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## **Religious Liberty At Risk Around The Globe: Persecution Fueled By Iraq War And More**

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Washington's invasion of Iraq ignited sectarian war and fueled religious persecution across much of the Middle East. Religious minorities also suffer elsewhere around the globe.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom publishes an annual report on the status of religious liberty abroad. The panel's latest findings are dismal. In much of the world people are killed, imprisoned, tortured, kidnapped, and otherwise victimized because of what they believe. The USCIRF concluded that "By any measure, religious freedom abroad has been under serious and sustained assault."

To some American policymakers religious liberty might appear to be an esoteric concern, but it acts as the famed canary in a mine. A society unwilling to defend the most basic freedom of conscience—responding to a person's view of the transcendent—is not likely to protect political or civil liberties. A government willing to coerce a person's beliefs about god and spirituality will not hesitate to impose political "truths" as well. No liberty will be secure.

Unfortunately, the list of persecutors is long. USCIRF highlighted nine countries which had been cited as "Countries of Particular Concern" by the State Department.

There's Burma, or Myanmar. Great changes are occurring, but the new civilian government only shares power with the military. During the political transition over the past year, reported USCIRF: "Burma's government and non-state actors continued to violate religious freedom" with passage of discriminatory legislation and brutal persecution of Rohingya Muslims. Hundreds of thousands of the latter have been displaced by violence.

Although China has come far from its days of Maoist madness, "severe religious freedom violations continued" last year, reported the Commission. The Communist Party destroyed and damaged churches, targeted Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, and prosecuted Falun Gong

practitioners. A year ago Beijing “undertook a sweeping dragnet rounding up lawyers and human rights defenders, including religious freedom advocates.”

Eritrea is an isolated, brutal, totalitarian state. It is one of the world’s worst offenders against liberty. According to the panel: “Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations include torture or other ill-treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities of unregistered religious groups, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups.”

Despite the election of President Hassan Rouhani three years ago, the number of people in Iran imprisoned for their spiritual beliefs is up. Religious liberty continued to erode, with “Baha’is, Christian converts, and Sunni Muslims” facing the greatest threat, followed by Sufi and dissenting Shia Muslims.

North Korea likely is the most oppressive state on earth. The Communist leaders rule as royalty and are essentially treated as gods. As USCIRF reported: “the government restricts basic freedoms and often treats most harshly individuals believed to engage in religious activities, including through arrests, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution.”

U.S. ally Saudi Arabia is among the worst religious persecutors. Explained the Commission: Riyadh “remains uniquely repressive in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam.” Even North Korea allows official churches to exist. Moreover, through individual prosecutions the monarchy has continued its assault on “freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.”

The conflicts which have consumed Sudan for years were always more than religious fights—witness the tragic collapse of nominally Christian South Sudan into civil war. Nevertheless, reported USCIRF: “government officials stiffened penalties for apostasy and blasphemy and continued to arrest persons accused of apostasy and Christians.” The latter have been repressed and marginalized.

Of Turkmenistan, concluded the panel: “The government requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups’ activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups.”

Similar is Uzbekistan, which, said USCIRF: “continues to enforce a highly restrictive religion law and impose severe restrictions on all independent religious activity, particularly by Muslims, unregistered Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses.” Harsh imprisonment is the norm.

The Commission also recommended that Washington name as CPCs the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Vietnam. They have varying mixtures of violence, social hostility, discrimination, official persecution, war, imprisonment, torture, and more.

Often there is little that Washington can do to ease repression in such cases. But it at least should follow the Hippocratic Oath: first do no harm. Intervention and war usually make problems worse.

Moreover, the U.S. should avoid aiding and abetting persecutors. Sometimes Washington must make tough decisions, but it is difficult to justify essentially permanent support for Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Central Asian nations.

Most important, Americans should act outside of their government to protest, embarrass, and punish oppressive governments. The best ambassadors for America and its principles remain Americans.

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