



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

FACTSHEET

PROTECTING PLACES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY SITES

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Overview

Places of worship and other religious sites should be sanctuaries where worshippers feel safe to practice their faith. Tragically, as the 2019 incidents in [New Zealand](#) and [Sri Lanka](#) attest, attacks on places of worship are occurring with greater frequency around the globe. Alongside these horrific attacks, places of worship are often harmed more subtly through the misuse of registration procedures to prevent their construction or renovation, or the malicious surveillance of holy sites to intimidate worshippers. Different types of buildings and properties that are significant to religious communities, such as cemeteries, monasteries, or community centers, also have been targeted. While violent attacks on such places are typically committed by non-state actors, less overt forms of harms and restrictions are imposed by state authorities.

To help ensure the safety of places of worship, USCIRF in its [2019 Annual Report](#) recommended that the U.S. government implement programs to train and equip local officials and communities to protect places of worship and other holy sites, especially in countries where such sites face a high risk of attack.

International Standards that Protect Places of Worship

Places of worship are an essential element of the manifestation of the right to freedom of religion or belief. [Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) enshrines the right to manifest religion or belief in a community with others, including in worship. The UN Human Rights Committee has explained that “the concept of worship extends to ... the building of places of worship.” Article 6 of the [Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief](#) also makes clear that freedom of religion or belief includes the freedom to “worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes.”

In protecting the rights of all persons to worship or assemble in connection with their religion and to establish and maintain places for these purposes, [states must ensure that religious places, sites, shrines, and other symbols are fully respected and protected, including when vulnerable to desecration or destruction](#). In recognition of the vital importance of the preservation of these sacred places, places of worship and cultural property that constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of people receive

protected status during armed conflict. Cultural property as defined in *international humanitarian law* as “any movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people,” including museums, historic monuments, and works of art that are religiously significant. An intentional attack on a place of worship or cultural property may be considered a war crime.

Examples of Assaults on Places of Worship

Despite the protection afforded by international law, places of worship and other holy sites continue to be targeted through an array of tactics. Various types of assaults, among them illustrative examples that have occurred in 2019, include the following:

- **Violent attacks:** Houses of worship are often violently targeted because they symbolize a specific religious community. These attacks aim to destroy the place of worship precisely for its religious significance, cause harm to a unique religious group, and instill fear in those who worship there. Increasingly, places of worship are intentionally targeted on holy days.

During Easter services in 2019, three churches in Colombo, Sri Lanka, as well as three luxury hotels, were violently attacked by suicide bombers, killing 259 people. The bombing was conducted by the local extremist group National Thowheeth Jama'ath and later claimed by the Islamic State.

- **Physical destruction or demolition:** Because places of worship take on spiritual significance for those who practice their faith there, the destruction of such sites is typically devastating. It is similarly distressing when holy sites are destroyed and their associated religious meaning is lost. Often, places of worship are destroyed as part of a wider campaign to restrict religious practice. Although states may need to demolish places of worship for non-discriminatory purposes, states must ensure the protection of religious and cultural heritage whenever possible, including during conflict. Holy sites and places of worship should never be targeted for demolition because of their religious significance.

In July 2019, Chinese authorities continued the demolition of the Yachen Gar Tibetan Buddhist Centre, where Buddhist ethics and spiritual teachings have traditionally been practiced. The destruction followed the forced removal of residents from the center, which housed an estimated 10,000 monks and nuns. These acts are part of a larger campaign by the Chinese government to erase the independent practice of religion and the cultural and linguistic heritage of religious and ethnic communities. This campaign has included the destruction of other Buddhist temples and religious sites across Tibet.

- **Seizure:** While there may be legitimate, non-discriminatory reasons for the state to seize a place of worship or holy site, it is impermissible for states to target a particular religious group through the seizure of its property. Often without a place of worship, a religious group's ability to manifest its religion or belief is extinguished.

In Iran, the Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Tabriz was forcibly closed in May 2019. While a revolutionary court order had confiscated the church in 2011, the congregation had been allowed to continue worshipping there until the closure. Intelligence agents changed the locks to the 100-year old church and removed the cross from the building. Although the cross was eventually restored, the congregation is still not permitted to worship in its historic church.

- **Vandalism:** Places of worship can be vandalized, often by non-state actors or individuals trying to intimidate worshippers. Acts of vandalism typically aim to send a threatening message and harm property; however, these acts can be violent and may result in injury to worshippers.

In February 2019, swastikas and other Nazi symbols and anti-Semitic slogans were spray-painted on roughly 80 gravestones in a Jewish cemetery in France. The damage was discovered the day marches were planned against a rise in anti-Semitic attacks in the country.

- **Surveillance:** Surveillance can be used to intimidate worshippers, particularly when a state is more broadly targeting a religious community. Although surveillance is sometimes implemented under the guise of security measures, states cannot deem specific religious groups as extremist or terrorists and use this as a justification to monitor the religious practices of worshippers.

A mosque in the capital of Russia's Tatarstan region was forced to install surveillance cameras that the Federal Security Services will monitor. The government argues that the cameras are needed to improve security, but many worshippers are concerned the surveillance will allow law enforcement to illegally meddle in the private lives of Muslims. The mosque's imam is concerned that worshippers will stop attending the mosque for fear of being recorded during their prayers.

- **Restrictions on property rights:** The recognition of places of worship is not a prerequisite for the right to manifest one's religion or belief in these locations. However, registration of places of worship as religious and/or cultural sites and their related property rights are often important both symbolically and practically for religious groups. In addition to the value of the significance of these sites gaining recognition, this status can confer benefits and assist in preservation efforts.

In Pakistan, the law denies Ahmadi Muslims the right to call their houses of worship mosques and the right to recite the azan, making both acts offenses punishable by imprisonment. This law has helped instigate attacks against Ahmadiyya houses of worship, such as in May 2018 when a mob destroyed a 100-year old Ahmadiyya mosque in Sialkot.

- **Restrictions on construction and renovation:** States can target places of worship by placing undue restrictions on their construction and renovation. While the construction and renovation of places of worship may be regulated in a non-discriminatory manner, states sometimes use arbitrary restrictions and regulations to target religious groups. The inability to maintain premises or expand into new places of worship can severely impact religious congregations.

In Cuba, religious groups are required to request permission from the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) for all construction or renovation of religious buildings. The ORA rarely grants permission for such improvements, which has resulted in overcrowding in places of worship, and led to dilapidated structures. In 2017, the ORA granted the Maranatha Baptist Church a construction permit to build a new church to address the overcrowding of the congregation of over 700 people. However, in May 2019, the ORA arbitrarily rescinded the permit, halting progress on the new church despite the congregation's significant investment.



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