some fighting between Islamist groups, such as in the Syrian civil war, the Sahel and the Chad Basin. Violent Islamist groups also differ in whether they are rooted in the respective countries ("homegrown") or of a primarily transnational nature.

It remains unclear to what extent these groups are actually motivated

26 This refers to groups that (a) make Islamist demands and also (b) use violence. Non-violent Islamists should be distinguished from these groups. Jihadists are sometimes regarded as a sub-group. The report uses the terms "violent Islamists" and "jihadists" as synonyms.

27 Categorisation of the groups on the basis of UCDP categories (see footnote 26) and the criteria in footnote 27; see the use of categories in Basedau, Matthias, Deitch, Mora and Zellman, Ariel. (2022) "Rebels with a Cause: Does Ideology Make Armed Conflicts Longer and Bloodier?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64 (10), pp. 1826-1853.

28 See Rapaport, David. (2022) *Waves of Global Terrorism: From 1879 to the Present.* New York: Columbia University Press.

by religion.[29] Interviews with former fighters in West Africa suggest that religious motives only play a relative role.[30] However, these groups often carry out their ideological demands, such as the introduction of Sharia law, as soon as they gain control over a territory. In this context, empirical studies indicate a combination of religious and non-religious factors.[31] Governments' lack of control over their territory, the instrumentalisation of ethnic tensions, and socio-economic and demographic factors are of benefit to jihadists in places such as West Africa and the Sahel. Disastrous escalation spirals are often triggered when ethnic groups as a whole are stigmatised.

Influence does not only come from military or economic power, but also from ideas and values. Religion is a significant influencing factor whose potential for violently escalating conflicts must be monitored.[32] Two security risks are relevant. Firstly, some countries' targeted religious foreign policy can promote radicalisation by exporting religious ideology, thus jeopardising peaceful coexistence in other countries. Secondly, international tensions can develop when countries compete for ideological or theological leadership rights and the claim to geopolitical influence this entails.

29 See, for example, Friedensgutachten 2023: *Noch lange kein Frieden*, published by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, the Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) and the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, p. 9.

30 See, for example, United Nations Development Programme. (2023) *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement.* No. 2. New York: United Nations Development Programme

31 See Basedau, Matthias, Lüssenheide, Fredric, Deitch, Mora and Köbrich, Julia. (2025) "Explaining Jihadist Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Deprivation, Ideology, or Opportunity?" Manuscript. Hamburg: GIGA.

32 See, for example, Bettiza, Gregorio and Henne, Peter S. (2023) "Religious Soft Power: Promises, Limits, and Ways Forward." in Mandaville, Peter (ed.) (2023): *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press; Mandaville, Peter (ed.) (2023). *The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power: How States Use Religion in Foreign Policy.* New York: Oxford University Press.

3. Religion and freedom

The relationship between religion and freedom is similar to that between religion and security. Religious actors can have a lasting positive impact on people's freedom or curtail it dramatically. *Freedom of religion or belief* is thus a key aspect. Not only is it a human right in itself, it can also be regarded as a benchmark for a society's freedom and openness. As a necessary component of a liberal democracy, genuine freedom of religion or belief can also strengthen democracy and the rule of law, as well as indirectly enhance international stability. The downside is that religion is also used in various forms to legitimise authoritarian rule.

3.1 Pressure on freedom of religion or belief worldwide

Under Article 18 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, freedom of religion or belief entails the right to choose, practise or change one's religion or belief freely or not to have any religion or beliefs. Furthermore, this right is legally guaranteed in many countries. In Germany, it is enshrined in the Basic Law. Freedom of religion or belief describes an individual right in both a positive ("freedom to") and negative ("freedom from") sense. It explicitly includes secular belief systems. Such systems can be humanist, atheist or agnostic, but should not be confused with political ideologies in the narrower sense of the term. The Federal Government is committed to promoting and preserving freedom of religion or belief. The post of the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief and this report are expressions of this engagement.[33]

The available collections of data on freedom of religion or belief focus on different areas; no single source encompasses the status of freedom of religion or belief completely, globally and over the long term. The data set

33 See the Federal Government Report (2023). The Federal Government's Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Reporting Period 2020-2022

Religion and the State (RAS) collected as part of a research project by Bar-Ilan University, Israel, explores state discrimination and the societal limitations of religious freedom, but focuses on religious minorities and does not cover non-religious belief systems. Current data are only partially available. Studies that specifically address religion, such as those by the Pew Research Center, provide valuable findings on specific relevant questions, but mainly in the form of isolated analyses. The World Values Study collects survey data on religious and secular attitudes around the world, but only covers non-western regions to a limited extent.

Other sources focus on specific groups[34], while more wide-ranging projects such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) cover a large temporal and geographical spectrum, but concentrate on a broad range of subjects and only address religion and freedom of religion or belief in individual indicators.

An overview of the available sources shows that freedom of religion or belief is under pressure all over the world. The long-term picture is mixed. Expert estimates such as those by V-Dem show largely stable development since the positive momentum initially triggered by the end of the Cold War. However, more recent findings by RAS reveal increasing religious discrimination, both by state actors and at the level of society.[35] In general, freedom of religion or belief can be violated by states, but also by non-state actors. This differentiation is explicitly broken down by sources such as RAS.[36]

34 "Open Doors" on the discrimination against and persecution of Christians; reports on Islamophobia by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation; studies on antisemitism by the Anti-Defamation League; and the Freedom of Thought Report on restrictions faced by atheists and non-religious people.

35 See Fox, Jonathan and Zellman, Ariel. (2025) "Religious Freedom and Religious Equality in Western Democracies, 1990-2023: An Empirical Study of Government Policy and Societal Discrimination." *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 23 (supp. 1): pp. 111-136; Fox, Jonathan, Haynes, Jeffrey and Zellman, Ariel. (2026) "Governmental Discrimination Against Religious Minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2023." *Africa Spectrum* OnlineFirst

36 The data set Religion and the State differentiates between "government religious discrimination" and "social religious discrimination". See, for example, Fox and Zellman. (2025) Updated data are still being collected for some parts of the world.

Freedom of religion is largely respected by the state in Western Europe, North America and Latin America, as well as in sub-Saharan Africa, where the comparatively recent achievement of independence after the end of colonialism often led to the adoption of constitutions inspired by the European model; however, restrictions are increasingly being imposed here by non-state actors. According to these sources, governments in Eastern Europe and parts of Asia curtail freedom of religion to a somewhat greater extent, while particularly strong state restrictions exist in South and Central Asia, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa. Two types of state are particularly prone to imposing restrictions. Theocratic systems favour one faith group, while in non-religious authoritarian states, a state ideology often curtails the exercise of religion. In many countries with weak governance and/or in conflict situations, such as in sub-Saharan Africa, violations of freedom of religion or belief often stem from non-state actors. Overall, religiously charged conflicts and terrorism curtail freedom of religion for many minorities worldwide, with the perpetrators mainly coming from the majority religions.[37]

The sources quoted also show that members of numerous faith groups worldwide are affected by state or social discrimination. Only a small part of the global population is of the Jewish faith. At the same time, Jews worldwide are particularly subject to discrimination, which often develops into overt antisemitism. Antisemitism sometimes stems from states, but more commonly from social groups or individuals. Since 7 October 2023 and the start of the Gaza war, the Federal Government has observed a steep increase in antisemitic incidents; however, specific criticism of the Israeli Government should not be equated with antisemitism.[38] This

37 See Henne, Peter S., Saiya, Nilay and Hand, Ashlyn W. (2020) "Weapon of the Strong? Government Support for Religion and Majoritarian Terrorism." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64 (10), pp. 1943-1967.

38 See the Anti-Defamation League. (2025) Global 100: An Index of Antisemitic Attitudes Worldwide. New York: ADL. https://www.adl.org/global100; Shafa, Angelique. (2025) "Gaza conflict leads to rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia", Vision of Humanity, 9 May 2025. https://www.visionofhumanity.org/gaza-conflict-leads-to-rise-in-antisemitism-and-islamophobia/.

is expressed in hate speech in social media, damage to property and threats. The fatal attacks on a synagogue in Manchester and a Hanukkah celebration in Sydney in 2025 were particularly egregious cases.

Civil-society organisations also deplore the discrimination and persecution of Christians.[39] RAS data show that threats to Christians by non-state actors are particularly common in sub-Saharan Africa.[40]

Anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia[41] also pose a serious problem;[42] the increasingly Hindu-nationalist India, which has a large Muslim minority, is a commonly cited example of state repression against Muslims. In western countries, anti-Muslim sentiment is often seen in the context of discrimination and racism, in connection with displacement and migration, and in the form of blanket stigmatisation on the basis of Islamist terrorism.[43] A tragic international record was set by the anti-Muslim terrorist attack in New Zealand in 2019 that claimed 51 lives. Anti-Muslim attacks also appear to have increased since 7 October 2023.[44]

The information on the situation of non-religious people is less reliable. It is more difficult to gather data on their situation, as many people in countries where freedom of religion or belief is under pressure conceal their convictions in order to avoid discrimination. This also reflects the stigmatisation

39 See Open Doors. (2026) World Watch List 2026: Persecution Trends and Country Rankings for Christians. Kelkheim: Open Doors, published on 14 January 2026. https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/persecution-trends. See Kirche in Not (ACN Deutschland): „Das ist Kirche in Not“, https://www.kirche-in-not.de/kirche-in-not/das-ist-kirche-in-not/ (downloaded on 12 June 2026).

40 See Fox et al. (2026).

41 The German version of this report uses the term “Muslimfeindlichkeit” (anti-Muslim sentiment), which highlights the animosity towards Muslims as a group of people.

42 See, for example, Bayraklı, Enes and Hafez, Farid. (2025) European Islamophobia Report 2024. Vienna: Independent Academic Publishers (Leopold Weiss Institute and partner institutions); Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. (2025) 17th Annual Report on Islamophobia. Jeddah: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. (Report by the Islamophobia Observatory).

43 See, for example, Bayraklı and Hafez (2025); Fox and Zellman. (2025)

44 See Shafa, Angelique (2025)

they face. The Freedom of Thought Report shows that agnostics, atheists and apostates face discrimination or even physical danger in many countries.[45] In very religious societies, an overt lack of religion can also lead to social distrust, exclusion or collective bullying. Furthermore, non-religious individuals face legal disadvantages, for example in the form of marriage laws, access to public services, and blasphemy or apostasy laws.

3.2 Religion as a help or a hindrance to political freedom?

Freedom of religion or belief is a vital component of liberal democracy and a state based on the rule of law. In addition to the freedom to choose one's elected representatives, liberal democracies have freedom rights that include freedom of religion or belief. This applies in particular to minority rights. As a result, all liberal democracies largely uphold freedom of religion or belief, although at times there may be tension between religious rules and state laws. Restrictions on freedom of religion or belief often serve as early warning signs of authoritarian trends.

Autocratic governments try to exploit religion as a linchpin of their power in various ways. Religion can be instrumentalised politically to directly justify authoritarian rule as "ordained by God"; religious organisations are integrated into the ruling system. Threats to a country's own religious identity are also used. Other religious groups and believers become scapegoats or are demonised, and external threats are often invoked.

In addition to countries such as Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a current example of authoritarianism legitimised on religious grounds. The country's official name shows the theocratic nature of the regime, in which the highest authority is held by Shia spiritual leaders. The Iranian President and Parliament are subordinate to the Shia Council of Guardians headed by the Supreme Leader. The

45 See Wadsworth-Jones, Emma, (ed.). (2024) The Freedom of Thought Report 2024: Key Countries Edition. London: Humanists International. https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/FOTR-PAGE.pdf.

security apparatus with the so-called Revolutionary Guards (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, also known as Pasdaran), which are regarded as particularly ideologically entrenched and are better equipped than the regular military, form an important part of the system.[46] The volunteer militia Basij is subordinate to the Pasdaran. The apparatus is supplemented by the "morality police", whose tasks include enforcing adherence to religious rules such as the compulsory wearing of the hijab by women.

While the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to maintain the support of conservative and religious parts of the population for many years, its own legitimisation through religious ideology is increasingly becoming a burden to the regime, particularly as regards support from young Iranians and women. The wave of protests against the regime in 2022 and 2023 was triggered by the death of a young woman who had been arrested for a breach of the country's mandatory dress code for women. The protestors were designated as "enemies of God". The Islamic Republic of Iran is also a repressive regime, in which religious anti-imperialist ideology is combined with the elites' concrete power-political and economic interests.[47]

Religion is also used in less institutionalised forms to stabilise authoritarian rule.

Nuanced examples are currently found in Latin America. Nicaragua shows how a dictatorial ruling system instrumentalises religious actors to enhance its own stability and oppresses religious actors[48], thus simultaneously halting their endeavours to foster freedom in religious and social contexts.

46 See, for example, Posch, Walter. (2024) "The Iranian Security Apparatus: History – Present – Mission". *Journals of the Austrian National Defence Academy*, no 11. Vienna: Austrian National Defence Academy.

47 See, for example, Boroumand, Ladan. (2025) "The Islamic Republic's War on Iranians." *Journal of Democracy* 36 (3): pp. 169-183. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-islamic-republics-war-on-iranians/.

48 See Reder, Désirée. (2023) "Closing Spaces: The Last Bulwark of Nicaraguan Civil Society under Attack." GIGA Focus Lateinamerika 1. Hamburg: GIGA.

In the processes of democratisation after the opening of the Iron Curtain, most religious actors supported democratisation.[49] Theological criticism is often expressed against dictatorships that are legitimised by religious pretexts. Religious opposition often develops when religion is used to legitimise a dictatorship. This applies conversely to atheist autocracies, which are mainly Marxist and whose repression of religion provokes resistance from faith-based actors.

Freedom is not merely a value in itself – it also promotes security. When religious extremism undermines security, freedom of religion or belief and other freedoms are usually curtailed, too. Conversely, freedom can strengthen security.[50] Democratic systems provide non-violent processes for making decisions on questions of political power. Criticism can be expressed openly, and those who lose an election may win one in the future. Governments are rewarded for successful policies, such as those resulting in economic prosperity.

4. *Summary of the findings*

The analysis shows that religion is a factor that should be taken seriously in the foreign-policy priorities of freedom and security, particularly in an international environment where both values are increasingly coming under pressure. At the same time, the complex role played by religion must be assessed realistically. Its effects are ambivalent. Expressed in a wide range of ways via religious beliefs, group identities and organisations, they also intertwine with non-religious context factors.

Religion often has a positive (albeit not always very visible) impact on security by preventing conflicts before they escalate. Even after the outbreak of

49 See, for example, Leininger, Julia. (2013) *Religiöse Akteure in Demokratisierungsprozessen: konstruktiv, destruktiv und obstruktiv*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag.

50 See Hegre, Håvard. (2014) "Democracy and Armed Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research 51* (2): pp. 159-172.

violence, numerous examples show that religion can help to foster conflict resolution and reconciliation. At the same time, religion can create domestic and foreign-policy risks, particularly through religious extremism and tensions between religious actors. Various international conflicts and globally active violent jihadist groups show this clearly. Islamist actors are clearly prominent here, but they must not be equated with Islam and Muslims – the challenge comes from extremism, not from particular religions. Religious factors are often combined with power ambitions, disputes over the distribution of resources and secular ideologies such as ethnonationalism. Political actors sometimes use religion to mobilise support for their own goals, thus heightening rivalries and conflicts.

Similar dynamics are seen in the connection between religion and freedom. Authoritarian rule is partly legitimised by religion. Influential religious actors are integrated into authoritarian ruling systems. Religious prejudices are used to consolidate power. Examples of this are particularly prevalent in theocratic regimes. At the same time, many religious actors strive to promote political, religious and belief-based freedom and oppose dictatorship and discrimination. Nevertheless, the human right to freedom of religion or belief has been increasingly subject to multiple attacks and attempts to curtail it in recent times. Its universality is being called into question politically and culturally, and members of religious minorities face discrimination or even physical attacks. With religion being instrumentalised and politicised to a greater extent, demands to restrict the human right to freedom of opinion and the enforcement of such restrictions are also growing.

Restrictions on freedoms and ownership around the world often affect the rights of women, LGBTI+ people and marginalised minorities in particular, for example when these rights are seen as violations of the rules of the majority religion. These people's human rights are regularly violated as a result of the instrumentalisation of religion. Attempts are also made to transform the individual human right to freedom of religion or belief into a collective right, and thus to curtail the right to freedom of opinion, for instance through efforts to place a religion as such under protection. The growing number of violent conflicts, rising instability, the further consolidation of power by authoritarian regimes and ruling structures, and the prevalence of populist rhetoric have further increased

the pressure on freedom of religion or belief. Discrimination is particularly prevalent in countries that favour a religion or in atheist authoritarian regimes that restrict any exercise of religion.

At the same time, the importance of political stability for global freedom of religion or belief should not be underestimated, as better protection of faith groups, including against non-state actors who make use of weak state structures, can usually only be achieved in a stable environment in the first place. Factors that have recently further facilitated attacks on freedom of religion or belief by both state and non-state actors include the ever-greater advances in digital transformation worldwide and the proliferation of disinformation on social media. Populist instrumentalisation of religious identity or narratives in order to restrict freedom of religion or belief and human rights in general, the dissemination of imported extremist narratives, or incitement against members of particular religious groups in the form of hate speech, accusations of blasphemy or apostasy, and attempted blackmail can frequently be seen in this context.

Transnational Repression

What does freedom of religion have to do with transnational repression (TNR)?

Some countries with limited freedom of religion or belief also persecute members of religious minorities or representatives of undesirable religious interpretations or belief systems living abroad. The term "transnational repression" (TNR) is used for such cases.

What is TNR and who does it affect?

Transnational repression (TNR) refers to any action by a foreign state through which persons living abroad who have been classified as opponents by the state concerned are persecuted, oppressed and/or intimidated. Dissidents, human rights activists and journalists living abroad are particularly affected, as are members of diaspora communities. These individuals also include members of ethnic or religious minorities. TNR can take the following forms, among others:

- Physical attacks, ranging from bodily assault to abduction and murder
- Spying on, threatening, contacting or stalking a person, inter alia, often with the aim of exerting psychological pressure
- Digital TNR such as online intimidation, online smear campaigns, cyberattacks or the deliberate publication of personal data without consent (doxing)
- The misuse of multilateral or bilateral prosecution mechanisms, such as placing an individual on the wanted registry, launching extradition proceedings, entering travel document details into police systems and seeking other forms of international legal assistance
- Misuse/refusal of consular services by the country of origin
- Threatening family members in the country of origin

TNR is a growing global problem, which also occurs in Germany. The perpetrating states violate the victims' rights, as well as the national sovereignty

and security of the countries affected. In addition to state actors, such as intelligence agencies, the perpetrators include non-state actors, for example criminal networks, who work on behalf of the state.

What is the connection between TNR and freedom of religion or belief?

In many cases, there is a clear connection between freedom of religion or belief and TNR. Authoritarian states in particular use internal control of freedom of religion, belief and opinion to uphold their power. Particularly in countries where religion and state authority are closely interwoven, members of religious groups and minorities are often under pressure. Numerous examples of this will be provided in the report's country chapters below. Efforts to support marginalised groups can be viewed by authoritarian states as a threat to their hold on power and can lead to repression. The transnational repression of members or supporters of these groups who have found refuge abroad constitutes a continuation of national repression.

The connection between TNR and freedom of religion or belief is always strongly influenced by political and structural factors, which include the role of religion in the perpetrating state's political system, the importance of religious identities in its society, the use of religious or belief aspects for political or social mobilisation purposes by opposition groups, and historical conflicts. As a general rule, an individual's mere affiliation with a religion or belief system does not make them the target of repressive measures. The perception on the part of the country of origin that an individual and their activities abroad pose a political threat is more relevant. The size and structure – in other words, the influence – of the dissident diaspora is also a crucial factor in the powerholders' perception of threat. This perception ultimately determines whether and to what extent TNR will form part of the spectrum of action.

The main TNR perpetrators, such as Russia or Iran, thus carry out such measures in Germany primarily against their Governments' political opponents and on the basis of opposition activities. In the case of other TNR perpetrators, their targets

are also defined along religious or belief conflicts. China is one example here. In addition to critics of the Chinese Government, the main focus of China's TNR is on members of groups of people that the Communist Party of China has classified as anti-system. These people include Uygurs and Tibetans, whose identity is also defined by religion, and members of the Falun Gong movement. Members of these groups of people resident in Germany are also affected by investigative and repressive measures. Furthermore, their relatives in China are put under pressure.[51] Experience also shows that Christians are at times the focus of Chinese surveillance and repression efforts because of the exercise of their faith.

There is not yet enough global data on the connection between TNR and freedom of religion or belief. However, the available data points to a connection between TNR and freedom of religion or belief worldwide. For example, over a third of the cases of physical TNR recorded by Freedom House are linked to religious, ethnic or national minorities. Religious, political and ethnic motives for persecution are often interwoven and can rarely be clearly distinguished. At any rate, the easy availability of digital instruments of repression, such as social media smear campaigns, as well as malware and spyware, have greatly facilitated TNR. In her report of July 2025 to the General Assembly, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief underlined that host countries must take steps to prevent the transnational persecution and intimidation of people on the basis of their religion or belief.



Federal Government Commissioner Thomas Rachel and Professor Nazila Ghanea, United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief

51 See, for example, the 2025 Report on the Protection of the Constitution (Federal Ministry of the Interior (2026): 2025 Report on the Protection of the Constitution, pp. 366-367).

What is the Federal Government doing about TNR?

In its coalition agreement, the Federal Government undertook to implement effective measures against TNR in Germany. It is pursuing a comprehensive approach encompassing all affected groups, including members of religious minorities. The focus of the fight against TNR is on preventing such activities and protecting those affected. In order to be able to pursue TNR activities more effectively under criminal law, the Federal Government introduced a new criminal offence, which entered into force in April 2026 (section 87a of the Criminal Code – exertion of foreign influence and working as an agent to this end). The aim here is to ensure that illegal TNR activities in Germany can be prosecuted more appropriately under criminal law. The Federal Ministry of the Interior has published new guidance for people affected by transnational repression[52] with information on how to deal with TNR risks.

The police authorities of the German *Länder* are responsible for protecting targeted individuals. If the locally competent police authority detects a threat situation, protection measures are reviewed and implemented in line with the specific threat.

In the field of foreign policy, the costs for TNR perpetrators are being increased via bilateral diplomacy tools. To this end, a special coordination unit was set up in the Federal Foreign Office in July 2025. The Federal Government is also active at multilateral level in the fight against TNR, including in the EU, the G7 and the UN. The Federal Foreign Office supports international measures to fight TNR, not least by providing financial support. The Federal Government liaises closely with civil society on TNR and freedom of religion or belief.

52 https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/security/counterintelligence-economic-secret-protection/transnational-repression/transnational-repression-artikel.html

Country sections

The situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief in selected countries

The following country sections focus on the situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief in 30 countries that are particularly important for political, religious or geopolitical reasons and can thus be seen as systemically relevant to the global situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief. These include countries with a regional leadership role, a marked religious influence or strategic relevance for German foreign policy. Furthermore, the situation is described in countries where typical or special developments or challenges with regard to freedom of religion or belief could be observed during the reporting period. Each country report outlines the key information on religious demographics and the legal framework of freedom of religion or belief, before presenting the development of the situation in the specific country during the reporting period, taking into account the relevant political and socio-political aspects. The countries have expressly been chosen as examples in order to analyse global trends and particular challenges. The choice of countries does not constitute a statement on the situation with regard to freedom of religion or belief in other countries.

Key

General trend regarding development of freedom of religion or belief in the last two years	 Situation improved	 No change	 Situation worsened
Reservations in respect of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (guarantee of freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief)	 No	 Yes	
Signature or ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	 Year of accession	 Signed but not ratified	 No
Reservations in respect of Article 18 of the ICCPR (guarantee of freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, including the prohibition of coercion)	 No reservation	 Reservation	
Laws or measures with equivalent effect that prohibit people from converting or from leaving a religious community or that make it disproportionately difficult to do so	 No	 Yes	
Laws or measures with equivalent effect that prohibit certain religions or beliefs or that make it difficult to join them	 No	 Yes	
Religions accorded preferential treatment under the constitution	 No	 Yes	

Afghanistan



Situation worsened

 UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1983	 No ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Almost all 45 million Afghans are Muslims, 85-90% of them Sunnis and around 10-15% Shiites, including approximately 5% Ismailis. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and of other religious groups, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá'ís and Christians, made up less than 1% of the population even before the Taliban seized power.

In August 2021, for the second time since 1996, the Taliban declared the establishment of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan". Although the Taliban leadership has publicly committed to the protection of religious minorities, such groups are in practice subject to reprisals and disadvantages.

Many of these minorities have left the country. The remaining religious minorities practise their faith largely in secret, out of fear of discrimination and violence.

Afghanistan's de facto Taliban government pursues a social policy based on its religious beliefs and traditions that violates or hugely and systematically infringes on international fundamental rights standards. This predominantly affects ethnic and religious minorities and women.

Following the Taliban's seizure of power, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the legal right to undisturbed practice of religion enshrined therein were suspended. The de facto government dismissed many members of religious minorities from public service

posts and positions of influence, restricted their role in government apparatus and greatly cut their access to resources.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

International organisations, non-governmental organisations and human rights defenders document cases of discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities, including detentions, massive intimidation and enforced conversion. The Taliban say that Christianity is not a religion in the country. Within Afghanistan's Sunni majority society, the Hanafi school of jurisprudence dominates. The Taliban ideology incorporates further elements, such as Pashtun tribal traditions, strict interpretation of Sharia law, and the teachings of the Deobandi movement from northern India, which is characterised by puritanism, insists on a literal interpretation of the Koran and rigidly rejects foreign cultural influences.

The Taliban are distrustful of members of other religions (Christians, Hindus or Bahá'ís), but also of other Muslim communities (Shiites, Ismailis, Sufis, Salafists, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community). This stems not only from religious considerations. Shiites and Ismailis were loyal to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan when it was attacked by the Taliban. A large proportion of Shiites come from the Hazara ethnic group, which inhabits the central highlands of Afghanistan, a region claimed as seasonal pasture by nomadic Pashtun tribes with whom the Taliban maintain close ties. There have been many reports of the Hazara minority suffering forced evictions and expropriations since the Taliban's seizure of power. Sunni Salafists are generally suspected of sympathising with Islamic State (Khorasan Province, ISKP), the Taliban's rival for power. Dozens of Salafist preachers have been killed since the seizure of power.

It is true that the number of attacks against religious minorities fell once the Taliban took power and stopped carrying out attacks themselves. However, ISKP continues to openly incite murder of Shiites and other religious minorities. In April 2024 and December 2023, Herat was the scene of deadly attacks, in part targeting community leaders and Shia clerics.

Following the Taliban's seizure of power, all special rules for minorities in family and inheritance law were revoked.

Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence applies to all people in Afghanistan. Non-Muslims cannot inherit from Muslims. Apostasy leads to the loss of all property rights and inheritance claims. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community are not recognised as Muslims by the Taliban, and their religious belief is categorised wholesale as blasphemy, which in numerous cases has led to their persecution by the security authorities.

The de facto government curtails the practice of religion by interfering with religious rituals and cultural traditions: while the pre-Islamic tradition of the Nowruz holiday has not yet been banned by decree (as it was under the first "Emirate" in 1996-2001), public celebrations of the originally Zoroastrian festival are regularly cancelled on the grounds of risks to public security. Local authorities ban Shia community processions during Ashura and demand that Shia prayer and fasting times be synchronised with Sunni Hanafi rules. Construction of non-Islamic places of worship or assembly is neither prohibited nor permitted by law (as was also the case in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan).

The "Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" is the central authority for the issuance and monitoring of religious rules on behaviour and seeks to "promote good deeds and prevent wrongdoing". In August 2024, the de facto government promulgated a law on the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, stresses that the law not only lays down religious obligations for Muslims, but also considerably curtails the practice of non-Islamic religions. Among other things, it prohibits the wearing of crucifixes and other "un-Islamic" symbols as well as the celebration of occasions not rooted in Islam.

A recently published handout from the de facto government on statutory provisions pertaining to criminal law and criminal procedural law states that the Hanafi school of jurisprudence is the determining framework and criminalises members of other Muslim movements, and others, as heretics, and religious minorities as dissenters. Promoting non-Islamic religious ideas or beliefs that run counter to Taliban guidelines can lead to the death penalty. Apostasy and atheism carry the death penalty.

Only institutions that observe the Taliban ideology receive state funding. Thus government money has been spent on the construction or maintenance of mosques and religious schools (madrasas). While

girls can only attend secular schools up to the sixth grade, they can continue to attend madrasas beyond that. The curriculum is often based on religion and emphasises women's traditional role in the home. The de facto Education Ministry now controls more than 21,000 religious schools, including so-called jihadi schools that propagate militant jihadi subject-matter.

The Taliban leadership does in principle accept that Afghanistan, too – and thus its government – is bound by international agreements. However, the de facto government takes the view that international human rights standards are subject to Sharia and to local traditions and customs. The de facto government rejects criticism of non-compliance with international human rights standards as interference with state sovereignty. Leading members of the Taliban regard criticism from Western states as the continuation of war at an ideological level. For several years now, the de facto government has refused the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan entry into the country.

Bangladesh



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 2000	 ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

In Bangladesh, approximately 91% of the population follow Islam, 8% Hinduism, 0.6% Buddhism, 0.3% Christianity and 0.1% belong to other religious communities. Since 1988, the Constitution has dictated that the

state religion is Islam, but adheres to the principle of secularism. It prohibits religious discrimination and provides for all religions to have equal status. The Constitution also says that the state must not grant political status in favour of any religion and prohibits religiously motivated political parties. It guarantees all religions the right to practise and disseminate their religion within the scope of laws, order and customs, and gives religious communities or denominations the right to establish, maintain and administer institutions.

Family law contains separate provisions for the various religious communities (Muslims, Hindus/Buddhists and Christians). The laws are applied by secular courts. Separate civil family law applies to families of mixed faiths or no faith. As specific family law based on religion is applied, Hindus and Buddhists have no legal possibility of divorce. Muslim women are clearly discriminated against in inheritance law, and Hindu women even more blatantly so, as they are not allowed to inherit any property whatsoever.

The Ministry of Religious Affairs was established in 1980. Its core task is to manage, regulate and promote the religious activities, events and real estate holdings of all faith communities represented in the country. The state funds are distributed via state-run and state-financed vehicles – Islamic Foundation, Hindu Welfare Trust, Buddhist Welfare Trust and Christian Welfare Trust. The Ministry also has the task of coordinating cooperation between religious agencies, ensuring peace among religions, supporting the religious infrastructure and administering state religious programmes.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

From March 2026, the new Government has run a pilot project in which selected religious leaders receive a monthly allowance. The Catholic Church rejects this, however. The Government influences the appointment and dismissal of imams through the Islamic Foundation and sets out the content of sermons, saying that this is a way to prevent violence and extremism. The religious rights of indigenous peoples in the country continue to be adversely affected by displacement and land appropriation.

The fact that Islam is enshrined as the state religion has led to concerns that religious minorities are receiving unequal treatment when it comes to accessing public services. Religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh have long been subject to discrimination, leading to unequal treatment in many areas as well as to limited access to basic state services. This is true in particular of indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the majority of whom are Buddhist, Hindu or Christian and some of whom speak only tribal languages, making it extremely difficult for them to access government services. Christians among the Rohingya who found refuge in Bangladesh after fleeing Myanmar find themselves repeatedly subject to various forms of societal discrimination. Religious, ethnic and other marginalised groups continue to be underrepresented in politics and the administration. Converts frequently experience marginalisation and hostility, particularly in rural areas. Further, this reporting period has seen criminal damage and arson attacks on Catholic schools, as well as mob violence against members of religious minorities, primarily Hindus. Cases of mob violence have also been directed against women and minorities. The justification given for these violent attacks often refers to the religious or conservative tradition.

Clergy are generally seen as trustworthy figures who lead their communities in everyday life, on moral issues and in religious festivals. Many are actively engaged in social development projects and address social issues in their sermons. Furthermore, they frequently assume the role of mediators in local disputes, thus strengthening social cohesion within their communities. In rural areas in particular, the influence that religious leaders have can be considerable. Interfaith organisations such as the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council work to support minorities, calling on government agencies to ensure their safety and equal rights.

Belarus



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1973	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Belarus is one of the least religious societies of the former Soviet Union. Approximately 55% of the population now describe themselves again as believers (1980: 15%), and around 12% expressly say they remain non-believers. The vast majority of those who say they are religious, about 73%, profess themselves Belarusian Orthodox. The second-largest religious community, Catholicism, accounting for 9.5% of believers, is concentrated mainly in the north and west of the country. Other religious communities exist in Belarus, including the Protestant Church, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. Around 2% of believers are Jewish. Although the Belarusian Jewish community was almost completely eradicated during the Holocaust, there are today still 51 Jewish synagogue communities in the country.

Alexander Lukashenko has been the repressive authoritarian leader of the Republic of Belarus since 1994. The exercise of religion is subject to strict state control. The Belarusian Constitution, which entered into force in 1994, guarantees the right to profess no religion, as well as the right to practise a religion. The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations adopted in 1992 (and revised in 2023) states that all creeds and religions are equal before the law, but the preamble accords the Belarusian Orthodox Church a privileged role. Religious institutions of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Lutheran Churches, Judaism and Islam are explicitly mentioned as "traditional religions". Other Protestant and Evangelical groups are classified as "non-traditional" religions. The

Belarusian Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs is responsible for regulating relations between the state and the religious communities.

However, the right to the free exercise of religion and free opinion, association and assembly are severely limited by repressive legislation and administrative regulations. The exercise of religion is suppressed if, from the viewpoint of the regime, it includes statements critical of current policies or governance. The Belarusian Orthodox Church, which as an exarchate is subject to the Moscow Patriarchate, is openly privileged by the state, but it is less politically and culturally important than, for example, the Orthodox Church in Russia.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The repressive authoritarian regime in Belarus secures its position of power through mass repression, oppression and surveillance, from which religious structures are not exempt. Their relationship with the state is one of dependency and is characterised by arbitrariness, administrative obstacles and repression on the one hand and political favour on the other. Restrictions of freedom of religion consist, among other things, in a legal obligation to register all religious communities with the Commission for Religious and Ethnic Affairs as a prerequisite for being able to practise freedom of religion. Religious activities that are not registered with the state are punishable by law, as are unreported religious activities, such as group prayers or masses, in private spaces. As a result of a new obligation imposed in 2023 for all religious organisations in Belarus to re-register, the number of registered religious organisations dropped by about 5%. Smaller faith communities in particular, such as the Greek Catholic Church, were at a legal disadvantage when registering as religious organisations. Religious communities may only be headed by Belarusian nationals resident in Belarus. Religious organisations are legally prohibited from participating in political activities and activities run by political parties. The process to obtain authorisation to conduct religious ceremonies in public spaces is restrictive and subject to considerable fees. The Belarusian Orthodox Church enjoys a series of symbolic and economic privileges.

Belarusian society displays a high level of religious tolerance, with Christian denominations and values dominating. Religious communities' radius of action is determined by their degree of loyalty to the regime. If they engage in political activities perceived to be critical of the regime, they – like all other institutions of civil society – are subject to repression, political persecution and criminal prosecution. Clergy and adherents of various religions were prosecuted and detained due to the stances they took after the excessive violence of the security forces following mass protests against the fraudulent presidential elections in 2020. In the face of the threat of severe repression, leaders of religious groups exercise restraint in commenting on politics and society. Detained priests are increasingly being used by the Belarusian regime as political bargaining chips in political talks with other states, including the Vatican or the country's heavily Catholic neighbour Poland. The authorities limit clerical visits to prisons; some prisoners are not allowed pastoral visits at all.

Since 2020, the pressure already exerted for many years on the Catholic community in particular has been systematically ramped up. The Catholic community was denied the right to manage and use the Church of Saints Simon and Helena, known as the Red Church, a landmark in the centre of Minsk, in October 2022 and the church was closed, allegedly unsafe following a fire. Requests to celebrate mass have been denied. The building is supposed to reopen in January 2027, although it is not known whether it can once again be used as a church.

A Consultative Interfaith Council was created in 2008 under the Commissioner for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. It is made up of 16 representatives of various religious communities and Government representatives. The purpose of the Council is to promote the development of interfaith dialogue, the preservation of traditions, tolerance, and the intensification of cooperation between state bodies and religious organisations in resolving issues of relevance to society. The Council meets at least every six months.

China



Situation worsened

 UDHR reservation	 Signed ICCPR in 1998	
 No bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

The figures on religious affiliation in the People's Republic of China vary in part hugely, depending on survey methods and sources. Particularly in the case of Buddhism and Daoism, the figures for formal religious self-identification are low, whereas in reality the practice of these religions is far more widespread. For Buddhism the figures range from 4% to 15.6% of the total population, for Daoism from below 0.5% up to 19.6%. Around 1.6% (18 million adults) belong to ethnic groups where the majority is traditionally Muslim. In addition, approximately 0.05% are Muslim Han Chinese. Depending on the source, the figures for Protestantism vary from 1.28% to 2.7% (18 to 38 million people), and those for Catholicism from 0.4% to 0.7% (6 to 10 million).

Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution formally guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination on grounds of faith. At the same time, it grants state protection only for "normal religious activities" that do not, for instance, disrupt public order. In China, religious activity can only be practised legally if it is officially registered, controlled and loyal to the political system. China regularly voices its position in principle that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights agreements are to be applied in accordance with national law and social order, and maintains that this ensures adequate protection, also with regard to freedom of religion.

The guiding principle is the coercive "sinicisation" of religions by the

Government, meaning that religious communities and teachings must be clearly subordinated to the political leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Religious groups must register under the state-approved umbrella associations of the five officially recognised religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism.

The registered communities are subject to very tight controls, covering everything from sermon content to training and personnel issues to funding and the use of religious sites. Judaism is not one of the five officially recognised religions, and the existing Jewish communities are very small by comparison.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Overall, in the last few years there has been a noticeable tightening of the system of legal control, to the detriment of freedom of religion or belief. The actual treatment of religious communities by local authorities varies markedly from place to place. Religious activities where the Chinese authorities suspect a potential for political assemblies, criticism of the Party or state, or "separatist" tendencies are subject to particularly great pressures. This is especially the case for the Falun Gong spiritual movement, as well as in the Autonomous Region of Tibet and the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, home to many Uygurs, where religious and ethnic images and texts are increasingly being removed from religious sites and other public spaces. Muslim members of the Uygur minorities and Buddhist Tibetans are subject to particularly strong repression in these regions. However, the scope is also narrowing for the unofficial Christian Churches, which are also subject to strong repression and can only practise their faith underground.

The Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress envisaged for 2026 expressly subordinates religion to the "formation of national identity, patriotic education and the fight against extremism"; religious institutions and members of the clergy must promote patriotism and social harmony. Further, the Law prohibits the provocation of conflicts on the grounds of religious belief and states that criminal responsibility will be pursued in cases of "religious extremist activities". Members of the CCP are as a matter of principle forbidden from practising religion. In reality this makes it difficult or impossible

for people who profess a faith to access many government offices.

Official agencies continue to crack down on unregistered congregations. There are reports of arbitrary detentions, in some cases long prison sentences, and close surveillance. Since the spring of 2025, there has been a particularly severe wave of repression against some larger Christian house churches. Among these are the Zion Church and the Early Rain Covenant Church in Sichuan, each of which saw a two-digit number of church members arrested. In the course of 2025, measures were taken against further congregations across the country, such as the Maizhong Reformed Church in Anhui. Some legislative measures that entered into force in March 2022 – including the Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services – also deliberately curtail the activities of informal communities, which are often organised online. Moreover, the state's powers of intervention have also been further extended in respect of religious sites. Tighter rules have applied nationwide since September 2023. These include provisions on the redesign of places of worship in keeping with the policy of "sinicisation".

Article 300 of China's Criminal Law forms the basis for the criminal prosecution of religious groups accused of spreading false doctrine or heterodox teachings. This affects in particular the Falun Gong movement, banned since 1999.

Minors are largely prevented from participating in religious activities. Since 2022, for example, it has been expressly forbidden to organise minors' participation in religious activities via the internet.

The Chinese Government tries to control or restrict religious organisations' contact with other countries as much as possible. New administrative regulations governing religious activities by foreigners entered into force in May 2025, with comprehensive obligations to obtain approval from state-sanctioned religious communities. The agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese Government on the appointment of bishops was extended for a further four years in 2024.

In Xinjiang, the practice of religion by Muslim population groups is subject to particularly tight controls. The revised regional regulations on religious affairs, which entered into force on 1 February 2024, tighten, among other things,

the approval requirements for places of prayer, religious education and religious events. The practice of Tibetan Buddhism, too, is greatly curtailed. The state controls monasteries, religious education and in particular the selection and recognition of religious authorities. China continues to consider the Dalai Lama a "separatist" threat; even possessing his portrait can lead to prosecution. The revised Measures for the Administration of Tibetan Buddhist Temples, which entered into force on 1 January 2025, further expanded administrative and ideological control over Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, including monastic administration and education.

Moreover, Uygurs, Tibetans and other groups, such as Falun Gong practitioners, are among the prime targets of Chinese transnational repression. The measures employed include (digital) surveillance, intimidation in exile and the exertion of pressure on relatives remaining in China.

Situation in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

In contrast to the Chinese mainland, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) continues to enjoy broad freedom of religion. According to figures from the Hong Kong SAR Government, there are over a million followers both of Daoism and of Buddhism, a million Protestants, 390,000 Catholics, 300,000 Muslims, 100,000 Hindus, 15,000 Sikhs and 2500 Jews. Smaller religious groups like Falun Gong and Jehovah's Witnesses remain visible. Faith-based schools play an important role in education. There are numerous church-based organisations in the social welfare sector.

However, the security legislation introduced since 2020 is also having an ever greater impact on religious life in Hong Kong: self-censorship among the clergy is increasing (e.g. discontinuation of the formerly customary public services to remember the violent suppression of the democratic movement on Tiananmen Square in Peking on 4 June 1989).

Cuba



Situation unchanged

No UDHR reservation	Signed ICCPR in 2008	
No bans on conversion	No banned religions	No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Approximately 70% of Cuba's population are Christians, with around 60% baptised Roman Catholics. However, the number of practising Christians remains very low. In addition to around 15% who are adherents of syncretic Afro-Cuban religions such as Santería, about 15% of the population are non-religious or atheists.

There is no state funding or subsidies for religious institutions in Cuba. Religious communities must finance themselves entirely – including the salaries of their clergy – through voluntary donations and collections from their members. The Catholic Church receives funding from the Vatican. There are registration requirements for religious or belief organisations in Cuba. Official recognition is overseen by the Ministry of Justice as well as the Office of Religious Affairs (Oficina de Atención a los Asuntos Religiosos, OAAR) of Cuba's Communist party. The construction, purchase or use of places of worship are controlled by the state through the OAAR. In Cuba, the OAAR regulates public religious life by requiring authorisations for events. Furthermore, Decree Law 370 is used to monitor religious statements on the internet, while educational institutions implement a strict ban on missionary activity and symbols.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The state interferes in the capability of religious communities in Cuba to act and in their internal autonomy. This manifests itself, not least, in the revocation of legal status for religious groups critical of the regime, interference by the OAAR in the appointment of officials, and restrictions on the operation of theological seminaries, as well as general censorship. In Cuba, there is systematic inequality, which is usually not based solely on religious affiliation or belief, but on a lack of ideological loyalty in conjunction with general restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly. In view of the multidimensional crisis facing the Cuban state, churches are increasingly taking over functions in the care of the elderly, childcare and the provision of support for vulnerable population groups.

Intimidation is a routine tactic used by the Cuban authorities against supposed regime opponents. The Cuban state deploys transnational repression (TNR) in a targeted manner to project its power beyond Cuba's national borders in order to control exiled critics even when they are abroad. Discrimination and persecution are generally directed against individuals and political opponents of the Cuban Government, not against religious or belief groups or minorities.

The Catholic Church could play a key role in Cuba in a scenario of upheaval and change. In contrast to the state and the party, it is not discredited. Rather, it remains trustworthy thanks to its courageous stances. Furthermore, the Church is institutionally anchored and represented throughout the entire country, and is active as a respected humanitarian player with international connections.

Relations between the Cuban Government and the Holy See are marked by mutual respect. In February 2023, Cardinal Beniamino Stella visited the island as the representative of the Holy See and met President Miguel Díaz-Canel. The Holy See regularly negotiates with the Cuban Government, for example concerning the release of political prisoners. Cuba is currently experiencing the most serious economic and institutional crisis of its recent history. Religious groups, in particular the Catholic Church, serve here as the most important social safety net and humanitarian coordinator. Humanitarian assistance from the United States, for instance, is distributed via the Cuban arm of Caritas.

The scope for action in terms of foreign policy and human rights to strengthen freedom of religion or belief in and with Cuba is extremely limited. Cuba regards itself as a socialist one-party state. Religious practice is tolerated, provided that no fundamental public criticism of the socialist social system is expressed. The EU and Cuba are conducting a human rights dialogue (most recently in November 2023, led by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore), within the framework of the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement. There is no evidence that religion is being instrumentalised in Cuba. Rather, religious stakeholders must stand their ground within the socialist system and in everyday life.

Egypt



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1982	 No ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

In principle, the Egyptian Constitution guarantees freedom of belief. In addition, the Government's official positions stress a commitment to religious tolerance. However, the freedom of religion guaranteed in the Constitution expressly applies only to the three recognised, monotheistic and Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Around 90% of Egypt's roughly 109 million inhabitants are Sunni Muslims, and roughly 10% are Christians, the majority of them Coptic. Only a small number of Jews still reside in Egypt today. The largest religious groups that are not legally recognised are probably Shiites and Bahá'ís. Reputable

estimates by experts presume there are several hundred thousand Shia Muslims in the country. The Bahá'í religious minority has between 1000 and 2000 members. There are no reliable figures on the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Jehovah's Witnesses or other small religious groups. Nor are there any reliable estimates of the number of atheists or religious converts.

Islam is the religion of the state. According to Article 2 of the Constitution, Sharia is the principal source of legislation. Islam's special standing is also reflected institutionally in the role played by the globally important Sunni religious institution Al-Azhar, the Grand Mufti and the Ministry of Endowments. Death sentences must be submitted to the Grand Mufti for comment before they are carried out. Imams at licensed mosques are appointed and paid by the Ministry of Endowments. Sermons given at major mosques on Fridays are monitored by the state. Imams who use the sermons prepared by the Ministry receive bonuses.

The 2016 Church Construction Law is in principle regarded as a positive development, although implementation at local level faces considerable challenges. Article 64 of the Constitution guarantees the freedom to practise religious rituals and associated rights to construct places of worship for the revealed religions only.



Commissioner Thomas Rachel talking with Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Believers of certain religions, such as Shiites and Bahá'ís, can in many cases not practise their faith openly. Currently, the Bahá'í community only has one almost full cemetery in Cairo, and applications for the allocation of new burial areas in

other parts of the country have repeatedly been rejected. Identity cards document adherence to the Islamic, Christian or Jewish faiths. Since 2009, Bahá'ís have merely had a dash inserted on their cards. Thus members of non-recognised faiths like the Bahá'ís are at a legal disadvantage in many respects, particularly with regard to marriage, inheritance law and civil status issues.

Although a change of religion is formally permitted by law, conversion from Islam is not generally recognised by authorities. There has been no definitive ruling on a case that has been pending before the Supreme Constitutional Court for years on the application of Islamic Sharia to religious conversion.

Women face disadvantages in various areas of civil status law. While Christian communities in principle have the right to apply their own religious laws in family matters, the lack of a uniform Christian civil status law continues to lead to inconsistencies and discrimination, particularly against women in inheritance issues and divorce. Muslim women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslim men, whereas Muslim men may marry Christian or Jewish women.

In principle, the recognised revealed religions may practise their religion in their places of worship. However, promoting one's own faith (missionary activity) remains a socially sensitive issue and can be subject to criminal prosecution, for example citing disregard for religion, disturbance of public order, or the dissemination of extremist ideas. The line between the provision of religious information and proselytising remains blurred and in practice is interpreted in different ways. This particularly impacts atheists and people critical of religion. Blasphemy law is still applied. Since 2022, there have been further cases of individuals being prosecuted or sentenced to imprisonment for alleged "defamation of Islam". Public pronouncements by the state's leaders have repeatedly emphasised that Egypt respects non-religious people and their freedom of belief, but committed atheists still face animosity and official abuses, even imprisonment.

President El-Sisi regularly publicly stresses the importance of religious tolerance and of the peaceful coexistence of the recognised religious communities in Egypt. The security situation for Coptic Christians has improved markedly in comparison to the years following 2011, especially in urban areas. At the same time, the situation in rural areas, particularly in Upper Egypt, remains more fragile. Here, there are still local tensions

as well as occasional violent attacks against Christian communities. In 2024 and 2025, cases were again documented of conflicts about the construction or use of churches leading to attacks on Coptic houses or the forcible displacement of individual families. Traditional local conflict settlement outside the framework of regular courts often discriminates against Christian minorities.

So-called Islamic State remains active in the Sinai peninsula, although its scope for action has been substantially curtailed. Sporadic attacks on civilian and security-related targets still occur. On the whole, however, the Christian population's security situation has stabilised noticeably in the past ten years.

Religious minorities, converts and atheists remain vulnerable to social discrimination and on occasion to state repression.

The Greek Orthodox Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai is currently facing uncertainty regarding the property rights of the monks whose home it has been for over a millennium. In addition, the large-scale expansion of the tourism infrastructure threatens to jeopardise the sacred character of the place. While state-imposed regulations and restrictions prevent free access to the historic library and its religious manuscripts, getting long-term residence permits issued for the Greek Orthodox monks living in the Monastery poses a challenge.

Public opinion remains mostly critical of, if not hostile to, the small Jewish community, and has become even more negative since 7 October 2023. At the same time, President El-Sisi continues to seek understanding with the Jewish community at a symbolic level.

Structures for interfaith dialogue remain in place. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, and the Coptic Pope Tawadros II continue to work together. The semi-state Egyptian Family House (Bayt Al-'Aila) is a platform to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence among religions. Further, organisations such as the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) have been engaged in the social and interreligious spheres for decades.

Eritrea



Situation unchanged

 UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 2002	 ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

According to the Eritrean Government, around half of the population (some four million) are Christian and the other half are Muslim. There are no official statistics available. Foreign sources estimated the proportion of Christians in the population after independence in 1993 at around 61%. The majority of the Christians (56%) belong to the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The Catholic Church estimates that roughly 4% of the population is Catholic. No figures are available for other religions. Owing to differing demographic dynamics and emigration primarily of Christian groups, the Christian/Muslim ratio today is indeed likely to be around 50/50. It can be assumed that this dynamic will continue.

Reports on freedom of religion published by civil-society organisations regularly point to a high degree of discrimination and restriction in Eritrea. Freedom of religion is in actual fact curtailed, because the state recognises only four faith communities: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Sunni Islam. Unofficially, the Government has made it known that, for reasons of maintaining religious peace and social cohesion, it has no interest in registering, and thus approving, further religious communities beyond these four. Other religious communities are not permitted and run the risk of persecution. In Eritrea's secular state, atheists experience no discrimination. There used to be vibrant Jewish life in Eritrea. As a result of

emigration, the Jewish community now has only one member.

The extensive freedoms of religion or belief enshrined in the 1997 Constitution have never been applied, as it never entered into force, despite being adopted by the provisional National Assembly. Proclamation 73/1995 (the guiding law on religious issues) regulates in legislative form the most important issues relating to freedom of religion or belief. On this basis, a Department of Religious Affairs was established to regulate religious institutions and activities, with which all religious institutions are required to register once as non-governmental organisations in respect of their general work of religious instruction and thereafter once every year giving details of their assets, in order to be able to implement social and other projects.

By law, the only government-authorised sources of income for the approved religious groups in Eritrea are donations from the populace and grants from the Government. The latter, however, are modest. Funding from abroad requires approval (and approval is granted on a very restrictive basis), and religious communities must not be dependent on it. Public religious events require approval. Engaging in missionary activity in public is strictly prohibited.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The state intervenes in and controls religious communities' autonomy through the Department of Religious Affairs. Candidates are appointed to posts in the recognised religious communities only once approval has been granted by the authorities. The responsibility for training clergy lies with the religious groups themselves. It must be assumed that they, too, are monitored by the authorities.

Representatives of the state regularly take part in public religious celebrations by the recognised communities in order to strengthen cohesion among the religious groups.

Hate speech (by the state) is not usual in the control of or in measures against religious minorities. Rather, the customary narrative is that additional religious groups would endanger peace in society as a whole. Currently, there are scarcely any official instances of terrorism being

quoted in connection with Islam as justification for restricting religious activity. There have been scattered reports of surveillance and intimidation of religious groups, but these reports cannot be independently verified.

The ideology of the sole political party, the PFDJ, presumes that the nation is united in a collective struggle against the former occupying power Ethiopia, and the foundation of this nation must not be damaged by any social, interreligious or ethnic tensions. As framed by the PFDJ, Eritrea is a secular state that tries to keep religious issues out of society.

Violations of the law on religious issues risk drastic punishments including lengthy imprisonment. Fewer detentions have been heard of recently, primarily because the recognised religious groups, and especially the non-recognised religious groups, are being more cautious and because the stringent control of religion has led to fewer people joining non-recognised religious communities. Members of religious minorities (Jehovah's Witnesses, for example) are particularly likely to be arrested for practising their faith.

There are structures for dialogue in place at all levels of society and government in Eritrea to promote social cohesion, including through cooperation with and among religions. These structures are encouraged and supported by the state, but often also spring into life without any further prompting (especially at lower levels). The Government expects the recognised religious communities to actively strengthen social cohesion through their activities and to focus on tackling general social problems (e.g. the fight against female genital mutilation).

Ethiopia



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1993	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Ethiopia is a majority Christian country. Unofficial figures put the number of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians at less than 40%. Then there are Protestant churches (estimated at 20%, increasingly Evangelical) and Catholics (less than 1%). The proportion of Muslims is estimated at 40%. In addition, approximately 3% is accounted for by natural and other religions.

Freedom of religion or belief is enshrined as a fundamental right in the Ethiopian Constitution. Article 27 (1) guarantees all citizens the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes the freedom to hold, to adopt or to give up a religion or belief of one's choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. State restrictions on the exercise of these rights are not known.

Religious institutions finance themselves independently. Income from donations is exempt from taxes. The Government is planning to establish registers of property held by religious institutions and to audit their real estate properties used for commercial purposes.

Under Article 11 of the Ethiopian Constitution, state and religion are separate. With Abiy Ahmed's inauguration as Prime Minister in 2018, the importance of the Orthodox Church lessened. Prime Minister Abiy, Foreign Minister Gedion and other members of the cabinet are

members of Evangelical Free Churches. Prime Minister Abiy – who regards himself as chosen by God – regularly uses religious references in speeches.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

No deliberate legal discrimination of religious minorities can be ascertained. Prime Minister Abiy welcomes all religions: for example, he acknowledges the role of the Orthodox Church in Ethiopian history, was the first Prime Minister to take part in the Iftar celebrations, during Ramadan in 2019, and signalled his support for the practice of the traditional religion of the Oromo people. He established Islam and Protestantism as completely institutionalised religions in Ethiopian law and granted them the same status as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council was granted formal legal personality by an act of parliament back in 2012. The first Evangelical Council was established under Prime Minister Abiy, bringing together all Evangelical/Free Church movements and granting them legal status as religious bodies.

The proportion of Evangelicals is growing, particularly in the south of the country. The rising importance of the Evangelicals is also shaking the vision the Orthodox (and former state) Church, dominated by Amharas and Tigrinya, holds of itself. The Orthodox Church is therefore annoyed at the Evangelicals' missionary activity. Adherents evangelise also among Muslims, causing annoyance in that community, too. Particularly in areas with a strong Muslim or Ethiopian Orthodox presence, non-traditional Protestant converts are facing increasing pressure, being marginalised and in some cases suffering physical violence.

The Government comes down hard on Islamist and fundamentalist movements, in particular Wahhabi or Salafist groups, justifying this with the need to combat extremism and terrorism. Believers accuse the Government of interfering in religious matters and of curtailing the freedom to practise religion.

The majority of Ethiopian Jews emigrated to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is estimated that fewer than 8000 people of Jewish faith remain in Ethiopia. At present, societal and state antisemitism or religiously motivated anti-Judaism no longer play a role.

Ethiopia views itself as a model of inter-religious tolerance and understanding. In practice, however, multifaceted inter- and intrareligious tensions do exist. The Orthodox Church is fighting a schism: in January/February 2023, a few Orthodox priests originating from Oromia formed an independent synod of the Oromia Orthodox Church. This led to violent clashes between supporters of the two sides and security forces, with an unconfirmed number of deaths.

Formal institutions such as the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia are committed to interfaith dialogue and to strengthening peaceful coexistence in cooperation with local religious representatives. In 2026, the Inter-Religious Council will implement a human rights project (funded by the Federal Foreign Office) to promote interfaith dialogue in conflict regions.

Since October 2025, there have been repeated attacks on Orthodox Christians, among others, in Arsi Zone in the majority Muslim Oromia Region. Whether these attacks are primarily religiously motivated or rather the Orthodox Christians are being attacked as ("immigrant") Amharas is difficult to say. The region has been marked by increasing political and religious tensions for years. The Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council condemned the attacks, which claimed a total of more than 50 lives, and warned against attempts to foment inter-religious or interethnic violence. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission called on the state security agencies to protect the civilian population against the attacks and to fulfil their responsibility to maintain security by increasing the police presence.

Hate speech is disseminated and religious minorities are defamed in social media. In the main, individuals or groups from the diaspora use these platforms to comment on developments in the country, particularly in the crisis region of Amhara.

Ethiopia is a member of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva for the 2025-2027 term and holds the vice-presidency in 2026. Thanks to the country's membership of the HRC, dialogue with Ethiopia on human rights issues has intensified. At the 58th session of the HRC in March 2025, Ethiopia voted in favour of the annual thematic resolution on freedom of religion or belief.

India



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1979	 No ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

As the birthplace of three world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism), India is a country of immense religious diversity. In the most recent census (2011), Hindus accounted for 79.8% of the total population. India also has the third-largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan. Alongside the heterogeneous majority religion Hinduism and Islam (14.2%), India recognises in law Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.7%), Buddhism (0.7%), Jainism (0.4%) and Zoroastrianism. In addition, there are a large number of indigenous communities (for example "Adivasi" or "tribals"), small Jewish and Bahá'í communities (though with an estimated two million members, this is the world's largest Bahá'í community) and other religious groups that collectively comprise 0.9% of the population.

Tibetan Buddhists continue to find refuge in the country and have built large monasteries, especially in Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, where they have also established the seat of their government in exile. Bahá'ís may practise their religion. Members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community are recognised as Muslims under Indian law.

In the 2024 national parliamentary elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) once again emerged as the strongest party, albeit recording losses, as the Hindu nationalistic campaign rhetoric (inauguration of the Ayodhya temple; Prime Minister Modi's description of himself as being "sent by God") did

not, as had been hoped, bring in more votes. Since then, however, the BJP has succeeded in further expanding and cementing its position of power in several regional elections. With various high-profile appearances (e.g. attendance at a Christmas service and talks with Muslim clerics), Prime Minister Modi is mindful to anchor inclusion in the public image. Religious minorities are important voter groups in many federal states, so political parties are keen to attract their vote.

In India under the rule of law, citizens may take legal action to defend their freedom of religion or belief as guaranteed in the Constitution – but the proceedings may be lengthy. Only rarely do state agencies directly curtail the free exercise of religion.

Under its Constitution, India regards itself as a secular state based on equality of all recognised religions. This principle is being challenged by Hindu nationalist efforts. The mainly peaceful coexistence between the religions is repeatedly being overshadowed by tensions and, in some instances, violence. In this context, the situation differs from region to region: while conflicts are slightly more frequent in the north, there is a tradition of more harmonious coexistence in the south. The bloody partition of the former British colony into two states, India and Pakistan, along sectarian lines still places a strain on relations among Indian religious communities. At the same time, the governing BJP party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organisation, with which it shares ideological roots, paint a picture of India as a Hindu civilisation thousands of years old and propagate Hinduism as the essence of the Indian nation and culture.



View of the main tower of the Virupaksha Temple in Hampi, Karnataka, at dusk

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Against this backdrop, non-governmental organisations and representatives of Muslim and Christian communities in particular complain of an increase in hate speech, discrimination and intolerance. Resentments (primarily towards Muslims) are sometimes fanned in popular culture (e.g. Bollywood films) and used as a political tool (e.g. anti-Muslim election narratives), lowering the psychological barrier for violence, mainly by Hindu radical groups.

As a result, there have been a host of physical attacks against Muslims, including (Muslim) beef traders and supposed illegal Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh. Despite a Supreme Court ban, there are still sporadic instances of "bulldozer justice" in which the property of members of generally Muslim minorities is destroyed without due court process. In the wake of the Islamist terrorist attack in Pahalgam in April 2025, in which 26 people were killed, the presumably arbitrary arrests of Muslim leaders in the name of national security or the fight against terror were criticised from various quarters.

The data on trends in hate crimes in India is inconsistent and complicates accurate analysis. Christian organisations report a high level of violence and intimidation targeting Christians. This includes attacks on prayer meetings, forced exhumation of deceased family members, social exclusion and arrests on dubious grounds of attempts at conversion or proselytising, as well as inadequate responses by the police and authorities to such attacks. Christian converts from Hindu origins are particularly affected: campaigns are run to put them under pressure to return to Hinduism.

Since 2023, there have been repeated outbreaks of violence in Manipur between the Kuki (majority Christian) and Meitei (majority Hindu) ethnic groups, resulting in a large number of deaths and (forced) displacements. The conflict stems from disputes over distribution that crystallise along religious fault lines. A new state government comprising representatives from all groups was appointed in early 2025, without the introduction of a political peace process.

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) requires associations to register in order to be able to receive funding from abroad. Many organisations feel

their work in India to be jeopardised by licensing refusals and non-transparent procedures. Religious organisations, especially Christian and Muslim groups, are among those affected by restrictions. Some 14,500 organisations in India are currently registered under the FCRA. Although a planned tightening of the law was deferred in March 2026 following protests, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued new regulations in June 2026 on how, where and for what purposes non-governmental organisations may use foreign funding.

In 2025, the Indian Government adopted at federal level the "Waqf Act" (under Islamic law, "waqf" denotes a religious or charitable donation), providing for a new framework for the administration of Muslim properties donated for the benefit of the community and the expansion of the state's means of control. For example, district authorities were empowered to decide unilaterally whether a waqf property belongs to the Government. The Supreme Court suspended key provisions of the law, including that power of decision.

Thirteen Indian states have adopted "anti-conversion laws" that criminalise changes of religion and interfaith marriages as alleged attempts to convert. Civil-society organisations criticise the laws as being Hindu nationalist instruments aimed at intimidating religious minorities and curtailing the free exercise of religion. The Supreme Court is currently examining the compatibility of some of these laws with the country's Constitution. Although it is unconstitutional, marginalising, discriminating against and stigmatising people based on the caste system is still a reality in Indian society. Many of those affected hope that by leaving Hinduism they can escape this. In 2025, the Supreme Court decided that members of the "scheduled castes" who convert from Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism to another religion would no longer be entitled to their status as disadvantaged groups and the related special rights.

A Uniform Civil Code (UCC), envisaged in the Constitution and a goal of the Government in this legislative term, has so far failed in the face of societal resistance. Critics fear that a Uniform Civil Code would undermine religious diversity and autonomy (e.g. in family law). Some states have already adopted a Uniform Civil Code (Uttarakhand in 2024, Gujarat in 2026). The amendments to the Citizenship Act that entered into force in March 2024 exclude Muslims from the envisaged simplified procedure for acquiring citizenship. According to

the Government, the Act is conceived only for refugees who have fled religious persecution in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. In the face of protests, a National Register of Citizens has not been introduced to date. Muslims fear being stripped of their citizenship. The Supreme Court has still not considered the 1991 Places of Worship Act. The law is intended to prevent conflicts over religious sites between Muslims and Hindus. The BJP-led central Government would like to repeal the entire Places of Worship Act.

Indonesia



Situation worsened



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 2006



No ICCPR reservation



Bans on conversion



Banned religions



Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country in the world. One principle of the state philosophy Pancasila is the "belief in the one and only God". A total of six religions are recognised. Everyone must have a religion entered in their identity documents. The distribution among religions is as follows: 87% Islam (of which 99% Sunni), 7% Protestantism, 3% Catholicism, 2% Hinduism (especially in Bali), just under 1% Buddhism plus only a few adherents of Confucianism. Since 2017, it has also been possible to enter "belief in one omnipotent God". There is no option to list atheism or adherence to a polytheistic religion.

State funding goes primarily to the Islamic education sector. The Government monitors the activities and funding of international religious organisations in particular. This religious and

social landscape is dominated by the two major Islamic mass organisations Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which together number over 100 million members and which have an impact far beyond the religious sphere through their management of numerous schools, universities, hospitals and social institutions. For Muslims throughout the country, Sharia largely applies in family and inheritance law. Some regions apply Sharia-inspired local regulations irrespective of religious affiliation.

In the autonomous province of Aceh, Sharia is regarded as formal regional law in certain spheres. Among other things, this means that corporal punishment (such as caning) under Sharia law can be imposed for certain offences, such as extramarital sexual relations, gambling or alcohol consumption. Furthermore, Islamic rules of conduct and dress, and in certain situations gender segregation in public areas, are monitored and enforced by the local authorities.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The state deliberately influences the practice of religion and religious education. School pupils belonging to non-recognised faiths must take part in the religious education of other religions. In order to counter radicalism and interreligious conflicts, the state oversees religious education in state schools, and the Ministry of Religious Affairs can appoint senior management at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions. In addition, schools and local governments can issue rules shaped by religion. For example, female pupils in some regions are required to wear a hijab as part of their school uniform, whether or not they are of the Muslim faith. Moreover, the "pesantren" Islamic boarding schools, which provide both religious and general education to millions of pupils, play a special role.

Groups other than the six recognised religions can at best register as social organisations. This excludes them from the privileges accorded to religious organisations, above all government funding. Religious minorities often have trouble obtaining construction permits for places of worship, as this requires widespread confirmations of support from the local neighbourhood. Further, private buildings cannot be used for religious gatherings in the

long term without special authorisation. For non-recognised religions, this means that they can hold services only on a small scale and cannot advertise them publicly. Non-Muslims meet with discrimination in many areas. To access public-service jobs, membership of the Muslim community is a de facto prerequisite in some cases. Even in the wake of the Constitutional Court's 2017 decision that it must be possible to enter not only the six recognised religions in identity documents, but also indigenous religions, human rights groups continue to report discrimination in administrative services. As access to cemeteries is often dependent on religious affiliation, members of other groups frequently have difficulties in finding legal burial places. A loophole that had previously existed for interfaith marriages was closed by the Supreme Court in 2023, meaning that these couples can now only marry abroad or after converting.

Blasphemy laws and other regulations relating to religion in the criminal code that have recently been expanded substantially restrict personal freedoms, in particular freedom of religion and opinion, in certain areas. Moreover, their threats of punishment and their wording offer a basis for misuse by government actors and for legal prosecution of people with different beliefs.

Societal actors also use religious narratives to step up the pressure on social minorities, including other minorities not only based on religion. Religious minorities are among the victims of online campaigns, which sometimes tip over into the physical world. For instance, violent groups have organised themselves on social media and, among other things, forced the closure of churches or of mosques belonging to the Ahmadiyya minority. In June and July 2025, violent attacks on Christian youth events in West Java and West Sumatra devastated the event venues.

Iran



Situation unchanged

 UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1975	 No ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

In Iran, Shia Islam is the sole state religion (official figures: 90-95% of the approximately 93 million inhabitants; 5-8% Sunnis). All other religious groups (approximately 0.5-2%) face varying degrees of restrictions on their freedom of belief and religious practice, or their religious affiliation is an additional cause of discrimination. While Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians are guaranteed rights – at least under the Constitution – and are entitled constitutionally to send representatives to Parliament, this does not apply to the largest religious minority – the Bahá'ís (around 300,000 members). Both proselytising and apostasy, including conversion from Islam to another religion, are subject to severe penalties (including the death penalty). Moreover, the regime uses "religious crimes" as a pretext for implementing repressive measures.

In reality, large sections of the population live secular lives or are either agnostic or atheist. Shia traditions are observed on certain occasions, in particular the Day of Ashura or funerals. Interfaith conflicts or stigmatisation are not particularly prevalent among the population.

In the 47 years since the founding of the Islamic Republic – regardless of the government of the day – the religious leadership has ensured that the principles of the Islamic Revolution remain inviolate and that the regime's political and religious authority to interpret these principles remains unchallenged. The Government, whose policies

are designed to preserve power and existing structures, instrumentalises purported religious beliefs to oppress its own people.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of religion or belief is subject to massive restrictions in Iran. Ultimately, only members of the Shia Islam community can invoke all the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. In the 2026 Freedom House index, Iran was given zero out of a possible four points for the criterion of religious freedom. Religious minorities face economic, occupational and social discrimination. Discrimination against non-Muslims is illustrated, among other things, by the fact that they cannot hold senior positions in the armed forces (Article 144 of the Constitution) or become judges (Article 163 of the Constitution). The religious freedom of Muslim converts and members of Protestant free churches in particular is severely infringed upon. Any form of missionary activity is prohibited and can lead to a conviction, including the imposition of the death penalty. Christian congregations that welcome converts have to reckon with consequences (e.g. closure) if the presence of converts among them becomes public.

Bahá'ís have been systematically discriminated against and persecuted in Iran since the founding of the Islamic Republic. This includes arrests, detention, torture, denial of access to higher education, economic and occupational discrimination and, in recent times, the rising destruction and seizure of property and holy sites. Bahá'í women in Iran face intersectional discrimination – as women (e.g. mandatory wearing of the hijab) and as Bahá'ís. Many Bahá'í women are very active in providing informal education opportunities (e.g. tutoring, language courses, music lessons for children and young people – also for Afghan refugees). The Iranian regime views this as criticism of the current social order – and thus of the regime – as propaganda against Sharia or as a threat to security and has cracked down harshly on it. Between June and November 2025, the Bahá'í community counted more than 750 cases of persecution, including over 200 raids on homes, at least 110 arrests, more than 100 court proceedings and prison sentences of between two and ten years. At least 45 persons were summoned to begin serving their prison sentences during this period.

Sunnis also experience discrimination in Iran. They are largely excluded from high offices of the state. The construction or operation of Sunni mosques is obstructed or prohibited by the regime.

Under criminal law, penalties vary depending on the religious affiliation of the perpetrators and the victims. In the sphere of civil law, for example, section 881a of the Islamic Civil Code states that non-Muslims cannot inherit from Muslims. If, on the other hand, the deceased is a non-Muslim and there is a Muslim in the line of succession, all non-Muslims are excluded from the inheritance, leaving the Muslim descendant the sole heir. However, this regulation can be overridden by a will.

The persecution of adherents of other religions remains at a high level. The regime is deeply suspicious of followers of other religions. In particular, Bahá'ís and Christian converts as well as members of the Sunni minority have been arrested with disproportionate frequency on espionage charges, for instance during the Woman, Life, Freedom protests in 2022, the 12-day war (June 2025) or the military conflict with the United States and Israel. Likewise, Iranian security forces have used excessive force against protesters in provinces populated by ethnic and religious groups.

Despite rights guaranteed under the Constitution for recognised religions of the Book (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity), these religious communities also face de facto restrictions on practising their faith. The regime uses measures such as expropriation, restrictions on access to places of worship and summonses by the intelligence services to limit the practice of religion. Christian minorities are prohibited from using Persian as a liturgical language. When it comes to family and marital law, the religions of the Book enjoy autonomy. Pupils who belong to recognised religious minorities can take part in religious education at a private school run by their faith community, although the curriculum and textbooks are prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

The Islamic Republic of Iran seeks to present itself to the outside world as a tolerant and religiously diverse republic. Thus, it regularly cites the presence of Jewish communities in Iran as supposed proof to downplay its stated goal of destroying Israel (tokenism). The Holy Mary underground station in Tehran was presented as a sign of dialogue between religions when it was inaugurated in November 2025. In reality, the Catholic Church, whose diplomatic representation is a Nuncio, is severely restricted in the practice of its faith.

Iraq



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1971	 No ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Presuming a current population of over 46 million, the proportion of Muslims in the total Iraqi population is estimated at 95-98%, the majority of them (about 60-65%) Arab Shiites and around 30-35% Arab and Kurdish Sunnis. The number of Christians is estimated at 170,000 (a majority of whom live in the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq). Up until 2003, some 1.5 million Christians still lived in Iraq. The number of Yazidis is estimated at up to 500,000, more than 300,000 of whom live in the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq. There are some 400,000 Kaka'i, 5000 Mandaeans and 2000 Bahá'ís in Iraq. The Jewish community numbers only a few individuals. No reliable data on converts is available. There is also a small group of atheists.

As a consequence of its experiences of the atrocities committed by so-called Islamic State, Iraq, including the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq, views itself as a society in which the peaceful coexistence of various religions and faith communities is deliberately emphasised and highlighted in policymaking. This image the country has of itself follows on from a long history of religious diversity: Iraq is regarded as one of the key cradles of millennia-old religious groups including Zoroastrians, Yazidis, Kaka'i, and Shabaks. Since time immemorial, Christianity and Judaism, too, have played a part in shaping the social fabric, though today it is dominated by the major religious streams of Islam – Shia and Sunni. The Iraqi Constitution of 2005 reflects this cultural heritage and guarantees freedom of religion.

Despite public commitments to coexistence, however, religious minorities still face pressure. Political and economic instability and the inadequate state monopoly on the use of force mean that rights and security are not universally guaranteed. The coexistence of religious groups continues to pose a great challenge, which has in the past been the source of numerous conflicts, fragility and discrimination. The repercussions of the terror of so-called Islamic State (IS) were particularly severe, especially the atrocities it committed against the Yazidi population. Yet the targeted persecution of and violence against other religious minorities also led to massive displacement and migration. Alongside the Yazidis, the Christian populations were also hard hit in this regard. These events have left deep traces. Work is still ongoing to strengthen trust, security and social cohesion. Investigation of the crimes committed, compensation for the survivors and the reconstruction of the affected areas (especially Niniveh Province, Sinjar District) remain huge national challenges.

Compared with some other states in the region, Iraq has a fairly progressive legal environment in regard to freedom of religion or belief, although it is afflicted by numerous contradictions and shortcomings. Article 2 of Iraq's Constitution of 2005 designates Islam as the official religion of the state and as a foundational source of legislation. No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam, the principles of democracy or the rights and basic freedoms stipulated in the Constitution. At the same time, Article 2 also guarantees unrestricted freedom of religion to all individuals. Article 7 prohibits racism, terrorism and takfirism (branding different interpretations of Islam as heresy and declaring them to be apostasy). Under Article 43 of the Constitution, the Iraqi central Government maintains three religious endowments (authorities for religious affairs): one Sunni endowment, one Shia endowment, and one for other religions. They report to the Office of the Prime Minister and administer funds for the sake of preserving and protecting religious institutions. The Kurdish regional government maintains three similar endowments.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

There are a host of Iraqi laws that, within the context of religious rules, discriminate against women and do not protect them from violence. On 27 August 2025, the Iraqi Parliament passed the codification of Shia civil status law ("Jaafari Code") as an alternative to secular civil status law; applying the Jaafari Code can lead to considerable legal disadvantages for women (for example in relation to divorce or inheritance). The bill did not make fundamental changes to the provisions on conversion, apostasy or interfaith marriages; these continue to be determined by the Constitution, general civil status law and the relevant provisions of civil law. Conversion to Islam is legally permitted, while disaffiliation from Islam, although not explicitly subject to punishment, is regularly not recognised by the state and can result in considerable disadvantages in terms of civil law as well as social disadvantages. Interfaith marriages remain subject to the general provisions on civil status, which disadvantage Muslim women in particular. A marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man is not legally valid. The Code is not automatically applicable in the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq, but is nonetheless having an effect there. The fact that children are automatically assigned their parents' religion – generally that of the father – is also problematic. Under Yazidi religious law, children born to Yazidi women and Muslim fathers are not recognised as part of the Yazidi community – this also affects children born as the result of the rape of Yazidi women by IS fighters. Iraqi Nationality Law No. 26 of 2006 explicitly excludes Jews who lost their Iraqi nationality in the early 1950s due to denaturalisation laws in the context of the foundation of the State of Israel and whose property was confiscated.

The political participation of religious minorities remains limited. Nine of the 329 seats in Parliament are reserved for representatives of minorities: five for Christians, two for Yazidis and one each for Mandaeans and Feyli Kurds. Members of religious minorities are to be found in senior positions in Parliament and the central Government, but they complain that they are barred from influential positions in security institutions and the judicial system. The same is true when it comes to appointments at local level. In the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq, the regional government and the overwhelming majority of the population stress and safeguard tolerance and peaceful coexistence as

part of what makes the region special – the majority of religious minorities in the country live here. They can generally practise their faith and live largely without discrimination. After lengthy debate about an amendment to electoral law, five of the 100 seats in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament are reserved for representatives of minorities – three for Christians and two for (Shia) Turkmens.

In Iraq, issues related to freedom of religion or belief have always been negotiated between representatives of moderate Islam and representatives of a strict interpretation of Islam. The secular spirit of the Constitution, which the United States helped to draft, has to date been upheld, despite increased Iranian influence. Society's awareness of minorities and the value of diversity appears to have increased following the territorial victory over Islamic State (IS). However, religiously motivated hate speech is repeatedly encountered in social media in particular (a planned law against it has not yet been adopted). In April 2025, an IS supporter, with the approval of the IS leadership, carried out a violent attack against people taking part in the Assyrian and Babylonian spring festival in Dohuk, injuring two civilians.

The media and political environments in Iraq are firmly dominated by pro-Iranian narratives driven by armed groups close to Iran. Freedom of expression is greatly curtailed. Instances of conversion or apostasy, in particular disaffiliation from Islam, are not generally publicly announced. If they do become known in the individual's close social circle, this can lead to exclusion and social marginalisation. At the same time, a move away from religious faith can be observed, particularly among young people in the urban centres. The Law on the Protection of Minorities has been in force in the Region of Kurdistan-Iraq since 2015; it guarantees religious minorities socio-economic rights equal to those of the Kurdish-Muslim majority. Forms of discrimination arising from the Iraqi Personal Status Law (including naming law and inheritance law) remain in place. In the interests of national security and anti-terrorism efforts, imams considered overly radical by the regional government are relieved of their duties.

Libya



Situation worsened

 UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1970	
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Libya's population of around 6.75 million is almost entirely Sunni Muslim (approximately 98.9%). Other religious communities are small and consist predominantly of foreign-born migrants: Christians (0.5%), primarily Coptic Orthodox as well as immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa; Buddhists (0.3%); Hindus (0.1%); Bahá'ís (<0.1%); Jews (<0.1%, in reality no longer present since 2002), as well as other groups, including atheists and agnostics (0.2%). Within the indigenous Amazigh community, there are also Ibadhi Muslims. The majority of non-migrant Christian Libyans have converted from Islam to Christianity and, due to safety risks, practise their faith almost exclusively in secret.

Libya can look back on a long history of religious diversity. However, military conflicts, political fragmentation and the rise of radical Islamist movements in some regions have made minorities especially vulnerable today. For Libyan nationals, there is no legal way to register as anything other than Muslim with the Libyan authorities. Under the law and in practice, all Libyans are regarded as Muslim and conversion to another religion is not recognised. Government agencies provide financial support for the practice of Islam by organising celebrations for Eid and Ramadan and maintaining mosques, as well as funding officially authorised Friday prayers.

The transitional constitution of 2011 declares Islam to be the state religion and Sharia to be the primary source of legislation, while non-Muslims are formally guaranteed the right to practise

their faith. The draft Constitution of 2017 further restricts legal pluralism and does not provide effective protection of freedom of religion or belief.

Personal status laws – including those relating to marriage, divorce, and inheritance – are governed by Islamic law, which results in legal discrimination against women, religious minorities and converts. The Criminal Code criminalises the dissemination of ideas regarded as an attack on the social or religious order. Under certain circumstances, the death penalty may be imposed for renouncing the Islamic faith (apostasy) or proselytising. Even non-Muslims accused of publicly insulting Islam face penalties that can include the death penalty. Since the Arab Spring of 2011, there have been no further executions.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Non-Muslim communities face restrictions, for example regarding the registration of organisations, the acquisition or maintenance of places of worship and the holding of public religious events. The funding of private religious institutions is largely unregulated and favours Sunni Islam structures.

Libya's political fragmentation has led to the establishment of several centres of power in the west and east of the country, which each enforce their own interpretations of Islam and corresponding legal rulings. In addition, there are independent Salafist jihadist groups – including Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, and the so-called "Islamic State in Libya" (IS-L) – which, despite being small in size, specifically target religious minorities, especially Christians, non-Muslim migrants and converts. There are still pockets of the IS-L in parts of the south and east of the country and these present an ongoing threat to the civilian population there. State-controlled security bodies regularly arrest individuals accused of apostasy, proselytising or "violating Islamic values". In some cases, the local staff of international non-governmental organisations have been arrested. They face accusations that, through their involvement in Western organisations, they are promoting "non-Muslim values". Moreover, there are known cases in which Libyan activists or human rights defenders have been prosecuted on charges of apostasy. In some cases, foreign nationals have

also been arrested and forced to make confessions on video.

Non-Muslim communities in Libya are subject to considerable restrictions. The Coptic Orthodox Church mainly serves foreign migrants. Converts from Islam practise their faith in secret out of fear of persecution. According to reports, Christian migrants have been repeatedly kidnapped, blackmailed and tortured in the past. In 2015, the IS-L executed 21 Coptic Egyptians while Sirte was temporarily under its control.

Women's rights are also restricted: family law favours men, while domestic violence and marital rape go unpunished. Other particularly vulnerable groups are likewise affected by social norms influenced by religion.

Freedom of expression is restricted by legal provisions on national security and blasphemy, which particularly affect atheists and secularists who publicly advocate for the separation of religion and state, as well as converts. State and non-state stakeholders use religious narratives to legitimise power, justify arrests and enforce conformity. Hate speech, intimidation and arbitrary detentions of religious minorities and non-religious individuals are widespread and are frequently amplified by the media or social surveillance.

Threats to life, freedom and property continue, in particular for non-Muslims and converts. Armed conflicts and the weakness of the state increase vulnerability, while militia and Islamist groups enforce a strict interpretation of Sharia law. Moreover, the absence of a functioning central authority hinders effective protection and interfaith dialogue. At present, the situation remains dangerous for minorities.

In contrast to neighbouring states with established dialogue formats, interfaith cooperation in Libya is barely developed due to political fragmentation, a lack of political and sociocultural will, persistent security risks and the small size of non-Muslim communities. Christian activities – including Coptic Orthodox communities – largely cater for foreign migrants. There is virtually no organised outreach to Libyan converts due to fear of persecution.

Malaysia



Situation worsened

 UDHR reservation	 ICCPR not signed	
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Malaysia is a multiethnic, multireligious country with a long tradition of pluralism and tolerance. At the same time, there are tensions, due among other things to the preferential treatment granted by the state to the Malay Muslim majority (known as the Bumiputra policy) and the privileged position of Islam. An influential religious bureaucracy and Sharia jurisdiction are strengthening Islam's dominance in public life and undermining social diversity. On the international stage, too, Malaysia sees itself as part of the Islamic world.

Some 63.5% of the population are Muslim, followed by Buddhists (18.7%), Christians (9.1%) and Hindus (6.1%). According to the Constitution, Islam is the "religion of the Federation", while other religions may, in principle, be practised freely. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and freedom of religion, albeit with restrictions – particularly regarding the propagation of religion and in relation to Islam. Sunni Islam has been established as the official doctrine since a 1996 fatwa.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The state provides extensive support to Islamic institutions, for example by funding mosques, religious education and administrative operations. Non-Muslim communities frequently face bureaucratic hurdles when it comes

to constructing and using places of worship. Islam's special status is also evident in everyday life, for example the requirement that Muslims state their religion on their national identity cards.

Muslims are subject to Sharia law, which restricts religious freedom and prescribes corporal punishment in certain cases. In addition, Muslim women may be married before reaching the minimum age of 16 established under civil law, provided they have the consent of Sharia courts. A controversial fatwa declares female genital mutilation to be mandatory, which contributes to the widespread prevalence of this practice.

Ethnic Malays – who are Muslim by definition – are granted preferential treatment under the law in areas such as education, public service and business. Laws permit restrictions on missionary activity by other religions among Muslims. Violations may be subject to criminal prosecution.

The Government may ban events if it fears they pose a threat to religious harmony. Religious authorities sometimes take preventive action to control matters even before such events take place. The dissemination of publications by non-Muslim communities is also subject to restrictions, for instance specific requirements, the need for official approval or the threat of licence revocation. The distribution of Christian material is regulated especially strictly, especially Malay-language Bibles or religious writings. The state controls the scope of religious communities to act via authorities such as JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) as well as through extensive registration requirements. Non-Islamic groups are often required to organise themselves as associations and, as such, are subject to close government oversight.

The "defence of Islam" plays a central role in political discourse. According to human rights organisations, political opponents are regularly portrayed as a threat to the state's Islamic character, which provides a justification for restrictions on civil liberties. Especially in the run-up to elections, there is an increase in religiously charged rhetoric and, in some cases, hate speech. In this context, non-Muslims are occasionally portrayed as "immigrants" or as not fully belonging to society. Non-governmental organisations report that security laws are being used to detain members of dissenting religious groups, sometimes without due process or adequate judicial oversight.

Any criticism of Islam is severely punished under blasphemy laws. The dual legal system also leads to structural inequalities, as Sharia courts effectively take precedence over civil courts in certain areas – such as family law, child custody, inheritance law or conversion issues. Religious affiliation is likewise legally relevant: in practice, marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims generally requires conversion to Islam, which restricts civil liberties.

In everyday life, Islam's special status is also evident in other regulations. Same-sex acts are punishable under Sharia law. Overall, freedom of religion is subject to significantly more regulation than other fundamental rights. Reports by the non-governmental organisation Freedom House point to cooperation with neighbouring countries to monitor religious or political dissidents and, if necessary, to prosecute or extradite them across borders.

Cases of alleged enforced disappearances and religious tensions are of particular concern. Pastor Raymond Koh and Amri Che Mat, who was accused of disseminating Shia teachings, are presumed missing (since 2017 and 2016 respectively). An investigation by the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) evaluated these cases as possible examples of state-sanctioned or unexplained enforced disappearances. There are also isolated incidents of vandalism targeting religious properties. Religious minorities and atheists frequently face hostility in everyday life and particularly on social media, often in connection with accusations of "insulting Islam".

For ethnic Malays, leaving Islam is extremely difficult, both legally and in practice. In only three federal states is this possible without penalty through a Sharia court proceeding, which involves hearings, counselling sessions and repeated attempts to dissuade the individual concerned from converting. In other federal states, sanctions or mandatory "re-education measures" may be imposed. In some cases, local laws even prescribe the death penalty for apostasy, even though this contradicts federal law and is not carried out in practice. Some individuals leave the country due to this legal, social and familial pressure.

At the same time, institutional initiatives on interreligious cooperation exist. There are formats for dialogue between religious communities. The Conference of Rulers, a constitutional body, has repeatedly spoken out publicly against religious intolerance and ethnic discrimination. Furthermore, religious stakeholders foster social stability and

the reduction of ethnic and religious tensions through educational initiatives and joint social projects – for instance, in crisis and disaster situations – although their impact is affected by structural inequalities.

Mauritania



Situation unchanged

 UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 2004	 ICCPR reservation
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Mauritania was founded as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania upon gaining independence in 1960. The 1991 Constitution enshrined the legal primacy of Islam. According to Article 5 of this Constitution, Islam is the religion of the Mauritanian people and the state. According to government figures, 99% of the population are Muslims. Islam in Mauritania is traditionally influenced by the Maliki school of law as well as by Sufi traditions. Since the 1990s, Salafist influences have also been present.

Christian communities essentially consist of foreign nationals, mostly from West African states (migration). The Catholic Church estimates that there are between 4000 and 5000 Christians. A small number of Mauritanian nationals are said to have converted to Christianity through evangelism. The United Nations estimates that this group is made up of around 650 people. Other religious faiths play a minor role. There is no Jewish community in Mauritania. Openly professed atheism is socially stigmatised and can result in legal sanctions.

Mauritania's legal system is shaped by the fact that Islam is the state religion. Mauritanian nationals are not permitted to freely choose their religion or beliefs. Under Article 306 of the Penal Code, apostasy and certain forms of blasphemy are punishable by death. Blasphemy cases provoke strong reactions among the public. There are documented isolated cases of accusations of blasphemy leading to arrests.

Although there has been a de facto moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty since 1987, the threat of punishment itself acts as a strong deterrent. In addition, there are restrictive cybersecurity regulations (2016) as well as the Law on the Protection of National Symbols and the Criminalisation of Attacks on State Authority and the Honour of the Citizen (2021). The latter criminalises, among other things, acts that are considered an attack on the "constant values" of the Islamic Republic or the "sacred principles of Islam".

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs and Original Education funds and oversees Islamic institutions, in some cases with support from Arab Gulf states. Mosques, Koran schools, universities and the national imam and muezzin structure are supported by the state. The construction and opening of mosques are subject to a strict administrative procedure overseen by the Ministry. The Ministry exerts influence over religious content, particularly Friday sermons.

There is no general procedure for registering non-Muslim religious communities. All non-governmental organisations must register with the Ministry of the Interior. They are required to refrain from any form of proselytism or from promoting any religion other than Islam. There is no clear legal framework for non-Muslim religious institutions. Mauritania and the Vatican have maintained diplomatic relations since 2016. The Nuncio in Dakar is also accredited in Nouakchott. The Catholic Church owns churches from the colonial period as well as two cemeteries. Protestant groups use buildings owned by the Catholic Church as well as private premises.

Mauritania's civil status, family and inheritance laws were first partially regulated in the Civil Status Act of 2001,

which combines and codifies state law with Sharia law. Religious discrimination exists. In family and inheritance law, women are subject to restrictions grounded in religion. Marriage, divorce and inheritance matters fall under the jurisdiction of state courts. However, actual implementation is often influenced by social norms, family agreements or traditions, such as material benefits for women in divorce cases. Renouncement of Islam can have serious consequences under family law and in society.

General freedom of action for non-Islamic religious communities is practically non-existent. However, the Catholic Church enjoys a special status due to its historical roots in Mauritania and the country's diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The practice of the Christian faith is tolerated by the state within a limited framework, but exclusively by foreign congregations and within recognised church structures. Christian organisations do not enjoy the same legal status as Islamic institutions. The public dissemination of non-Islamic religious materials as well as evangelising among Muslims is prohibited. The import of liturgical materials and religious texts requires government authorisation, which is granted to the Catholic Church but not to other organisations.

There is no evidence of systematic discrimination based on religious affiliation when it comes to access to public services such as education or healthcare. The Catholic Church provides recognised support for the Mauritanian population in the spheres of social services, healthcare and education. The Catholic Church's Caritas is officially recognised in Mauritania as a non-governmental organisation and provides support, for example, to prisoners and migrants, as well as in the healthcare and education sectors. Non-Muslims and those with secular or atheist beliefs are effectively marginalised in the public sphere. Under current law, adherence to the Muslim faith is a prerequisite for obtaining Mauritanian citizenship and the rights derived from it.

Religious narratives are also invoked to stabilise and legitimise the state order and are used to curb social or political opposition. The state positions itself as the guardian of Islam and the Maliki legal tradition. Official media and state-controlled religious formats help propagate a state-sanctioned religious narrative.

Freedom of religion or belief is not afforded the same level of protection in Mauritania as other human or civil rights. While there is a limited degree of

tolerance for the practice of the Christian faith, this tolerance ends when it is publicly visible or when evangelisation, the conversion of Mauritanian nationals or criticism of norms based on Islam are involved. In the past, the state has protected institutions of the Catholic Church during times of social tension. A constructive, non-confrontational dialogue with the Government, religious authorities and civil society allows scope for action in the sphere of foreign and human rights policy.

Social media plays a significant role in the spread of hate speech against human rights defenders.

Several Islamic stakeholders are working to combat political extremism and are helping to promote conflict prevention and social cohesion. Involving imams, ulema, traditional authorities and female religious mediators (known as mourchidates) can foster deradicalisation.

Mexico



Situation unchanged



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 1981



No ICCPR reservation



No bans on conversion



No banned religions



No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Data on religious and belief affiliations in Mexico are primarily collected through the national census, which is conducted every ten years by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) and has provided a comprehensive and reliable nationwide set of data. Accordingly, 78% of the population identify as Catholic, 9% as Protestant or Evangelical, around 2% as Christian but

not Protestant (primarily Jehovah's Witnesses), and around 10.5% as atheist or non-denominational. Furthermore, 0.05% of the population are Jewish and the rest (less than 0.05% in each case) are adherents of indigenous or oriental religions or Islam. Despite a slight decline (but less than in other parts of Latin America), Mexico remains one of the most heavily Catholic countries in the world.

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 guarantees extensive freedom of religion or belief within a strictly secular state model, prohibits any discrimination on religious (and other) grounds and guarantees both positive and negative freedom of religion. Religious officials may not hold political office and the state may neither favour nor place restrictions on any religion.

To register a religious community with the Ministry of the Interior, certain requirements must be met, including a demonstrable religious purpose, a headquarters in Mexico, at least five years of activity, sufficient resources to achieve its objectives, a statute and compliance with constitutional stipulations. Registration is not required for the practice of religion itself, but it is necessary for a religious community's capacity to act when it comes to legal or business matters – for example, when entering into contracts, acquiring property or claiming tax advantages.

To obtain a legal personality recognised by the state – which is not mandatory but is required for certain permits for the public exercise of religious practices – religious communities must register with the state. However, there are no special barriers to overcome. The internal autonomy of religious communities is largely guaranteed.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Overall, the Catholic Church plays an important role in Mexican society, one that is generally respected by political forces. On rare occasions, religious motifs are referred to in political speeches, particularly during election campaigns. To date, there is no evidence that religious narratives have been used for political legitimisation, nor has this led to any restrictions on individual civil liberties. Religious organisations are legally prohibited from operating radio or television stations.

President Claudia Sheinbaum was repeatedly the target of verbal anti-semitic attacks due to her Jewish roots during her presidential campaign. According to press reports, this occurred predominantly in social media. After 7 October 2023, there was a considerable increase in public and digital reactions in Mexico to the Israel-Gaza conflict, and this has also had an impact on the country's Jewish minority.

In Mexico, freedom of religion or belief is formally enshrined in the Constitution on the same level as other fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly through the recognition of individual freedom of religion and the prohibition of discrimination. It thus enjoys the same legal status as other human rights protected under the Constitution.

In areas where "usos y costumbres" (customary law that continues to apply locally) is in effect, the majority religions repeatedly use it to pressure non-believers to convert or participate in religious activities. In such cases, those targeted are, for example, denied access to water and/or electricity.

There are waves of displacement, particularly from states with a higher proportion of indigenous population groups. However, these are driven not only by religious reasons but also by land conflicts, organised crime and illegal migration. In some cases, Christian groups are displaced. In 2024, for example, 150 Baptists were displaced from Hidalgo.

Organised criminal groups target leading religious figures, who often have great influence in their communities, in order to destabilise them and establish a culture of silence and terror. Criminal groups repeatedly blackmail churches and try to force religious leaders to pay protection money or to allow their churches to be used for money laundering. Anyone who resists these attempts becomes a target. Religious stakeholders engaged in social and community work are particularly vulnerable in regions of the country where criminal gangs exert influence, partly because they repeatedly speak out against organised crime.

Mexico's Federal Government coordinates religious matters through the Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB). Within the SEGOB, the General Directorate for Religious Affairs (DGAR) is responsible for promoting religious tolerance, mediating conflicts and investigating cases of religious intolerance. What is more, there are agencies responsible for religious affairs in all 32 federal states.

The Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM), a church-affiliated organisation that systematically collects and analyses media reports and data on the situation of the Catholic Church and religious stakeholders in Mexico, documented a consistently high level of violence during the presidency of López Obrador (2018–2024). According to a CCM report, during this period 10 priests were murdered, 14 attacks on priests and bishops were recorded, an average of 26 attacks, desecrations or attacks on churches were registered per week and around 900 cases of blackmail and death threats against members of the Catholic Church were documented. Due to their public profile and role as social mediators in areas dominated by organised crime, religious functionaries are especially vulnerable.

Morocco



Situation unchanged



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 1979



No ICCPR reservation



Bans on conversion



Banned religions



Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Morocco has a population of approximately 38.7 million, 99% of whom are Muslim (Sunni-Maliki rite). The rest of the population identify as Christian, Jewish or Bahá'í.

According to Article 3 of the Moroccan Constitution, "Islam is the religion of the state, which guarantees everyone the freedom to practise their faith". Article 41 of the Constitution designates King Mohammed VI not only as Morocco's Head of State but also as the Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful). The King thus also fulfils the role of religious leader. The Alawite

dynasty of the current royal house traces its lineage directly back to the Prophet Muhammad, which underpins the state's religious legitimacy. As the Commander of the Faithful, the King is, according to the Constitution, also the guarantor of the free practice of religion. The King explicitly includes the other two Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity, under this protection.

The King also chairs the Supreme Council of the Ulema (religious legal scholars, Conseil supérieur des Oulémas), which he can task with religious matters. The composition and practices of the Supreme Council of the Ulema are governed by royal decree (dahir).

The Jewish community in Morocco numbers approximately 3000 people. In addition, there are between 45,000 and 90,000 Christians in Morocco – divided into foreign Christians (approximately 40,000) and Moroccan Christians (estimated at between 5000 and 50,000, depending on the source). The Christian communities in Morocco now consist primarily of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. According to estimates, there are also several thousand Shia Muslims in Morocco, most of whom live in the north of the country.

Churches are allowed to operate in Morocco (and are protected by the police): the Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican Churches all have different forms of official status in Morocco. The Russian Orthodox and Anglican Churches are registered as international organisations by the Embassy of the Russian Federation and the Embassy of the United Kingdom respectively. The Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches were established in Morocco before the country gained independence in 1956 and enjoy a special status recognised by the Government. This allows them to maintain places of worship and assign non-Moroccan clergy to churches throughout the country. The strict law against evangelising to Muslims makes it somewhat difficult for churches to welcome Moroccan nationals.

Under the law relating to the civil status of persons in Morocco, Christians are classified according to the Maliki-Sunni interpretation of Islam. Moroccan Christians, as well as Moroccan atheists or followers of other religions thus do not have their own civil status and are generally treated as Muslim Moroccans. The only exception is the Moroccan Jewish community, which is subject to Moroccan Jewish family law.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Morocco regards itself as a shining example of peaceful co-existence among religions. Although Islam is the official state religion, in practice only the Maliki-Sunni rite is regarded as socially acceptable. Shiites face obstacles when it comes to openly practising their faith. Moroccan atheists who are open about their beliefs may face social pressure in some instances. There are strict laws that punish anyone who criticises Islam (up to two years' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 200,000 Moroccan dirhams, approximately 20,000 euro). The penalties for public criticism are harsher. Under the Moroccan Penal Code (Article 267-5), public (including digital) displays of blasphemy can carry a prison sentence of up to five years. For Muslims, breaking the fast in public is prohibited during Ramadan, provided there are no religiously recognised grounds for an exemption. This offence may result in up to six months' imprisonment and a fine of between 200 and 500 dirhams (approximately 20-50 euro).

Political parties based on religious, ethnic, linguistic or regional affiliation are banned. Parties that are "Islam-oriented" are permitted, including the Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD).

As Islam is the state religion, missionary activity among Muslims is prohibited under Moroccan penal law (Article 220 of the Code pénal). However, the same article states it is a criminal offence to hinder others from practising their religion. Apostasy, or "renouncing Islam", is subject to severe social ostracism in Morocco. The strict blasphemy laws can be interpreted in such a way that they can be used to punish Muslims who have converted to another religion (apostates). In addition, in accordance with Islamic legal tradition, the individuals in question face significant restrictions regarding family and inheritance law. For example, persons who have left the Islamic community lose their rights to inherit from Muslim relatives.

Islam as the state religion is enforced through corresponding government and administrative practices. The Ministry of Habous (Religious Endowments) and Islamic Affairs closely monitors the structure and content of sermons in mosques and Islamic education in schools, as well as the dissemination of Islamic religious content in the media. Imams and female spiritual guides are trained in state institutions to promote the Government's desired version of a "moderate Islam". Morocco is trying to counter extremist

movements in this way. In reality, however, these practices also limit the dissemination of non-Islamic religious content and Islamic content that does not conform to the Maliki school of law.

The Jewish community is the only religious community recognised in the Constitution alongside Islam. There is a separate law for Moroccans of the Jewish faith with regard to marriages, inheritance and other civil status matters.

Moroccan family law (Mudawana) governs the relations of "all Moroccans". In line with Islamic legal traditions, the law prohibits marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man, unless he converts to Islam before the wedding. The marriage of a Muslim man with a non-Muslim woman is only permitted if the non-Muslim woman is Christian or Jewish. Once the marriage is valid, it is governed by Sharia law. Marriages which do not comply with these rules (with the exception of marriages concluded under Jewish family law) are not recognised under Moroccan law. This also applies to marriages entered into abroad.

Myanmar



Situation unchanged

 UDHR reservation	 ICCPR not signed	
 Bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Myanmar has a diverse religious landscape. The majority of the population (88%) are Theravada Buddhists, followed by Christians (6%), Muslims (4%), and smaller minorities who practise Hinduism, as well as traditional Chinese and

animistic religions. Although the 2008 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it is subject to public-order, moral and health considerations. The political, human rights and humanitarian situation has deteriorated dramatically since the military putsch of 1 February 2021.

Freedom of religion or belief for all religious and belief groups has come under massive pressure. This is due to a mix of ethnically and religiously motivated discrimination, nationalism and geopolitical interests (for instance, land use, raw materials, border policy).

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The military is resorting to brutal violence, including the bombing of civilian targets, in the ongoing conflict between the military regime and various (mainly ethnic) resistance groups. Religious stakeholders also have to reckon with attacks, arbitrary arrests and murder carried out by the military. Targeted persecution mainly occurs when religious practice goes hand in hand with a critical stance towards the regime (either genuine or alleged by the regime). There are reports of systematic destruction of religious sites and institutions. Between January 2024 and December 2025 alone, there were 312 airstrikes on monasteries, churches, mosques and temples, leaving 431 dead and 871 injured.

On 14 and 15 January 2023, Myanmar's military and members of the Pyu Saw Htee militia, which has close links with the military, attacked the village of Chan Thar, a largely Christian village in the township of Ye-U in Sagaing region, a mainly Buddhist area. Troops stormed the village and set up camp in the grounds of the 129-year-old Catholic Our Lady of the Assumption Church before setting fire to the church and the surrounding buildings used by priests and nuns. The church was reduced to rubble, as were most of the houses.

Many priests and members of religious orders or religious communities were forced to flee to remote areas. Furthermore, several monks and nuns fell victim to violence. These attacks highlight the widespread and indiscriminate violence in the country. Some 3.5 million people have been displaced within the country and more than a million have fled abroad.

Freedom of expression and assembly is being severely curtailed. Religious events and gatherings must be

registered just like any other gathering and authorisation is sometimes not granted. The regime acts as a "moral guardian" and takes action against alleged "indecent" behaviour, especially where women are concerned. This is reflected in the arrest and prosecution of women who do not conform to the regime's conservative moral values.

Laws governing marriage, such as the Interfaith Marriage Law as well as the Population Control Law, can potentially lead to discrimination. The former makes marriages between Buddhists and non-Buddhists more difficult and places non-Buddhist husbands of Buddhist women at a disadvantage with regard to divorce and inheritance law. The latter enables the state to intervene in family planning ("waiting periods" between pregnancies) on the basis of regional differences and thus indirectly on the basis of ethnic or religious affiliation.

Apart from possible negative reactions within the family, renouncing a religion or converting is possible although – at least internally – it is not possible in the case of Islam, which does not permit apostasy. The Religious Conversion Law of 2015 makes converting more difficult: nationals who want to change their religion must be at least 18 years old, submit an application to a Scrutiny and Registration Board and be questioned. This body can require the applicant to undertake up to 180 days of religious studies before the application is approved. This law contains criminal provisions on forced conversions and conversions intended to "insult, denigrate, destroy or abuse a religion".

The situation of the mostly Muslim Rohingya, one of the religious minorities at the greatest risk in Myanmar, is especially concerning. They have been subjected to discrimination, persecution and displacement on a massive scale for decades. The members of this minority lost their citizenship in 1982, which rendered them stateless and legally vulnerable. Furthermore, repression has taken the form of restricted access to education and healthcare as well as the destruction of their villages and religious sites.

Ethnic and religious discrimination overlap, with Muslim religious affiliation being perceived as part of an alien identity. Radical Buddhist movements fuel anti-Muslim resentment, which is used by the junta to style itself as the protector of Buddhism. Violence, displacement and massacres are justified by claiming that Muslims are a threat to the "Buddhist heritage".

Following massive attacks, killing and mass displacement in 2016 and 2017, more than one million members of the Rohingya ethnic and religious minority are still living outside the country, primarily in refugee camps in neighbouring Bangladesh. An orderly, voluntary return to Myanmar remains inconceivable for most families. This attitude is evident in a considerably less marked form towards other Muslim groups. They experience (in some regions very substantial) discrimination. However, this is not comparable to the systematic persecution of the Rohingya ethnic minority.

The growing opposition among the population to the military regime has led to a revival of religious awareness. It is not uncommon for people to openly display their religious affiliation, a gesture welcomed by members of other faiths, which has resulted in considerable interfaith understanding. This solidarity has resulted in joint demonstrations and relief efforts for those affected by violence.

Nicaragua



Situation worsened

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1980	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

There are no reliable up-to-date statistics on the religious affiliation of Nicaraguans or the state of freedom of religion. Exile media outlets and local opinion polling institutes estimate that 28% of the population are Catholic. Between around 26% and 35% of the population belong to Protestant congregations,

in particular the diverse Evangelical groups. The decline in Catholic congregations, which has been ongoing for about three decades, (according to the 2005 census, 58.5% of the population was still Catholic and 21.6% Protestant) and the continued growth of Evangelical congregations thus persists. There are no exact figures on the size of other faith communities such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Judaism or Islam. The Moravian Church (Iglesia Morava) traditionally plays a prominent role in the autonomous regions on the Caribbean coast. Most of its members (around 1.5% of the population in 2005) are of indigenous or Afro-Caribbean origin. It is estimated that 0.5% of the population practise indigenous religions.

Under the Constitution of February 2025, Nicaragua is a state based on Christian values (Article 3), which guarantees the freedom of religion or belief (Article 11). In practice, however, this is meaningless. There is no state religion. At the same time, the exercise of freedom of religion or belief is restricted by constitutional requirements to uphold public order – a term that is not further defined – and any "foreign control" of religious organisations is prohibited (Article 21). Religious organisations that receive funds from abroad are, for the most part, required to register as "foreign agents" with the Ministry of the Interior, while every project and transaction must be approved individually.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The massive deterioration in the human rights situation in Nicaragua since 2018 has been accompanied by serious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. The Catholic Church, which acted as a mediator and defender of human rights and worked to protect the population during the suppressed unrest and protests of 2018, is a particular target of repression. Surveillance, intimidation, persecution, detention and deportation have forced approximately 130 Catholic priests and members of religious orders to leave the country. Lay representatives are also regularly persecuted, threatened or detained. In March 2022, the Nuncio had to leave the country, and the Apostolic Nunciature was officially closed one year later. Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who is critical of the Government, was expelled from the country in January 2024 after 17 months in prison, while three other bishops are

in exile. In August 2025, Carlos Cárdenas Zepeda, the former legal adviser of Nicaragua's bishops' conference during the 2018 national dialogue process, died in police custody a few weeks after his arrest. Surveillance and repression are also carried out on a transnational level, for example by revoking citizenship.

Protestant/Evangelical congregations also come under increasing pressure if they are perceived as not being sufficiently aligned with the Government or as being too critical. Since 2018, more than 1300 (Catholic and Protestant) institutions and non-governmental organisations have been banned or stripped of their legal status, and their property has often been confiscated. In August 2023, the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), a Jesuit university, was seized and many faculty members and students had to leave the country without documentation of their previous studies or work history. In August 2025, a school run by the Josephine Sisters was seized. As in the case of the UCA and other former religious institutions, it was subsequently re-opened as a state-run institution. Virtually all Catholic and independent religious television and radio stations have now been shut down.

Religious ceremonies outside church buildings – such as Easter processions – are regularly banned with minimal justification. Selected large-scale religious events take place under state control and, in some cases, are organised by the state.

While (supposedly) religious references regularly appear in the Government's public addresses (the regime's motto is "Christian, Socialist and Solidary!") and are misused to fuel polemics aimed at exclusion, religious groups critical of the Government and church representatives themselves are the targets of defamation and hate speech coming from the highest levels.

The legal status of the Moravian Church was revoked in August 2024. Communities practise their faith under surveillance and amid a difficult human rights situation. Armed land grabs, violence, arrests and the murders of leaders and activists, as well as forced displacement, pose a threat to the (cultural) survival of indigenous communities in Nicaragua. The free practice of religious customs and traditions is severely restricted.

The United Nations, particularly within the framework of the Human Rights Council and the Organization of American States (OAS), as well as civil society organisations and human rights defenders, regularly criticise the Nicaraguan

Government's repressive policies. It dismisses criticism from the EU and other governments as interference in its internal affairs and refuses to cooperate with international or regional human rights mechanisms.

Nigeria



Situation unchanged



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 1993



No ICCPR reservation



No bans on conversion



No banned religions



No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

The Nigerian population consists of almost equal percentages of Muslims and Christians, with a considerable number of people practising forms of traditional African spirituality. There is a very small Jewish community. Muslims are the majority population in the northern states while Christians make up the majority in the southern states. The Muslim community in Nigeria is predominantly Sunni; only 5 to 10% of Muslims are Shiites. The majority of the Christian community is Protestant (Anglican, Pentecostal, Evangelical Church Winning All); a quarter of the Christians are Catholic. Evangelical congregations are experiencing rapid growth in membership. Blending Christianity or Islam with traditional African spirituality is very common. Religion plays a large role in social and political life, atheism is rare and is often not socially accepted.

The Government is careful to uphold equal treatment of the main religions, for example by ensuring that political posts at federal level are filled roughly proportionately. Interfaith marriages and family structures are widespread in some regions.

The 1999 Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits naming a specific religion as the state religion, either at federal level or in individual states (Article 10). Article 38 guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, defined as the freedoms to choose, exercise, propagate, leave or freely change one's religious affiliation or beliefs.

In 2000 and 2001, twelve northern states (out of a total of 36) introduced local Sharia criminal law. Although Sharia law only applies to Muslims, in practice it also leads to some restrictions for non-Muslims, often on the basis of social norms (e.g. alcohol bans, gender segregation). Persons convicted under Sharia law may bring an appeal in a higher Sharia court or a secular appeals court. The secular Supreme Court is always the court of final appeal, no matter which system a case began in. Blasphemy is prohibited under both secular and Sharia law. Section 204 of the Nigerian Penal Code makes "insult to religion" punishable by up to two years in prison. In states with Sharia criminal law, even more severe punishments for blasphemy – including the death penalty – can be imposed. Cases are often settled out of court. The question of whether the crime of blasphemy under Sharia law is constitutional is currently being argued before the Supreme Court as part of a case being heard on appeal.



Commissioner Thomas Rachel visits Yelwata village in Benue State

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of religion is enshrined in Nigeria's Constitution. However, freedom of religion or belief is restricted by public authorities in some localities.

In the northern states, non-Muslim communities report that applications for permits to build churches and religious community buildings encounter

bureaucratic hurdles that may delay construction or even make it impossible. Northern Christians complain that they are sometimes discriminated against or even excluded when appointments are being made to public sector positions. Similar complaints are made by Muslims in predominantly Christian areas.

The rights of religious minorities who are not Christians or Muslims are sometimes curtailed in practice – but less by state actors than by the social environment in which they live. Professed atheists have reported that they are very much stigmatised by society. There have been repeated reports in the majority Muslim north about attacks on alleged and actual converts. However, in other parts of the country, conversion is common, primarily among the Yoruba in the south-west. Since 2015, several adherents of Sufism have been sentenced to death for blasphemy under Sharia law in Kano State, and are still in prison. The death penalty is currently not being executed in Nigeria. The Shiite Islamic Movement in Nigeria was banned in 2019 following violent clashes with Nigerian security forces.

The level of violence, particularly in northern and central Nigeria, remained high during the current reporting period and has caused unspeakable suffering across religious lines. In several regions, the exercise of freedom of religion or belief is significantly curtailed by Islamist and other violent groups. These include terrorist groups (ISWAP and Boko Haram in the north-east, ISSP and Lakurawa in the north-west), armed criminals (bandits, above all in the north-west, herder militias in central Nigeria, as well as cattle rustlers in some parts). Due to the number of violent groups, it is not always possible to attribute attacks unequivocally to specific groups.

Terrorist groups often target the places of worship of Christians and Muslims who do not subscribe to their jihadist ideology, and also attack members of their congregations. For example, Islamic State claimed responsibility for an attack on a Muslim community in Mafa in September 2024. At least 100 people died in the attack. IS accused the victims of apostasy for cooperating with state security forces. In June 2025, militant Fulani herders committed a massacre in Yelwata village in Benue State. Up to 200 Christians were murdered and many more were displaced.

In October 2025, the Christian Association of Nigeria (the umbrella organisation for Christian denominations) published a statement calling on the Nigerian Government to better protect Christian communities. In it they stated

that many Christian communities, particularly in the north of the country, had experienced violence and severe attacks. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria also expressed concern about the violence against Nigerians of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs in a statement issued in November 2025.

Nigerians are often adversely affected by conflicts that are not primarily grounded in religion, but which flare up along religious and ethnic lines. In the Middle Belt Region, predominantly Christian farming communities and predominantly Muslim herders compete for scarce resources such as land and water. A growing population and climatic conditions fuel these conflicts yet further, as does the presence of raw materials.

The security forces do not always take a firm line to protect those who experience religious discrimination and persecution. In addition, criminal law is not applied, or not applied adequately, to many of those who perpetrate violence, which further fuels resentments and distrust amongst the population.

Accusations of blasphemy or witchcraft in Nigeria have repeatedly led to mob violence or vigilante justice. Allegations of witchcraft are made most often against adherents of traditional religions. Under Sharia law, witchcraft can be punished with the death penalty. In September 2025, a woman was burnt to death by a mob at a market in Niger State, after having been accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad.

Both the Government and non-governmental organisations have established institutions dedicated to interfaith dialogue. The Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) was established in 1999 at the Government's initiative, with the mandate to promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims and to prevent or reduce conflicts with religious components. The Christian and Muslim umbrella organisations, the Christian Association of Nigeria and Jama'atu Nasril Islam, also maintain a dialogue with each other.

In addition, numerous interfaith platforms and dialogue forums – some of them with support from abroad – foster communication between the two major religions, frequently with an explicit focus on peace and conflict prevention.

Nazila Ghanea, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, visited Nigeria in June 2026. She will present her report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva early in 2027.

North Korea



Situation worsened



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 1981



No ICCPR reservation



No bans on conversion



Banned religions



No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has sealed itself off from the outside world almost entirely since the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains virtually impossible to obtain reliable independent information about the situation in the country, due to the limits on freedom of movement. This is also true with regard to information about freedom of religion or belief in North Korea.

The final report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, issued in 2014, described the extent and type of human rights violations in North Korea as unprecedented in the modern world. According to the report, this includes the almost complete denial of liberties such as freedom of religion or belief and freedom of opinion and assembly. The White Paper on Human Rights published in mid-2025 by the Korea Institute for National Unification stated that the situation in North Korea had not improved in most areas. On the contrary, since the introduction of new laws in 2021, such as the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act, North Koreans can be punished even more severely than before.

North Korea is officially an atheistic country ideologically based on the personality cult surrounding the country's founder Kim Il Sung, later expanded to include his son Kim Jong Il and grandson Kim Jong Un. Expressions of reverence for the many statues and portraits of Kim Il Sun and Kim Jong Il in public spaces

are obligatory. In 2019, North Korea officially replaced *Juche* ideology with Kim Il Sung-Kim Jong Il-ism by amending the Constitution, and changed relevant laws to reinforce ideological control over the population with the aim of ensuring the stability and succession of the unitary leadership system.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion in principle, but also limits it by stating that religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the social order. Autonomous religious activities by adherents of religions such as those traditionally practised in North Korea in line with the teachings of Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as Christianity and the Chondo religion, are viewed as competition to veneration of the "Kim Dynasty", which is also enshrined in the Constitution. These religious groups rarely express their faiths, or do so only behind closed doors. It is therefore impossible to make reliable statements about the demographics of the religious groups.

The few religious activities allowed in North Korea are managed and controlled by the state. These include one state-run Protestant and one state-run Catholic association and one Catholic, one Russian Orthodox and two Protestant churches, all in Pyongyang, which also serve as visitor attractions. There is also a state-run Buddhist federation and a Buddhist theological seminary that trains monks. Buddhist temples in North Korea tend to be monuments rather than places for religious practice. Only the Chondo religion, which originated in Korea, is recognised and has a political arm, the Chondoist Chongu Party. As one of the North Korean block parties, it is represented in the Supreme People's Assembly and loyal to the "Kim Dynasty". No further information is currently available about the internationally controversial Unification Church, also known as the Moon movement or Moon sect. The founder of the movement, Sun Myung Moon (1920-2012), maintained good relations with the Kim family during his lifetime.

All community life in North Korea is closely monitored. The autonomous expression of beliefs or religious or secular viewpoints that might relativise the Kim cult's claim to absolute authority is strictly prohibited and

fiercely sanctioned. For example, it is a crime to possess or import a Bible. According to reports by human rights organisations, prisoners are incarcerated in political camps because of their religion, because they publicly professed their faith, possessed Bibles, or for other reasons associated with the autonomous exercise of religion. For example, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) has reported that possession of Bibles or religious recordings, as well as participation in spiritual practices, is classified as ideological subversion and punishable with five to ten years of forced labour or, in cases perceived to be grave, by death. Such provisions are applied particularly harshly to young people. There are no reliable data on the number of people who have been detained on religious grounds.

Serious human rights violations take place in the political camps. Time and again, North Korean nationals who have escaped to the People's Republic of China are forcibly returned to North Korea, where they face imprisonment, torture, forced labour or even the death penalty. This practice is sharply criticised by human rights organisations.

Pakistan



Situation worsened



No UDHR reservation



Acceded to ICCPR in 2010



No ICCPR reservation



Bans on conversion



Banned religions



Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Pursuant to the Constitution, the state religion is Islam (96% of the population); it is estimated that of this number, 80-85% are Sunni and 15-20% are Shiite. Other religious groups include Hindus (2.2%), Christians (1.4%), Ahmadis, Bahá'ís,

Parsis/Zoroastrians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Kalasha and Jains. Some members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community boycotted the last census. It is assumed that at least 500,000 Ahmadis live in Pakistan (roughly 0.2% of the total population).

Pakistan's Constitution guarantees religious freedom and protects the rights of religious minorities. However, freedom of religion or belief can be restricted by legislation, and is subject to considerations of public order and morals. As an Islamic Republic, the state of Pakistan selectively supports Islamic institutions. Ahmadis in particular face social and legal discrimination, for example as regards public documents and political participation. Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, but according to the Pakistan Constitution they are not. Ahmadis are prohibited from calling their places of worship "mosques" and from using Islamic symbols. They reported that in 2025, 20 of their mosques were destroyed and 381 graves desecrated, and four members of the Community were killed in the streets. Roughly a third of all blasphemy accusations are made against members of the Ahmadi religious group – a strikingly high proportion given the fact that they make up only about 0.2% of Pakistan's population.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Since 2009, 5% of all positions in government services have been reserved for minorities (so far only 2.8% have been filled, of which 80% are in the low-wage sector). The caste system continues to exist indirectly in today's Pakistan in an altered form based in large part on religious identities. As a result, caste-based professions (such as waste collection) are associated with religious minorities. Work by non-governmental organisations and Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights has contributed to convincing the Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provincial governments to abandon their longtime practice of advertising vacancies in the cleaning and sanitary sector only to non-Muslims. However, an Amnesty International report of 2025 showed that this practice is still widespread.

Blasphemy is a criminal offence in Pakistan. The blasphemy law has been enforced more actively during the current reporting period (according to non-governmental organisations,

344 cases were brought in 2024, whereas only 208 people were charged in 2020). Blasphemy is punishable by death in Pakistan. At present, 20-80 people convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death are reported to be awaiting execution. The death penalty has not been carried out in Pakistan since December 2019. Even so, the mere accusation of blasphemy can be life threatening. According to non-governmental organisations, at least 24 people were killed by mobs or individuals in 2024 because of allegations of blasphemy. Accusations of blasphemy are increasingly being made in connection with activities on social media, and can lead to criminal proceedings, years of being held in custody on remand, as well as significant societal and extra-judicial violence against the accused.



Commissioner Thomas Rachel with representatives of Muslim organisations and regional politicians

In February 2026 a bill (which has not yet been adopted) was introduced in the Provincial Assembly of Punjab in order to protect the property of all religious minority communities in the province, which is where the majority of Christians

live. It is not illegal to convert from one religion to another. Apostasy – in this context renouncing Islam – therefore does not carry a criminal penalty, but it is still widely condemned by the majority of the population. In practice, it often results in serious discrimination by society and state institutions. Converts are not only severely marginalised and threatened with violence, but also face administrative barriers, since their religious status is not altered in their official documents by government authorities when they renounce Islam. People who leave the Muslim faith therefore tend not to do so publicly. The danger to life and limb is particularly great if they draw attention to themselves.

Many young women, particularly Hindus and Christians, were victims of kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage – or attempts at the same – during the reporting period. Non-governmental organisations report that between 2021 and 2024 some 421 young women in Pakistan were forcibly converted. Religious intolerance and political extremism have led to violence, often inter-denominational between Sunnis and Shiites or against religious or belief minorities. The response of the Pakistan Government and security forces has been muted. Various Muslim groups with a proclivity to violence are active in Pakistan, including the now banned political party Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) and the terrorist groups Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). These groups have a Sunni Islam background.

Targeted mob violence against Christian groups was seen in 2023 in Jaranwala following allegations of blasphemy. At least 24 churches and numerous smaller chapels were burnt down or seriously damaged. Hundreds of homes belonging to Christians were destroyed or damaged by mobs. Some 2500 Christians were forced to flee their neighbourhood temporarily. In Sargodha, allegations of blasphemy led to mob violence against a Christian family in 2024 and the death of one person. The TLP played a key role in both incidents. The party has been banned since October 2025.

Attacks were also carried out by TTP and ISKP. TTP attacks are overwhelmingly politically motivated. In contrast, the attacks by ISKP target religious minorities – particularly the Shia minority – and include attacks on mosques, most recently in Islamabad in February 2026. For the year 2024, the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies reported 521 militant attacks (up 70% from 2023), which resulted in 852 deaths (up 23% from 2023). State authorities and

security forces are not able to stop the attacks entirely.

The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) is an important state actor that is supposed to review compliance with human and minority rights in Pakistan. The National Commission for Minorities, a separate body, was reconstituted at the end of 2025. Its task is to counter discrimination on the basis of religion and promote interfaith harmony. Its final composition is not yet known.

In November 2025, the EU's GSP+ Monitoring Mission under the General Scheme of Preferences framework noted problems on issues including freedom of religion, and is currently drawing up recommendations. Under the latest Universal Periodic Review conducted by the United Nations Human Rights Council, Pakistan received numerous recommendations in 2023 relating to blasphemy, the protection of minorities and non-discrimination.

Russia

Situation worsened

UDHR reservation	Acceded to ICCPR in 1973	No ICCPR reservation
Bans on conversion	Banned religions	No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

According to the Levada Center for opinion research, basic religious demographics remain largely unchanged, with some 60-75% of the population belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, approximately 7% following Islam and less than 1% affiliated to other religions. Officially, Russia is a multifaith state, in which the Russian Orthodox Church and Muslim, Jewish

and Buddhist communities are classified as "traditional religions" and represented on a Presidential Council. However, the Russian Orthodox Church is politically, culturally, demographically and legally dominant (see Presidential Decree no. 809 of 9 November 2022). It has been accorded a privileged role as part of the politically led return to "traditional spiritual and moral values". It also acts as an instrument through which the Government achieves its political aims, such as increasing popular support for the Russian war against Ukraine and stepping up the repression of vulnerable groups. The Government also uses religious arguments to bolster Russia's image of itself as a great power and its claim to spheres of influence in its neighbourhood. Other religious communities, in particular smaller faith groups, find themselves increasingly under pressure.

The Russian Orthodox Church is also privileged as regards public funding. All other religious groups rely on voluntary donations, as church tax is not levied in Russia. The laws on the funding of religious communities were tightened up during the reporting period. So-called "centralised religious organisations" are now privileged when it comes to the receipt of donations pursuant to Article 16 (6) of Federal Law No. 125-FZ of 1997 (Religion Law). In order to be classified as a centralised religious organisation, a group requires a certain number of members and a particular organisational structure (see Article 6 of the Religion Law). These provisions make it more difficult for smaller religious communities in particular to obtain funds.

In addition, so-called missionary activities are also prohibited without prior permission. According to reports from the Sova Research Center, a non-governmental organisation, the number of prosecutions for such offences is on the rise. Muslim associations and Evangelical churches are particularly affected by this development. Administrative fines have repeatedly been imposed on Muslims praying in public. However, criminal prosecutions for offending religious sensibilities are on the decline.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The domestic situation in Russia has deteriorated dramatically since the start of the country's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine. Human rights and civil liberties are guaranteed by the Russian Constitution, but have been de facto

abolished in today's Russia. In April 2026, the human rights organisation Memorial reported that of 1435 political prisoners, 480 were held for religious reasons, and 204 of these were Jehovah's Witnesses. It must be assumed that the actual figures are far higher.

Several regional religious congregations were dissolved by the courts in 2025 alone, including the Lutheran Church in Kaluga, the Christian Church of Evangelical Christians in Mednogorsk, and several Muslim organisations. Muslim places of worship have been closed by the authorities and other religious organisations have been declared "undesirable". Being declared undesirable has the same effect as a ban, making the organisation's activities and any cooperation with it criminal. Both Falun Gong – founded in China and now based in the United States of America – and Jehovah's Witnesses have been classified as extremist organisations and subjected to particularly severe repression, including prison sentences of many years for members of these religious communities. A bill has been introduced in the Duma which aims to restrict worship in residential buildings – a measure no doubt designed to exert further pressure on small religious communities. An increase in Islamophobia was observed in Russia during the reporting period. This is linked with widespread criticism of migration, which is focused by the Government on migrants from Central Asia.

Physical attacks on women wearing headscarves are a regular occurrence in Moscow. Where religious violence occurs, it often targets Muslims. Vandalism of Muslim institutions has increased significantly. The Russian Orthodox Church has spoken out in favour of a significant reduction in immigration and views Russian culture as being under threat. Patriarch Kirill has claimed, for example, that migrants are forming criminal gangs and that the continued influx of migrants with no intention of integrating into society could lead to the country's "downfall". Muslim groups outside the "mainstream" that cooperates with the Government are regarded as potential terrorists, but it is not always clear if this is a pretext or a genuine threat.

In general, there is little antisemitism, but it has increased since the start of the war of aggression against Ukraine. The Kremlin often utilises antisemitic themes in its anti-Ukrainian war propaganda. Representatives of Jewish communities fear an increase in antisemitism, which had, as of June 2025, caused at least 20,000 Jews to leave

Russia since 2020. In October 2023, the airport in Makhachkala, Dagestan, was stormed by a mob when an aeroplane from Tel Aviv landed there. Patriarch Kirill ascribed responsibility to foreign forces trying to sow unrest and division in Russia. At least 20 people were killed in attacks on a synagogue and an Orthodox church in Makhachkala and Derbent (also in Dagestan) in June 2024. Holocaust remembrance is increasingly being replaced by state-sponsored remembrance of the "genocide of the Soviet people" as a whole.

The Russian Orthodox Church is a staunch supporter of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. At its so-called World Congress in March 2024, the Church declared the war against Ukraine to be a "Holy War", and accused the West of having "fallen into Satanism". Patriarch Kirill views himself as Patriarch of "all Rus", an area that also includes Ukraine and Belarus. The Church blesses weapons, forgives the sins of Russian soldiers and collects donations for the war. Outside Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church has been fiercely criticised by the World Council of Churches, especially following the Congress of 2024. Resistance to the Church's stance within Russia is waning, critics face harsh Church and state repression. Some liberal priests who are critical of the war have left the country. The German association Mir Vsem, which helps Russian Orthodox priests facing repression, was listed as an "undesirable organisation" in September 2025. Attempted intimidation of this kind is a standard tool of transnational repression.

Numerous media reports document the links between the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian secret services, especially abroad. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine also has an impact on the freedom of religion or belief of people in Ukraine, for example through the prohibition of faith communities and severe repression in the Russian-occupied territories as well as through missile attacks on church buildings and monasteries in other parts of Ukraine. (See section on Ukraine.)

In August 2023, the Allatra religious community, which was founded in Ukraine, was declared an "undesirable organisation", and in June 2025 an "extremist organisation". Custodial sentences have also been imposed on numerous members of the free Ukrainian Vozrozhdenie Church founded by Vladimir Muntian.

Saudi Arabia



Situation improved

 UDHR reservation	 ICCPR not signed	
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Saudi Arabia has approximately 35.3 million inhabitants (as of late 2024), roughly 15.7 million (44%) of whom are foreign nationals. 85 to 90% of Saudi nationals are Sunnis (predominantly of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence). Shia Muslims form a minority of roughly 10-15%, the majority of whom live in the Eastern Province. In addition, more than two million Christians live in the country, most of whom are migrant workers from south and south-east Asia. There are also 708,000 Hindus, 114,000 Buddhists, 70,000 members of other religions – including a few thousand Jews – and around 250,000 religiously unaffiliated people who live in the country.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, whose political and legal systems are based in large part on Sharia. Since the Saudi King is also the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (Mecca and Medina), the country is of key religious importance in the Muslim world.

The state exerts comprehensive control over religious institutions, for example by appointing preachers and influencing religious content. There is no freedom of religion in Saudi Arabia, and therefore non-Muslim groups and institutions are not recognised. Apostasy (the renunciation of Islam), blasphemy and proselytising are crimes, but convictions are rare. The public practice of other faiths and beliefs is also forbidden. Saudi Arabia has accordingly not signed the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and likewise rejects

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. All rights in the Kingdom, including exercise of religion, are subject to Sharia rules.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The religious infrastructure in Saudi Arabia is controlled in the main by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which funds and manages the majority of Sunni mosques, and provides their staff. In contrast, Shia mosques are privately funded and most are not officially registered. Non-Muslim religious communities have no legal recognition, public places of worship are prohibited, as are services in public. However, it is becoming increasingly possible to practise religion in private.

Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing a fundamental societal transformation under the country's Vision 2030 agenda for reform, which promotes a move towards greater interreligious tolerance, although legal restrictions remain in force. This is tangibly improving the situation of religious minorities in the Kingdom.

This trend is illustrated by the regular open visits by an Orthodox Jewish rabbi to the diplomatic community in the country, the toleration of private Christian services and the sale of Christmas decorations in winter. These are examples of the "moderate Islam" promoted by the Crown Prince as the guiding framework for modernisation in a religious society. By the same token, religious narratives also serve to legitimate the monarchy, by anchoring loyalty to the leadership in religion and setting this within the context of national progress. The role of the religious establishment has been severely curtailed in Saudi politics.

Different religious groups are treated very differently under the laws of Saudia Arabia. Direct violence on the basis of religious affiliation is very rare, in part because the exercise of non-Sunni religious practices is scarcely visible in public life. Discrimination against religious minorities and atheists by the population is now largely expressed through social media. However, various reports suggest that the Saudi Arabian authorities have recently still interrogated, deported and taken other measures against people who have converted from Islam to Christianity.

Relations between Sunni and Shia communities, the two largest religious groups in the Kingdom, have continued to improve over the last few years. Although Shia communities are often still disadvantaged as regards exercise of religion and access to public office, they have increasing grounds for cautious optimism. For example, in 2025, Shia processions were held again in the Eastern Province on the Day of Ashura. The monarchy's retreat from a rigid understanding of Islam continues to gather pace, as also demonstrated by reforms in the education system (including revisions of various textbooks) and the cultural opening of the country, where music festivals, concerts and similar events now regularly take place.

There are state initiatives on interreligious cooperation, above all at international level, for example through the Muslim World League. Interfaith dialogue is not yet established within the country, although individual initiatives to promote tolerance are being launched in the youth and educational spheres under the Saudi Vision 2030 agenda (organised for example by the King Abdulaziz Center for Cultural Communication). Since independent civil-society activities are severely restricted, it is to be expected that any further efforts to foster social cohesion and interfaith cooperation will be controlled primarily by the state.

International cooperation, for example within the framework of bilateral (strategic) partnerships, human rights dialogue (not least at EU level), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) initiative, and meetings between religious leaders (such as the planned trip by the Commission for World Church Affairs), provides opportunities to foster interfaith tolerance. Dialogue and economic cooperation can support the reforms being pursued by the Saudi Government, but will remain limited in effect because of Sharia law.

Syria

Trends not yet clearly discernible following the fall of the Assad regime

No UDHR reservation	Acceded to ICCPR in 1969	No ICCPR reservation
Bans on conversion	Banned religions	Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Demographic data on Syria is extremely unreliable due to displacement and forced migration resulting from years of conflict. It is estimated that prior to 2011, the majority of the population were Sunni Muslims, roughly 10% were Christians, 9% Alawites, 1-3% Shiites and 3% Druze. The number of Christians has dropped dramatically since the outbreak of war. There are currently estimated to be approximately 300,000 in the country. Christian communities are found predominantly in and around the cities of Aleppo, Damascus, Hama, Homs and Latakia, in Hasakah Governorate and the Jazira Region. Druze communities are located primarily in Suwayda Governorate, and in smaller communities around Damascus and Idlib. Most Alawites live in Latakia and Tartus Governorates, with smaller communities in Homs, Hama and Damascus.

The Ministry of Endowments oversees Sunni mosques, waqf endowments and the wages of Sunni imams. All religious groups must be registered. If they are recognised by the state, they will receive tax advantages. According to the Syrian Constitution, the President must be Muslim, and "Islamic jurisprudence is the principal source of legislation." Religious communities have jurisdiction over their internal affairs, including their members' personal status matters, subject to state approval. Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men. Religious affiliation is recorded in everybody's birth certificate. Missionary activity was discouraged under the Assad regime. After the fall

of the regime, isolated missionary activities took place, without state approval, for example in the Christian quarters in Damascus.

Under Islamic law, conversions by Muslims to other religions are not recognised. Syrian society is on the whole conservative, and considers renouncing Islam, conversion and atheism to contravene moral and religious norms. Article 3 paragraphs (2) and (3) of the Constitution protect freedom of religion and exercise of religion, but refer solely to Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity and Judaism). Restrictions are permitted to safeguard public order, national security, territorial integrity, health and morals; there are no clear definitions of these terms or checks on their application. In theory, all Syrian nationals are equal in the eyes of the law. However, in practice the Government, the security forces and the military are predominantly Sunni. In 2025, President al-Sharaa reinstituted the position of Grand Mufti and convened the Supreme Fatwa Council, which issues legal opinions and appoints local muftis. This increases state influence over Sunni Islam. Minorities such as Christians and Druze enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy, but continue to act under state supervision.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The Syrian Government has repeatedly pledged to respect the rights of religious and non-religious minorities in an integrative state. The existing Syrian Christian holidays for Easter and Christmas have been kept, and the Kurdish New Year holiday Nowruz (non-religious) has also been declared a national holiday for all.

The Jewish community in Syria comprises fewer than ten people in Damascus, but maintains good relations with the Government. Following the fall of the Assad regime, diaspora representatives have again been able to visit religious sites, and a Jew stood for election to the People's Assembly for the first time since 1967. At local level, rules governing women's dress and behaviour have occasionally been passed. Some of these have been withdrawn following public outcry. Islamist groups exert pressure on moderate Sunnis, for example by imposing dress codes or vandalising shops selling alcohol. Religious minorities and secular Sunnis have noticed discrepancies

between the official Government line and actions taken by various players and militias outside of Damascus. State-sanctioned interventions have not, however, been observed.

After 55 years under Assad dictatorship and 14 years of war, society is extremely polarised. The Assad regime sometimes tried to present itself as the protector of minorities against Sunni Salafist jihadists. This gave rise to tensions. After the regime collapsed, minorities felt threatened, and the Sunni majority was not well-disposed to supporters of the deposed regime. The Government is focusing on the economy, reconstruction and stabilisation, and is not pursuing a primarily religious agenda. It is however caught between secular liberals and Islamic conservatives, since its power-base comprises both. While parts of the population – members of minorities, but also and above all the more secular members of the Sunni population – fear the country will be gradually transformed into an Islamist state, the extremist Salafist elements in the country criticise the government line for being too moderate.

Politically motivated and religious violence are often inextricably linked. Since the Assad regime was ousted, misinformation and hate speech have resulted in an escalation of violence, acts of retaliation and vigilante justice, including murder. Extremists have regularly instrumentalised existing social polarisation. There are, for example, some reports of Sunni preachers calling for violence against Shiites, Alawites and Druze. People with connections to the authorities have also spread hate speech. There were serious incidents of violence against Alawites in the coastal regions in March 2025, and against Druze in Suwayda in July 2025. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Alawite women and girls have been kidnapped in the Syrian coastal areas and in Homs, and the authorities did not respond uniformly. Terrorist groups remain a threat to certain faith communities. Twenty-five people lost their lives in a suicide attack on the Greek Orthodox Church Mar Elias on 22 June 2025 carried out by the Saraya Ansar al-Sunna militia. An explosion in an Alawite mosque in Homs on 26 December 2025 claimed eight lives. The security forces have managed to thwart several planned attacks, including one on a Christian service in Aleppo on 31 December 2025.

The Government is taking measures to curb hate speech and inter-community strife. These include the adoption of an ethics code for the media intended

to protect minorities, the issuing of instructions to preachers to avoid sectarian rhetoric, and the adoption of teaching standards. In July 2025, the Fatwa Council prohibited assaults on civilians and denominational violence. At local level, dignitaries and religious leaders have been able to mediate in disputes. The Civil Peace Committee, which is designed to strengthen social cohesion, works at an overarching level to foster reconciliation and prevent retaliatory attacks.

The polarisation of Syrian society has, among other things, led to the entanglement of religious and political violence, retaliatory attacks and vigilante justice. So far, the Government and the judiciary have often not been able to fully live up to their responsibility to protect freedom of religion or belief and to punish offenders. Inter-community understanding, the protection of freedom of religion and the rigorous prosecution of crimes are, however, among the key prerequisites for successful stabilisation.

Tajikistan

Situation unchanged

No UDHR reservation	Acceded to ICCPR in 1999	No ICCPR reservation
No bans on conversion	No banned religions	No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

By the end of 2025, the population of Tajikistan had reached 10.7 million. The demographic breakdown by religion has not, however, changed materially. Almost 95% of the population are Muslim, 4% of whom are Ismaili. The remaining 5% includes approximately 230,000 Christians (Russian Orthodox, Evangelical Christian Baptists, Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Korean

Protestants, Lutherans and Jehovah's Witnesses), as well as a small proportion of Bahá'ís, Zoroastrians and Bukharan Jews (0.014%).

The Tajik Constitution guarantees neutrality of belief and freedom of religion. In practice, the Government strictly controls all religious communities. Only recognised religious communities have access to legal assembly rooms and places of worship. If a community is not registered as a religious community, it thus faces discrimination as regards the legal exercise of religion in group settings. The Orthodox and Catholic Churches act with restraint and are accordingly left in peace by the state. All proselytising activities, including those by Christian organisations and foreign missionaries, require official permission. Administrative action is taken if this rule is violated.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The security services and law enforcement agencies interpret their legal remit broadly in the name of national security. They take vigorous action against people or organisations considered to be extremist. The extension of counterterrorism rules to cover religious groups means that these are now equated with extremist groups. Jehovah's Witnesses were declared a terrorist organisation in 2024. Long prison sentences can be imposed on members. In 2025, five people were convicted in connection with religious activities, a further 14 people were imprisoned following accusations of extremism or because they practised a form of Islam not approved by the state. Various reports indicate that in certain cases, people's political background or criticism of the Government have led to persecution and judicial convictions for extremism, even without any proven link to a fundamentalist or extremist religious organisation.

Religious instruction for children continues to be permitted only in facilities licensed by the state, provided both parents have given their consent in writing. Unauthorised religious education, including over the Internet, is punishable by a fine or up to three years' imprisonment. Islamic clerics trained abroad are not allowed to work as imams; sermons must be approved in advance by governmental agencies. In 2024, Parliament passed a law prohibiting the wearing of strict Muslim dress (e.g. hijab) and children's parties on the two major Islamic holidays Eid al-Fitr and

Eid al-Adha. Religious rituals, weddings and funerals have also been banned.

Cases have been reported in which women wearing the hijab were not admitted to hospital because their head-covering was not worn in the "Tajik way", a fault for which they were briefly arrested. Other reported cases involve men who were arrested and forced to shave their beards off.

Following clashes between state security forces and the local Pamiri ethnic and religious minority population in 2021/22, which resulted in 40 dead, more than 150 wounded and approximately 200 arrests in the predominantly Ismaili Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (Gorno-Badakhshan), numerous activists, journalists and lawyers were convicted of crimes including forming a criminal association, inciting a riot or the overthrowing of the Government. Long prison sentences were handed down in trials that were mainly closed to the public. Ismaili instruction in schools was banned in 2021.

Non-governmental organisations have been closed down or forced to shut their own doors, especially in Pamir, and increasingly since 2024. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) had been involved in supporting sustainable development throughout Tajikistan, above all in the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region. The Cooperation Agreement with the AKDN was terminated by the Tajik Government, and the AKDN has not enjoyed any privileges since 2025. Some of its facilities, including schools and hospitals, have been nationalised, its cultural centres can no longer be freely accessed, and its university in Khorog was "temporarily" closed in 2026.

Tanzania



Situation worsened

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1976	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Religious pluralism is widely accepted in Tanzania. No official data is collected on religion; accepted estimates suggest that roughly two-thirds of the population are Christian, roughly one third is Muslim, with smaller religious communities also present (including Hindus and Bahá'ís), as well as people with no religious affiliation. There are significant regional differences. Coastal areas and urban centres have higher proportions of Muslims; in many places syncretist practices are widespread. Zanzibar is almost entirely Muslim.

Both the national Constitution and the Constitution of Zanzibar guarantee freedom of religion or belief and equal treatment, although this is subject to the safeguarding of public order, security, health and public morals. There are no state arrangements to finance religious organisations. On the whole, religious communities fund their activities through donations and their own institutions. Religious organisations must comply with registration obligations and supervisory rules (including periodic re-registration and potential de-registration in the event of proven administrative offences). Legal restrictions relating to places of worship are derived primarily from building, safety and planning laws. Some projects can be controversial locally, especially in Zanzibar. Any risk of discrimination is caused less by formal laws and more by conflicts between secular law, religious norms and social practices (especially family and inheritance law, and qadi court rulings in Zanzibar). There are no laws that generally prohibit religious services

or the promotion of one's own faith. Practical difficulties may arise in certain cases from administrative rules and selective enforcement by the authorities.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of religion or belief is in principle just as much a reality in daily life as other civil liberties. However, in practice, it is very closely correlated with the space accorded to civil society. Wherever freedom of opinion, assembly or association are restricted, it is normally the case that religious stakeholders are also limited in their activities.

The most important development was the domestic crackdown following the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2025. The reported serious riots, numerous arrests and temporary restrictions on information and communications also had an impact on religious stakeholders – not by means of any general ban on religious practice, but due to a distinctly heightened sensitivity to religious speech in public. Church representatives, above all Catholic bishops, made public statements about the violence, human dignity and accountability. Such comments were viewed as politicising in some quarters. That increased the risk that religious stakeholders could come under pressure or be put in danger wherever they take a public stance on social issues.

The freedom to exercise one's religion, in the narrow sense, remains widely guaranteed. At the same time, there are identifiable individual cases in which authorities use administrative instruments (de-registration, closure) against prominent preachers or institutions, if sermons are considered to be politically arousing or contrary to the permitted standards of conduct of religious organisations. There is no sign of systematic intervention in the internal autonomy of religious organisations, but even administrative actions can impact the ability of individuals or organisations to go about their business.

There is no evidence of structurally unequal treatment when it comes to access to public services; occasional discrimination is instead linked to local majority/minority status. The small Christian minority in Zanzibar is potentially more vulnerable than most. State actors use religious narratives primarily to emphasise national unity;

at times of domestic tension, discourse becomes increasingly moralising and focused on public order, which can have a detrimental effect on the exercise of freedoms.

The imposition of disproportionate restrictions in the name of national security has not been documented as a general issue, but remains a risk in practice, particularly in Zanzibar. At national level, freedom of religion or belief is not restricted in order to protect any specific religion, along the lines of a state religion. However, in Zanzibar it is clear that Islamic institutions do in fact enjoy a privileged position in public life.

Where the norms of different groups in society conflict, religious reasons are often given to negotiate away the rights of vulnerable groups. This particularly applies to women and children (e.g. as regards the minimum age for marriage, and in matters of inheritance and family law). There is no identifiable pattern of transnational repression against exiled religious leaders as an issue in its own right. State action primarily targets the political opposition and critics from within civil society. However, it can also affect religious figures if they are perceived as participating in political discourse.

Religiously motivated violence is not a major issue at national level. There are however threats in specific areas. In Zanzibar, there are reports of social pressure being exerted on converts, and local conflicts regarding religious infrastructure can escalate. Violence in the context of accusations of witchcraft is a structural problem.

The events of 2025 indicate that any restrictions placed on political discourse also have an indirect impact on freedom of religion or belief. This is not so much related to active persecution but rather to the politicising of religious speech and selective interventions. Forced migration for reasons of religion is not currently a dominant trend. However, taking further action rooted in the rule of law to strengthen freedom of religion could have a stabilising effect in a polarised environment.

Structures of interfaith dialogue and cooperation are an important stabilising factor in Tanzania. There are both national and local structures that bring together Christian and Muslim leaders, as well as other stakeholders. These structures help prevent conflicts and, in the event of disputes, can provide informal mediation. Religious communities also foster social cohesion through their social welfare institutions.

Turkey



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 2003	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

More than 98% of the Turkish population (approximately 85 million) are officially classified as Muslims. The overwhelming majority are Sunnis of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. In accordance with Turkey's narrow interpretation of the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, the only other recognised religious groups are the Jewish community, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church, although they have no independent legal status.

Alevis, estimated to make up 15% of the population, are not recognised as a religious minority. This group's demands have, to date, not been fully met, above all as regards equal treatment for their "houses of gathering" (cemevis). Since 2022, public grants have been provided to support these, but they have not explicitly been recognised as places of worship. Some Alevi associations are very critical of this funding because they fear government control.

Some 100,000-170,000 Christians live in Turkey (estimates vary widely), including Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic and various Protestant Churches. An estimated 14,000 Jews live in Turkey. Surveys from 2025 show that up to 8% of the Turkish population describe themselves as atheists or non-believers. In the previous reporting period this figure was only 2%. Religious affiliation is still a mandatory field in the civil records database, but it has not appeared on identity cards since 2016.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience, religious belief and conviction (Article 24) and prohibits discrimination and the abuse of religious feelings or objects. Turkish secularism has the aim of protecting the state against direct attack by religious authorities. At the same time, however, it claims the monopoly on controlling and regulating religious life (de facto Sunni Muslim). The state exerts such control via the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), which reports to the Presidency. The Directorate of Religious Affairs has around 140,000 employees and is responsible for some 90,000 official mosques.



Commissioner Thomas Rachel meets the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, in Istanbul

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

Since the electoral victory of the AKP in 2002, Sunni Islam has re-entered public life to an extent unprecedented in the modern Republic of Turkey. While relations between the state and the established religious minorities have improved – it is, for example, now possible to create foundations, property has been returned, churches have been restored and reopened, the Alevis have been able to build some new places of worship (cemevis) and attendance there is now allowed – structural discrimination remains, for example for Christian groups that have not historically been based in Turkey. Shortcomings in the field of human rights and the rule of law also have a negative impact on freedom of religion or belief. Especially since the attempted coup in July 2016, the Government has cracked down severely on followers of the Muslim Gülen movement, which it classifies as a terrorist association.

Challenges facing freedom of religion or belief in Turkey are closely related to the continuing deterioration of the overall human rights situation, caused among other things by the increasing erosion of the rule of law and judicial independence, which is linked to rising repression. Acts or statements deemed to be Islamophobic increasingly result in prosecution. Individual comedians have faced criminal prosecution for comments made about religious issues. It must however be said that the Government's emphasis on the importance of Islam is sometimes also a means to a political end. A distinction must also be drawn between the minorities that have historically been recognised, for whom the situation has improved somewhat under the AKP Government, and the religious and belief groups that have no place in the Government's concept of religion and its worldview, and who thus sometimes face discrimination.

Mandatory religious education at state schools continues to be strongly Sunni/Hanafi in nature, and does not meet pluralistic standards, even though it has been revised by Turkey in line with numerous judgements of the European Court of Human Rights. Conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons is not an option.

No non-Sunni religious or faith community (such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Alevis, etc) have legal personality as a religious community in Turkey. The three ethno-religious groups granted minority status under the Treaty of Lausanne have to set up foundations for administrative purposes. Places used for religious gatherings can be subject to restrictions. The training of new clerics has been officially prohibited for all minorities since 1971. For that reason, too, reopening the seminary in Halki (also known as Heybeliada), closed since 1971, is a matter of great concern for the Greek Orthodox Church and Patriarch Bartholomew, which has been addressed, for example, in talks with President Erdoğan and US President Trump. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople has said that training the next generation of its own clergy is essential for the future of the Patriarchate, and thus for Orthodoxy worldwide. The Pope's visit in November 2025 was an important occasion, marking the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. This first trip abroad by Pope Leo XIV was intended above all to demonstrate the ties between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. At the same time, the visit underscored Turkey's multi-faith legacy.

The situation of Christian groups that have not historically had a base in Turkey is still largely unchanged. Key problems remain as regards legal recognition, restrictions on establishing places of worship and the training of clergy, as well as ongoing religiously motivated vandalism and hate crime (non-governmental organisations report that Christians, Jews and Alevis are particularly targeted by hate crime). A church in Istanbul was attacked by supporters of IS in January 2024. One person was killed. Members of foreign Protestant Churches have reportedly been expelled or refused re-entry into the country following allegations of proselytising (which is not illegal in Turkey).

There are no legal restrictions on leaving one religion and joining another (conversion). However converts are often ostracised by their families. According to credible reports, non-Sunnis wishing to enter the civil service face state discrimination.

Muslim brotherhoods are banned by law, but the Government continues to tolerate them. They are not collectively prevented from conducting their economic or political activities. Followers of the so-called Gülen movement have been targeted by the Turkish Government since the attempted coup of 2016, which was attributed to the movement. Non-governmental organisations have reported that individuals have been abducted, abused and tortured.

Personal discrimination against members of religious minorities remains widespread. Antisemitic sentiments, in particular, are to be found not only in the tabloid press and social media, but are also expressed by high-ranking politicians. There were public protests during the Pope's visit to Turkey in November 2025, as the demonstrators viewed the visit as a Christian evangelisation mission orchestrated from abroad. Official Turkish authorities, such as the Directorate of Religious Affairs and some municipal authorities, organise interfaith meetings and high-level dialogue. The issues are also discussed at theological faculties. In rare cases, non-governmental organisations, many of which are run by (religious) minorities, some of whom are subject to restrictions based on security arguments, manage to create spaces for encounter and dialogue between people of differing religions and beliefs.

Ukraine



Situation unchanged

 No UDHR reservation	 Acceded to ICCPR in 1973	 No ICCPR reservation
 No bans on conversion	 No banned religions	 No constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

According to surveys, the majority of the population describe themselves as Orthodox. Roughly half identify as belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). About one tenth do not identify with any church, stating that they are "simply Orthodox." Fewer and fewer people claim allegiance to the pro-Russian Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). The percentage has fallen from roughly 13% in 2021 to approximately 5% in 2025. Roughly 12% of the population belong to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). 3% are Protestant, 1% are Roman Catholic, less than 1% follow other religions. Approximately 15% of the population have no religion.

The areas occupied by Russia are undergoing rapid, radical and planned demographic change. Some of the local populace have fled, Russian nationals have moved in, and measures of enforced assimilation are being taken. These changes are part of an overarching Russian strategy to alter the demographic composition of the territories. Reliable figures are not available. But eyewitness reports make it clear that churches belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) have been closed and many priests arrested. Tens of thousands of the estimated 300,000-400,000 Crimean Tatars living in Crimea prior to 2014 are said to have left the area. It is currently estimated that between 230,000 and 285,000 Crimean Tatars remain.

Freedom of religion or belief is guaranteed by the Constitution of Ukraine. It

is in principle not subject to any state restrictions. Ukraine ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1973. Article 35 of the Ukrainian Constitution guarantees freedom of religion or belief, separates religion and state, and prohibits a state church. It also stipulates that no one shall be exempt from their duties to the state or refuse to abide by laws on religious grounds. Martial law does not permit conscientious objection to military service for religious reasons. It is above all Jehovah's Witnesses who are affected by this rule, and they faced greater pressure in 2025. In theory, believers do have the right to serve in the military without using weapons. However, this right does not always seem to have been respected in 2025. Since April 2026, the clergy have been able to gain exemption from conscription in certain circumstances.

The free exercise of religion is not guaranteed in the Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine. Believers who do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church encounter severe restrictions on the practice of their religion. Christians who do not belong to the Russian Orthodox Church can only practise their religion in private. Muslims, and Crimean Tatars in particular, bear the brunt of particularly severe repression under the guise of combating terrorism. Russia does not grant access to the occupied territories to independent observers, such as those from the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe or the Council of Europe. The situation has thus been assessed on the basis of information from people who have left the occupied territories or who are still there, reporting on the situation on the ground in spite of the potential consequences. Ukrainian official statistics do not include membership figures for religious groups. The available data on the number of congregations in each religious group does not allow any reliable conclusions to be drawn about the total number of believers.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

The Orthodox Churches in Ukraine were undergoing massive change even before 2022 and in particular since the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) became autocephalous in 2019. The Ukraine Orthodox Church (UOC) is deeply distrusted and greatly criticised by the people for its ongoing ties with Russia; the majority have called for it to be banned. Although the UOC's statutes

were amended in 2022, in an attempt to demonstrate the Church's disconnection from the Moscow Patriarchate, the religious authorities are sceptical about whether Russia's influence has fully waned. According to officials, the UOC has not cut all canonical ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and has likewise not made necessary legal and administrative changes. The judicial proceedings to dissolve the UOC for these reasons, instituted in 2025, are still ongoing. Criminal prosecutions have been initiated against more than 100 members of the UOC clergy, for charges including treason, collaboration with and aiding Russia by publicly inciting religious hatred and selling firearms. In addition, President Zelensky has imposed sanctions against a number of members and supporters of the UOC. The Culture Minister has moreover terminated the lease for the UOC headquarters in the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra.

Russian law is applied in the occupied areas, and freedom of religion or belief is severely curtailed. The suppression of freedom of religion or belief is driven above all by Russian state actors. There is no freedom of religion. Only the UOC quasi enjoys the status of a state church. OCU adherents and other Ukrainian church communities have had to withdraw from public view and can only practise their faith in private. The Roman Catholic Church in Luhansk was closed at the turn of the year 2018/2019. Catholic and Islamic clerics have been arrested; no Muslim communities remain. Evangelical Christians have also seen their freedom of belief curtailed. Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned; the Russian Supreme Court has declared them to be extremists. Their premises have been confiscated. Their members have had to stay out of public view and live in fear of persecution.

The Russian war of aggression has further exacerbated the situation. At least 643 religious sites – most of them Orthodox churches – have been seriously damaged or destroyed by Russian air raids, artillery strikes and/or looting in the course of the war. There are credible reports that Russian soldiers have killed, abducted, tortured or arrested priests, pastors, imams and monks of various faiths and denominations. Russian regulations on religious activities are also enforced in Russian-occupied Crimea. Even before the OCU was established, churches there had been taken over by force by the UOC. All religious communities that were affiliated with other Orthodox Churches had to close. The Ukrainian

Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) now claims to have only five active congregations. All in all, the number of religious organisations has been reduced by more than half since the annexation of 2014. The human rights situation of the Crimean Tatars in Crimea has also deteriorated. They are subject to severe restrictions on their religious practice and a disproportionately large number are conscripted into the army. There are allegedly still some active Islamic communities, which are overseen by imams from Chechnya who have ties with the Russian security services.

Antisemitic incidents are vanishingly rare. In its last report from early 2025, the Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, which regularly documents such incidents, mentioned only three incidents of vandalism in 2024 across the whole country and no attacks on individuals. Antisemitism in Ukraine has thus reached its lowest level in two decades.

United Arab Emirates



Situation improved

 UDHR reservation	 ICCPR not signed	
 Bans on conversion	 Banned religions	 Constitutional privilege

Religious demographics and the current legal situation

Most of the populace of the United Arab Emirates are Muslim (approximately 75%, of which 84% are Sunni, 16% Shiite); UAE nationals are almost 100% Muslim (94% Sunni). Other significant religious groups include Christians (12.6%), Hindus (6.6%), Buddhists (approximately 500,000) and Jews (approximately 10,000-12,000).

The legal treatment of religious institutions in the UAE differs dramatically depending on whether they are Islamic or non-Islamic communities. The Constitution enshrines Islam as the official religion and guarantees the free exercise of religion as long as it does not conflict with public order. There is no right to convert from one religion to another. The UAE authorities have full control over Sunni mosques as regards their teachings and staffing. Shia mosques are considered private institutions.



The Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi contains a church, a mosque and a synagogue

The registration, funding and administration of non-Islamic religious communities is regulated by statute. The registration of non-Islamic places of worship is dependent on state recognition and meeting minimum criteria (at least 20 founding members who are over 40 years of age, have been resident in the UAE for at least five years and have no prior convictions). The

Houses of Worship Law sets out a simple registration process for non-Islamic places of worship, but makes this subject to the condition of state control. The law prohibits missionary activity by other religious groups, the denigration of other religions, and engaging in political discourse or activity. Religious activities are only permitted on registered premises. Failure to comply with this rule can result in fines, prison sentences or deportation. Visible religious symbols outside places of workshop are prohibited.

Family and inheritance matters are governed by Sharia law for Muslims, and by civil (federal) law for non-Muslims. Federal law prohibits any form of expression that the Government determines is contradictory to Islam, as well as literature deemed to be blasphemous or offensive toward religions. Official permits must be obtained by all religious communities if they wish to hold public events. The importation and dissemination of literature critical of Islam, as well as publications that are considered proselytising or political in nature, are prohibited.

Developments regarding freedom of religion or belief

A "zero tolerance" approach is adopted towards religious extremism and Islamism. Religious hate-speech is punished with fines and prison sentences, as well as deportation from the UAE. Political Islamism is cracked down on in the name of fighting extremism. The Muslim Brotherhood is prohibited. People are regularly arrested on charges of religious extremism.

The Government does not expressly enjoy any religious legitimation. There is no evidence of unequal treatment as regards access to public services on the basis of religion or belief. Discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation is prohibited by the Constitution. However, time and again people are arrested for sorcery and black magic. Apostasy (leaving the Islamic faith) is punishable by death as a matter of law, but the authorities to do not actively enforce this. In the history of the UAE there is no known case in which capital punishment has been imposed, let alone executed.

Since the terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, the Jewish community has been asked by the authorities to exercise particular caution for its own protection. However, in spite of the attempted murder of a rabbi in Dubai

in 2024, community representatives report that they feel safe in the country. The Jewish community is in fact growing in the UAE.

Muslim women suffer structural discrimination in family and inheritance law as a result of the application of Sharia in civil law matters. An incremental improvement in their rights can, however, be observed. Laws prohibiting all criticism of the political system and the ruling dynasty are strictly enforced in the UAE. This has the effect of curtailing the scope for political expression with regard to freedom of religion or belief and rules out any criticism of the state-ordained course of religious tolerance.

The UAE follows a policy of tolerance and permits the free exercise of religion, but it reserves the right to determine which religions and beliefs may benefit from this. The country is particularly intolerant of political Islamists, because they are viewed as a threat. Given the large number of migrant workers (over 90% of the population are of foreign origin), the UAE underscores the importance of social cohesion for stability. There are no known instances in which individuals have been physically attacked because of their religion; any antisemitism is especially strictly prosecuted. It must be assumed that anybody publicly leaving the Islamic faith in the almost entirely Muslim society of the Emirates will be socially ostracised.

The UAE promotes interfaith dialogue through initiatives such as the Abrahamic Family initiative launched in 2019, which led to the establishment of the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi in 2023, which contains a mosque, a synagogue and a Christian church on a single site. The Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence was founded in 2016, and organises programmes for interfaith dialogue and education in order to promote social cohesion and public security. Both institutions work together with representatives of religious communities. The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments oversees and promotes Islamic activities in the country.

The Federal Government's fields of action

In this, its fourth report on the global status of freedom of religion or belief, which looks by way of example at 30 specific countries, the Federal Government has come to the conclusion that this human right is increasingly under attack. Attempts to curb freedom of religion or belief include political and cultural challenges to its universality, discrimination, and physical attacks on members of religious minorities, as well as attempts to turn this individual right into a collective right, or to limit freedom of religion or belief by imposing restrictions on freedom of opinion. The growing number of violent conflicts, increasing instability, the consolidation of power by authoritarian regimes, and the presence of populistic rhetoric, which is often full of misinformation, have stepped up the pressure worldwide. In addition, political actors around the world are increasingly using national-religious or group-oriented discourse. Digitisation has made it easier for religious identities to be instrumentalised and for narratives inimical to freedom of religion or belief to transcend national borders. Social media are being used to disseminate imported extremist narratives, or to incite hatred of members of specific religious groups, who find themselves exposed to hate speech, accusations of blasphemy or apostasy, and subjected to attempted coercion or blackmail. By placing the office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Federal Foreign Office from May 2025, the Federal Government has focused its foreign policy more sharply on the worldwide protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief and has advanced international cooperation in this field.

Against this backdrop, the Federal Government will:

1. Advocate for the protection and promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief as part of its human rights policy, and in this context will work in an appropriate manner to thwart abuses of this right.

2. Campaign to preserve the international human rights architecture and advance the protection and forging of the common acquis of fundamental norms, rules and standards, in particular also in connection with the right to freedom of religion or belief.

3. Continue to support the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote the right to freedom of religion or belief, and will in the future also support the work of both the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and the European Union Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU.

4. Use Germany's membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council for the 2027-2029 term to promote its work in support of the right to freedom of religion or belief worldwide and, in this context, will campaign for trust-based cooperation with civil society, in part also in order to protect the civic spaces required to protect the exercise of the right of freedom of religion or belief.

5. At international level, too, clearly articulate its position regarding the existing close interdependence between the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights, such as the right to freedom of opinion, and, if necessary, take a more pronounced stance; it will also continue to underscore the universality of the right to freedom of belief, including the inviolable right to belong to no religion at all.

6. Attentively monitor further developments in the global status of freedom of religion or belief, in particular also with regard to the extent to which globally increasing transnational repression has an adverse impact on the right to freedom of religion or belief.

7. Utilise the office of the Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief in the Federal Foreign Office to create additional synergies with international partners through bilateral and multilateral contacts, as well as with civil-society contacts, to better protect global freedom of religion or belief; the Government will also maintain links with religious communities or belief groups that are particularly affected by persecution or discrimination, and will work together with them at international level for more effective protective measures.

The present report also underscores the importance of religious actors in foreign policy. The overwhelming majority of people worldwide have a religion or belief. Religious actors and organisations wield great influence in

their local and regional contexts and have a profound impact on their societies. Particularly in states or regions with weak state structures, religious communities often contribute significantly to social and welfare systems and even the political infrastructure.

Many foreign-policy goals can therefore often only be achieved together and in dialogue with religious actors. Likewise, many conflicts around the world cannot be adequately understood without taking their religious dimension into consideration.

The Federal Government will therefore:

8. Strengthen the extent to which the dimension of religion is taken into consideration in foreign policy by means of appropriate measures in the Federal Foreign Office, including the missions abroad.

9. Pay even greater attention to religious actors as important interlocutors in Germany and abroad, and identify possible forms of cooperation on joint objectives and interests.

10. Play an active role in the relevant European dialogue formats, the EU Religion and Diplomacy Advisors Group and the Vienna Group on Religion and Diplomacy. Coordination with European partners on religious matters in foreign policy is a core element of our international engagement on this issue.

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