

Highlights of [GAO-13-196](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Congress passed the Act in 1998 to promote international religious freedom, among other purposes. The Act established within State the Office of International Religious Freedom, headed by an Ambassador-at-Large. The Act also established USCIRF, with the Ambassador-at-Large as an ex-officio member. In addition, the Act outlined primary responsibilities for both State and USCIRF.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Reform and Reauthorization Act of 2011 required GAO to report on matters related to the U.S. promotion of international religious freedom. This report assesses (1) State's implementation of its primary responsibilities established in the Act, (2) USCIRF's implementation of its primary responsibilities established in the Act, (3) State's and USCIRF's interaction to promote religious freedom, and (4) NGOs' views on U.S. efforts to promote religious freedom.

GAO analyzed documents and interviewed officials from State, USCIRF, NGOs, and foreign governments. GAO conducted fieldwork in five countries, including CPCs, and surveyed 131 NGOs. The survey results reflect the views of survey respondents and cannot be generalized.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State and the Chair of USCIRF jointly define how State and USCIRF should interact in their efforts to promote international religious freedom. State and USCIRF concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-13-196](#). For more information, contact Thomas Melito at (202) 512-9601 or melitot@gao.gov.

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INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ACT

State Department and Commission Are Implementing Responsibilities but Need to Improve Interaction

What GAO Found

The Department of State (State) is implementing the primary responsibilities outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (the Act) by undertaking numerous actions to promote religious freedom, engaging with foreign officials, and annually publishing its *International Religious Freedom Report*. The Ambassador-at-Large and the Office of International Religious Freedom assist the Secretary of State with certain responsibilities outlined in the Act, including the designation of Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) and the development of training.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is implementing its primary responsibilities outlined in the Act by conducting ongoing reviews of violations of religious freedom and issuing policy recommendations to the U.S. government. According to USCIRF officials, its primary responsibilities culminate in the release of its annual report. The report discusses the 20 to 30 countries that USCIRF considers the worst offenders against religious freedom, and it presents policy recommendations to the U.S. government. USCIRF has at times also provided technical assistance or recommendations to foreign officials.

Although the Act, as amended, directs State and USCIRF to cooperate, they have not defined how they should interact, which has at times created tensions with foreign-government officials. For example, in its 2012 report, USCIRF recommended that the Secretary of State designate Turkey as a CPC. Because the Ambassador-at-Large was not regularly attending USCIRF meetings at the time, State officials learned of the commissioners' intent shortly before USCIRF published its report. State officials explained that Turkey did not warrant CPC designation, as it had taken steps to improve religious freedom, but USCIRF proceeded with its recommendation. According to Turkish officials, USCIRF's report contradicted State's report and was therefore "null and void." State officials told GAO that they had to resolve the resulting tensions with the Turkish government.

Representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whom GAO surveyed and interviewed generally viewed overall U.S. government efforts to promote international religious freedom positively, while raising some concerns and suggesting several improvements. To better promote international religious freedom, some NGOs suggested greater inclusion of civil society and other nonstate actors and further empowerment of U.S. government entities. Likewise, NGOs familiar with State's and USCIRF's annual reports generally viewed them positively, although several raised concerns that both reports lacked objectivity. Finally, NGOs generally viewed State's CPC designations positively, although some doubted how useful the designations or recommended designations were to their work. NGOs from GAO's five fieldwork countries provided similar opinions.