

# Tolerance, Religious Freedom, and Authoritarianism

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY



# 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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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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# ABOUT THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

## WHO WE ARE

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). USCIRF uses international standards to monitor violations of religious freedom or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and Congressional leaders of both political parties. The Commission's work is supported by a professional, nonpartisan staff of regional subject matter experts. USCIRF is separate from the State Department, although the Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom is a non-voting, ex officio Commissioner.

## WHAT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS

Inherent in religious freedom is the right to believe or not believe as one's conscience leads, and to live out one's beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear. Freedom of religion or belief is an expansive right that includes the freedoms of thought, conscience, expression, association, and assembly. While religious freedom is America's first freedom, it also is a core human right that international law and treaty recognize; a necessary component of U.S. foreign policy and America's commitment to defending democracy and freedom globally; and a vital element of national security, critical to ensuring a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, an increasing number of authoritarian states have invested heavily in promoting religious tolerance. This report defines religious tolerance promotion (RTP) primarily as initiatives that focus on reforming relations among citizens from different religious communities within a state. By contrast, promoting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) refers to a state itself undertaking systemic changes, reforming laws, and implementing new policies to comply with international human rights laws. RTP and FoRB are both meaningful tools of statecraft, but there are important differences between them. RTP shifts the burden of responsibility for social peace onto citizens, a dynamic that can occur within both authoritarian and democratic states, while FoRB maintains the burden of responsibility on the state to undertake and implement a range of reforms to meet standards to which they have agreed in international treaties and accords.

Many authoritarian states' RTP initiatives considered in this report have an internal focus, such as the creation of state-approved institutions ostensibly aimed at fostering mutual toleration and understanding among their citizens of different faiths. However, some authoritarian states direct their RTP efforts at an international audience. These authoritarian states host high-profile international conferences attended by prominent religious leaders and diplomats and organized by prominent state-approved institutions. Many of these conferences culminate with the signing or issuance of an international declaration of shared religious values, which are well-received in the international media and often named after a particular city: Amman, Mecca, Bukhara, etc. Some of the authoritarian states in this report also build and renovate grand houses of worship for use by religious minorities with a history of suffering. At the same time, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), human rights organizations and the U.S. Department of State (DoS) have sharply criticized religious freedom conditions as well as the wider human rights environment in these states. Moreover, USCIRF has also recommended in previous years that many of these states be designated Countries of Particular of Concern (CPC) or placed on a Special Watch List (SWL) and sanctioned in accordance with the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Consequently, there is a clear disjuncture between the high-profile RTP initiatives implemented by the authoritarian states in this report and the fulfillment of their international obligations to ensure freedom of religion or belief.

In particular, authoritarian states that are major investors in RTP include: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates. Authoritarian states that are substantial investors in RTP are: Egypt, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Russia, and Uzbekistan. Authoritarian states that made limited or no investment in RTP are: Algeria, Angola, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Iran, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Nicaragua, North Korea, Oman, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Togo, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

In this final category, this is not to say that RTP does not occur in these states. Rather, when RTP initiatives are present, they are not necessarily state-led, and they are primarily focused internally rather than internationally.

The profiles of these authoritarian states are provided later in the report. Each profile includes brief details about major conferences, prominent institutions or organizations, high-profile declarations, or significant state-approved religious leaders in each country. Each profile notes USCIRF's recommendation from its 2022 Annual Report on whether the state should be categorized as a CPC or placed on the SWL to give insight into the context for religious freedom in the country, and also references reports from human rights organizations.

The results of this research highlight which authoritarian states are making substantial investments in RTP, both internally and internationally, and why; how the U.S. government can productively differentiate between its efforts related to RTP and FoRB; and how the U.S. government might best engage this dynamic in the light of IRFA requirements and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

# METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research was to gain a broad overview of the terrain of RTP by authoritarian states. To do so, the research considered the following questions:

1. Which authoritarian states are investing in RTP? To what extent? Why?
2. Are there particular regions where authoritarian states invest in RTP more than others?
3. Is there a meaningful difference between RTP and promoting FoRB? If so, what might be the significance of this difference?
4. To what extent does a state's interest in RTP cohere with undertaking systemic changes and reforms to promote FoRB, or otherwise? To what extent does a state's interest in RTP intersect with the wider human rights context in each state?
5. How might the US government best engage this trend in order to promote genuine freedom of religion or belief as defined in international law?

The scope of this research was limited to strong authoritarian states. Some states that are authoritarian but not strong or states where violence and conflict occur at the hands of non-state actors were excluded from the research. Examples of the latter could include Central African Republic (CAR) or Syria. After reviewing a number of annual democracy indexes and human rights reports, the definition of "authoritarian" by the

Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) published "Democracy Index" and the rankings from the [2021 data set](#)<sup>1</sup> was selected for purposes of this research.

The research then established a typology (see the Appendix) to measure the extent to which an authoritarian state: a) made major investments in RTP, either internally or internationally; b) made substantial investments in RTP; or c) made limited or no investments in RTP.

For primary source material, the research used USCIRF annual and special reports; DoS annual IRF reports; publicly available data on various RTP initiatives, organizations, and declarations sponsored by authoritarian states; and interviews with experts.

To contextualize and interpret the gathered data, the research surveyed key secondary academic literature. This survey informs the following section of this report, "Contextualizing Religious Tolerance Promotion in Authoritarian States."

The research then placed each authoritarian state into one of three categories (see the Appendix) based on the extent of its investment in RTP. This report includes short, state-by-state profiles for those authoritarian states categorized as major investors in RTP or substantial investors in RTP. Profiles of those states categorized as making limited or no investments in RTP were also carried out but are not included in this report.

<sup>1</sup> This particular data set used a methodology that aimed to assess: a) if national elections were free or fair; b) if voters were secure; c) the extent of foreign powers' influence over a government; and d) if a civil society was capable of implementing policies. For reasons of methodological consistency, countries that the 2021 EIU Democracy Index categorized as "hybrid" but other indices, such as V-Dem, have deemed electoral autocracies or closed autocracies, such as Turkey and Morocco, were not included in the research.

# CONTEXTUALIZING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE PROMOTION BY AUTHORITARIAN STATES

This section draws on insights from key secondary literature in order to contextualize and better interpret the gathered data that follows.

## AUTHORITARIAN STATES REPRESS RELIGION TO REMAIN IN POWER

In *The Varieties of Religious Repression*, Ani Sarkissian [notes](#) that the prime concern of regimes in authoritarian states is remaining in power. Consequently, when authoritarian states repress religion, the intricacies of a particular doctrine or practice are rarely the prime concern (with some notable exceptions). Rather, authoritarian states' concern in surveilling, regulating, and controlling the activities of religious groups and individuals stems from the wider effort to forestall the emergence of an independent civil society that might threaten a regime's hold on power. Consequently, religious organizations oftentimes bear the brunt of authoritarian state repression, particularly in regions where religion plays a prominent role in social and public life. This is because religious organizations can be particularly cohesive and socially or politically active, while also looking to sources of authority and legitimacy beyond the bounds of authoritarian state control. Examples of this might include Bahraini Shi'a looking to religious authority figures outside Bahraini state control (such as in Iran), or Catholics in Nicaragua or Cuba looking to Catholic communities in states where Catholic institutions are relatively independent of authoritarian state control. Thus, when states repress religious organizations or individuals, the underlying goal is often the repression of any public, social, or political activities that may facilitate the emergence of an independent civil society that could threaten authoritarian rule. If an authoritarian state deems elements of religious life threatening to state power, it will engage in repression. However, if tolerating or promoting certain elements of religious life are deemed to better ensure an authoritarian regime's survival, by maintaining good relations with the United States for example, then a regime will do so.

## AUTHORITARIAN STATES' INVESTMENT IN RTP IS PART OF AUTHORITARIAN LEARNING AND UPGRADING

A religious community's private expression of religious beliefs is less threatening to states than religious expressions of public, social, or political concerns. Consequently, when an authoritarian state does undertake systemic legal or policy changes that allow greater FoRB, these changes often affect traditions and groups' private beliefs or rituals rather than social or political freedom. When an authoritarian state initiates RTP toward a religious community and its adherents, for example, through governmental rhetoric or a minister attending a minority community's religious celebration, these changes often pertain to the private elements of a tradition rather than the public or political.

Sarkissian also notes that these adaptations are not uniform. Sometimes a state's offering of increased legal privileges or toleration toward a religious group's functions can occur while that same state represses the adherents of another religious tradition (or at least the public, political elements of that tradition). In authoritarian states, this dynamic is commonplace. In Arabian Peninsula states, for example, increased toleration and legal privileges for expatriates who adhere to minority religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism) are not extended toward all of those states' citizens, namely those from the majority Muslim community. This is because the extension of limited privileges to expatriate or minority communities in the Arabian Peninsula is part of a process of "authoritarian learning" and "authoritarian upgrading."

Authoritarian states are highly flexible, resilient, and accommodate international partners' changing demands to better remain in power. This process [involves](#) "reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions." They also learn from each other's examples and best practices. Part of this process may involve learning the language of RTP and religious "tolerance talk," just as they [learned](#) "democracy language" and "donor talk" in previous decades. Because these changes and new language work to retrench authoritarian state power, they ultimately work to the detriment of the majority of a state's residents that do not hail from these small communities, who (in the case of the Arabian Peninsula) are often expatriates.



## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE TALK SHIFTS RESPONSIBILITY FROM STATES ONTO CITIZENS

RTP and the language of religious tolerance, or “tolerance talk” as Wendy Brown *calls* it, deploys tolerance as a modern, liberal value. Brown emphasizes that liberal tolerance prioritizes the individual, individual choice, and individual responsibility. However, that focus distracts from the wider structural issues over which individuals have no control. Brown notes that tolerance talk is a “depoliticizing” discourse. This means that tolerance talk removes those conflicts over religion from the realm of political analysis or the analysis of structural factors that may be at work. Instead, responsibility for conflict — and for its solution — falls upon individuals. As a result, authoritarian states are not actually fulfilling their obligations under international law solely through tolerance promotion.

When authoritarian states use the language of religious tolerance or engage in state-led RTP, it depoliticizes conflicts within and between those states by moving the focus of international partners, analysts, donors, policymakers, etc. onto interpersonal relations as the source of conflict and site of solutions. This language shifts attention away from authoritarian states’ obligations to undertake legal systemic changes to improve freedom of religion or belief, as well as broader human rights abuses or *structural violence*. Authoritarian governments engage in RTP when it furthers their primary goal of remaining in power, in many instances with the intent of maintaining or bettering relations with the United States. The *Bahrain Declaration* (2017), issued by the King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Manama, the 2019 *Document on Human Fraternity For World Peace and Living Together* (also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration) co-signed by Pope Francis and the Egyptian Sheikh of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib, or the recent *Bukhara Declaration* (2022) illustrate these dynamics at work. In each, the responsibility for resolving conflict and violence falls to citizens without considering the obligations of authoritarian states to provide religious freedom and other fundamental rights under international law.

This is not to say that these declarations and U.S. engagement with them do not have any positive value, however. U.S. engagement with an authoritarian state’s declarations and conferences can facilitate a process known as “*rhetorical action*.” As part of this process, the U.S. government might engage “in the strategic use of norm-based arguments” with an intent to influence “their interlocutors into norm-conforming behavior in a manner greater than the outcome merely from constellations of interests and power alone.” Once authoritarian states start to utilize a new rhetoric of religious tolerance, the United States and like-minded

governments can use this rhetoric to encourage concrete action on religious freedom to follow words promoting religious tolerance.

Tolerance talk enables authoritarian states to further entrench state power over religious life. As a result of religious tolerance talk, the authoritarian state assumes the “responsibility to educate its intolerant residents” and more closely regulate religious life to ensure toleration flourishes. This occurs in instances where, as DoS reporting notes, conflict and violence frequently cut across religious, ethnic, or political boundaries. Elizabeth Hurd *describes* the dynamic as the “agenda of reassurance” and the “agenda of surveillance.” The agenda of reassurance works by framing RTP as a simple and “reassuring solution” that circumvents the complex causes of multi-faceted conflicts, which occur against a backdrop of structural violence and authoritarianism. By extension, the agenda of surveillance operates by placing the burden of responsibility for conflict or violence exclusively upon residents and their religious views and values, which are defined as distinctly problematic and in need of greater surveillance. Authoritarian states’ often use RTP as a basis for encouraging religious views they cast as “tolerant” or “moderate.” However, these designations often relate more to a group’s relationship to a regime while legitimizing increased surveillance, censorship, and regulation of religious life and wider civil society. Consequently, RTP by authoritarian states can lead to an increase in violations of religious freedom for some groups.

To counteract this subversion of FoRB in the name of RTP, the U.S. government should categorically differentiate between authoritarian states undertaking legal, systemic changes in accordance with international agreements around promoting FoRB and RTP initiatives led by an authoritarian state or state-approved body. RTP initiatives led by authoritarian states or state-approved institutions may further state control over religious life in ways inconsistent with international religious freedom. The U.S. government can continue to participate in high-profile conferences and encourage RTP so long as it maintains a categorical distinction between FoRB and RTP.

## SECURITIZING ISLAM AFTER 9/11 IMPACTED AUTHORITARIAN STATE BEHAVIOR

Many of the authoritarian states that are the major investors in RTP are close allies of the United States and are located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. On the one hand, predominantly Muslim authoritarian states often feature in studies on religion, conflict, and politics because religion plays a *more prominent* role in MENA societies than

elsewhere. As a result, political or social activity, or violence perpetrated against a state or fellow citizens in the MENA region may reference religion or overlap with religious communal boundaries to a greater extent than elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Global War on Terror that followed had a seismic impact on U.S. policy toward the MENA region and its broader relations with predominantly Muslim states.

Among the many changes that occurred, most relevant was the emergence of a perceived need to cultivate the spread of “tolerant” or “moderate” religion, namely Islam. As Hurd *notes*, to the United States and notable allies such as the United Kingdom and Canada, the term(s) tolerant/moderate Islam meant a form of religion most amenable to democratic governance, flourishing civil society, and free market economics. Resultantly, many predominantly Muslim authoritarian states that enjoyed close relationships with the United States began to mimic this terminology in order to position themselves as indispensable U.S. allies. This explains why RTP initiatives are more common among predominantly Muslim authoritarian states than states in other regions.

Nonetheless, while DoS reporting notes that some authoritarian states have made positive changes such as removing (or at least reducing) antisemitic or anti-Christian references in school textbooks in the name of RTP (e.g., [Qatar](#), [Saudi Arabia](#)), authoritarian states also define intolerance and extremism in vague terms or on the basis of a group’s orientation toward authoritarianism. As USCIRF has reported, states like [Uzbekistan](#) target religious individuals on the basis of “these individuals’ nonviolent expression of religious belief, political opinion, or opinion on politically sensitive issues,” while also targeting Muslims “who practice Islam outside of strict state controls and do not defer to the government’s prescribed religious practices, expression, or beliefs” and those who “have shown no resistance to the state but were nonetheless viewed as ‘too pious’ and therefore subversive.” Other examples of authoritarian states defining threatening religious beliefs in these kinds of ways are apparent in the following profiles of states that invest in RTP.

Some of the authoritarian states also feature religious leaders who have become prominent internationally as a result of state sponsorship or have achieved a high rank in a state-approved religious institution. These religious leaders are often selected based on their *support* for the government. In the state-by-state profiles, this report references instances of prominent state-approved figures involved in authoritarian states’ RTP.

There are earlier examples of authoritarian states, especially in the MENA region but also elsewhere, adopting a new form of language in their international diplomacy. In the 1990s and early 2000s MENA regimes dependent upon the United States for aid and loans *learned* to adopt “democracy language” and “donor talk” to avoid restrictions on funding. The language of RTP and “tolerance talk” plays a comparable role in the case of wealthy authoritarian states in the Arabian Peninsula; what is at stake through maintaining close relations with the United States is security guarantees and weapons sales (which can be *restricted* under IRFA sanctions) rather than development aid or loans. These dynamics are also part of a broader process termed “state branding.”

### **AUTHORITARIAN STATES “INVEST” IN RTP AS “STATE-BRANDING”**

Authoritarian states’ efforts in RTP represent a form of “investing” that is part of a wider project of “*state-branding*.” Smaller or vulnerable states, especially those that rely on the United States for their security or economic aid, must “brand” themselves on the international stage to garner investment. For smaller authoritarian states that rely on the United States for security, this branding involves a range of efforts to ensure that the United States remains interested and invested in the security of the government. High-profile RTP initiatives, such as international declarations, are one element of these wider branding efforts.

### **AUTHORITARIAN STATES’ RTP HAS LED TO “DECLARATION PROLIFERATION”**

Many of the issues just outlined are visible most clearly through what Annelie Sheline has *described* as “Declaration Proliferation.” Declaration Proliferation is the most visible element of authoritarian state investment in RTP. Such declarations often involve an international gathering of religious leaders in a major city where, notably, they will rarely discuss religious freedom issues within the particular country in question and the resulting document typically will use vague language. For example, the 2022 [Declaration on the Common Human Values](#) published in Riyadh by The Forum for Promoting the Common Values and organized by the Saudi-funded [Muslim World League](#), while containing important affirmations of religious tolerance, did not encourage the Saudi state to alleviate mistreatment of the country’s Shi’a Muslim minority. As Sheline notes, while these declarations condemn violence by adherents of a particular tradition, “the Muslim religious leaders that attend such gatherings tend to be affiliated with the religious bureaucracies of their home countries” and are not

“particularly credible sources of religious authority ... by the individuals that carry out the attacks that such events are intended to condemn.”

The first high-profile example of this wave of declarations was the 2004 [Amman Message](#). The Amman Message did [emerge](#) partly out of a genuine concern to promote interfaith dialogue and peace among some of its participants. However, it also had the effect of deflecting attention away from the authoritarianism of the Jordanian government and worked to “deepen trust” with the United States as an indispensable ally. Nearly all the high-profile declarations in recent years have emerged at the behest of predominantly Muslim authoritarian states and state-approved organizations.<sup>2</sup> The chief result of many of these declarations appears to be to “blame Islam rather than authoritarianism.” In other words, they deflect attention away from authoritarian states’ responsibility for [direct violence or structural violence](#). Consequently, these declarations work to foreground interpretations of a religious tradition as a source of direct violence, and thereby attenuate the context of political authoritarianism and structural factors out of which such interpretations emerge.

Furthermore, what the U.S. government means by promoting tolerant religion differs from what authoritarian states intend by the term in important ways. Declaration Proliferation is the apex of this trend. As such, DoS should clearly distinguish

between systemic, legal reforms undertaken in accordance with promoting FoRB and RTP initiatives that contain helpful messages but do not involve these kinds of structural reforms. DoS should avoid any rhetoric or programming that lends credence to a securitization of Islam (a policy approach to Muslim societies that centers the threat of violent extremism justified on Muslim religious grounds) above and beyond other traditions. The Global War on Terror and securitization of Islam have provided a certain legitimacy to authoritarian state genocide in predominantly Muslim countries (or [against](#) Muslims in the case of China’s genocide of Uyghur Muslims). There are other regions and countries where religious organizations and leaders have opposed authoritarian states and suffered repression as a result. For example, DoS reporting notes Christian leaders and communities supporting recent waves of protest in [Belarus](#) or [Nicaragua](#). However, neither of these authoritarian states have seen fit to issue a “Minsk Declaration” or a “Managua Declaration,” calling for reform from within the Christian Orthodox or Catholic traditions. That such moves have not occurred speaks to the impact of 9/11 and the fact that “since this new internationalized terrorism originated precisely in the Arab World, authoritarian regimes there could even more [convincingly](#) ask for active external support for oppressive policies by claiming to pursue genuinely Western interests,” RTP in this case.

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2 An exception might include the 2018 [Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity](#) issued in Uruguay to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the UDHR. The [Washington Declaration](#) was organized by the United Arab Emirates-backed [Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies](#) (FPPMS) and consequently is considered a UAE initiative. The prominent 2016 [Marrakesh Declaration](#) was also organized by FPPMS and consequently can be considered a UAE initiative as well. Indonesia was also not included in this research, and the 2017 [Jakarta Declaration on Violent Extremism and Religious Education](#) has also received some international attention. While Morocco and Indonesia were not included in this particular research as they did not fall under the category of “authoritarian state” here (categorizations with which some may reasonably differ), both states would be noteworthy candidates for further research.

# CONCLUSION

Authoritarian states that are allies of the United States, especially those located in the Arabian Peninsula, are the most active investors in RTP. As highlighted in this report, the authoritarian states that are categorized as “major investors” or “substantial investors” in RTP internationally are predominantly Muslim states located in the Middle East and North Africa or Central Asia: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, and Uzbekistan. These states either depend on the United States for security and aid or seek to improve their relations with the United States. The one exception to the preceding list is Russia, a state that is also a substantial investor in RTP as part of its international relations but does not enjoy close relations with the United States.

The phenomenon of international RTP has emerged most prominently in these predominantly Muslim states due to two underlying factors: a) religion generally plays a greater role in social and public life in comparison with other regions. Thus, areas of social conflict, communal differences, political contestation, and even violence will likely reference religion in some form or other to a greater extent than in other regions; and b) these authoritarian states are learning to use a new language of religious “tolerance talk,” which is part of a wider dynamic that has previously been termed “authoritarian upgrading.” This echoes the process whereby authoritarian states create “imitative institutions” that look (but are not) democratic as a strategy to engage U.S. and European Union (EU) partners. Religious tolerance talk initially emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 as authoritarian states sought to position themselves as key U.S. partners in promoting “tolerant” religion, namely Islam, as part of the wider Global War on Terror. It then received renewed impetus after the 2011 Arab Spring as authoritarian states deflected attention from their repression of protestors’ demands for democracy and greater accountability. While religious tolerance itself is a worthy policy goal, some authoritarian states internationally use RTP efforts to divert attention away from these states’ religious freedom abuses and aim to “deepen trust” with the United States.

RTP overseen by authoritarian states or state-approved institutions contributes to the expansion of authoritarian power over civil societies. Consequently, these kinds of initiatives can lead to an increase in violations of religious freedom of certain religious communities (as defined by IRFA). This dynamic is different from RTP that is initiated

organically by genuinely independent nongovernmental organizations (NGO) that are part of a vibrant civil society.

Some of the authoritarian states and their governments have made high-profile overtures to religious minorities with a history of suffering, notably Christian and Jewish communities. In many instances, the government ministers have become more welcoming in their rhetoric or appear at minority communities’ religious celebrations, while also making some legal changes. Nevertheless, these changes have not been a steppingstone to a wider loosening of restrictions for all. Instead, some authoritarian states allow greater freedoms or toleration toward some communities they consider as no threat to a regime, while at the same time repressing other religious communities that might be viewed as more threatening. Consequently, the limited changes highlighted in this report often occur in the context of continuing (or increasing) repression in authoritarian states. Moreover, in authoritarian contexts where a ruler depicts greater tolerance toward religious minorities as emerging from their personal benevolence — rather than institutionalized systemic, legal, or policy changes — such moves are contingent upon the whim of the current regime. They are also dependent upon whether such moves might help gain better U.S. or European relations.

Religious tolerance promotion by authoritarian states through international conferences, declarations, etc., may be an affirmation of the value of religious tolerance, but they may also constitute authoritarian upgrading. Also, while the RTP initiatives these states invest in are high profile and well-received, the states listed are either monitored closely by the State Department and/or USCIRF for specific violations pertaining to FoRB, or they are sharply criticized by human rights organizations for human rights abuses across civil society at large.

A key takeaway of this report is that RTP and FoRB are meaningfully different as they relate to states’ obligations under international law. The U.S. government should introduce and maintain a clear distinction between changes that entail state reform (i.e., FoRB) and non-legal initiatives aimed at relations between citizens (i.e., RTP). Such a separation would allow the U.S. government to engage states’ RTP initiatives without compromising the goal of holding authoritarian states to their own international commitments.

# STATE PROFILES

These profiles provide an overview and may not be comprehensive. Specific inclusions or omissions of a particular instance of repression, or reference to an institution or individual, should not be taken as a signal that a particular case is of greater or lesser importance or the only available example. Rather, the goal of these profiles is to shed greater light on the some of the diverse ways that authoritarian states invest in a range of initiatives around the theme of RTP.

**Authoritarian states that are major investors in RTP are:**  
Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates.

**Authoritarian states that are substantial investors in RTP are:** Egypt, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Russia, Uzbekistan.

**Authoritarian states that made limited or no investment in RTP are:** Algeria, Angola, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Iran, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Nicaragua, North Korea, Oman, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Togo, Venezuela, Vietnam, Zimbabwe.

# AZERBAIJAN

Recent major RTP conference(s): [Baku Summit of World Religious Leaders](#)

Major RTP declaration(s): [Baku Declaration](#)

Prominent state-approved religious leader(s) involved in RTP internationally: Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade

Prominent state-approved RTP organization(s): [Baku International Centre for Interfaith and Inter-Civilizational Cooperation](#) (BCIC)

USCIRF 2022 recommendation: [Special Watch List](#)

In recent years, Azerbaijan has become a major investor in RTP, which is a significant part of the state's international diplomacy and state branding. Since 2010, and most recently in [2019](#), Azerbaijan has hosted the [Baku Summit of World Religious Leaders](#). The Summit usually concludes with a [Baku Declaration](#) and has been *well-attended* by, for example, the High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC). In 2017, Azerbaijan also founded the [Baku International Centre for Interfaith and Inter-Civilizational Cooperation](#) (BCIC). In Azerbaijan, religious life is overseen by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), while Islamic practice and Muslim public life more specifically are regulated by the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB). Both organizations participate in an Azerbaijani state project to extend greater state control over religious life in the name of *promoting* "traditional Islam." CMB is headed by the state-approved Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade, who is a prominent figure on the international stage. For example, Sheikh Pashazade is *involved* with the Secretariat of Saudi Arabia's [King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue](#) (KAICIID, see below). In 2019, BCIC and KAICIID *collaborated* to issue

a [Vienna Declaration](#). Sheikh Pashazade is also *part* of the Secretariat of Kazakhstan's [Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions](#) (CLWTR, described below). In 2019, the Government of Azerbaijan *organized* the 5th World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNAOC, United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the Council of Europe, and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), in the name of "Building dialogue into action against discrimination, inequality and violent conflict." Sheikh Pashazade also comments on international relations with near neighbors such as [Turkey](#) and [Iran](#), while [SCWRA Chairman Murbariz Gurbanli has also played a role in bringing U.S. religious leaders to the country to meet with President Aliyev, "in the name of tolerance."](#) During the recent war with Armenia, Sheikh Pashazade *authored* a *Newsweek* op-ed alongside Azerbaijan's Chief Rabbi Shneur Segal and Archbishop Alexander, "United in Faith for the Future of Karabakh." USCIRF *maintains* Azerbaijan be included on the SWL for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

# BAHRAIN

**Recent major RTP conference(s):** [Arabian International Religious Freedom Roundtable](#) (2019)

**Major RTP declaration(s):** [Kingdom of Bahrain Declaration](#)

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization:** [King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Coexistence](#)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** None ([recommended for Special Watch List in 2020, previously on USCIRF's Tier 2 from 2012 to 2019](#))

In recent years, Bahrain has become a major investor in RTP, which is a significant part of the state's international diplomacy and state branding. In 2017, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa [issued](#) the Bahrain Declaration, which posited a “centuries-old traditional Bahraini way of life as an example to inspire others” that was later [affirmed](#) by international religious leaders in Los Angeles. In 2018, King Hamad [founded](#) the King Hamad Global Centre for Peaceful Existence. The King Hamad Centre is very active on the international stage and within Bahrain, for example [hosting](#) in 2019 “the first International Religious Freedom Business Roundtable,” and in 2021 hosting a high-profile international forum on interfaith relations [titled](#) “Ignorance is the Enemy of Peace.” In 2020, the King Hamad Global Centre [signed](#) memoranda of understanding with the U.S. Department of State to “promote religious tolerance through youth empowerment” and combat antisemitism. Among its various programs, the King Hamad Centre [hosts](#) a “Cyber Peace Academy” with its own online “interfaith dialogue tool” called *Growing Peace*. Bahrain has also [endowed](#) a King Hamad Chair in Inter-Faith Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence at the Sapienza University of Rome, while the King Hamad Centre also [features](#) as part of the Bahrain Embassy in the United States’ public-facing efforts as well as in [relations](#) with the European Union. Members of the Bahraini ruling family and diplomats also frequently reference the country’s status as a home of “religious freedom” and “pluralism,” with Bahraini officials participating in the June 2022 International Religious Freedom Summit.

In its international relations, Bahrain is a signatory to 2020 Abraham Accords, an international diplomatic agreement with the state of Israel. The Accords [reference](#)

supporting “efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace.” In this vein, Bahrain hosts the new [Association of Gulf Jewish Communities](#) (AGJC) in recognition of the continued presence of its historic Jewish community. The AGJC, inaugurated in the UAE, is an association across all the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that aspires to assist in a revival and flourishing of Jewish life in the region by working to, for example, import kosher products and introduce Beit Din courts for voluntary dispute resolution. Bahrain is also undertaking a [renovation](#) of the Manama Synagogue, has [built](#) the largest Roman Catholic Church in the Gulf and [hosts](#) the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, and is also [building](#) a new Hindu temple. Bahraini ministers are also a [common sight](#) supporting the festivals of many religious minorities from its expatriate communities.

Amid this wide range of high-profile and well-received initiatives, USCIRF [in 2020](#) recommended that Bahrain be included on the State Department’s SWL for the country’s “continued ongoing and systematic discrimination against some Shi’a Muslims on the basis of their religious identity” and included the country in its Tier 2 category of religious freedom violators from 2012 to 2019. As DoS and USCIRF reporting [note](#), the repression of the Shi’a majority in Bahrain dates back to the 2011 Arab Spring and before and is an instance where religious and political repression overlap. With these points in mind, Bahrain would appear to be an instance where an authoritarian regime has engaged in RTP as part of its international diplomacy and state branding. Moreover, Bahrain’s seeming embrace of religious minorities, primarily expatriates, appears to come at the detriment of the political rights for the majority of the country’s citizens.

# SAUDI ARABIA

**Recent major RTP conference(s):** [Centrism and Moderation Conference](#); [Forum on Common Values Among Religious Followers](#)

**Major RTP declaration(s):** [Mecca Document](#); [Declaration on the Common Human Values](#)

**Prominent state-approved religious leader(s) involved in RTP:** Sheikh [Muhammad al-Issa](#)

**Prominent state-approved RTP organizations:** [King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue](#) (KAICIID); Mecca Grand Mosque's [Mediation and Moderation Academy](#); [Muslim World League](#) (MWL)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** [Country of Particular Concern](#)

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has become a major investor in RTP, which is a significant part of the state's international diplomacy and state efforts to rebrand as a cosmopolitan hub for business and tourism. In 2019, the state-funded [Muslim World League](#) (MWL) organized a major [Centrism and Moderation Conference](#) in Mecca, which led to the publication of the [Mecca Document](#) emphasizing Islamic principles of non-violence and other commitments. More recently, in 2022 the MWL organized the [Forum on Common Values Among Religious Followers](#) in Riyadh that was *well-attended* by a range of international religious leaders and concluded with a [Declaration on the Common Human Values](#).

Internationally, the [King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue](#) (KAICIID) has been very active in organizing conferences in Europe and more widely. In 2019 KAICIID *collaborated* with Azerbaijan's BCIC to issue a [Vienna Declaration](#). Among its variety of programming, KAICIID also conducts a prominent [Interreligious Dialogue Fellowship](#). At its launch in 2012, KAICIID was based in Vienna in collaboration with the Austrian and Spanish governments and has recently *relocated* to Lisbon amid *controversy* over Saudi Arabia's human rights record.

On the international stage, the head of the MWL, Sheikh Mohammad al-Issa, is a major figure representing Saudi Arabia at a range of *conferences* in the United States and elsewhere that are dedicated to RTP, and he has *authored* opinion pieces in outlets such as *Newsweek* on the subject. In 2018, Sheikh al-Issa was *awarded* the country's new Moderation Award, which aims "to highlight the true

image of the Kingdom in the field of moderation." In this vein, Sheikh al-Issa was recognized by the awarders for "his efforts in promoting moderation and highlighting the Saudi moderation approach in international forums."

Within Saudi Arabia, DoS *reporting* has noted in January the creation of a [Mediation and Moderation Academy](#) in Mecca with the stated goal of "fighting extremist thoughts and promoting mediation and moderation." In March, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education "announced the establishment of intellectual awareness units in all universities and education departments that were intended 'to promote loyalty to religion,' and 'to spread the values of moderation, tolerance and coexistence.'"

Saudi Arabia would appear to be an instance where a prime factor in defining a group or community as tolerant or moderate is their orientation toward the regime. In that vein, DoS *reporting* notes that part of al-Issa's efforts in spreading moderation overseas included raising awareness "of the dangers posed by political Islam, led by the Muslim Brotherhood." USCIRF *reporting* also highlights Saudi state repression of many forms of Muslim religious expression that deviate from state-approved norms, including association with the Muslim Brotherhood, being a part of the Shi'a minority or Sufi communities, or being deemed to have insulted Islam publicly. More broadly, human rights reporting, including reporting on religious freedom, *highlights* that "Saudi Arabia spends billions of dollars hosting major entertainment, cultural, and sporting events as a deliberate strategy to deflect from the country's image as a pervasive human rights violator."



# UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

**Recent major RTP conference(s):** FPPMS [Annual Conference](#); [Global Conference of Human Fraternity](#); [Festival of Tolerance](#)

**Major RTP declaration(s):** [Abu Dhabi Declaration \(Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together\)](#); [Marrakesh Declaration](#) (sponsor); [Washington Declaration](#) (sponsor)

**Prominent state-approved religious leader(s) involved in RTP internationally:** Sheikh [Abdullah Bin Bayyah](#)

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization(s):** [Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies](#) (FPPMS); [Muslim Council of Elders](#) (MCE); [Ministry of Tolerance](#); [Al Muwatta Centre](#)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** [Not recommended](#)

The UAE represents the archetype of an authoritarian state that has invested heavily in a range of initiatives and projects dedicated to RTP as an effective element of wider state branding and international diplomacy. Internationally, many efforts have been led by the state-sponsored [Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies](#) led by the Mauritanian Sheikh Abdullah Bin Bayyah, with research and administrative support provided by the [Al Muwatta Centre](#). Since its founding in 2014, FPPMS and the Al Muwatta Centre have led a host of international initiatives around the theme of RTP. These initiatives have included organizing the 2016 [Marrakesh Declaration](#), and the “Peace Caravan” and “Alliance of the Virtuous” [initiatives](#) in collaboration with U.S. religious leaders, which led to a [Washington Declaration](#). Sheikh Bin Bayyah, [head](#) of the UAE fatwa council and the highest ranking religious state-employee in the UAE, is a frequent [guest](#) in the United States and [interviewed](#) in the U.S. media. While Sheikh Bin Bayyah is praised in foreign policy circles in Western capitals for his religious tolerance talk, his support for authoritarian rule in general and the Emirati ruling family in particular has led academics to criticize him for [promoting](#) a “theology of obedience” to authoritarianism and describe FPPMS as a “[cynical branding exercise](#).” FPPMS’ [annual conference](#) in Abu Dhabi each December is now arguably the most high-profile event in an increasingly crowded international interfaith calendar. FPPMS is also active in various areas overseas, ranging from [arranging](#) a conference in Nouakchott, Mauritania, to [setting up](#) a branch in the United Kingdom. The UAE has also founded a [Muslim Council of Elders](#), whose events have also been [well attended](#) in the past by figures such as U.K. Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby.

Among other state-led initiatives, the UAE has also [established](#) a Ministry of Tolerance that aspires to [launch](#) a “global tolerance alliance.” Notably, 2019 was [dubbed](#) the country’s “Year of Tolerance” and [included](#) a “National Festival of Tolerance.” The highlight of the year was the first official papal visit of Pope Francis to the Arabian Peninsula for a [Global Conference of Human Fraternity](#) to [sign](#) along with the Egypt Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration. The event led to the formation of a [Higher Committee on Human Fraternity](#) that now issues an award named after the UAE’s founder, the [Zayed Award for Human Fraternity](#).

In 2020, the UAE also signed the Abraham Accords, the AGJC was inaugurated in Abu Dhabi, and the UAE also hosts a [Jewish Council of the Emirates](#). The UAE is routinely praised for its welcoming attitude toward expatriates from religious minority communities and is constructing an [Abrahamic Family House](#) that upon completion will house a mosque, church, and synagogue side-by-side as well as an educational institution. A purpose-built Hindu temple is being [constructed](#), and the UAE also hosts the [Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia](#). Also in 2020, according to DoS [reporting](#), the Expo 2020 Dubai featured a thematic week on “Tolerance and Inclusivity” that included the UAE’s launching of a “Global Tolerance Alliance” and a “Global Interfaith Summit” which featured discussions of religious co-existence, along with a joint USA-Israeli screening of a documentary about the nascent Jewish community in the UAE. At the same time, human rights groups have [criticized](#) Expo 2020 Dubai and the situation in the country more broadly in light of the fact that “domestic critics are routinely arrested” in the UAE.

In the United States, the UAE embassy has worked to [showcase](#) the country's RTP efforts. Within the UAE, interfaith dialogue is also showcased to the extent that discussions between religious leaders (overseen by UAE royals) are [televised](#) on state channels. Meanwhile, DoS [reporting](#) notes that imams in the country are regularly surveilled and the texts for Friday sermons closely controlled.

The UAE has [invested](#) in several efforts "aimed at painting the country as a progressive, tolerant, and rights-respecting nation, yet [...] [s]cores of activists, academics, and lawyers are serving lengthy sentences in UAE prisons following unfair trials on vague and broad charges that violate their rights to free expression and association." In the UAE, repression is generally aimed at political dissidents, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring and appeals for greater freedom to express dissident religious beliefs as in the case of the [UAE-94](#) and those associated with the al-Islah party.

# EGYPT

**Prominent state-approved religious leader(s) involved in RTP internationally:** Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization(s):** [al-Azhar Centre for Interreligious Dialogue](#); [al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism](#); [Egyptian Family House](#)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** [Special Watch List](#)

Egypt has not issued major RTP-related declarations or hosted major conferences comparable with its near neighbors in the Gulf region. However, the Egyptian government makes substantial use of Egypt’s position at a historical crossroads of Islamic learning and scholarship and the location of the venerated institution of al-Azhar to position itself as a center of RTP and dialogue, particularly with regard to the Coptic Christian community, the largest ethno-religious Christian minority in the MENA region. Al-Azhar hosts high-profile [symposiums](#) in collaboration with institutions such as the Vatican and [engages](#) in other realms of interfaith dialogue internationally.

Within Egypt, the [Egyptian Family House](#) — launched in 2011 in the wake of a [deadly bombing](#) of a Coptic Orthodox church in Alexandria — is among the most prominent state-approved interfaith and RTP initiatives aimed at improving relations between Muslims and Christians within the country. This initiative is included in this research since, in contrast to other Muslim-Christian dialogue endeavors in other regions, this is an example of an authoritarian state-approved initiative. President al-Sisi has frequently presented himself as representing “moderate Islam” and expressed a desire to revive “the tolerance and moderation of the Muslim faith.” The Egyptian Embassy in the United States [issues](#) these kinds of statements to demonstrate the President’s efforts to “promote coexistence” and likely improve Egypt’s image with U.S. partners. Egypt has also recently made high-profile renovations to synagogues in [Alexandria](#) and [Cairo](#) and is now [reportedly](#) constructing the MENA region’s largest Coptic Orthodox church.

More recently, in September 2021 President al-Sisi [launched](#) Egypt’s “first national strategy for human rights” with great fanfare. The [document](#) suggests that the RTP elements are top-down, state-led initiatives in the realm of curricula oversight, censorship of certain Islamic materials, and greater surveillance of mosques and control of sermon topics. While the results of such initiatives in terms of interpersonal relations are not possible to predict or measure in a report such as this, what is worth noting here is that these RTP initiatives significantly differ from promoting FoRB. The RTP elements of the national strategy can be understood as an authoritarian state further expanding its control of religious life. This approach is in contrast to promoting FoRB, which entails the state itself making reforms that would lead to a reduction in state control over religious life.

Egypt’s al-Azhar, the oldest center of Islamic learning in the region (nationalized by the state in 1952, turning its upper echelons into state-approved employees) hosts centers such as the [al-Azhar Centre for Interreligious Dialogue](#) and the [al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism](#) that also undertake RTP-related programming. The Observatory issues documents with titles such as *Religious Freedom: An Authentic Islamic Principle*, and the al-Azhar International Academy aims to train imams in to promote RT internationally and establish training branches abroad to export “moderate Islam.”

Though Egypt does not host regular international conferences or events comparable with Bahrain, the UAE February 2019, or Saudi Arabia, Egypt’s Sheikh of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib is a prominent figure on the international stage and a high-profile guest at these kinds of events. In particular, Sheikh al-Tayyib traveled to the UAE to meet with Pope Francis at the [Global Conference of Human Fraternity](#) and [sign](#) the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi Declaration.

Amid these RTP efforts by the Egyptian state, USCIRF *maintains* its recommendation that Egypt be included on the SWL for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of international religious freedom, pursuant to IRFA. Moreover, in line with defining RTP as initiatives that do not require authoritarian states to make legal, systemic changes, USCIRF *reporting* also highlights the use of “customary reconciliation” councils in the aftermath of acts of violence against Coptic Christians. These councils represent instances of interpersonal tolerance and reconciliation being foregrounded *at the expense of* upholding the rule of law.

More broadly, human rights organizations *emphasize* that Egypt “has been experiencing one of its worst human rights crises in decades [...] Grave crimes, including torture and enforced disappearances, are committed with impunity.” In that environment, Egypt has made substantial investments in RTP in an effort to depoliticize conflicts by shifting the focus toward interreligious communal relations at the expense of considering structural violence and political authoritarianism in the country. Part of these efforts include the conflation of religiously-oriented political opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood with violent groups such as ISIS under a broad umbrella of “religious extremism” in the wake of the 2013 military coup that overthrew the country’s first democratically elected government. President Morsi, formerly a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, died in prison in 2019 *reportedly* after being denied proper medical care.

# JORDAN

**Major RTP declaration(s):** [\*Amman Message\*](#); [\*A Common Word\*](#)

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization(s):** [\*Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute\*](#); [\*Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies\*](#); [\*Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center\*](#)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** [\*Not recommended\*](#)

Jordan's famous [\*Amman Message\*](#) and [\*A Common Word\*](#) in 2004 were the first high-profile initiatives in the RTP declaration trend, and followed the 2003 invasion of Iraq and increasing worldwide concern for Arab Christian suffering. Participants in these initiatives were [\*sincere\*](#) in their concern for greater Muslim-Christian dialogue. Nevertheless, the documents ultimately [\*work\*](#) to serve Jordan's "strategic interests," specifically the interests of the Jordanian monarchy. These initiatives worked to deepen trust with Jordan's most important ally, the United States, and position Jordan as an indispensable partner in the spread of a tolerant Islam and the Global War on Terror. Jordan has also founded a number of high-profile, state-approved institutions dedicated to RTP including the [\*Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute\*](#), the [\*Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre\*](#), the [\*Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies\*](#) (RIIFS), and the [\*Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center\*](#). Many of these centers' initiatives are directed within Jordan rather than internationally. RIIFS (established in 1994) [\*includes\*](#) among its programs "Teachers

of Tomorrow 2022" that seeks to educate Jordanian teachers in "human values inspired by moderate religious values" and prevent extremism. U.S. DoS [\*reporting\*](#) also highlights RIIFS activities under the patronage of Prince Hassan bin Talal in sponsoring periodic discussions and initiatives in the realm of interfaith dialogue and pluralism. At the same time, these DoS reports noted that in Jordanians' assessments these activities "did not increase intercommunal harmony and were often a façade for the West."

Despite Jordan's positive image as an interfaith partner on the international stage, in recent years, "[a]uthorities in Jordan are becoming [\*increasingly\*](#) repressive, quashing dissent by arresting and harassing activists and journalists and using vague and abusive laws to restrict civic space in violation of international legal protections." These discrepancies suggest a disjuncture between the country's international image and domestic reality.

# KAZAKHSTAN

Recent major RTP conference(s): [Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions](#)

USCIRF 2022 recommendation: [Special Watch List](#)

As USCIRF [reports](#), since 2019 Kazakhstan has engaged in a religious freedom working group with U.S. governmental and Kazakhstani civil society actors with limited results at the level of systemic legal change. The [view](#) that “[d]uring 2021, the Kazakh government continued to claim it is pursuing human rights reforms, despite the absence of meaningful improvements in its rights record” echoes that perception. Perhaps to put off undertaking legal, systemic changes, Kazakhstan has increasingly invested in RTP, which includes an international branding and diplomacy element. In 2021 for example, Kazakhstan [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding with the New York-based NGO Love Your Neighbor at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, D.C., with the stated goal of implementing a range of programming in the country such as interfaith roundtables, workshops, and cross-cultural literacy training. State-approved interfaith activities within the country are also held under the auspices of the Association of Religious Organizations of Kazakhstan, which in one instance included U.S. embassy participation at the [request](#) of the organizers. During the wave of popular unrest in January 2022, Kazakhstan appeared to attempt to follow the example of other authoritarian states and [attribute](#) opposition to terrorism and religious extremism, though USCIRF [considers](#) this attempt to have been unsuccessful.

Kazakhstan’s more recent initiatives build on earlier efforts. Since 2003 the country has hosted the famous [Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions](#) (CLWTR) that convenes every three years (though the secretariat meets more frequently). In 2018, a Museum of Peace and Reconciliation was [inaugurated](#) in the capital to Kazakhstan’s position as a “territory of peace and harmony.” The building’s distinct pyramid shape is now an unmissable part of the Astana city skyline. The 2022 [conference](#) included representatives from 20 countries and will reportedly include a high-profile [visit](#) by Pope Francis. The conference will also reportedly include a final document that will reflect “the Kazakh model of interethnic and interreligious harmony in global interreligious and intercivilizational dialogue.” As in other instances, the point of this report is not to definitively assert that these kinds of efforts are necessarily insincere and cosmetic or that participants are not motivated by genuine concerns. Rather, Kazakhstan appears to be a case where RTP, that is, internal initiatives occurring below the level of state reforms and those with an international focus, seems to emerge as a substitute for legal, systemic reforms in accordance with FoRB promotion.

# QATAR

**Recent major RTP conference(s):** DICIP [Annual Conference](#)

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization(s):** [Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue](#) (DICIP)

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** Not Recommended

Qatar was among the first states to undertake investments in RTP to support its international standing. In 2003, the [Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue](#) (DICIP) held its first [Annual Conference](#). DICIP was officially inaugurated in 2007 and then expanded in 2010.

Like its regional neighbor the UAE, Qatar also has sponsored a network of scholars, the [International Union of Muslim Scholars](#). However, in contrast to the UAE, this organization and support for prominent religious leaders in the past such as Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi (now retired) appear to [detract](#) from rather than strengthen Qatar's standing with the United States and other allies in the realm of international religious diplomacy. Qatar also does not appear to have invested in the high-profile construction of houses of worship for expatriate communities from religious minorities, though U.S. DoS reporting [notes](#) that the Meysameer Religious Complex ("Church City") provides worship space for major Christian denominations.

USCIRF [reports](#) increasing restrictions on the Baha'i community in Qatar. Additionally, Human Rights Watch reported on the wider context of Qatar's human rights violations, including the abuse and exploitation of the country's large [migrant workforce](#) and [restrictions](#) on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, and intersex community on the basis of "violating public morality." Consequently, positioning itself as a partner in RTP internationally through DICIP has long featured in Qatari international diplomacy and state-branding, but apparently not to the same extent as its GCC neighbors Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

# RUSSIA

**Recent major RTP conference(s):** Kazan Conference

**Prominent state-approved RTP organization:** *[Interreligious Group for the Protection of Rights and Believers from Discrimination and Xenophobia](#)*

**USCIRF 2022 recommendation:** *[Country of Particular Concern](#)*

Russia has made substantial investments in RTP, both within Russia and as part of its international diplomacy. In Russia, where religious boundaries often correspond to ethnic distinctions with the federation, a prominent example of a regular conference dedicated to RTP within the country includes the semi-regular *[Kazan Conference](#)*, held in the capital of the Tatarstan Republic. This conference is attended primarily by religious leaders from across Russia, but religious leaders from Central Asian states participate as well. The Chairman of the state-approved Muslim Spiritual Board of Tatarstan has often *[written](#)* on the theme of RTP within “the Tatar world.”

While a state-approved Interreligious Council of Russia was established in 1998, a more recent initiative was the establishment of the Interreligious Group for the Protection of Rights and Believers from Discrimination and Xenophobia (*[established](#)* in October 2021). The group’s initiatives internationally appear similar to those of other authoritarian states in this report. In this case, the Group organizes the distribution of aid in *[Syria](#)* and *[Ukraine](#)* in order to highlight the Russian view that Russia’s military actions have been motivated to protect threatened Christian minorities in the two countries. In 2021, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nation Security Council Vassily Nebenzia conflated Syria and Ukraine as he highlighted Russian *[efforts](#)* in “countering religious intolerance.” In 2022, discourses around protecting minorities also featured in President Putin’s *[justifications](#)* for the invasion of Ukraine.

On the other hand, the Anti-Defamation League *[argued](#)* that Russia instrumentalized antisemitism in Ukraine. Protecting Christians in Syria was also a prominent rhetorical *[justification](#)* for intervention in that country.

The Russian Orthodox Patriarchate highlights its state-approved interfaith dialogue efforts. Notable examples include the Russian-Iranian Commission for Orthodoxy-Islam Dialogue (founded in 1997) and relations between the Patriarchate and the Caucasus Muslim Board led by the Sheikh ul-Islam of Azerbaijan. The Patriarchate *[presents](#)* a *[positive image](#)* of Russian interfaith tolerance, particularly between Christians and Muslims, and in its relations *[internationally](#)* with the European Union. In 2015, the Russian Ministry of Culture *[produced](#)* a documentary “dedicated to traditions of interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence” in South Dagestan, a region bordering Chechnya that has suffered violence at the behest of the Russian state.

As far as the *[wider context](#)* of human rights in Russia is concerned, “Today, Russia is more repressive than it has ever been in the post-Soviet era,” while USCIRF *[reported](#)* on the 2021 closure of the Memorial International Society with concern. At the same time, the country has made significant investments in promoting its image through RTP initiatives and international diplomacy. Unlike those of other authoritarian states profiled in this report, these religious tolerance promotion efforts appear aimed at predominantly Muslim states and states from the former Soviet Union rather than at the United States or the European Union.



# UZBEKISTAN

Recent major RTP conference(s): [\*Dialogue of Declarations\*](#)

Major RTP declaration(s): [\*Bukhara Declaration\*](#)

USCIRF 2022 recommendation: [\*Special Watch List\*](#)

Uzbekistan has only relatively recently begun to invest in RTP internationally. In 2018, the Uzbekistan government [\*signed\*](#) a memorandum of understanding with the international NGO Institute for Global Engagement (IGE). Since then, IGE has [\*undertaken\*](#) a range of RTP-related programming in the country and assisted the government in [\*convening\*](#) the 2022 international “Dialogue of Declarations,” which brought to the country international religious leaders from around the world and concluded with a [\*Bukhara Declaration\*](#).

Within Uzbekistan, U.S. DoS [\*reporting\*](#) notes the suppression of religious freedom. USCIRF [\*maintains\*](#) the country be included on the SWL and in 2021 published a report [\*detailing\*](#) the continued imprisonment of Muslims in the country. More broadly, human rights groups [\*note\*](#) that despite widespread hopes for reforms, “Uzbekistan’s political system remains deeply authoritarian.” There appears to be a disjuncture between Uzbekistan’s increasingly high-profile RTP efforts internationally and its domestic reality.

# STATES THAT MADE LIMITED OR NO INVESTMENT IN RTP

Algeria, Angola, Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Comoros, Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Iran, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Nicaragua, North Korea, Rwanda, Tajikistan, Togo, Venezuela, Vietnam, Zimbabwe.

Although the states in this last list have made some RTP investments, they have not done so to the degree of the states profiled previously. To give a few examples, many of the authoritarian states in this final category have state-approved interfaith dialogue organizations, such as the Zimbabwe Interreligious Council (ZIRC, [launched](#) in 2020). However, the focus of these organizations is internal, in contrast to those state-led RTP organizations listed earlier that included an international component. In other instances, states such as Cameroon and Togo suffer from internal conflict that cuts across religious, ethnic, and political lines, prompting such states to establish RTP efforts as part of an effort to ameliorate those conflicts. Togo, for example, in 2019 [established](#) an Interministerial Committee for Combatting and Preventing Violent Extremism, supported by the United States, and there is a Togolese branch of the [West Africa Network for Peacebuilding](#) (WANEP). It is also important to note that in the case of Sub-Saharan African states, many RTP initiatives occur at the sub-state level and are not instigated in a top-down fashion as they are in the MENA region, though they do overlap with the state in some instances.

In other cases, states have engaged with international NGOs to run programming in the realm of RTP, such as Laos and Vietnam who [collaborate](#) with IGE. Other East Asian authoritarian states also engage in international diplomacy with regard to religion, as in the case of China [speaking](#) to the OIC.

In other countries, such as [Belarus](#), [Cuba](#), or [Nicaragua](#), Christian groups and leaders have been involved in protests and opposition to authoritarian rule. However, in contrast to the predominantly Muslim states mentioned in this report where repression of groups espousing interpretations of Islam that differ from the state-approved version occurs, repression

of Christians in Belarus, Cuba, and Nicaragua is not cast in terms of countering religious extremism. This disjuncture is likely influenced by the post 9/11 Global War on Terror environment that gave a certain credence to state repression in predominantly Muslim states.

In the realm of international diplomacy, instances where interfaith relations are posited as a means to improve the brand of states that have suffered in the international media are also detectable in this final category, but not to the degree that would warrant inclusion as a major or substantial investor in RTP. An example would be Ethiopia. In 2021, the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia (founded in 2010) [held](#) its first overseas meeting at its U.S. embassy, implying a possible international branding element. International workshops on the theme of religion and conflict are also organized in Ethiopia, a recent example included one on “Secularism and Politicized Faith” presented in [collaboration](#) with WANEP, though that is not a state-led initiative comparable to those in the previously described states.

Other states in the Gulf region, such as Kuwait and Oman, might also have been included as substantial investors in RTP, but their efforts were not as pronounced as those of Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain, or Saudi Arabia. Since 2015, Kuwait’s Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs has made high-profile initiatives in the realm of [promoting](#) “moderation,” and Kuwait’s [role](#) in promoting tolerance is sometimes stressed internationally. In Oman, U.S. DoS [reporting](#) notes that the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs prepares a quarterly publication, *Mutual Understanding (al-Tafahum)* and hosts events to mark International Tolerance Day. Muscat also hosts the interfaith [al-Amana Centre](#) founded and supported by an American Protestant denomination, though this is not a state-controlled institution.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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