

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR SPECIAL WATCH LIST

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Algeria deteriorated, with the government increasingly enforcing blasphemy laws and continuing to restrict worship. Algerian authorities convicted and sentenced individuals for blasphemy and proselytization, maintained the closure of dozens of Protestant churches, and charged religious minorities with illegally gathering while not providing a legal path for them to worship collectively. These actions impacted religious minorities across many faiths and beliefs, including Protestant Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and freethinkers.

In January 2021, a court sentenced [Hamid Soudad](#), a Christian, to five years in prison for “insulting the prophet of Islam” by sharing a caricature of the Prophet on social media. In February, a court sentenced freethinker [Saïd Djabelkhir](#), an expert on Sufism and advocate for a progressive interpretation of Islam, to three years in prison for “offending the precepts of Islam.” In March, authorities sentenced opposition activist [Walid Kechida](#) to three years in prison for “offending the precepts” of Islam in internet memes. In June, a court upheld a proselytization conviction against pastor and bookshop owner [Rachid Mohamed Seighir](#) and his book shop assistant Mouh Hamimi, sentencing them to suspended one-year prison sentences. In October, a court sentenced two Ahmadiyya Muslims to two years in prison for defamation

based on religion and denigration of common rituals of Islam.

In June, a court in Oran [ordered](#) the government to physically seal three churches despite the ongoing appeal by the Protestant community protesting the order for their closure. Since 2017, the Algerian government has ordered the closure of 20 Protestant churches under Ordinance 06-03, which prohibits non-Muslim organizations from establishing places of worship without authorization. The Evangelical Protestant Association (EPA) applied for authorization but the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, which reportedly never meets, has not adequately responded to the request.

In November, following the U.S. Department of State’s announcement adding Algeria to its Special Watch List for engaging in and tolerating severe religious freedom violations, the Algerian government [summoned](#) the president of the EPA to court for practicing non-Muslim rites without permission. Algerian authorities also continued to prosecute Ahmadiyya Muslims and Protestants for gathering without authorization. The Algerian government insists the Ahmadiyya Muslim community register with the Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups, while Ahmadis, who consider themselves Muslim, believe that to be in violation of their conscience as Muslims.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Maintain Algeria on the U.S. Department of State’s Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
  - Direct U.S. Embassy officials to:
    - Urge the Algerian government to develop and implement a plan to decriminalize blasphemy and proselytization;
    - Meet with the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups and other relevant government officials, and insist the Algerian government deliver clear and timely responses to registration requests by non-Muslim organizations as required by Ordinance 06-03; and
    - Attend and observe court proceedings on blasphemy charges or cases related to houses of worship to emphasize the U.S. government’s concerns about such cases.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Continue to raise the implementation of blasphemy laws and closure of houses of worship with the State Department and relevant Algerian counterparts to ensure religious freedom concerns are incorporated into the U.S.-Algeria bilateral relationship.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in Algeria](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Persecution of Ahmadiyya Muslims](#)

## Background

Algeria is home to [nearly 43 million people](#), 99 percent of whom are estimated to be Sunni Muslim. The remaining 1 percent of the population is comprised of Jews, nonbelievers, Muslim minorities (including Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims), and Christians (including Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, the Reformed Church, and Egyptian Coptic Christians). [Algeria's constitution](#) establishes Islam as the official state religion.

Algeria has a long history of repression and persecution of religious minorities, including against [Jews](#), [Baha'is](#), Protestant Christians, and [Ahmadiyya Muslims](#). Despite Algeria's constitution affording all Algerians the right to freedom of opinion and worship, the Algerian government limits the free expression and practice of belief through the enforcement of laws that favor a particular interpretation of Islam and restrict religious activities. Algeria's penal and information codes criminalize blasphemy with punishments including imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to approximately \$829 USD (100,000 Algerian dinars). Algeria's Criminal Code also censors publications by prohibiting content that is "contrary to Islamic morals."

Through [Ordinance 06-03](#) passed in 2006, the Algerian government requires all non-Muslim organizations register with the Algerian government to conduct affairs and establish places of worship. The process for registration has been opaque and poorly implemented, yielding legal uncertainty for some non-Muslim religious communities, which the government exploits to repress and prosecute religious minorities. Ordinance 06-03 also criminalizes proselytization by non-Muslims with punishments of up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of approximately \$8,347 USD (1 million dinar).

## Blasphemy and Proselytization Convictions

In January, a court sentenced [Hamid Soudad](#), a Christian, to five years in prison for "insulting the prophet of Islam" by sharing a caricature of the Prophet on social media. Upon appeal, the Oran City Court of Justice upheld the sentence in March. Soudad has appealed the verdict, a process that can take over a year, and in the meantime remains imprisoned. In April, a court convicted [Said Djabelkhir](#), a scholar and free thought leader, of blasphemy for "offending the precepts of Islam" and sentenced him to three years in prison and an approximately \$375 USD fine (50,000 dinar), reportedly after a fellow academic [filed a complaint](#) that his writings constituted "an attack and mockery of the authentic hadiths of the Sunna [the custom and practice] of the Prophet," and had caused individuals psychological harm.

In March, authorities sentenced opposition activist [Walid Kechida](#) to three years in prison for insulting President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and "offending the precepts" of Islam in internet memes. Also, in April authorities detained Christian convert Foudhil Bahloul, interrogating him on his conversion, searching his house, and confiscating Christian materials. In July 2021, a court sentenced Bahloul to six months imprisonment and fined approximately \$750 USD (100,000 dinar) for "illegally accepting donations" from religious groups when local Christians raised funds to help him cover costs after he lost his job due to his conversion.

In June, a court upheld a proselytization conviction against pastor and bookshop owner [Rachid Mohamed Seighir](#) and his book shop assistant Mouh Hamimi for "printing, storing, or distributing materials that can 'shake' the faith of a Muslim," sentencing them to a suspended one-year prison sentence and an approximately \$1,500

USD (200,000 dinar) fine. In August, alleged plainclothes agents abducted Algerian national, Christian convert, and UN-recognized refugee [Slimane Bouhafis](#) in Tunisia and transferred him to Algeria, where he remains detained on several charges including blasphemy. In October, advocates reported that two Ahmadiyya Muslims were convicted of defamation based on religion and denigration of common rituals of Islam and unlicensed fundraising and sentenced to two years in prison, although they were not incarcerated after the verdict due to time served awaiting trial for six months.

## Restrictions on Houses of Worship

In 2021, Algerian authorities continued to uphold and implement restrictions on houses of worship for both Protestants and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Since 2017, Algerian officials have ordered the closure of [20 Protestant](#) churches. The Algerian government [justifies](#) these closures by citing Ordinance 06-03, which requires that non-Muslim religious organizations register to establish houses of worship. Protestant organizations report that government authorities systematically refuse to provide them the necessary receipt for registration, effectively rendering their activities illegal. In June 2021, a court in Oran ordered the physical sealing of three churches despite the ongoing appeal by the Protestant community protesting the order for their closure. In November, a court [charged](#) the leader of the country's largest Protestant church and three other Christians with worshipping without the prior approval of the National Commission for Non-Muslim Religious Groups.

Algerian authorities have also [restricted Ahmadiyya Muslims](#) from establishing houses of worship. The Algerian government, which does not consider Ahmadiyya Muslims to be Muslims, has required that the Ahmadiyya Muslim community register as a non-Muslim organization under Ordinance 06-03. Since doing so would violate Ahmadiyya Muslims' conscience, as the community considers themselves Muslim, the Ahmadiyya community remains unregistered in Algeria and is subject to forced closure of its mosques and prosecution for unauthorized gathering under existing regulations. The majority of pending court cases against Ahmadiyya Muslims pertain to accusations of [unauthorized gatherings](#) for the purposes of worship.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States is one of Algeria's [top trading partners](#), and professional exchanges play a valuable role in strengthening the U.S.-Algeria law enforcement and security partnership at both the senior and working levels. The U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) "has supported the work of Algeria's civil society through programming that provides training to journalists, businesspeople, female entrepreneurs and parliamentarians, legal professionals, and the heads of leading non-governmental organizations."

In April, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [spoke](#) with Algeria's Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum over the phone and discussed strengthening the bilateral relationship founded on shared values and mutual interests. In July, a group of bipartisan Senators sent a [letter](#) to Secretary Blinken requesting that the State Department take action against systematic, discriminatory treatment toward members of religious minority groups. On November 15, the State Department [placed](#) Algeria on its Special Watch List for the first time for severe violations of religious freedom.