
Algeria's Government Must Respect Freedom of Religion and Belief

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Algeria is facing a number of significant changes and open questions about the prospect for a more inclusive and stable Algeria. The large-scale protest movement started in February 2019 ultimately led to a new president in Algeria for the first time in twenty years, but this has not been without controversy. A new draft constitution has been proposed, but whether this meets the demands of citizens remains an open question. Concerns about political rights and fundamental freedoms persist, such as the lengthy imprisonment of demonstrators or the continued closure of protestant churches, alongside other religious freedom violations, that led the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to recommend Algeria for its Special Watch List for the first time.

What are the prospects for the transition to a more stable, flourishing, and inclusive Algeria for all Algerians? What are the next steps that may signal genuine systemic changes and true reforms are possible?

This year, for the first time, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) recommended that the State Department place Algeria on its Special Watch List of severe religious freedom violators. In particular, USCIRF is deeply concerned by a recent spate of church closures and the arrest of protesters peacefully calling for these houses of worship to be re-opened. We call on the State Department to clarify with the Algerian government how it approves houses of worship to operate, and to condition future U.S.-Algerian cultural exchanges on the re-opening of all houses of worship and improvements in religious freedom conditions more broadly.

USCIRF is a bipartisan independent U.S. government agency created by the [International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 \(IRFA\)](#). Our mandate is to monitor religious freedom conditions abroad according to standards outlined in international law, including Article 18 of the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#). Based on these standards, we recommend annually to the State Department a list of countries of particular concern (CPCs)—foreign governments that engage in or tolerate systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. We also recommend to the State Department countries to include on its Special Watch List of foreign governments that come close to but do not meet this threshold. In addition, USCIRF makes recommendations to Congress and the administration on specific actions the U.S. government can take to better advance religious freedom abroad.

As part of these monitoring and reporting efforts, USCIRF has been focused on political developments in Algeria. The country's *Hirak* protest movement has created immense opportunities

for greater political freedom in this vibrant and diverse country, whose people are calling for an accountable government that protects the rights of its citizens. As that government looks toward the future, it is imperative that it respect its citizens' calls for greater freedom of religion and belief as a part of the larger structural changes necessary to move Algeria in a positive direction. The United States government has an important role to play in supporting this process, especially at this pivotal moment in Algeria's history.

Unfortunately, as described in USCIRF's [2020 Annual Report](#), the Algerian government has increasingly engaged in systematic and ongoing violations of religious freedom. It arrests and prosecutes Ahmadi Muslims for "insulting Islam" and collecting religious donations without a license. More than 315 members of that community stood trial in Algeria between 2016 and 2018, persecuted by a government that considers their religious beliefs blasphemous. In fact, Algerians can face prison terms of up to five years for [blasphemy](#) under article 144 Section 2 of the Criminal Code and article 77 of the Information Code of 1990. Article 26 of the Criminal Code furthermore censors content "contrary to Islamic morals" as determined by the government.

The Algerian government also has closed 12 churches affiliated with the Association of Protestant Churches of Algeria (EPA) since late 2018, three of them in a single day in 2019 in the northern Tizi Ouzou province. Police beat and removed Pastor Salah Chalah of the Church of the Full Gospel in that province, and they have arrested congregants conducting peaceful protests against these closures elsewhere. The government of Algeria claims these churches lack a permit from the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which was established by Ordinance 06-03 in 2006. However, since its establishment, that commission has met rarely and has not issued even a single permit for any church seeking registration. As a result, virtually no Evangelical church in Algeria can operate legally, even those attempting for years to obtain permits and operate within the boundaries of the law. Under international human rights law, [registration requirements](#) cannot be compulsory in order to practice religion.

USCIRF has recommended that the State Department add Algeria to its Special Watch List for these systematic and ongoing religious freedom violations. We note with great concern that many Algerians are unable to exercise their essential freedom of religion and belief as guaranteed under international law. At this critical moment in Algeria's history, it is imperative that the United States government urge its government to respect these freedoms, which are deeply intertwined with the political progress Algerians are seeking.

Specifically, the U.S. Embassy in Algiers should meet with the Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and clarify procedures for issuing permits for houses of worship. Governments should not interfere arbitrarily with their citizens' freedom to worship and engage in other religious practices; accordingly, Algeria's permit system should not be used as a legal weapon to violate the freedom of religious groups, and the government must cease its harassment and arrest of those citizens who are peacefully protesting this system.

The U.S. government also should condition future cultural exchange programs on the improvement of religious freedom and related human rights conditions in Algeria. Governments such as that of Algeria, which close churches and arrest religious minorities on the basis of their beliefs, should not enjoy a 'business as usual' relationship with the United States. Algeria should not

be able to send delegations to the United States on the pretext of learning more about fundamental freedoms while it systematically violates them at home.

In an atmosphere of political change in Algeria, the United States has an important role to play in helping Algerians guarantee their freedom of religion and belief. The U.S.-Algeria relationship also stands to benefit greatly from a partnership between two countries that hold these freedoms in high regard. We therefore urge the U.S. government to actively and boldly advocate for these freedoms, and to impose real costs should Algeria's government continue to deny its citizens the ability to exercise them.

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