

Research Briefing

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The UK and global freedom of religion or belief

Summary

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- 2 Global religious demographics
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Summary

The [1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) states everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the freedom to choose, change and practise their own belief or faith, or not to profess one.

However, across the world faith, non-faith, and unaffiliated groups experience discrimination on the grounds of their religious adherence and observance. In 2023, [the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, reported that there were “alarming” challenges](#), undermining efforts on conflict prevention, other human rights including freedom of speech, and the ability of minority groups to participate in public life.

This research briefing sets out international commitments on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) data on religious adherence, reports of discrimination, UK international work on the issue, and further resources.

International commitments on FoRB

The UN's [1948 Declaration](#) is complemented by the [1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#). While the two declarations are non-binding, they set out expectations that those with religious faith, and those without (such as atheists), have the right to choose and practise their beliefs.

The protection for freedom of religion or belief in the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) is binding on states that have signed it. To date, there are 173 parties to the covenant, including the UK. Those who have not yet ratified it include China and Cuba.

Religion and belief in the global population

The [US-based Pew Research Center](#), a nonpartisan organisation that conducts polls, research and analysis, estimates that across the world there are around 2.3 billion Christians of all denominations (31% of the global population), 1.8 billion Muslims (24%), 1.2 billion in unaffiliated groups, such as atheists and agnostics (16%), 1.1 billion Hindus (15%), and 500 million Buddhists (7%). Those of other faiths such as Sikhs, Baha'is and Jews constitute smaller numbers.

These estimates are based on those who self-identify with a faith or belief/non-belief group and include non-observant groups. It does not include those who may record their ethnicity as corresponding to a religion.

Most Muslims, Christians and Hindus live in countries in which they are a majority. However, substantial minorities do not: [208 million self-identified](#)

[Christians live as minorities](#), including in China and India, and [400 million self-identified Muslims live as minorities](#), with the largest concentrations in India and Ethiopia. [Israel is the only state with a Jewish majority](#). [There are five states with an unaffiliated majority](#), including North Korea and Estonia.

Global trends in freedom of religion of belief

Several government and civil society organisations have published assessments of government and societal restriction of FoRB.

In its [most recent annual survey of global freedom of religion or belief](#), published in 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur found that legal restrictions had increased from 2007 to 2017. These included restrictions on freedom to worship publicly, the operation of humanitarian agencies and associations, the appointment of faith leaders, and access to education.

In 2020, [the Pew Research Center found that government or societal harassment was reported](#) in 155 countries against Christians, in 145 against Muslims and in 94 against Jews (out of the 198 countries surveyed).

Globally, [in at least 10 countries, apostasy \(renouncing a faith or belief\) is potentially punishable by death](#) (PDF), as is the [case in seven countries for blasphemy](#). These include Afghanistan, Iran, and Mauritania. However, enforcement of these laws varies.

How does the UK support FoRB?

The UK Government says [promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief is a priority in its international human rights work](#).

To promote this, in 2018 the Government [appointed its first dedicated special envoy](#), currently [Fiona Bruce MP](#). The Government also funds several aid programmes, including the [John Bunyan Fund](#) and the [FoRB leadership network](#), and can apply [sanctions against those who abuse freedoms](#).

The UK is a member of the [International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance](#), launched by the US in 2020. In 2022, the UK hosted a conference where [35 countries signed one or more statements on freedom of religion or belief](#).

The Government's approach was criticised in the [Bishop of Truro's 2019 report on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's support for persecuted Christians](#). The report made several recommendations, including the better mainstreaming of work on FoRB across the department. [The Government accepted the recommendations in full](#). A [July 2022 review of progress](#) found "positive overall progress" had been made in implementing the report.

Section 5 of this briefing provides further publications on discrimination in specific countries and against specific groups.

1 International commitments on freedom of religion or belief

UN declarations of 1948 and 1981

Article 18 of the UN's [1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) provides for the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), in both public and private:

Article 18: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The declaration also states that regardless of a person's beliefs or religion they should be entitled to the wider rights set out in the declaration, such as freedom of speech, the right to life, liberty and security of person, and recognition before the law.¹

The UN Human Rights Committee states Article 18 should be interpreted broadly, and to include “theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs.”²

The declaration is not legally-binding. Instead, its importance is as an “authoritative guide” for states to develop their own legislation.³

In 1981, the UN General Assembly adopted without a vote a [Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#). The assembly reiterated the importance of FoRB set out in the 1948 Declaration and the 1966 Covenant (see below), Article 6 defined the related freedoms of thought and conscience:

- (a) To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;
- (b) To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;
- (c) To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;

¹ UN, [Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948](#), Articles 3, 6, 18 and 19

² University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, [Human Rights Committee, General comment 22, Article 18, 1993](#), 1994

³ I Brownlie and GS Goodwin-Gill, eds, *Basic documents on human rights*, 2002, p18

- (d) To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas;
- (e) To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;
- (f) To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;
- (g) To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;
- (h) To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief;⁴

Similar to that of 1948, the declaration is a statement of agreed standards of action and moral obligation and does not have the status of treaty (a legally binding international agreement).

International Covenant, 1966

Article 18 of the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) states that everyone has the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief, and to manifest this through worship, observance, practice and teaching. Among other commitments, Article 18 states:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.⁵

As of 2023, there are 173 parties to the covenant, of whom 76 are signatories. Those who are neither [parties](#) nor [signatories](#) include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Singapore. Those who have not yet [ratified](#) include China and Cuba.⁶

⁴ [Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief](#), November 1981, Article 6

⁵ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [International covenant on civil and political rights](#), 1966

⁶ UN Treaty Collection, [International Covenant on civil and political rights](#), status as of 18 August 2023. See also UN Library, [What is the difference between signing, ratification and accession?](#)

2

Global religious demographics

The data in this section primarily comes from work undertaken by the [US-based Pew Research Center, a non-partisan organisation that conducts polls, research and analysis](#). It uses census data and other surveys to estimate the number of people who identify with a faith or belief group or are unaffiliated. As the Center notes, its “measure of religious identity [...] is sociological rather than theological” and includes non-observant groups and those who “may be viewed as unorthodox” by others of the same religion. It does not include those who may record their ethnicity as corresponding to a religion.⁷

The data is supplemented by research by the [University of Boston’s World Religion Database](#) (subscription required), which uses a range of similar source material to make estimates of religious adherence and demography.

2.1

Religious adherence globally

The below table is based on [estimates from the World Religion database](#). Christians of all denominations formed the largest group, totalling 2.5 billion (32% of the population). The second were Muslims, totalling 1.9 billion (24%). Pew Research Center uses a different methodology, described above.

Estimated adherents of major religious and belief groups in 2020 (World Religion Database, WRD) and in 2015 (Pew)

	World Religion database	Pew Research Center
Group	Size and % of world population	
Christians	2.5 billion (32%)	2.3 billion (31%)
Muslims	1.9 billion (24%)	1.8 billion (24%)
Hindus	1.1 billion (14%)	1.1 billion (15%)
Agnostics and Atheists (WRD)/Unaffiliated (Pew)	901 million (12%)	1.2 billion (16%)
Folk Religionists and Ethnic Religionists (WRD)/Folk religionists (Pew)	751 million (10%)	418 million (6%)
Buddhists	533 million (7%)	500 million (7%)

⁷ Pew Research Center (hereafter Pew), [The changing religious landscape: Appendix C, methodology](#) (PDF), 2017, p2.

Other religions, including Baha'is, Sikhs, and others	144 million (2%)	59 million (1%)
Jews	15 million (0.2%)	14 million (0.2%)

Source: T Johnson and P Crossing, [Projecting global religious populations, 2020-50](#), Journal of Religion and Demography, vol 8, 2021, pp124-53, at p126 and Pew Research, [The changing global religious landscape](#), April 2017

Gender and religion

Pew has found that globally more women identify with a religion than men, though how they practise their faith can vary. For 2010, it estimated:

- 83% of women identified with a religion or belief, compared with 80% of men (around 100 million more women than men).
- In 61 of 192 countries, women were 2 percentage points more likely to have an affiliation with a religious group. This included South Africa, China, Brazil, and Japan.
- Women attended religious services more than men in 30 of 81 surveyed countries. These were mostly in Christian denominations in Brazil, South Korea, Botswana, and Mexico.
- Muslim men reported attending services more frequently than Muslim women across the globe (70% of Muslim men reported weekly attendance compared with 42% of women). Pew states “higher levels of weekly attendance” among both Muslim and Jewish men globally “are due in large part to religious norms that prioritize men’s participation”.⁸

2.2 Distribution of religious and belief groups

Research by Pew estimates that most religious adherents (defined in the research as those self-identifying with a faith or belief group) live in a country in which their faith or belief group forms a majority of the overall population. As this section uses Pew data, the global population of each group is different from that estimated by the World Religion Database in section 2.1

Christians

In 2011, Pew estimated 1.9 billion of the 2.2 billion self-identified Christians (90%) lived in countries where Christians form the majority.

⁸ Pew, [The gender gap in religion around the world](#), 22 March 2016

Around 26% of Christians live in Europe, 37% in the Americas, 25% in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 13% in the Asia-Pacific region. Less than 1% live in the Middle East and North Africa.⁹

An estimated 80% of the 208 million Christians living as a minority are found in ten countries. These include:

- China: An estimated Christian population of 67 million, or 5% of the local population. This represents 3% of the global Christian population.
- India: 32 million Christians, or 3% of the local population (1.5% of the global Christian population).
- Indonesia: 21 million Christians, or 9% of the local population (1% of the global Christian population).
- South Korea: 14 million Christians, constituting 29% of the local population (less than 1% of the global Christian population).¹⁰

Christian denominations

Globally, around half of Christians are Catholic, 37% are Protestant, 12% Orthodox, and around 1% of other denominations (such as Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses).¹¹

There are 67 countries in which most of the population is Catholic. In all 10 countries with the largest Catholic populations, Catholics are in the majority.

Protestants form the majority in 49 states. After the US, Nigeria has the second highest number of Protestants (60 million, 38% of the local population), China third (58 million, 5%) and Brazil fourth (41 million, 4%).

The Christian Orthodox population is concentrated in Europe, forming majority in Russia and many of its European neighbours as well as Greece, Romania and Serbia. They constitute significant minorities in Ethiopia (44% of the local population, 36 million people) and Egypt (5% of the local population, 3.9 million).

No other Christian denominations form majorities in any states; they generally constitute small minorities. They represent less than 1% of the population in all countries other than Mexico and the US.¹²

⁹ Pew, [Global Christianity: A report on the size and distribution](#), 19 December 2011

¹⁰ Pew, [Global Christianity—A report on the size and distribution](#), 19 December 2011: "[Living as majorities and minorities](#)"

¹¹ As above

¹² As above, "[Christian traditions](#)"

Muslims

In 2011, Pew estimated that 1.2 billion of the 1.6 billion identified Muslims (75%) lived in countries where Muslims form most of the population.¹³

Most Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region (62% of the global Muslim population, 1 billion), followed by the Middle East and North Africa (20%, 322 million) and Sub-Saharan Africa (15%, 243 million). Less than 3% of Muslims live in Europe and less than 1% in the Americas.¹⁴

2009 Pew estimates identified [five countries where 75% of Muslims living as minorities reside](#):

- India: 160 million Muslims, constituting 13% of the local population or 10% of the global Muslim population.
- Ethiopia: 28 million Muslims, 34% of the local population (2% of the global Muslim population).
- China: 22 million Muslims, 2% of the local population (around 1% of the global Muslim population).
- Russia: 16.5 million Muslims, 12% of the local population (1% of the global Muslim population).
- Tanzania: 13.2 million Muslims, 30% of the local population (less than 1% of the global Muslim population).¹⁵

Shia and Sunni Muslims

Around 85% of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Sunni, and most of the remainder are Shia.¹⁶ Other groups include Ahmadiyya Muslims, who have a presence in countries including Algeria, Malaysia, and Pakistan.¹⁷

Most Shias live in four countries: Iran (where they form a majority, around 90% to 95% of the local population), Pakistan (10% to 15% of the local population), India (10% to 15%) and Iraq (65% to 70%). Shias constitute a majority of the population in four states: Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, and Iraq.¹⁸

Unaffiliated groups and individuals

In 2011, Pew estimated that 860 million of the 1.1 billion unaffiliated population globally live in Asia and the Pacific (76% of the global population), followed by Europe (135 million, 12%) and North America

¹³ Pew, [The future of the global Muslim population](#), January 2011, "[Muslim-majority countries](#)"

¹⁴ As above

¹⁵ Pew, [Mapping the global Muslim population](#), 7 October 2009

¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, [The Sunni-Shia divide](#), 27 April 2023

¹⁷ US Commission on Religious Freedom, [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#) (PDF), 2021

¹⁸ Pew, [Mapping the global Muslim population](#), 7 October 2009 "Sunni and Shia populations"

(59 million, 5%). It estimates 62% of all people without a stated religious affiliation live in China.

There are five countries where those unaffiliated with a faith or belief constitute a majority: China, Czechia, Estonia, North Korea, and Japan.¹⁹

Pew defines unaffiliated groups as atheists, agnostics, and those who do not identify with any religion, belief, or faith.

Hindus

Almost all Hindus reside in the Asia-Pacific region (99%, 1.0 billion) and a majority live in India (94% of the local population, 983 million). They form a majority in two other countries: Nepal (81%, 24 million) and Mauritius (56%, 730,000).²⁰

Buddhists

Almost all Buddhists live in the Asia-Pacific region (99%, 481 million). Half live in China, followed by Thailand, Japan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

Seven countries have Buddhist majorities, including Cambodia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia. Countries in which Buddhists form large minorities are China (18% of the local population), Japan (36%) and Vietnam (16%).²¹

“Folk religions”

Pew defines “folk religions” as those less institutionalised than other faiths, often being associated with specific groups of people or tribes, and often lacking formal creeds or sacred texts.

Pew identified the largest concentration to be in the Asia-Pacific region (365 million, 90% of the global population), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (27 million, 7%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (10 million, 3%).

An estimated 73% of all Pew-identified “folk religionists” lived in China in 2010. They did not constitute a majority in any county.²²

Jews

Of the 14 million Jews globally, 82% live in two countries: the United States (5.6 million, 41%) and Israel (also 5.6 million, 41%). Israel is the only country in the world with a Jewish majority, forming 76% of the population.

¹⁹ Pew, [The global religious landscape](#), 18 December 2012, “[Religiously unaffiliated](#)”

²⁰ As above, “[Hindus](#)”

²¹ As above, “[Buddhists](#)”

²² As above, “[Folk religionists](#)”

Canada, France, and the UK respectively have the third to fifth largest Jewish populations worldwide.²³

Other religions

Around 1% of the world's population adhere to other organised religions including Baha'ism, Daoism, Jainism, Shintoism, Sikhism, Tenrikyo, and Zoroastrianism. Based on the World Religion Database, [2020 data suggests](#):

- Sikhism: An estimated 27 million adherents worldwide.
- Daoism: 9 million.
- Baha'ism: Around 8.5 million
- Jainism: Around 6.3 million
- Zoroastrianism: An estimated 200,000 worldwide.²⁴

Further reading on global religious demography

Pew Research Center

- [Measuring religion in China](#), August 2023. Challenges of determining how many people in China hold religious beliefs.
- [Key findings about the religious composition of India](#), September 2021. Distribution of religious group across India. Hindus form the majority in 28 of India's 35 states.
- [The countries with the 10 largest Christian and Muslim populations](#), April 2019. Includes projections to 2060.
- [The age gap in religion around the world](#), June 2018. Younger adults tend to identify less with a religion than older adults in many countries.
- [The changing global religious landscape](#), April 2017. Global population projections on religious identity to 2035.
- [The gender gap in religion around the world](#), March 2016. Globally, women are more likely to affiliate with a religion or belief.
- [What is each country's second largest religious group?](#), June 2015. Data on the significant minority group in each state. In North America, Europe, and South America this is usually unaffiliated groups. In North Africa, the Middle East and Western Asia it is generally Muslims or Christians.

²³ Pew, [The global religious landscape](#), 18 December 2012 "Jews"

²⁴ T Johnson and P Crossing, [Projecting global religious populations, 2020-50](#), Journal of Religion and Demography, vol 8, 2021, pp124-53, at p126

Data based on the [World Religion Database](#) (subscription required).

- T Johnson and P Crossing, [The World by religion](#), Journal of Religion and Demography, vol 9, 2022, pp1-90. Analysis of distribution of faith, non-faith and belief groups across the world by country and region.
- T Johnson and P Crossing, [Projecting global religious populations, 2020-50](#), Journal of Religion and Demography, vol 8, 2021, pp124-53. Data used for section 2.1, above.

Other sources

- CIA, [Field listing-religious](#). Short summaries of religious and faith groups and headline demographic data for each country.

3 Global trends in freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)

3.1 UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB

Assessment that restrictions rose from 2007 to 2017

The UN Special Rapporteur published their [most recent thematic global assessment on FoRB](#) in 2020. Overall, they concluded:

The prevalence of laws, policies and government actions that restrict the ability of rights holders to enjoy freedom of religion or belief increased from 2007 to 2017 [...]

States employ a range of extra-legal measures that violate freedom of religion or belief, which also serve to delegitimize and stigmatize certain religious or belief groups.²⁵

These measures include restrictions on the establishment of places of worship, operation of humanitarian agencies and associations, the appointment and persecution of faith leaders, and access to education.²⁶

Specific concerns

The Special Rapporteur cited specific restrictions of concern, including:

- The use of anti-blasphemy laws or laws against provoking “religious offense” to “arbitrarily detain and ill-treat individuals for expression of their faith”. The Special Rapporteur said these laws were “invariably targeted at distinct minorities”.²⁷
- Criminalisation of apostasy (renunciation of a faith or religion) in up to 21 countries, including several in which it is punishable by death (though the application of these laws varies).²⁸ See the box on page 16 for more.

²⁵ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Interim report of the special rapporteur on FoRB \[...\] A/75/385](#), 12 October 2020, para 14

²⁶ As above, para 14

²⁷ As above, para 15

²⁸ As above, para 16

Blasphemy and apostasy laws

2022 research by Humanists UK found that globally:

- In at least 10 countries apostasy (renunciation of a faith or religion) is potentially punishable by death in whole or part of the state. These are: Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, the Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.²⁹
- There are seven countries where the penalty for blasphemy potentially carries the same sentence: Afghanistan, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia.³⁰

The enforcement of these laws varies. Humanist UK research suggests [a higher share of Commonwealth countries have punishments for blasphemy than other states](#) (PDF): 23 of the 56 Commonwealth members have laws against blasphemy (50%) compared to 56 of the 140 other surveyed states (40%). In the Commonwealth, some of the laws are a legacy of legislation introduced when the territories were part of the British empire.³¹

- Acts of terrorism against minority religious or belief groups, and the use of anti-terrorism laws to target or criminalise the peaceful expression of an individual's religious or belief identity.³²
- The manner of registration requirements for religious groups, including for tax purposes or to gain a legal personality. In 40% of the 178 states that require this, the rapporteur judged them to be “discriminatory.”³³
- Challenges in recognising a legal identity. The rapporteur judged “some states” were making it harder for some religious and belief groups to gain access to legal documentation, negatively affecting their access to basic services and ability to participate in public life.³⁴
- Rhetoric and public statements that scapegoat religious and belief minorities, including on social media.³⁵

²⁹ Humanists International, [Freedom of thought report 2022](#) (PDF), December 2022, p12

³⁰ End Blasphemy Laws, [Laws by country](#)

³¹ Humanists UK, [Blasphemy laws and allegations in the Commonwealth](#) (PDF), September 2022, p2-3 and Commons Library research briefing, [The Commonwealth and human rights](#), section 2.4

³² UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Interim report of the special rapporteur on FoRB \[...\] A/75/385](#), 12 October 2020, paras 17-21

³³ As above, para 22

³⁴ As above, paras 25-29

³⁵ As above, paras 34-35

- Violence that in some countries “reached the devastating level of atrocity crimes.” This included the [Islamic State/Daesh genocide of the Yazidis in Iraq](#). Violence was often carried out on gendered lines.³⁶
- Denial of access to education or harassment when attending on the basis of belief or refusal to wear certain types of religious dress.³⁷

3.2 US Commission on International Religious Freedom assessment

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) was created as a federal agency under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

The agency is responsible for monitoring FoRB globally and making recommendations to the US President, Secretary of State, and Congress. It is independent from the US State Department.³⁸

Designation of countries and entities of concern or for “special watch”

Following the agency’s advice, the Secretary of State designates “countries of particular concern.” However, they do not have to follow the commission’s recommendations.³⁹ These countries are those in which the USCIRF has found the government “has engaged in or tolerated” the below practices:

systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, including violations such as torture, degrading treatment or punishment, prolonged detention without charges, abduction or clandestine detention, or other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.

The US Secretary of State also maintains a “special watch list” of countries that are deemed not to have met all the above criteria but are judged to “engage in or tolerate severe violations of religious freedom.”⁴⁰

The Secretary of State can also list entities (organisations and groups) as being of particular concern.⁴¹

³⁶ UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, [Interim report of the special rapporteur on FoRB \[...\] A/75/385](#), 12 October 2020, paras 37-38

³⁷ As above, paras 39-40

³⁸ USCIRF, [About us](#)

³⁹ USCIRF, [USCIRF outraged by omission of Nigeria and India \[...\] A/75/385](#), December 2022

⁴⁰ USCIRF, [FAQS: International religious freedom report and countries of particular concern](#)

⁴¹ USCIRF, [Factsheet on entities of particular concern](#) (PDF), November 2021

2023 list

In its 2023 annual report, the USCIRF recommended 16 countries of particular concern and 11 countries for the special watch list. Nine entities have also been designated as of particular concern.

Aside from Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia, all the countries are either in Asia, the Middle East, or Africa. They tend to have large Muslim populations with Christian minorities. Another of those listed, India, has a majority Hindu population with Muslim and Christian minorities, while in China and Cuba restrictions exist against a range of faiths. Discrimination also occurs between those of the same faith and against smaller religious groups.

USCIRF recommendations for countries and entities of concern/special watch		
Links in the table are to respective country/entity pages on USCIRF website		
Countries of particular concern	Special watch list countries	Entities of particular concern*
Afghanistan	Algeria	Al-Shabaab (Somalia)
China	Azerbaijan	Boko Haram (Nigeria)
Cuba	Central African Republic	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Syria)
Eritrea	Egypt	Houthis (Yemen)
India	Indonesia	ISIS-Sahel (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso)
Iran	Iraq	ISIS-West Africa (Nigeria)
Myanmar (Burma)	Kazakhstan	Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (North and West Africa)
Nicaragua	Malaysia	The Taliban
North Korea	Sri Lanka	Wagner Group (following actions in Central African Republic)
Pakistan	Turkey	
Russia	Uzbekistan	
Saudi Arabia		
Syria		
Tajikistan		
Turkmenistan		
Vietnam		

Note: * These are those designated by the Secretary of State. The 2023 USCIRF annual report did not include recommend entities.

Source: USCIRF, [Annual report 2023](#), 2023, p5 (columns 1 and 2 of this table) and USCIRF, [Countries of particular concern, special watch list countries, entities of particular concern](#), updated November 2022, for column 3.

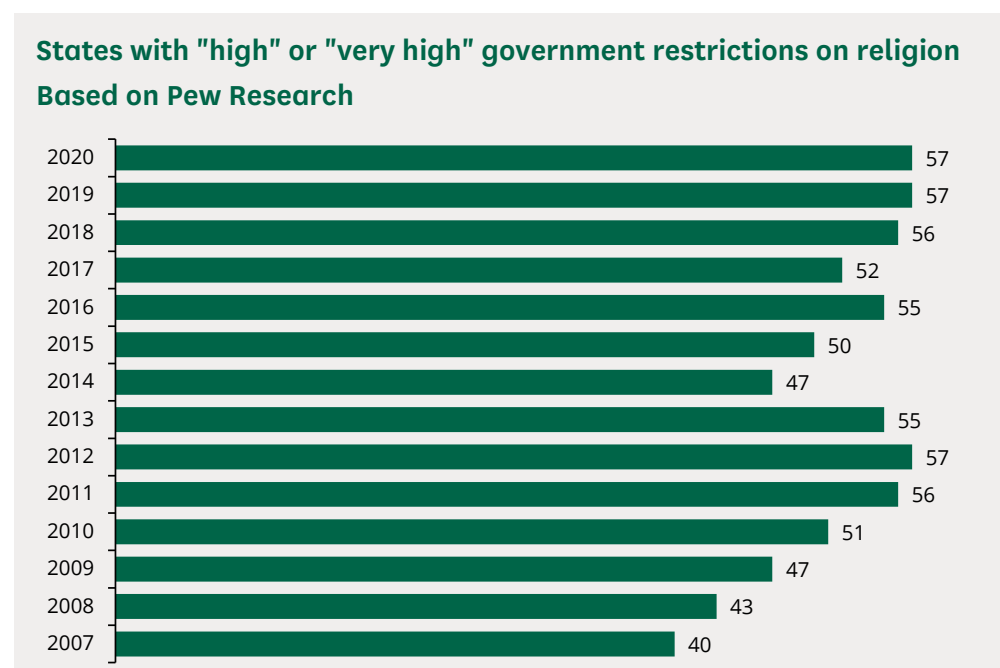
For information on the conditions for FoRB in each of these countries, see the further resources in section 5 of this research briefing, and the links to the USCIRF assessment for each respective country or entity in the below table.

3.3 Pew research on government restrictions

The US-based Pew Research Center publishes assessments on the degree to which governments have put restrictions on religion. Its [latest report was published in 2023](#) and covers the period to 2020.

The 2023 research judged that the number of countries with “high” or “very high” government restrictions on religion have increased steadily from a recent low of 47 in 2014 and returned to levels seen at the start of the 2010s, to stand at 57 countries in 2020. Trends are shown in the below chart.

The data suggests that the proportion of countries and territories with high or very high restrictions rose from 20% in 2007 (40 states) to 29% in 2012 (57 states). It then fell to recent low of 24% (47) in 2014 before steadily rising to 29% in 2020.



Source: Pew Research, [Global religious futures project](#), December 2022

Pew assesses the level of government restrictions using 20 factors, including constitutional provisions for FoRB, limits on preaching and proselytizing, government harassment and statements on religious groups, and whether all religious groups receive the same level of government access and privileges.⁴²

⁴² See Pew, [Appendix D: Summary of results](#) (PDF), 2022, for a full list

Those countries with a score of 6.6 or more out of 10 on the resulting index are judged to have “very high” restrictions. In 2020, these 23 countries included China, Malaysia, Algeria, Iran and Russia.⁴³

Those 39 countries assessed as having “high” restrictions (scores of 4.5 to 6.5) in 2020 included Israel, Pakistan, Bahrain, Mauritania and Morocco.⁴⁴

Discrimination between those of the same faith (such as Shia and Sunni Muslims, for example) can be significant. In 2015, Pew noted that “Christians were actually harassed mostly in Christian-majority countries”, including by governments.⁴⁵

Further reading on government restrictions on FoRB

- A Bramsen and Z Vermeer, [Religious regulation in Muslim states](#), in Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: Politics, January 2019
- J Heymann, A Sprague and A Raub, [Advancing equality: How constitutional rights can make a difference worldwide](#), 2020, chapter 5 on religious freedom and equal rights and the associated World Policy Analysis Center, [Constitutional equal rights across religion and belief](#), 2022
- B Michael, A Lin and J Berlinerblau, [“Secular Africa?” Making sense of noncompliance to secular constitutions in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), Journal of Church and State, July 2023
- K Teater and LD Jenkins, [Religious regulation in India](#), in Oxford Research Encyclopaedias: Politics, April 2019
- Pew Research, [Many countries favour specific religions officially or unofficially](#), October 2017

3.4

Discrimination against specific groups

Global data on discrimination is limited, and often underreported. The below section summarises findings from non-government monitors of freedom of religion or belief. Section 5 of this research briefing provides a list of further resources and analysis.

⁴³ Pew, [How Covid-19 restrictions affected religious groups in 2020](#), November 2022 “Number of countries with ‘very high government restrictions’

⁴⁴ Pew, [How Covid-19 restrictions affected religious groups in 2020: appendix A](#) (PDF), p62

⁴⁵ Pew, [Christians faced widespread harassment in 2015, but mostly in Christian-majority countries](#), 9 June 2017

Global picture

In 2020, the Pew Research Center said that in 189 of the 198 countries and territories it assessed, [harassment by governments or social groups had occurred against religious or faith groups and unaffiliated groups](#). Its definition of “harassment” included a range of actions, from derogatory statements to the use of force against groups and individuals. The number of countries in which harassment has occurred has risen from 161 in 2010.⁴⁶

Gender and discrimination

Vulnerability to persecution and discrimination based on belief and religion can be influenced by factors including a person’s economic status, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.⁴⁷ Several organisations have reported women are more likely to be targeted than men on matters of FoRB:

- Open Doors, an NGO which supports Christians worldwide, published a [report on gender-specific persecution in 2021](#). For the 50 countries analysed, it found Christian women were often at higher risk than Christian men. Physical violence, economic harassment and imprisonment were reported against men, while forced marriage, sexual and physical violence, and forced divorce were reported against women.⁴⁸
- The UN Special Rapporteur’s [2019 report on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred](#) cited evidence that “Muslim women are disproportionately targeted in Islamophobic hate crimes” in some surveyed European states.⁴⁹ They also referenced the UN’s Human Rights Committee’s findings that restrictions on head coverings can violate Muslim women’s right to FoRB and exacerbate their social marginalisation.⁵⁰

In 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB published a [report on gender-based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief](#). It argued:

- In all regions of the world, governments had failed to protect people from gender-based violence and discrimination by individuals and groups claiming a religious justification for such actions.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Pew, [Anti-Jewish harassment occurred in 94 countries 2020, up from earlier years](#), 17 March 2023

⁴⁷ UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance, A/71/269](#), 2 August 2016, paras 12, 20, 37, 39, 61, 63, 64

⁴⁸ Open Doors, [Same faith, different persecution](#) (PDF), March 2021, pp4-5

⁴⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Countering Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief \[...\], A/HRC/46/30](#), April 2021, para 49, see also para 18

⁵⁰ As above, paras 26, 54

⁵¹ UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Report on FoRB and gender equality, A/HRC/43/48](#), February 2020, para 7

- Instances of gender-based discrimination in the name of religion or belief included female genital mutilation, marital rape, forced marriage, polygamy, and to deny reproductive and sexual rights.⁵²
- Consultations with representatives from the south and south-east Asia regions had found women and girls from religious minorities to be at particular risk of violence, including forced marriage and conversion. The report acknowledged that governments themselves had often sought to combat gender-based violence and discrimination.⁵³

The issue of gender-specific religious persecution was [debated by the House of Commons in March 2022](#).

Christians

In 2023, Open Doors said that [at least 360 million Christians experienced “high levels of persecution and discrimination”](#). It said this constituted 20% of Christians living in Africa and 40% in Asia.⁵⁴

Open Doors also reported the number of Christians killed for their faith was 5,621 in 2023, down from 5,898 in 2022 but up from 4,761 in 2021. The majority were killed in Nigeria and linked to the actions of [Boko Haram and Islamic State](#) (PDF). Open Doors judged that North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Eritrea, and Libya had the highest rates of persecution against Christians globally.⁵⁵

[The types of persecution](#) included instances of intimidation, disinformation, stereotyping, legal threats, and attacks on places of worship.⁵⁶

Muslims

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an international association of states in which Muslims tend to form most, or a significant proportion, of their population. It publishes an annual report on Islamophobia, which it defines as “hatred, stigmatisation, racism, discrimination” in the public sphere and in private life, including online.⁵⁷

The OIC’s most recent report covers the period from 2020 to 2022. It said there had been a “general” increase since 2015 and said much was linked with Islamophobic statements by political parties in Europe, Asia and elsewhere.⁵⁸

The UN Special Rapporteur published a [report on Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred](#) in 2021. It judged that, globally, media and politicians often

⁵² UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Report on FoRB and gender equality, A/HRC/43/48](#), February 2020, paras 14, 40

⁵³ As above, para 18

⁵⁴ Open Doors, [World Watch List 2023](#), January 2023

⁵⁵ As above and [World Watch List 2022](#), January 2022

⁵⁶ Open Doors, [How does Open Doors create the World Watch List?](#)

⁵⁷ OIC, [Islamophobia](#)

⁵⁸ OIC, [14th Observatory report on Islamophobia](#), March 2022, p5

“reinforce [...] harmful stereotypes and tropes about Muslims and Islam”,⁵⁹ and that globally Muslims have “borne the brunt” of the “use and abuse of counter-terrorism measures” in recent years.⁶⁰

Jews

The 2020 Pew Center survey of harassment found that Jews faced harassment in more countries than any other religious or belief group other than Christians and Muslims. Harassment was reported in 94 countries, compared with 155 (against Christians) and 145 (against Muslims). This was despite the small size of the Jewish population (around 0.2% of the global population, as defined using Pew’s figures described above in section 2).⁶¹

The UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB published a [report on global antisemitism](#) in 2019. Citing the absence of data collection on antisemitic incidents in many countries, the report primarily focuses on Europe and North America.

The report noted that most online antisemitism originates in the United States and cited survey data suggesting “biased attitudes towards Jews are apparently prevalent among the general public” in Eastern Europe. For the Middle East, the rapporteur received evidence of antisemitism in school curricula and conflation of Jews with Israel and Zionism.⁶²

Hindus

An estimated 97% of the world’s Hindus live in India and Nepal, where they form most of the population.⁶³ In 2020 in India, 17% of Hindus reported discrimination on the basis of their religion, especially in northeast India where Hindus are less prevalent than elsewhere (forming around 58% of the local population).⁶⁴

The Hindu American Foundation publishes reports on [human rights in South Asia and the diaspora](#). Its 2017 report said there were nine countries in which the human rights of Hindus were “systematically violated.” This included Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Saudi Arabia.⁶⁵ In 2020, the Pew Research Center found that Hindus faced government or societal harassment in 21 countries.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Countering Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hatred to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief \[...\]](#), A/HRC/46/30, April 2021, para 15, 18

⁶⁰ As above, para 23

⁶¹ Pew, [Anti-Jewish harassment occurred in 94 countries in 2020, up from earlier years](#), 17 March 2023

⁶² UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, [Report on combating antisemitism to eliminate discrimination and intolerance based on religion or belief](#), 20 September 2019, paras 4, 24, 36

⁶³ Pew, [The global religious landscape](#), 18 December 2012, “Hindus”

⁶⁴ Pew, [Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation](#), June 2021 “[Religious freedom, discrimination and communal relations](#)”

⁶⁵ Hindu America, [Hindus in South Asia & the diaspora: A survey of human rights 2017](#), undated

⁶⁶ Pew, [Anti-Jewish harassment occurred in 94 countries in 2020, up from earlier years](#), 17 March 2023

Unaffiliated groups

Unaffiliated groups include atheists, agnostics, and those who do not identify with any religion, belief, or faith. In 2020, the Pew Research Center said there were 27 countries in which these groups were harassed, either by governments or in society. This was up from three countries in 2012.

Harassment included not being able to identify as not having a religion in official documents, attacks on atheism in the media, or restrictions on access to social media.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Pew, [Religiously unaffiliated people face harassment in a rising number of countries](#), March 2023

4 The UK and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) internationally

4.1 UK policy prioritisation of FoRB

Human rights in the FCDO

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) states FoRB is “an integral part” of its work on human rights, and that it integrates it into its wider work on strengthening the rules-based international order, advancing democratic values, promoting good governance, and contributing to conflict prevention.⁶⁸

The department also says it “considers the intersectionality of human rights” and recognises that women and girls from religious minorities can be particularly vulnerable because of their faith.⁶⁹

Speaking in July 2019, FCDO Minister and then Special Envoy for FoRB, Lord Ahmad, said:

Freedom of Religion or Belief has been a key priority for the FCO within our human rights agenda in recent years. Both strategically and through a focus on priority countries, we have not only raised the profile of religious persecution and abuse, but also acted on the rising tide of Christian persecution across the world with some success.⁷⁰

The department’s position is that “where FoRB is under attack, other basic rights are threatened too”. Attacks on FoRB, it states, can involve denials of freedom of expression, detention without trial, impunity for attacks on property and people, and often contributes to conflict and the growth of extremism.⁷¹

Analysis by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) notes that FoRB has become more of a priority in the FCDO’s human rights work since 2018 under Foreign Secretaries Jeremy Hunt and Dominic Raab.⁷²

⁶⁸ FCDO, [FoRB: How the FCO can help promote respect for this human right](#), 20 October 2016, p1

⁶⁹ PQ 138312 [[Development aid: Females](#)], 22 March 2022

⁷⁰ Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [Review into Christian Persecution catalyst for action](#), 8 July 2019

⁷¹ FCDO, [FoRB: Understanding this human right](#), 12 May 2022

⁷² ICAI, [The UK’s approach to democracy and human rights](#), 2023, para 4.7

Integrated Review of UK foreign policy

The UK's 2021 Integrated Review of diplomacy, development, security, and foreign policy commits the UK to support open societies and defend human rights across the world. It states the UK will promote FoRB globally and take forward the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report on how the UK Government responds to abuses of FoRB (see below, section 4.6).⁷³

4.2 The UK's Special Envoy for FoRB

Reflecting the desire to strengthen the UK's international work on FoRB, in September 2018 the Government appointed its first Special Envoy for FoRB.

Three individuals have held the role:

- Then-Minister of State for the Commonwealth, Lord Ahmad, from July 2018 to September 2019.⁷⁴ The Minister continues to responsibility for open societies and human rights as part of his FCDO portfolio.⁷⁵
- Rehman Chishti MP, from September 2019 to December 2020.⁷⁶
- Fiona Bruce MP, from December 2020 to the present.⁷⁷

In January 2022, former MP David Burrowes was appointed deputy special envoy.⁷⁸

Duties and responsibilities

The Special Envoy is tasked with:

- Supporting the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's recommendations on protecting Christians from persecution (see below, section 4.6).
- Working with members of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (see below, section 4.4) to raise cases of particular concern.
- Bringing together the UK's international efforts on the issue and consider how the UK can best advance FoRB.⁷⁹

⁷³ Cabinet Office, [Global Britain in a competitive age](#), 2021

⁷⁴ Number Ten, [Lord Ahmad appointed as PM's special envoy to promote religious freedom](#), 4 July 2018

⁷⁵ Cabinet Office, [Government ministers and responsibilities](#), updated 20 July 2023, p58

⁷⁶ Number Ten, [UK appoints new Prime Minister's special envoy for FoRB](#), 12 September 2019

⁷⁷ Gov.UK, [Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB](#)

⁷⁸ FCDO, [Prime Minister appoints deputy special envoy for FoRB](#), 20 January 2022

⁷⁹ Gov.UK, [Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB](#)

What support does the FCDO provide to the envoy?

The envoy role is not established by law. The FCDO provides some media and diplomatic support, though a 2022 review of the department's work on FoRB judged that its support for the envoy had "fluctuated over time."⁸⁰

The 2022 review also heard through interviews with FCDO and other relevant staff and stakeholders that some believed the role should be better integrated with the FCDO. They argued this would allow the post-holder greater input into discussions of current FoRB cases of concern. They also said the privileges and entitlement of the post should be better established.⁸¹

Other interviewees, however, expressed caution at whether the envoy should be closely associated with the FCDO, arguing its independence from the government was important for its international role.⁸²

Other special envoys on freedom of religion or belief

To 2018, there were seven countries and the European Union that had appointed special envoys to advance freedom of religion or belief: Canada, Denmark, the EU, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, the UK, and United States (though not all these remain in place).

Only that for the United States has been placed on a statutory footing as part of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (see above, section 3.2). For more information on international approaches, see the following reports:

- Danish Institute for Human Rights, [The International promotion of FoRB](#), 2019
- MD Toft and M Christian Green, [Progress on FoRB? An analysis of European and North American government and parliamentary initiatives](#), The Review of Faith and International Affairs, vol 16, 2018, pp4–18

⁸⁰ FCDO, [Assessment of the implementation of recommendations of Bishop of Truro's independent review of FCDO support for persecuted Christians](#), 4 July 2022, section 2.1.2

⁸¹ As above, section 2.1.2

⁸² As above, section 2.1.2

4.3

UK aid spending

General spending on democracy and human rights

There are no specific figures on UK aid spending intended to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief. Instead, FoRB forms part of wider aid programmes on democracy and human rights.

According to the ICAI, around £1.4 billion of UK aid supported the promotion of democracy and human rights from 2015 to 2021. It did not provide a breakdown of spending on FoRB.⁸³

The ICAI found that spending on human rights and democracy rose each year from 2015 to 2017, reaching around £225 million (1.7% of the aid budget). It then fell in 2018 to £200 million before rising to around £225 million in 2019.

Spending was then reduced 33% in 2020 as [part of the wider reductions in aid spending and move to the 0.5% aid spending target](#). In 2020 spending stood at £148 million (1.1% of the aid budget) before it rose slightly in 2021.⁸⁴

Specific commitments and programmes for FoRB

The UK has announced spending commitments for FoRB programmes:

UK Aid Connect and FoRB Leadership Network, 2020

In 2020, the Government [announced £5.6 million in UK Aid Connect funding for the freedom of religion or belief leadership network](#).⁸⁵

[UK Aid Connect](#) is a funding mechanism managed by the FCDO that provides financial support for civil society groups to address development challenges.

The project brings together researchers from Oxford University, the Church of England, the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs, the Jinnah Institute (Pakistan), and the Danish Institute of Human Rights.

The aim of the project is to build a network of parliamentary and religious leaders committed to freedom of religion or belief through a training programme and provision of other technical assistance.⁸⁶

The project currently works in The Gambia, Sierre Leone, Bangladesh and Pakistan.⁸⁷

⁸³ ICAI, [The UK's approach to democracy and human rights](#), 2023, para 3.14

⁸⁴ As above, para 3.17 and figure 7

⁸⁵ University of Oxford, [New international network for FoRB](#)

⁸⁶ As above

⁸⁷ FoRB Leadership Network, [About](#)

UK Aid Connect and CREID, 2018

In 2018, the Government committed £12 million to [support the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development](#) (CREID) via UK Aid Connect.

CREID was to work with faith groups, NGOs, and academics to promote religious diversity globally and help countries embed FoRB in their development approaches.⁸⁸

Its work included monitoring hate speech and supporting local FoRB campaigns.⁸⁹

No annual reports or updates have been issued on the programme.⁹⁰

The John Bunyan Fund for FoRB, 2019

The John Bunyan Fund was launched in 2019.⁹¹

Initial projects assessed the scale of persecution and evaluated what support the UK could provide. 2019 projects also had to support FoRB in at least one of 23 countries, including China, Egypt, India, Nigeria, Sudan, and Vietnam.⁹²

In 2019/20, 15 projects were funded, receiving around £140,000 in total. In 2020/21, £100,000 was allocated. Fewer projects were funded due to the pandemic and related public health restrictions.⁹³

The Government says the results of the 2019/20 projects included:

Deepen[ing] understanding of the intersecting vulnerabilities experienced by religious minorities living in poverty in the shadows of Covid-19, providing training to local data gatherers in two affected countries and producing reports on the scale of the problem.⁹⁴

Further funding is planned for 2023.⁹⁵

Other UK funding commitments

At the July 2022 global conference on freedom of religion or belief, hosted by the UK, the Government also pledged:

⁸⁸ Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department for International Development, [Government commits £12 million to champion FoRB worldwide](#), 8 November 2018

⁸⁹ Institute of Development Studies, [CREID](#)

⁹⁰ FCDO Development Tracker, [CREID](#), last updated 19 July 2023

⁹¹ [John Bunyan](#), author of a Pilgrim's Progress (1678) was imprisoned during the Restoration for preaching not in conformance with Church of England services.

⁹² Foreign & Commonwealth Office, [John Bunyan fund for FoRB: call for bids](#), 22 August 2019

⁹³ PQ 104090 [[John Bunyan Fund](#)], 20 October 2020

⁹⁴ PQ 25018 [[Christians across the Globe Independent Review](#)], 9 July 2021

⁹⁵ British High Commission Colombo, [Call for bids, Sri Lanka: John Bunyan Fund 2023 to 2024](#), 2 August 2023; British Embassy Baghdad, [Call for bids to protect and promote FoRB in Iraq](#), 17 July 2023

- £300,000 to provide British legal expertise to countries where FoRB is under pressure. It would support governments and advocates understand the legal steps they can take to achieve legislative change.
- £200,000 for the protection and promotion of FoRB, in the form of awareness campaigns and conflict-prevention programmes.⁹⁶

Effects of UK spending reductions from 2020

In 2020, the UK Government announced it would reduce aid spending from 0.7% of gross national income to 0.5%.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on FoRB argued this decision “contradicted” the Government’s commitment to FoRB set out in the 2021 Integrated Review. It said that the withdrawal of aid from “already marginalised” groups would see some groups, such as girls from religious and belief minorities, “suffer disproportionately” from the reductions.⁹⁷

The Institute for Development Studies also said that in 2021/22 CREID experienced a “significant budget cut” and that some FoRB programmes in South Asia had reduction of around 50% in their budgets.⁹⁸

In its impact assessment for the planned reductions in spending in 2023/24, the FCDO said reductions to its programmes in Myanmar would mean that ethnic and religious minorities would be “negatively impacted”.⁹⁹

4.4

Diplomatic activity

In addition to the actions detailed below, the UK Government also raises concerns regarding FoRB and human rights directly with governments as well at the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Commonwealth, and the G7.¹⁰⁰

At the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Commonwealth leaders “noted that freedom of religion or belief are cornerstones of democratic societies.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ FCDO, [UK to champion importance of freedom of religion or belief at global conference](#), 5 July 2022

⁹⁷ APPG on FoRB, [Submission to International Development Committee inquiry on the future of UK aid](#), 15 June 2021, paras 1 and 5

⁹⁸ Institute for Development Studies, [Evidence submission to the International Development Committee inquiry on the future of UK aid](#), 15 June 2021, p1

⁹⁹ [Correspondence from International Development Minister to the International Development Committee](#), 19 July 2023, p8

¹⁰⁰ PQ 189133 [[Persecution](#)], 19 June 2023; PQ 154052 [[Religious freedom: Commonwealth](#)], 26 April 2022; FCDO, [G7 foreign and development ministers’ meeting: Communiqué](#), 5 May 2021, section 55

¹⁰¹ The Commonwealth, [CHOGM 2022 communiqué](#), June 2022, para 11

International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, 2020

The International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance was launched by the United States in 2020. It is based on a series of principles, which include:

Advocat[ing] for freedom of religion or belief for all, which includes the right of individuals to hold any belief or none, to change religion or belief and to manifest religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, in worship, observance, practice and teaching.¹⁰²

The alliance acts as a forum to bring together senior government representatives to discuss collective actions to promote FoRB.¹⁰³

It currently has 37 members, primarily from Europe but including some African states such as The Democratic Republic of the Congo and The Gambia and South American states such as Brazil and Costa Rica.¹⁰⁴

The current chair is the UK's Special Envoy for FoRB, Fiona Bruce MP.¹⁰⁵

Declaration of Humanity, 2020

In November 2020, the UK Government launched the [Declaration of Humanity](#). The declaration condemns conflict-related sexual violence and committed its signatories to work to dismantle harmful interpretations of faith and belief that may be used to condone or commit such acts.¹⁰⁶

To January 2021, [50 faith and belief leaders, civil society organisations and governments had signed](#) from across the world.¹⁰⁷

UK international conference, 2022

In July 2022, the UK Special Envoy and UK Government hosted an international conference on FoRB. This followed previous conferences hosted by Poland and the United States from 2018 to 2020.¹⁰⁸

Thirty-five countries, primarily from Europe and North America but also including Brazil and Kenya, signed up to one or more statements on FoRB.

¹⁰² US State Department, [Declaration of principles for the international religious freedom alliance](#), 5 February 2020

¹⁰³ As above

¹⁰⁴ US State Department, [International religious freedom or belief alliance](#)

¹⁰⁵ US State Department, [Current international religious freedom or belief alliance steering committee](#)

¹⁰⁶ FCDO, [Declaration of humanity by leaders of faith and leaders of belief](#), 17 November 2020

¹⁰⁷ (@tariqahmadbt) [Twitter/X Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon](#), 8 January 2021 "Great news that Poland has endorsed the Declaration of Humanity. Alongside 50..."

¹⁰⁸ FCDO, [About the London 20-22 Ministerial Conference on FoRB](#)

These included statements on protecting and promoting FoRB in the context of gender equality and in insecure contexts (such as during conflict).¹⁰⁹

The Government said it would build on the conference commitments through “drawing on the convening power of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance” and the office of the Special Envoy.¹¹⁰

4.5 Sanctions

Under its [global human rights sanctions regime](#), the Government can impose travel bans and asset freezes against those deemed to violate human rights. Grounds on which sanctions can be imposed include abuses motivated on the grounds of religion or belief.¹¹¹

[The Government has designated a range of individual and sanctions on human rights grounds](#). These include some on the basis of FoRB violations:

On 10 December 2021, we used this regime to designate Furqan Bangalzai, a former commander of terrorist organisation Lashkar-e-Jhangvi for his role in orchestrating the 2017 bombing of a Sufi shrine, which killed over 70 people in Pakistan. On 22 March 2021, alongside the EU, US and Canada, we imposed sanctions on four senior Chinese government officials and one entity for gross human rights violations taking place against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.¹¹²

Other actions assessed as being a response to violations of FoRB include sanctions imposed against Myanmar Generals in July 2020.¹¹³

4.6 How effective is the UK’s work on FoRB?

Bishop of Truro report, 2019

Report’s conclusions and recommendations

In 2019, the Bishop of Truro [published his report into Foreign and Commonwealth \(FCO\) support for persecuted Christians](#). The report had been commissioned by the department.

The report found that the FCO’s response to reports of FoRB abuses was variable and “much depended on the individual FCO official concerned”. It

¹⁰⁹ FCDO, [International Ministerial Conference on FoRB 2022: Conference statements](#), 5 July 2022

¹¹⁰ HLWS204 [[International ministerial conference on FoRB: London 2022](#)], 15 July 2022

¹¹¹ FCDO, [Global human rights sanctions: Consideration of designations](#), 6 July 2020

¹¹² PQ 109225 [[Religious freedom: Sanctions](#)], 31 January 2022

¹¹³ FCDO, [Assessment of the implementation of recommendation of the Bishop of Truro’s review](#), July 2022, section 2.2.2

also heard that “often [...] other international missions were sometimes more approachable, proactive and reactive” than the UK.

It noted, however, that many FCO officials preferred to work behind the scenes and much work was therefore not visible or traceable.¹¹⁴

The report made several recommendations for the Government, including:

- A “clear restatement of uncompromising corporate commitment” to FoRB by the Government.
- Investigating the feasibility of establishing a diplomatic code to reflect FoRB values and enshrine them in strategic and operational guidelines.
- Seeking a UN Security Council Resolution urging governments in the Middle East and North Africa to protect Christians and other minorities.
- Being prepared to impose sanctions against perpetrators of FoRB abuse.
- Establishing a “John Bunyan” FoRB funding stream.

Government response and progress on recommendations

The Government accepted the report in full.¹¹⁵

In July 2022, the FCDO [published an assessment of its implementation of the review](#). The assessment judged the department had made “strides” in mainstreaming FoRB across its work, though questioned whether a full culture shift has taken place and whether it formed a distinct part of the department’s work on human rights.¹¹⁶

The report judged there “has been a positive overall response to the recommendations” and that progress on implementing the “overwhelming majority” of the recommendations had been made.¹¹⁷

It did raise concerns, however, of a risk “of the FCDO being perceived as overly Christianity-centric” in response to the Bishop of Truro’s review. It said the department had sought to mitigate this through reframing the report’s recommendation as “FoRB for all.”¹¹⁸

ICAI report on democracy and human rights, 2023

The [ICAI’s 2023 report](#) considered the overall work of the FCDO on promoting democracy, open societies, and human rights.

¹¹⁴ [Bishop of Truro’s independent review \[...\] of FCO support for persecuted Christians](#), 2019, p102

¹¹⁵ HC Deb, [18 July 2019](#), c1046

¹¹⁶ FCDO, [Assessment of the implementation of recommendations of Bishop of Truro’s independent review of FCO support for persecuted Christians](#), 4 July 2022, section 2.1.1

¹¹⁷ As above, section 4

¹¹⁸ As above, section 3

Overall assessment

The department's work was graded as green/amber (the second possible highest rating) and found to have "delivered useful results in often difficult contexts" though had been "significantly affected" by reductions in aid spending and "the lack of a clear policy framework since 2020."¹¹⁹

The ICAI judged that although the 2021 Integrated Review made commitments to advance human rights, the FCDO lacked a strategy to achieve this.¹²⁰

Assessments of individual programmes

It found the rights of people belonging to religious and ethnic minorities were "prioritised in some countries." This included in Pakistan, where the FCDO had prioritised gender inclusion and FoRB rather than democracy. However, the ICAI argued supporting all three is needed "if inclusion and human rights are to be protected on a more sustained basis".¹²¹

It also cited some public and private work by the FCDO and diplomats in Pakistan, Serbia, and Tanzania that it judged to be effective in promoting human rights, including FoRB.¹²²

In Pakistan, the [Aawaz programme](#) supports at-risk communities with information on their rights and connects them to social services, alongside an Aid Connect programme. Some of the funding was targeted at promoting FoRB. The ICAI said these "contributed to improved perceptions of minorities and the prevention of community conflicts."¹²³

In response to the report, the FCDO said work was underway for a specific strategy on open societies, democracy, and human rights. This will set out the UK's approach to threats to these priorities.¹²⁴

International Development Committee and Pakistan

The Commons International Development Committee published a report on UK aid to Pakistan in 2022.

The Committee expressed concern for Pakistan's blasphemy laws, the potential use of the death penalty against those accused (though noting most are acquitted on appeal) and the situation for religious minorities.¹²⁵

The Committee recommended the Government:

¹¹⁹ ICAI, [The UK's approach to democracy and human rights](#), 2023, 'Score summary'

¹²⁰ As above, para 5.5

¹²¹ As above, para 4.19

¹²² As above, para 4.55

¹²³ As above, para 4.68

¹²⁴ FCDO, [Response to the ICAI recommendations on the UK's approach to democracy and human rights](#), 28 February 2023

¹²⁵ International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan](#), HC 102, 29 April 2022, paras 61 to 73

- Encourage the Government of Pakistan to offer greater protection for those accused of blasphemy and adopt a “more rigorous approach towards evidence collection.”
- Ensure UK aid to Pakistan is “fully inclusive” and makes a “particular effort to reach religious minorities”.¹²⁶

The Government said it raised the “misuse” of the blasphemy laws privately with the government of Pakistan. Given potential sensitivities on FoRB, it said “we take a proportionate, and where necessary, a discreet approach” to ensure programming supports religious minorities and other minority groups.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ International Development Committee, [UK aid to Pakistan](#), HC 102, 29 April 2022, paras 66 and 73

¹²⁷ [Government response to International Development Committee report on UK aid to Pakistan](#), 4 November 2022

5 Further resources

5.1 Commons debates and Library briefings

The below is a list of Commons debates since 2021 on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and associated Commons Library debate briefings.

- HC Deb, [Religious minorities in Nigeria](#), 18 April 2023 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Human rights and religious minorities: Sudan](#), 23 February 2023 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Persecution of Christians](#), 17 November 2022 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Blasphemy laws and allegations: Commonwealth countries](#), 11 October 2022 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [FoRB: International conference](#), 28 June 2022 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Gender-specific religious persecution](#), 17 March 2022 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Christians and religious minorities: India](#), 24 February 2022 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [FoRB: 40th anniversary of UN Declaration](#), 25 November 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Violence against Christians: Central African countries](#), 23 September 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Covid-19: Religious and ethnic minority communities](#), 22 June 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Religions minorities: Land rights](#), 22 April 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [Government support for NGOs and Churches in developing nations: Covid-19](#), 25 March 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)
- HC Deb, [India: Persecution of minority groups](#), 12 January 2021 and [Commons Library debate briefing](#)

5.2

Assessments on FoRB globally

These resources include country-profiles on FoRB, assessments by the UK Government and others, and the global status of freedom of religion or belief. It is not an exhaustive list of organisations.

Governments and international organisations

- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Human rights and democracy reports](#). Published annually and summarise UK Government action on human rights and assessments of countries of particular concern to the UK.
- Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), [Islamophobia](#). Reports on incidence of Islamophobia globally. The OIC is an international organisation of 57 member states, with the majority Muslim-majority countries.
- [United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#). Resources and assessments on FoRB internationally. This includes more information on [international FoRB standards](#).
- US State Department, [Country reports on human rights practices](#). Published annually and summarises the human rights situation in each country, including freedom of religion or belief.
- US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Countries of particular concern and special watch list](#). Assessment of FoRB in countries identified by the Commission as of particular concern.
- US Commission on International Religious Freedom, [Topics](#). Links to research on topical issues such as blasphemy laws, gender and religious persecution, antisemitism and “positive trends” on FoRB.

Parliamentary organisations

- [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#). APPGs are informal cross-party groups that have no official status in Parliament. The APPG conducts inquiries and [publishes reports](#).
- [International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB](#). Resources on promoting FoRB
- [US Congress Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission](#). Bi-partisan commission of the US House of Representatives. Has held sessions on FoRB including [persecution against Muslims worldwide](#) and [religious minorities in Iran](#).

Non-governmental organisations, civil society groups and others

- [Anti-Defamation League \(ADL\)](#). US-based organisation. [Measures antisemitism worldwide](#)
- [Aid to the Church in Need UK](#). UK-based organisation that supports persecuted Christians worldwide. Published news-stories and a [bi-annual report on persecution](#).
- Baha'i International Community, [Documents and news: Human rights](#)
- Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry (Tel Aviv University). See its [Antisemitism worldwide report for 2022](#).
- [Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#). UK-based organisation promoting FoRB.
- [Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development](#). Works with religious minorities and people of non-faith around the world.
- [End Blasphemy Laws](#). Campaign on ending the laws and resources on their application worldwide.
- [Forum 18](#). Norway-Danish initiative on FoRB. Focused on Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.
- Hindu America, [Human rights report](#). Survey of discrimination.
- Humanists International, [The freedom of thought report](#). Annual assessment on the rights and treatment of humanists and the non-religious
- Human Rights Watch, [Religion](#). Stories and reports on FoRB
- [International Christian Concern](#). US-based organisation.
- [Minority Rights International](#). Supports the rights of minorities, including religious and faith groups. Also has profiles of many faith and belief groups.
- [Open Doors UK](#). UK-based organisation that supports persecuted Christians worldwide. Publishes an annual watch list of countries of particular concern.

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