

Debate Pack

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By Philip Loft (subject
specialist),
Tim Robinson (compiler)

General debate on freedom of religion or belief

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Summary

On 19 September 2023, Fiona Bruce MP will lead a debate in Westminster Hall on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

The subject was [chosen for debate](#) (PDF) by the Backbench Business Committee.

This Commons Library Debate Pack provides background and further resources for the debate.

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Background

International and UK commitments on FoRB

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 practice their own belief or faith, or not to profess one.

The declaration is complemented by the [1981 Declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief](#). While the two declarations are non-binding on states, they set out expectations that those with religious faith, and those without, have the right to choose and practice their beliefs.

The protection for FoRB in the [1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) is binding on states who have signed it. To date, there are 173 parties to the Covenant. Those not yet ratifying include China and Cuba.

The UK Government says [protecting FoRB is a priority in its global human rights work](#). It has [applied some sanctions](#) in response to violations of FoRB.

The UK is a member of the [International religious freedom or belief alliance](#), launched by the United States in 2020. In July 2022, the UK hosted an international conference attended by government, faith and civil society leaders that saw [35 countries signing one or more statements on FoRB](#).

What is the global state of FoRB?

In 2023, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Nazila Ghanea, reported that [challenges to FoRB were “alarming.”](#) undermining efforts on conflict-

prevention, other human rights including freedom of speech, and the ability of minorities to participate in public life.

In their [most recent annual survey of global FoRB](#), published in 2020, the Rapporteur concluded legal restrictions on FoRB 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, [US-based 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 ten countries apostasy \(renouncing a faith or belief\) is potentially punishable by death](#) (PDF), as is the [case in seven for blasphemy](#). These countries include Afghanistan, Iran, and Mauritania. However, the enforcement of these laws varies.

Example countries of concern

In her [submission to the Backbench Business Committee](#), Fiona Bruce MP, who acts as the [UK Government's Special Envoy on FoRB](#), raised 13 countries of particular concern: Algeria, Afghanistan, China, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, Nigeria, Nicaragua, Russia, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, and Uganda.

Section 3 onwards of this debate briefing provides further resources on FoRB in these countries and across the globe. The below provides further information on four: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nicaragua, and Ukraine (including Russian-occupied areas).

Afghanistan

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USICRF) assesses that religious freedom in Afghanistan since the Taliban captured Kabul in August 2021 has [“drastically deteriorated.”](#)

The Taliban is a Sunni Muslim group, and persecution against Shia Muslims (who constitute around 7% to 10% of the population) has been reported. [Other religious minorities](#) in the country include Sikhs, Christians, and Hindus, though their numbers are small and have declined further since 2021.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, [has reported that Hazaras, who are predominately Shia, and other Shia Muslims have been:](#)

one of the most severely persecuted groups. Members have been arbitrarily arrested, tortured, summarily executed, displaced from traditional lands, subjected to discriminatory taxation and otherwise marginalized.

Among the reported incidents are [allegations of extra-judicial killings and targeting of Hazaras by the Taliban](#), [bans on allowing Shia groups to celebrate religious festivals](#) and [forced evictions from their homes](#).

In addition, both Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and the Taliban are suspected to have carried out violent attacks against Shia groups. According to Human Rights Watch, [there were at least 16 attacks claimed by, or linked to, IS-KP against Hazaras](#) from August 2021 to September 2022. At least 700 people were killed or injured.

According to community groups, [the number of Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan fell](#) from around 400 in 2021 to nine in 2023. Verbal abuse has been reported and the decline reflects fears for their safety.

International Christian Concern [has described Christians in Afghanistan as “ostracised”](#) and forced to operate underground to avoid Taliban intervention. Like those of other faiths, many Christians have been forced to leave Afghanistan since 2021.

Eritrea

Eritrea recognises four faith and belief groups: The Eritrean Orthodox Church, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. The [population is around 60% Christian](#) (predominantly Eritrean Orthodox) and 40% Muslim, though up to 5% are of other faiths.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) state that in 2022 [adherents to faiths outside these groups “continue to be suppressed” by authorities](#). While some detainees had been released in 2020 and 2021, [Human Rights Watch report the trend has since “reversed.”](#) In 2022, authorities arrested Christian worshipers and Catholic Priests, and in 2023 [at least 32 Jehovah Witnesses are imprisoned](#).

[Detentions are reportedly on the grounds](#) of refusing to participate in compulsory military service, refusal to renounce a religious faith, and on grounds of national security.

Both the UK and United States have urged Eritrea to [implement the recommendations of the 2019 UN Periodic Review of human rights](#) (PDF) and release those arbitrarily detained for religious reasons.

Nicaragua

Nicaragua is a [largely Catholic Christian country](#), whose constitution provides protections for FoRB.

However, [since 2018 there have been reports of rising Government discrimination against the Catholic Church](#). This followed a political crisis that began in 2018 with the [violent response to anti-government protests](#) and many Catholic clergy voicing support for the protesters.

Government actions have included closing Catholic charities, the arrests of some clergy, and cancellation of some religious activities, according to a [2022 report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#). Local groups estimate [190 attacks and desecrations](#) against the Catholic Church from 2018 to 2022. These actions form part of [wider challenges to Nicaraguan democracy and civil society](#).

The UK Special Envoy on FoRB has [raised concerns for FoRB in Nicaragua](#) with members of the International FoRB alliance. In 2023, the UK [raised its concerns for the restrictions against civil society at the UN](#).

Russia and Ukraine

Russia and Ukraine are both predominately Orthodox Christian states, though concerns for discrimination against Orthodox adherents in both states have been raised during the current conflict.

In Ukraine, the main two branches are the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) and the historically Moscow Patriarchate-linked Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). In 2022, the UOC [declared its independence](#) in response to the Russian invasion and the [strong backing for Russia's action by Russian Patriarch Kirill](#).

Ukraine's Government has [introduced sanctions against some UOC clergy and conducted security searches](#) of some church properties. The United Kingdom has said [Ukraine has the right to protect its national security in the face of Russian attacks](#). The UN Human Rights Office has stressed [Ukraine must ensure these actions are in line with international law on FoRB](#).

The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine has also recorded a ["surge in hate speech and several incidents of violence"](#) against members of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church during the conflict.

In Russian-occupied part of Ukraine, [the USCIRF has reported "repressive" laws](#) that have violated FoRB and targeted religious minorities. In Crimea, the [number of registered religious organisations has fallen](#) from around 1,500 under Ukrainian law to 400 under Russian occupation. Jehovah's Witnesses have also been deemed by Russian authorities as an "extremist" group since 2017 and [several members have been detained](#). In the Russian-occupied Donbas region, [bans on some OCU and Protestant religious services](#) and Catholic clergy returning to the region have been reported.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, UNESCO says [116 religious sites have been damaged across Ukraine](#). This includes the [Transfiguration Cathedral in Odessa](#) (July 2023) and [Mariupol Mosque](#) (March 2022).

[The UN Security Council considered the topic of FoRB in Ukraine in July 2023](#). While the Russian representative accused Ukraine of pursuing a "state policy of destroying canonical orthodoxy in Ukraine" (through actions relating to the UOC), other countries including the United States, Japan, Ukraine, and the

United Kingdom said Russia was “misusing” the Council and should end the conflict if it wanted to protect religious freedom.

In June 2022, [the UK sanctioned Patriarch Kirill](#) because of his support for the invasion.

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Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

[**RUSSIA: Freedom of religion and belief monitoring group to be liquidated**](#)

Forum 18

Victoria Arnold

24 August 2023

[**'Forced To Dress Like a Muslim': Taliban Imposes Restrictions on Afghanistan's Sikh, Hindu Minorities**](#)

Radio Free Asia

Freshta Negah and Abubakar Siddique

22 August 2023

[**Residents say Christian churches attacked by junta in Myanmar's Chin state**](#)

Radio Free Asia

15 August 2023

[**Dances, bullfights, processions: Ortega masks persecution of Catholic Church behind 'traditional and religious' festivities**](#)

El Pais International

Wilfredo Miranda

3 August 2023

[**New Report on Christian Persecution Paints Grim Picture of Africa**](#)

ACI Africa

Agnes Aineah

25 June 2023

[**Egypt legalizes 374 more unlicensed churches and service buildings**](#)

Ahram Online

19 June 2023

[**Three Jehovah's Witnesses from Astrakhan Region Sentenced to Seven Years in Prison**](#)

Idel.Realii (Radio Liberty)

19 April 2023

[Bitter Winter Goes to Taiwan: Witnessing for Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

Bitter Winter
Massimo Introvigne
17 April 2023

[Tibet dying a 'slow death' under Chinese rule, says exiled leader](#)

Al Jazeera
29 March 2023

[Saudi Arabia Embraced Coptic Christmas. Could Its First Church Be Next?](#)

Christianity Today
Jayson Casper
29 March 2023

[Eritrea – more arrests, some Christians freed](#)

Release International: Voice of Persecuted Christians
22 March 2023

[Almost 500 religious sites were destroyed in Ukraine as a result of Russian aggression](#)

Institute for Religious Freedom
3 February 2023

[The Christian presence in the Holy Land is under threat](#)

Catholic Herald
22 January 2022

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Press releases

[If Russia is serious about ensuring freedom of religion or belief in Ukraine, it should end its senseless war: UK statement at the Security Council](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

26 July 2023

Statement by Ambassador James Kariuki at the UN Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and security.

[UN HRC 53: Statement on public acts of religious hatred](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

11 July 2023

UK Statement during urgent debate on "the alarming rise in premeditated and public acts of religious hatred" at the UN Human Rights Council.

[The UK is a proud champion of the rights of members of marginalised groups and is committed to defending them: UK statement at the Security Council](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

14 June 2023

Statement by Ambassador James Kariuki at the UN Security Council meeting on tolerance and international peace and security.

[UN HRC52: Statement on Freedom of Religion and Belief](#)

UK Mission to the WTO, UN and Other International Organisations (Geneva)

14 March 2023

During the 52nd session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the UK delivered a statement on Freedom of Religion and Belief on 13 March 2023.

[Russia is committing heinous crimes against Ukraine and trying to pull the wool over our eyes: UK Statement at the UN Security Council](#)

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

17 January 2023

Statement delivered by Ambassador James Kariuki at the UN Security Council briefing on human rights and religious freedom in Ukraine

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Parliamentary questions

[Rolando Álvarez](#)

31 Jul 2023 | HL9398

Asked by: Lord Hylton

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the resolutions adopted by the European Parliament on 15 September 2022, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on 27 June relating to the treatment of Bishop Rolando Álvarez; and what discussions they have had with the government of Nicaragua concerning the re-arrest and imprisonment in that country of Bishop Rolando Álvarez and three other priests, and the holding of two others under house arrest.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

On 28 June, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief and Chair of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, Fiona Bruce MP, called for the immediate and unconditional release of Bishop Alvarez and all others wrongly deprived of their freedom in Nicaragua, naming Bishop Álvarez as a prisoner of conscience. The UK continues to call for the release of Bishop Álvarez and all political prisoners in Nicaragua, including in conversations with the Nicaraguan authorities in Managua. The increasing suppression of political rights and the detention and expulsion of opposition politicians, activists and members of the clergy are further evidence of the serious democratic crisis in Nicaragua.

[Hkalam Samson](#)

31 Jul 2023 | HL9381

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the military regime in Myanmar regarding the release of imprisoned former president of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Reverend Samson.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK condemns the arbitrary detention of politicians, civil society members, religious leaders and journalists by the military regime, including the former President of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Reverend Dr Hkalam Samson. On 18 April, the UK Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) called for Reverend Dr Hkalam Samson's immediate release and for the release of all those arbitrarily detained in Myanmar. On 21 December 2022 the UK coordinated a landmark UN Security Council Resolution which urged immediate action by the military regime to release all those in arbitrary

detention. The UK reiterated this demand in the G7 Leader's statement on 20 May 2023.

China: Religious Buildings

20 Jul 2023 | HL9076

Asked by: Lord Hylton

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the compatibility with human rights of the reported "sinicization" of mosques and churches in China.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The environment for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) across China is restrictive, including the persecution of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners. We are aware of reports of religious sites being altered or destroyed, against the wishes of worshippers.

We work within international organisations and networks to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief for all where it is threatened, including the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.

For example, in October 2022 we raised China's severe restrictions on religious practice in a joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) alongside 49 other countries. At last month's UN HRC we made a statement urging China to reverse its ongoing, serious, and systematic human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet.

More generally, we regularly raise the human rights situation in China directly with the Chinese authorities at the highest levels. The Foreign Secretary did so in a meeting with the Chinese Vice President in May 2023.

Freedom of Religion and Belief

20 Jul 2023 | 736 c1011

Asked by: Fiona Bruce

To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what recent steps the Church of England has taken to help protect freedom of religion and belief in other countries.

Answered by: Andrew Selous | Church Commissioners

I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend, who serves with distinction as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, that the United Nations Security Council has recently adopted a resolution to produce an

annual report on freedom of religion and belief. It was sponsored by the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates, and the resolution was based on the Bishop of Truro's review and incorporates many of his original recommendations.

Asked by: Fiona Bruce

That is indeed a very positive development. My hon. Friend will have seen another report, produced by former BBC reporter David Campanale and other FORB experts for the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I chair, on the ongoing major violence in Manipur, India. It indicates that since early May alone hundreds of churches there have been destroyed, many burnt to the ground; more than 100 people have been killed and over 50,000 displaced; and schools and seminaries have been targeted in what looks like systematic and premeditated attacks with religion a key factor. There has been very little reporting about this. People there are calling out for help; what can the Church do to draw more attention to their cries?

Answered by: Andrew Selous | Church Commissioners

My hon. Friend has done a great service by putting this matter on the record in the House. I am sure that she, like me, would like to see much greater reporting of these issues by the BBC and others. What she has told us is truly shocking, and I know that the Archbishop of Canterbury, who visited India in 2019 to see the challenges at first hand, remains extremely concerned that such attacks have been worsening and spreading to other minority faith communities, so I will bring my hon. Friend's report on Manipur directly to the Archbishop's attention.

Asked by: Jim Shannon

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who does such fantastic work as the ambassador for not only the Prime Minister but all of us in the House.

In February, I visited Pakistan with the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. Further to what the hon. Gentleman said, will he advise the House on what steps the Church of England is taking to support the Anglican ministry in Pakistan and to defend the rights of Pakistani Christians to practise their faith and express their beliefs without fear of repression?

Answered by: Andrew Selous | Church Commissioners

I talked earlier this week with Dr Sammy Wainaina, the Archbishop's new adviser on Anglican communion affairs, and he specifically mentioned Pakistan, so I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned it. He is right that the situation there is extremely challenging—priests have been murdered—and the Archbishop visited quite recently. I express particular gratitude to the two hon. Members who have put these matters on the record this morning; they are right to do so and I hope they continue to do so.

Sudan: Minority Groups

10 Jul 2023 | 192288

Asked by: Fiona Bruce

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of the impacts of actions of (a) Rapid Support Forces and (b) the Sudanese Armed Forces on religious minorities in Sudan's (i) Blue Nile and (ii) South Kordofan states.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK condemns the rising violence across Sudan. We note reports of heavy fighting in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), as well as between SAF and Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The spread of violence to these states has brought with it the killing of civilians and sexual assault of women, amongst other human rights abuses. We continue to demand that the warring parties respect calls for a ceasefire, humanitarian access be granted and those responsible be held to account. We will support international efforts to secure a permanent cessation of hostilities and protection of civilians through statements and resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and Security Council and through cooperation with counterparts from African, Quad (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, UK and US) and European countries. We are also engaging with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union, where we are now working through a new Core Group to ensure inclusive regional and international action to secure a viable peace process. Following reports of attacks on churches and mosques since 15 April, we are monitoring growing infringements of religious freedom in Sudan and continue to promote freedom of religion or belief as a means of enhancing tolerance and inclusion.

Nigeria: Christianity

05 Jul 2023 | HL8690

Asked by: Lord Jackson of Peterborough

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they are making to the government of Nigeria regarding (1) persecution of, and (2) violence directed at, Christians in (a) Plateau, (b) Kaduna, and (c) Benue, states.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Insecurity, driven by a range of factors, is undermining Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for Nigerian communities of all faiths. Supporting Nigeria to address conflict will remain a focus of the UK-Nigeria Security and Defence Partnership. As part of this partnership, the FCDO has funded peacebuilding initiatives in Nigerian states including Plateau, Kaduna and Benue, targeted

at addressing intercommunal conflict. In April 2023, the former High Commissioner discussed the impact of insecurity on Christians with the Governor-Elect of Plateau State; and the UK's Special Envoy for FoRB called on the Nigerian government to bring perpetrators of attacks in Benue to account. We remain committed to supporting Nigeria to address insecurity - last week the British High Commissioner discussed insecurity in his first meeting with new Vice President Kashim Shettima.

Iran: Baha'i Faith

27 Jun 2023 | 190140

Asked by: Taiwo Owatemi

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment his Department has made of the implications for his policies of reports of the arrest of four Baha'i leaders in Iran on 1 May 2023.

Answering member: David Rutley | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK unequivocally condemns the persecution of religious minorities in Iran. We are appalled by reports of the regime's increased detentions of Baha'is, as well as expropriation of land and destruction of homes of the Baha'i community. On 20 December 2022, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), Fiona Bruce, expressed the UK's condemnation of Iran's imprisonment of Baha'i leaders. We raise FoRB and wider human rights issues with the regime at all appropriate opportunities, and we continue to work closely with our international partners to hold Iran to account for its dire human rights record.

Middle East: Minority Groups

21 Jun 2023 | 189938

Asked by: John Howell

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, whether his Department is taking steps to help strengthen the rights of indigenous (a) Kurdish, (b) Yazidi and (c) Jewish groups in the Middle East.

Answering member: David Rutley | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Building respect for human rights, including Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) and the rights of ethnic and religious groups, is a crucial element underpinning the UK's foreign policy in the Middle East. We regularly emphasise the importance of human rights through our engagements with Governments and other key partners.

We will continue to monitor the situation for ethnic and religious groups in the region, to speak out against human rights violations and abuses, and to press authorities to safeguard the human rights for all their citizens.

Sudan: Churches

07 Jun 2023 | HL8128

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what representations they have made to the government of Sudan regarding any attacks on churches in Sudan, and especially on the churches and people of the Coptic Orthodox Community.

Answering member: Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Prior to the outbreak of violence on 15 April, the British Embassy in Khartoum worked with political and civil society actors to monitor, raise issues, and lobby the Sudanese authorities for improvement on freedom of religion and belief in Sudan. Following recent reports of attacks on churches, the UK Government will continue to work closely with international and civil society actors to monitor the situation, and raise our concerns at the UN Human Rights Council and Security Council, noting that access for the international community to monitor human rights abuses is now been severely restricted. The UK funds and provides support to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Sudan (OHCHR), a crucial UN body for monitoring and reporting on human rights violations. We are liaising with the OHCRC as they set up and run their remote monitoring mechanisms.

China: Tibet

07 Jun 2023 | HL8039

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the statement by UN Special Rapporteurs on 27 April that suggested that vocational training programmes in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China "threaten Tibetan identity" and "carry risk of forced labour"; and what assessment they have made of the statement's recommendations that the government of China should explain the steps it intends to take to comply with its international obligations to prevent forced labour and trafficking, and to ensure access to compensation for victims of such practices.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

We are aware of human rights violations in Tibet, including restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly and association, and

reports of forced labour. We coordinate with partners to draw international attention to the human rights situation in Tibet, most recently on 20 May 2023 in the G7 Leaders' Communique, and in March 2023, as part of our Item 4 statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC). In June 2022, a UK-led lobbying effort helped to secure the support of 46 other countries for a joint statement at the UN HRC, which highlighted the situation in Tibet. We urge China to respect all fundamental rights across the People's Republic of China, including in Tibet, in line with both its own constitution and the international frameworks to which it is a party.

Tunisia: Religious Freedom

24 May 2023 | HL7779

Asked by: Lord Jackson of Peterborough

To ask His Majesty's Government what recent assessment they have made of freedom of religion and belief in Tunisia.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Tunisia's constitution guarantees the freedom for all to practice religious rites, on the condition that public security is not compromised. We engage with different faith groups to understand the challenges they may face. During my visit to Tunisia in June 2022, I [the Minister of State for the Middle East, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon] visited Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious sites to understand the situation regarding freedom of religion or belief and to express UK support for respect and tolerance between communities. I made a statement following the terrorist attack on 9 May in Djerba near the El Ghriba Synagogue, commending the Tunisian authorities' response to the situation.

Russia: Ukraine

26 Apr 2023 | 181465

Asked by: Dr Matthew Offord

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what assessment he has made of the potential impact on freedom of religion or belief violations in (a) Russia and (b) Ukraine of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Answering member: Leo Docherty | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Russia has a long-standing record of domestic repression, including violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). This repression has only increased since Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, as the Russian authorities seek to quash opposition. In Ukraine, Russia has persecuted Crimean Tatars,

Jehovah's Witnesses, and clergy belonging to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and Protestant churches in Russian-controlled areas since 2014. Russia has extended this policy to newly seized areas in the course of its invasion, resulting in further FoRB violations. We are also concerned about the impact of destruction of religious property on FoRB, with over 100 religious sites damaged or destroyed since February 2022.

Algeria: Churches

17 Apr 2023 | 176584

Asked by: Jim Shannon

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the closure of churches in Algeria.

Answering member: David Rutley | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all in Algeria. We engage regularly with groups from different faiths to understand their circumstances and any challenges they may face. The Prime Minister's Special Envoy for FoRB, Fiona Bruce MP, raised the ability of religious minorities to freely practice their faith with the Algerian authorities during her visit to Algiers in September 2022. The Minister for North Africa, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, raised church closures when he met the Algerian Minister of Religious Affairs in June 2022 and also with the Algerian Ambassador to the UK in March 2023.

Afghanistan: Religious Freedom

04 Apr 2023 | HL6661

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of any efforts by the Taliban to protect religious or belief minorities from attacks by the Islamic State–Khorasan Province; whether since September 2021 they have made any representations to the Taliban on the importance of protecting the rights of religious or belief minority groups; and if not, whether they intend to do so.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Since the Taliban took control, the marginalisation of minority groups has increased. Religious minorities are often victims of targeted attacks. FCDO officials regularly press the Taliban to protect religious minorities. We are

working with international partners to urge the Taliban to act on their commitments on counter terrorism and ensure the safety of all Afghans.

Nicaragua: Religious Freedom

28 Mar 2023 | HL6598

Asked by: Lord Alton of Liverpool

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of the implications for political and religious freedom in Nicaragua of (1) the decision of the government of Nicaragua to suspend diplomatic relations with the Holy See, and (2) the sentencing of Bishop Alvarez of Matagalpa to 26 years in prison, following his refusal to be exiled.

Answering member: Lord Goldsmith of Richmond Park | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The ongoing deterioration of political and human rights in Nicaragua is deeply disturbing. In March, the report by the UN Human Rights Council's Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua (GHREN) condemned the restrictions on civil space and radical repression against political opponents, clergy, independent media, and human rights defenders. The UK's Human Rights Ambassador, Rita French, delivered two UK statements on Nicaragua, decrying the climate of repression, intimidation, and harassment, and expressed UK support for the recommendations of the GHREN report. We will continue to raise our concerns about political and human rights in Nicaragua, including on the imprisonment of Bishop Alvarez and all political prisoners, and urge the Nicaraguan Government to respect the human rights of all Nicaraguans.

Eritrea: Religious Freedom

13 Mar 2023 | 157663

Asked by: Patrick Grady

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, whether his Department is taking steps to help protect religious freedom in Eritrea.

Answering member: Mr Andrew Mitchell | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Freedom of religion or belief, of the media and of travel are important rights. The British Embassy in Asmara regularly raises human rights issues with the Eritrean Government, with the freedom of religion or belief being one of the UK's priorities; the Embassy has consistently called for the release of those arbitrarily incarcerated for their religion. The UK has encouraged the Eritrean Government to implement in full the agreed recommendations of the 2019 UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review, through which we have

raised our views, and to cooperate with the mandate of the Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Eritrea.

Hong Kong: Religious Freedom

06 Jan 2023 | HL4445

Asked by: Lord Cormack

To ask His Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of religious freedom in Hong Kong.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all, including Hong Kongers, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Promoting the right to FoRB is one of the UK's longstanding human rights priorities.

The Sino-British Joint Declaration is a legally binding treaty between the UK and China, and under this China committed to uphold Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and protect the rights and freedoms of its people. This explicitly includes freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief.

However, the Hong Kong authorities have repeatedly used the National Security Law (NSL) to curtail freedoms, punish dissent and shrink the space for political opposition. We remain concerned about the growing use of the NSL to suppress freedom of expression and what this may mean for FoRB.

Russia: Jehovah's Witnesses

28 Jan 2022 | 108522

Asked by: Jim Shannon

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps her Department has taken to support freedom of religion or belief for Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in Russia.

Answering member: Chris Heaton-Harris | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK is deeply concerned about the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Russian Federation. In all levels of bilateral engagement, we continue to call on the Russian authorities to end the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, and to uphold their commitments on the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, for all individuals across the Russian Federation. The FCDO remains in regular contact with representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the UK and Russia.

6 Other Parliamentary material

6.1 Statements

[Annual Human Rights and Democracy Report for 2022](#)

13 Jul 2023 | HCWS944

[International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief: London 2022](#)

15 Jul 2022 | HCWS205

[Independent Report on the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's recommendations](#)

4 Jul 2022 | HCWS174

[Nigeria: Killing of Church Worshippers](#)

06 Jun 2022 | 822 cc1072-6

Lords statement on the killing of church worshippers in Ondo state, Nigeria yesterday, and on wider issues of violence against religious groups in Nigeria.

6.2 Urgent questions

[Violence against Religious Groups: Nigeria](#)

06 Jun 2022 | 715 cc557-567

Urgent question on the killing of church worshippers in Ondo state, Nigeria yesterday, and on wider issues of violence against religious groups in Nigeria.

6.3 Debates

[Religious Minorities in Nigeria](#)

18 Apr 2023 | 731 cc37-58WH

Motion that this House has considered religious minorities in Nigeria. Agreed to on question.

[Human Rights and Religious Minorities: Sudan](#)

23 Feb 2023 | 728 cc193-169WH

Motion that this House has considered human rights and religious minorities in Sudan. Agreed to on question.

Persecution of Christians

17 Nov 2022 | 722 c380WH

Motion that this House has considered persecution of Christians and freedom of religion or belief. Agreed to on question.

Baha'i Community in Iran

11 Oct 2022 | 720 cc51-7WH

Motion that this House has considered the treatment of the Baha'i community in Iran. Agreed to on question.

Blasphemy Laws and Allegations: Commonwealth Countries

11 Oct 2022 | 720 cc1-20WH

Motion that this House has considered blasphemy laws and allegations in Commonwealth countries. Agreed to on question.

Freedom of Religion or Belief: International Conference

28 Jun 2022 | 717 cc17-40WH

Motion that this House has considered the UK-hosted International Conference on the Freedom of Religion or Belief. Motion lapsed.

Gender Specific Religious Persecution

17 Mar 2022 | 710 c408WH

Motion that this House has considered gender specific religious persecution. Agreed to on question.

Christians and Religious Minorities: India

24 Feb 2022 | 709 cc223-246WH

Motion that this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India. Sitting adjourned without Question put.

6.4

Early Day Motions

Launch of the Our Story Is One campaign

EDM 1458 (session 2022-23)

Daisy Cooper

11 July 2023

That this House notes the launch of the Our Story Is One campaign; recalls that in 1983 10 Baha'i women were executed for their religious beliefs; observes that this campaign links the 40th anniversary of this infamous event with the increasing loss of life of women and girls in Iran since the killing of Mahsa Amini in September 2022; and affirms the goals of the campaign to support gender equality, ending violence against women and freedom of religion or belief in Iran.

[Birthday of Panchen Lama, Gedhyn Choekyi Nyima](#)

EDM 1104 (session 2022-23)

Jim Shannon

26 April 2023

That this House celebrates the 34th birthday of the Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, which was 25 April; urges the Government to engage with Chinese counterparts as to the whereabouts and safety of the Panchen Lama and his family following his abduction by the Chinese Government in 1995; notes that the succession of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama should not be a concern of the Chinese Government; further urges the Chinese Government to refrain from interfering in the succession of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama; and renews calls for freedom of religion or belief for Tibetans to be upheld and attacks against Tibetan culture to cease.

[Freedom of religion or belief in Iran](#)

EDM 914 (session 2022-23)

Alexander Stafford

28 February 2023

That this House deplores the ongoing human rights violations being perpetrated by the Islamic Republic of Iran; notes that these violations come in a context of more general restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief for many religious minorities in Iran, including Christians and the Baha'i, and also Sufi and Sunni Muslims; mourns the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini after her arrest for wearing the hijab "improperly" and her reported beating by members of the so-called morality police; considers the enforcement of religious dress codes for all Iranian women, regardless of their beliefs, to be a violation of the freedom of religion or belief of women from religious minorities in Iran, and also of Muslim women who do not wish to conform to mandatory hijab; highlights that these restrictions are in violation of Iran's obligations as a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); urges the Government of Iran to amend its constitution and relevant legislation to protect the right to freedom of religion or belief for all Iranians, as envisaged by Article 18 of the ICCPR; and calls on the UK Government to continue to defend freedom of religion or belief, in its fullest meaning, and to support the mandate of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran and of the UN's Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights in Iran.

[Open Doors and the World Watch List 2023](#)

EDM 776 (session 2022-23)

Patricia Gibson

18 January 2023

That this House applauds the work of the charity Open Doors which has, for more than six decades, supported persecuted Christians globally; understands that this year marks the 30th anniversary of Open Doors'

research into those countries where Christians face the greatest levels of persecution, information on which is published in its annual World Watch List; notes that in the World Watch List 2023, North Korea returns to the top of this list, scoring the highest number of points ever recorded by the charity; is deeply concerned that more than 360 million Christians experience high and extreme levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith; is alarmed that when the Open Doors World Watch List started, Christians faced high, very high or extreme levels of persecution in 40 countries and, 30 years on, that number has nearly doubled to 76 countries; recognises that this means that 1 in 7 Christians now experience at least high levels of persecution and discrimination which shows that persecution of Christians for their faith is a human rights outrage which is growing; is appalled that sexual violence is a key weapon used against Christian women and girls globally; and urges the UK Government to recognise faith as an additional vulnerability in all conflicts and use every diplomatic tool at its disposal as well as its role on the international community to make all possible efforts to uphold freedom of religion or belief which is a basic human right and must be recognised as such.

Father Achi of Saint Peter and Paul in Paikoro, Nigeria

EDM 765 (session 2022-23)

Jim Shannon

17 January 2023

The House extends its condolences to the family of Nigerian priest Father Isaac Achi, and to his parish of Saint Peter and Paul in Paikoro Nigeria; condemns in the strongest of terms the brutal murder of Fr Achi who was burned alive by armed terrorists on Sunday 15 January 2023; urges the government of Nigeria to address the deteriorating security situation in Nigeria as a matter of priority so that all faith and belief groups might enjoy freedom of religion or belief; and implores the government of Nigeria to ensure free and fair presidential elections next month, free from fear of armed terrorist groups.

Baha'i Faith

EDM 465 (session 2022-23)

Jim Shannon

17 October 2022

That this House notes the 2022 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and further notes that the Annex to that report which details reports of increasing insecurity facing members of the Baha'i religion in Iran, Yemen and Qatar; observes that Hon Members are receiving increasing expressions of concern by their Baha'i constituents on the growing repression of members of this peaceful faith; and urges the Government to make specific mention of the plight of Baha'is in written and oral statements

wherever possible across the human rights machinery of the United Nations and other international organisations.

2022 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief
EDM 426 (session 2022-23)

Jim Shannon

11 October 2022

That this House notes the 2022 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief; and further notes the Annex to this report which details reports of increasing insecurity facing members of the Baha'i religion in Iran, Yemen and Qatar; observes that Members of this House are receiving increasing expressions of concern by their Baha'i constituents on the growing repression of members of this peaceful faith; and urges the UK government to make specific mention of the plight of Baha'is in written and oral statements wherever possible across the human rights machinery of the United Nations and other international organisations.

7 Further reading

7.1 Commons Library papers

[Religious minorities in Nigeria](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0081, 19 April 2023

[Christian persecution: Freedom of religion or belief](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0200, 14 November 2022

[Use of blasphemy laws and allegations in Commonwealth countries](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0160, 3 October 2022

[The UK-hosted International Conference on the Freedom of Religion or Belief](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0119, 23 June 2022

[Gender-specific religious persecution](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0057, 14 March 2022

[Persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India](#), Commons Library Debate Pack, CDP-0042, 22 February 2022

7.2 Reports

[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom](#), Office of International Religious Freedom, US Department of State, 15 May 2023

[Assessment of the implementation of recommendations of Bishop of Truro's independent review of FCDO support for persecuted Christians](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, July 2022

7.3 Websites

[APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

[Forum 18](#)

[Aid to the Church in Need](#)

[Christian Solidarity Worldwide](#)

[International Christian Concern](#)

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