



Religious Minorities and Refugee Protection

Credit: Migrants and Refugees Section/The Vatican

Who are religious minorities?

Religious minorities encompass many different groups globally. While there is no official definition of a religious minority, the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities [describe](#) minorities generally as “a group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position.”¹ Many groups face persecution because of their religious practices, which are not the dominant religion in the country where they reside.² Examples of religious minority groups include Christians and Rohingya Muslims living in Buddhist-majority Myanmar and Christians and Yazidis, living in Muslim-majority Syria and Iraq.³

How many religious minorities are there in the world?

While most people live in countries where their religious group is the majority, approximately 27% of people live in a nation where they are a religious minority.⁴

Can a religious minority be a refugee?

Yes. A [refugee](#) is a person who is forced to leave their home country because of violence, persecution, or war. To qualify as a refugee an individual must have a well-founded fear of persecution.⁵ This persecution must be based on their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.⁶ While not all religious minorities face persecution, it is one of the major forces causing people to become refugees.

Are there refugees who suffered persecution as religious minorities who have been resettled to the United States?

Yes. Many refugees who enter the United States are religious minorities. For example, in fiscal year 2016, 37% of the 85,000 refugees resettled in the U.S. were religious minorities.⁷ So far in fiscal year 2020, 3,440 religious minority refugees arrived to the U.S., which is about 46% of the 7,434 of the total refugee admittance.⁸ Although religious minorities are now a larger percentage of refugees admitted, the decrease in overall number of refugees means that less religious minorities are being resettled.

Why does the Catholic Church care about religious minorities?

Respect for the right of religious minorities to practice their faiths without oppression from the State is essential for an inclusive society. The Catholic Church teaches that every human being is created in the image of God and is endowed with human dignity. As persons created in the image of God, all people naturally desire to know the truth about God and to live in accordance with the truth. Religious freedom means all people have the space to seek this truth and to respond to the truth freely. It is a fundamental right. Catholics seek to protect the religious freedom of people from all faiths, including religious minorities or others suffering religious persecution. When a situation becomes so dire that people must flee their homelands, we as Christians are called to welcome our new neighbors with love and compassion.

What are the Administration's policies concerning religious minorities?

The Administration has voiced a strong commitment to protect religious freedom and the rights of religious minorities globally. Increasing protection for religious freedom and religious minorities is listed as a priority in the Administration's National Strategic Strategy.⁹ Resettling religious minorities is also a stated priority of the Administration's approach to the U.S. refugee resettlement program.¹⁰

However, the Administration's effectiveness in combating religious persecution and ensuring religious minorities who have faced persecution for their faith can be resettled as refugees has been seriously underutilized. An example is this year's record low admissions ceiling for refugees of 18,000. The ceiling, known as the Presidential Determination (PD), is decided annually and the historically average is 95,000. With lower PDs have come lower admissions of religious minorities seeking refuge.¹¹ For example, the number of Yazidis, a persecuted religious group from Iraq and Syria, went from 417 in Fiscal Year (FY) 2016 to just 20 in FY 2019. Similarly, the number of Christians from Iraq and Syria resettled in the U.S. went from 440 in FY 2016 to 76 in FY 2019.¹² This sharp decrease demonstrates how despite the Administration's stated policy of prioritizing of religious minorities, the current resettlement strategy does not adequately protect them.

Besides resettlement, what other policies help protect religious freedom and religious minorities?

Resettling in a new country is very rare and difficult. Additionally, many facing religious persecution would prefer to stay in or near their home country but are prevented from doing so because of the threat of violence. Supporting religious minorities in their home countries or nearby refugee host countries is another important component of advocating for religious freedom.

Recommendations to protect refugees who are religious minorities

- (1) To the State Department: Utilize all existing slots for refugee resettlement in fiscal year 2020 that are set aside for religious minorities. Beyond that, enable flexibility, particularly using the existing P-2 category allocated in the fiscal year 2020 PD, so that all of the 18,000 slots will be used up for religious minorities and other refugees.¹³
- (2) To the President: Raise the overall Annual Presidential Determination, providing not only more slots for religious minorities and those fleeing religious persecution but also for refugees fleeing other forms of recognized persecution.
- (3) To Congress: Provide robust funding for two accounts in the State, Foreign Operations (SFOPs) appropriations. First, International Disaster Assistance (IDA), including support for religious minorities displaced in their home countries. Second, Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA), including help for religious minorities in refugee host countries to maintain their well-being while practicing their faith, and including resettlement of religious minorities who cannot live in safety and dignity in the refugee host or home country. Also, provide ample funding for Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) in the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education (LHHS) appropriations, including transitional support for religious minorities and for states and local communities that help to welcome and integrate them.



we are one family under God

Endnotes

- 1 “Minorities Under International Law,” *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Minorities/Pages/internationallaw.aspx>
- 2 “The inclusion of religious minorities in consultative and decision-making bodies,” *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* (September 2014) available at file:///Users/juliarosemckay/Desktop/Religious_minorities.pdf
- 3 Katayoun Kishi, “Most refugees who enter the U.S. as religious minorities are Christians,” Pew Research Center (2/7/2017), available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/07/most-refugees-who-enter-the-u-s-as-religious-minorities-are-christians/>
- 4 “Global Religious Landscape,” The Pew Research Center Forum on Religious and Public Life (December 2012) available at <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>
- 5 “What is a Refugee,” USA for UNHR Refugee the UN Refugee Agency, available at <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 Katayoun Kishi, “Most refugees who enter the U.S. as religious minorities are Christians,” Pew Research Center (2/7/2017) available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/07/most-refugees-who-enter-the-u-s-as-religious-minorities-are-christians/>
- 8 “Refugee Arrivals by Admissions Category,” Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration Office of Admissions- Refugee Processing Center (5/2020) available at <https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>
- 9 “USCIRF Annual Report 2019,” *The United State Commission on International Religious Freedom* (4/11/2019), available at <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>
- 10 “Who is left behind when the U.S. resettles fewer refugees?” International Rescue Committee (3/7/2020), available at <https://www.rescue.org/article/who-left-behind-when-us-resettles-fewer-refugees>
- 11 “Who is left behind when the U.S. resettles fewer refugees?” International Rescue Committee (3/7/2020), available at <https://www.rescue.org/article/who-left-behind-when-us-resettles-fewer-refugees>
- 12 “Admissions and Arrivals Interactive Reporting” Refugee Processing Center available at https://ireports.wrapsnet.org/Interactive-Reporting/EnumType/Report?ItemPath=/rpt_WebArrivalsReports/MX%20-%20Arrivals%20by%20Nationality%20and%20Religion
- 13 “Statement of Barbara L. Strack, Retired, Former Chief, Refugee Affairs Division, Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations Directorate, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security (2005-2018),” Hearing on The Current State of the U.S. Refugee Program, House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Immigration & Citizenship (2/27/20) available at <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110569/witnesses/HHRG-116-JU01-Wstate-StrackB-20200227.pdf>

