

U.S. commission: Russia among worst violators of religious freedom

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

The State Department should add Russia to its list of the worst violators of religious freedom, a U.S. commission declared in its annual report.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, founded to advise the federal government, cites the most abusive countries each year, a list consistently longer than the State Department's.

USCIRF recommended that the United States designate Russia as a "country of particular concern" for wielding an antiextremist law to violate the religious freedom of Muslims and other minorities.

Most recently, Russia banned Jehovah's Witnesses, labeling them "extremist" and ordering the state to seize their properties.

"They're treating these people like they're terrorists," said Tom Reese, a Jesuit priest who chairs USCIRF, referring to Russia's treatment of the Witnesses. "They're pacifists, they don't want to be involved in politics, and they just want to be left alone. The Supreme Court [in Russia] has basically said they're illegal."

On April 26, the same day as the report's release, the commission's vice chair publicized his dissent, which criticized the commission for failing to investigate Israel for discriminating against Muslims, Christians, and non-Orthodox Jews.

"I did not look for this issue, it came to us," said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, who cited a lengthy study from young lawyers in the West Bank that concluded that Israel fails to meet international standards on religious freedom on which other nations are judged. Those petitioning for an investigation were often dismissed as anti-Semites, and some commissioners feared the commission would lose congressional support, he said.

Reese said that USCIRF investigations require a majority vote of the commission.

Globally, “the commission has concluded that the state of affairs for international religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations,” Reese said.

USCIRF’s list this year differs from its 2016 list with the addition of Russia, but also in dropping Egypt and Iraq. Reese said that while violence against Christians in those nations remains a problem, the commission wanted to highlight the concrete steps that both the Egyptian and Iraqi governments have taken to protect religious minorities.

Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi “consistently has made noteworthy public statements and gestures encouraging religious tolerance and moderation, has condemned sectarian attacks and assisted victims, and has urged reform of textbooks and religious discourse in society, an important shift in tone and rhetoric from his predecessors.”

Still, Egypt and Iraq are on USCIRF’s list of Tier 2 countries, which are considered violators of religious freedom, but not at the same level as the countries of particular concern. For 2017 the worst violators are Burma (Myanmar), Central African Republic, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. —Religion News Service