



— *State of the* —
GOLDEN DOOR

Persecuted Christians and the U.S. Refugee
Resettlement and Asylum Processes

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A letter from Myal Greene, President & CEO of World Relief, and Ryan Brown, President & CEO of Open Doors US

The first edition of this report, released in 2020, noted soberly that an estimated 80 million people around the globe had been forcibly displaced from their homes and that at least 260 million Christians worldwide lived under the threat of persecution and discrimination.

In this third edition of the report, published fewer than five years later, those numbers have increased dramatically. The number of people globally who have been displaced by persecution, violence, human rights violations and disruptions of public order has **surpassed 120 million** for the first time in recorded history. And the number of Christians who face high levels of persecution or discrimination because of their faith has risen to **365 million**, accounting for 1 in 7 Christians globally. Of those individuals, 313 million live within the 50 countries on the **Open Doors 2024 World Watch List** of places where Christians are most at risk.

Not every persecuted Christian flees his or her home, of course, and not every displaced person is persecuted because of his or her religion, but these numbers certainly are related: When religious persecution becomes sufficiently acute, often compounded by other pressures, many determine that their only option is to flee, whether within their country or to another country as refugees. As in our past two reports, our goal is to help the U.S. church recognize that issues of international religious freedom and forced displacement are closely related.

However, this edition of the report has a new title. The **first edition**, in 2020, was published at a time when the United States had dramatically restricted refugee resettlement, including resettlement of those persecuted because of their Christian faith. The number of Christian refugees resettled in 2020 from the 50 countries on that year's Open Doors World Watch List was down 90 percent from the number who had arrived in 2015. By the **next edition** of the report, using data through fiscal year 2022, those numbers had begun to rebound, but only marginally. Both reports were titled "Closed Doors," reflecting the startling reality that the U.S. was offering refuge to tens of thousands fewer persecuted Christians than its historic norms.

This new report's picture is more nuanced and merits a more neutral title. When the fiscal year ended on September 30, 2024, 29,493 Christian refugees from the 50 countries on this year's World Watch List had been admitted to the United States as refugees. That's the highest number of Christians resettled from these 50 countries since 2016, roughly coinciding with a commensurate increase in the number of resettled refugees of all religious backgrounds and countries of origin.

While refugee resettlement remains a last-resort option, one available to just a small fraction of refugees around the world persecuted because of their faith, the "golden door" that poet Emma Lazarus once described as a refuge for those "yearning to breathe free" is open to far more today than it was just a

few years ago, and we celebrate this return to our country's historic leadership in offering refuge to the persecuted.

However, for Christians concerned with international religious freedom and forced displacement, there are still serious concerns. Changes to U.S. asylum policy implemented by the Biden-Harris administration in the past year have significantly reduced due process protections for those fleeing religious persecution who seek asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. And the progress in terms of refugee resettlement could be quickly undone in the coming months, as the U.S. president has broad legal authority to suspend refugee resettlement entirely, which former President Trump has **pledged** to do "on day one."

Given the hyper-partisan moment in which we release this report, less than one month before U.S. presidential elections, we should be explicitly clear: Both of our organizations are non-partisan organizations. This report should not be construed as an endorsement or a denunciation of any political party or candidate.

Instead, we intentionally release this report now to remind the U.S. church that our country's refugee and asylum policies impact their brothers and sisters around the world persecuted for their faith in Jesus, and to give candidates, as they angle for Christians' votes, the opportunity and incentive to commit to refugee resettlement and asylum policies that prioritize the wellbeing of persecuted Christians.

We also should be very clear, as we have in past editions of this report, that our concern is not only for those who share our faith in Jesus Christ. As Christians, we believe that all human beings — regardless of religion or any other qualifier — are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27) with inherent dignity and lives worth protecting. We believe that Jesus' all-encompassing command to love our neighbors clearly extends beyond love for

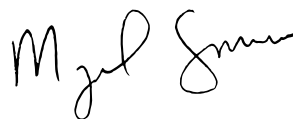
one's fellow believers, as illustrated by the "Good Samaritan," who was the model of neighborly love for a vulnerable traveler of a different religious tradition (Luke 10:25-37). Our nation's laws rightly offer refuge to those fleeing persecution because of any religious tradition or for other specific reasons, such as race, political opinion and nationality. And **recent polling** confirms that most U.S. Christians — 71 percent of U.S. evangelical Christians, at least — believe the U.S. has a moral responsibility to accept such refugees, not only fellow Christians.

But as this report demonstrates through both statistics and individual stories, followers of Jesus are often among those most at risk of persecution in countries that deny the religious freedom we believe is a God-given right of each human being. We cannot profess to care for our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ if we are unwilling to do what we can to address their physical needs for safety (James 2:14-16). One way we can do so is to be faithful stewards of the voices that God has entrusted to us, by advocating for refugee and asylum policies that offer refuge to fellow believers who face persecution.

Our hope and prayer is that this report equips and challenges fellow Christians to ensure that their witness in such a time as this, when Christians around the world face persecution and many have been forced to flee their homes, is marked by solidarity with these brothers and sisters in Christ, who desperately need our advocacy and prayers.

In Christ,

Myal Greene



President & CEO
World Relief

Ryan Brown



President & CEO
Open Doors US

INTRODUCTION

More than **120 million people** across the globe are victims of forced displacement, and 40 percent are children. Some 37.6 million people meet the formal definition of a refugee, having fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Three-quarters are hosted by low- or middle-income countries. War, trauma and other major social and economic disruptions drive millions more to migrate in search of better work opportunities and a safer place to call home.

A significant share of refugees worldwide are persecuted because of their religion, including many Christians. Globally, more than **365 million Christians** face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith. When individuals facing violence and pressure at home determine it is no longer safe to remain, some make the difficult decision to migrate, which is often the result of religious persecution in conjunction with other migratory pressures — hoping and praying to find a safe country that will welcome them.

The United States has long set the standard for the global agenda on refugees and asylum seekers. Yet over the past several years, the U.S. has not consistently been the safe haven for displaced persons that it once was. The “golden door” that Emma Lazarus poetically described as the gateway to safety and liberty for those “yearning to breathe free” largely closed shut by 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the low-point of refugee resettlement to the United States: Just 11,411 refugees were resettled in FY 2021, though the number already was declining precipitously well before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the past three years, however, the U.S. refugee resettlement program has rebounded dramatically, such that 100,034 refugees of all backgrounds were resettled in FY 2024, the highest overall resettlement levels since 1994. And as refugee resettlement overall has rebounded, so has the number of Christian refugees resettled from countries where Christians face persecution.

While the United States has made religious freedom a priority of domestic and foreign policy, religious persecution continues to drive the displacement of Christians. The U.S. government’s commitment to religious freedom — rightly proclaimed by the current administration, by both candidates seeking the presidency and by bipartisan leadership in Congress — necessitates an equally enduring responsibility toward refugees and asylum seekers.



IMAGE BY TOM COE

GLOBAL PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

Today, **one in seven** Christians worldwide live under the threat of persecution or discrimination in countries that hinder, outlaw or otherwise oppress the expression of the Christian faith. Christians face some of the most severe persecution in authoritarian countries, such as North Korea, Iran, Myanmar, China and Eritrea. These and other oppressive governments restrict Christian freedom of religion and impose harsh, sometimes debilitating, penalties on Christian conduct and expression.

In its 2024 **World Watch List**, a research-based overview of religious freedom conditions for Christians worldwide, Open Doors identified several current global trends that contribute to Christian persecution. Chief among them is the power of anti-Christian governments to arrest and execute Christians for practicing



A Christian asylum seeker at the U.S. southern border walks with his wife and child

their faith. This past year alone, at least 4,998 Christians were killed for their faith, while many others were arrested and imprisoned. But hostility toward Christians doesn't always come directly from the government. Social pressures, cultural norms and religious antipathies also can contribute to persecution.

Tragically, these religious antipathies often find expression in violence against Christians. Violence from militant religious factions is increasingly common across many areas of the globe, but especially in sub-Saharan Africa and East and South Asia, where governments struggle to control extremist groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS-affiliated clans. The Taliban, which returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, targets religious minorities. In Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Syria, longstanding conflict has led to the near-extinction of historic Christian communities that have existed since the days of the early church. Wherever religious extremists can operate unchecked, many Christians fear for their lives and their livelihoods.

As a result, Christians around the world are forced to choose between exposing their families to life-threatening risk at home or fleeing persecution. Many initially flee to another location within their country of origin they hope will provide safety; others seek refugee status or asylum in foreign countries. Some are initially **internally displaced**, but when the threat catches up to them, they conclude the only option is to seek refuge across a border. Those who make the difficult decision to flee face an uncertain future, full of its own risks and dangers. But for far too many Christians, choosing the vulnerable life of a refugee is the only way to keep themselves and their families safe from harm.

IMAGE BY HAN HTET AUNG



TESTIMONY: **PATE**

📍 MYANMAR

Pate was born in Chin State in Myanmar, also known as Burma, in 1991. His family had been Christians for at least **three generations**, inheriting a legacy of faith that began with Baptist missionaries who brought the gospel to Myanmar. But the military regime that controls Myanmar has long been **hostile to Christians and other religious minorities as well as to ethnic minorities**.

As he grew up, the threats of **persecution** against Pate increased, and at the age of 16 he made the difficult decision to travel by himself to neighboring Malaysia. In Malaysia, he **felt more freedom to worship Jesus**, but he struggled to learn the new languages around him. Making ends meet was almost impossible because he was not allowed to work lawfully. Pate met his wife, also a refugee from Myanmar, and they had two daughters together – but they were not allowed to attend school.

Pate registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees shortly after arrival in Malaysia and was eventually verified as a refugee. But the process of resettlement took many more years, with various interviews and security checks both from UNHCR and then the U.S. government. **Finally, after**

15 years as refugees in Malaysia, Pate and his family were approved for resettlement. They arrived in Greenville, South Carolina, in September 2022, a month which saw more Burmese refugees resettled to the U.S. than any month since 2017. In the years since, those numbers have continued to increase further.

Pate and his family were welcomed by World Relief Upstate South Carolina and by volunteers from a local church. Pate now works as a barista, and he and his wife had a third child since arrival, the first U.S. citizen in their family. He worries about his family back in Myanmar, where because of increased persecution by the military regime beginning in 2021, Internet and telephone communications are nearly non-existent. But he's thankful to be safe, **to be free to worship freely and to provide for his wife and children**.

Here and throughout this report, some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still be at risk of persecution for their faith.

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

Under both **U.S.** and **international** law, a refugee is an individual who has left their country of origin and who has a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group. Refugees are unable to find protection from their local governments and must seek safety and survival elsewhere.

While most refugees would prefer to return home if it were safe, in many cases the ongoing threat of persecution makes that impossible, negating the avenue of voluntary repatriation. Refugees wait until either local integration becomes a possibility and they are granted permanent protection in the first country to which they fled, or they are offered resettlement in a third country. They wait either in refugee camps or in urban settings, where they usually lack permission to work and provide for themselves. In some cases, Christian refugees face **additional persecution** in transitional settings, including relief discrimination and violent attacks targeting Christians and other religious minorities.

Since 1980, when the Refugee Act became law and formalized the U.S. refugee resettlement program, more than 3.3 million refugees have been resettled to the U.S. During the past decade, more than half of all resettled refugees have been Christians, including many persecuted for their faith. Everyone undergoes a thorough security and health screening prior to resettlement. As a **report** from The Heritage Foundation notes, “refugees

undergo more vetting than any other immigrants to the U.S.” For the relatively small share of the world’s refugees whom the U.S. government selects and approves for resettlement, the U.S. State Department partners with a variety of faith-based and other nonprofit organizations, including World Relief, to assist refugees in their process of cultural adjustment.

Under the authority of the Refugee Act, passed unanimously by the U.S. Senate and with broad bipartisan support by the U.S. House of Representatives in 1980, the U.S.



A former refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, photographed in front of his place of work.

president is responsible for setting an annual “ceiling” for refugee admissions. Those ceilings have ranged from 231,700 under President Carter in FY80 to 15,000 under President Trump in FY21.

When the Biden-Harris administration began in 2021, it was slow to fulfill its campaign commitment to rebuild the U.S. refugee resettlement process. President Biden surprised and dismayed many **refugee** and **religious freedom** advocates by initially resetting the refugee ceiling at the historically low level of 15,000 for the remainder of FY21. Gayle Manchin, then chair of the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom**, noted that this historically low refugee ceiling “fail[ed] to reflect that unprecedented numbers of individuals worldwide are forcibly displaced by conflict or persecution, including based on their religion or belief.” Her USCIRF co-chair, Tony Perkins, insisted that “to stand by our nation’s commitment to religious freedom, the United States should be a safe haven for persecuted religious communities.”

Since that time, however, the administration has made commendable progress in rebuilding the refugee resettlement program, setting the refugee ceiling at 125,000 each fiscal year since 2022, including for FY25, which began just a few weeks ago.

The actual number of refugees resettled, however, does not always reach the maximum allowed. Limitations in overseas processing as well as domestic resettlement infrastructure have prevented the Biden-Harris administration from hitting this ceiling. However, the overall number of refugees admitted has increased year over year, reaching a total of **100,034** in FY24, the highest level since 1994.

That increase has been made possible, in part, by several innovative processes that the U.S. State Department has implemented recently. Among the most important for advocates of persecuted religious minorities is the Welcome Corps, a private sponsorship pro-

cess launched in 2023. Whereas refugee resettlement has in recent history been limited to geographies where an office or affiliate of one of the ten national resettlement agencies had a physical location and staff, Welcome Corps allows a small group of Americans — including those from local churches — to take the lead in resettling a specific refugee family anywhere in the United States, covering initial costs as well as being responsible for volunteering their time to ensure a smooth integration into a new community.

One dynamic of Welcome Corps that is of relevance for those concerned with persecuted Christians and other religious minorities is that Welcome Corps allows the sponsoring group to name a specific refugee individual or family whom they would like to resettle. The refugee must of course still demonstrate that they meet the U.S. legal definition of a refugee and clear appropriate vetting procedures, but this process has allowed Americans with a concern for brothers and sisters in Christ who have had to flee their homelands to facilitate their lawful entry to the U.S. The Welcome Corps private sponsorship process has been modeled on a similar longstanding private sponsorship process in Canada.

That opportunity is now available in the United States as well. For example, World Relief, through its **Churches of Welcome** initiative, has already helped to support seven local churches in North Carolina, South Carolina and Wisconsin that have formed “Good Neighbor Teams” to sponsor Afghan Christian refugee families for resettlement. As of this time, those families are in Pakistan, awaiting final approval.

There are some ongoing challenges to the Welcome Corps process, however, particularly in that refugees in some host countries that happen to host large numbers of persecuted Christians, such as Türkiye, are ineligible for sponsorship due to limited U.S. governmental ability to interview and process refugees in these countries. A recent letter from the

International Religious Freedom Roundtable signed by various advocacy organizations noted this concern, while praising the program overall as “crucial to ensuring that the United States upholds its legacy as a beacon of hope and opportunity for those fleeing religious persecution.”

While the overall increase in resettlement is very encouraging, it coincides with a dramatic increase in the global need for resettlement. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees **estimates** that 2.9 million refugees will need resettlement in 2025, a number that has doubled just since 2021. In 2023, only 96,311 refugees — about 3.3 percent of the global need — were resettled to any third country. As religious persecution around the world rises, more Christians than ever before are facing religious persecution with scant hope of resettlement if they flee.

While refugees of various religious traditions need resettlement, among those most vulnerable are Christian refugees from the countries where Christians face the most severe persecution in the world. In 2024, the number of Christians resettled from the top 50 countries perpetuating Christian persecution on the **2024 World Watch List** was up 27 percent from 2023 and up a remarkable 447 percent from 2020. Last year, 29,493 Christians were resettled from these 50 countries, up from 5,390 in 2020. This represents the highest number of Christian refugees resettled



World Relief staff in Durham, NC

from these countries since 2016, when 32,248 Christian refugees from these 50 countries were resettled to the U.S.

For Christians from several countries that rank high on the 2024 World Watch List, the progress is mixed. A total of 2,007 Christian refugees from Eritrea (#4 on the 2024 World Watch List) were resettled in 2024, up 387 percent from 2020 and higher than any year since 2012. The number of Christian refugees from Iran (#9), Iraq (#16) and Myanmar/Burma (#17) were all up dramatically from 2020, but still dramatically below the numbers resettled in 2016 and prior years.

Looking forward, however, the future of resettlement for persecuted Christians, along with those of other backgrounds, is uncertain, particularly as the United States prepares to elect a new president. While Vice President Kamala Harris has generally **supported** refugee resettlement and not indicated that she would address refugee resettlement in distinct ways from President Biden, former President Donald Trump has **said** in campaign rallies that “on day one of the Trump administration” he will be “suspending refugee admissions,” and he has repeated that commitment on **social media**. He has not necessarily clarified if that would be the policy throughout his presidency or merely a temporary suspension, but, given the broad authority that the Refugee Act gives to the president to set the refugee ceiling, it would likely be within the president’s authority to simply set the refugee ceiling to zero (or, in the middle of a fiscal year, to the number already resettled up to that point).

The tragic reality is that many areas of the world simply aren’t safe for Christians, and Christians fleeing persecution need a safe haven in the United States. With religious persecution of Christians at some of the highest levels ever reported, closing the door to refugees threatens the lives of Christians — and American Christians must not remain silent.



TESTIMONY: MUSA

📍 PAKISTAN



IMAGE BY ZAIN ABID

In Pakistan, blasphemy is a crime. Charges of blasphemy can be wielded like weapons against Christians, leading to mob violence or death sentences. So when **Musa**, his wife and two children were questioned aggressively about their Christian faith in an open-air market, they knew they could be in trouble. When Musa tried to leave, the salesman loudly accused him of blasphemy, drawing an increasingly angry crowd.

After hiding for several days, Musa and his family boarded an airplane for the United States, having providentially already obtained tourist visas to attend a Christian conference. They knew that they **could never safely return** to their country of origin.

Once in California, Musa and his family struggled to make ends meet, since they were initially ineligible to work lawfully, and the asylum process was daunting. Eventually, they were connected to World Relief Sacramento and to a team of staff and volunteers who came alongside the family and guided them through the asylum application.

Ted Oswald, an immigration attorney on the World Relief Sacramento staff, had the privilege of sharing the news with Musa that **his case had been approved**. “The shouts of praise and jubilation from Musa and his wife were electric, giving me chills,” reflects Ted. World Relief Sacramento has since created a new project, Presideo, specifically focused on **providing asylum representation for persecuted religious minorities**.

As for Musa, while the adjustment to life in a new place has been difficult, he and his family are grateful that they are **safe and free to practice their faith**.

Here and throughout this report, some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still be at risk of persecution for their faith.

TESTIMONY: FERNANDO

📍 MEXICO

Pastor Fernando's life had been transformed when he met Jesus and was freed from alcohol, so after becoming a Pentecostal pastor, he led his church to launch an in-patient rehabilitation and discipleship program for individuals recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. The ministry, in Guanajuato, Mexico, was thriving – **until Fernando's Christian convictions brought him into the crosshairs of feuding cartels.**

Fernando's ministry would offer the love and hope of Jesus to anyone, regardless of their past, so when members of one cartel insisted Fernando turn over a fourteen-year-old boy being cared for by the ministry, he refused. **The cartel killed the boy – and told Fernando that he would be next.**

Fernando went to the police, but they proved **unable or unwilling to protect him.** One officer discreetly told him that his name was on the cartel's death list and his best option was to flee. After much prayer, Fernando traveled north to the U.S.-Mexico border, arriving in November 2022.

After six weeks at a church-operated shelter on the Mexican side of the border, Fernando was given the chance to explain his situation to border officials, was lawfully "paroled" into the United States and given a court date in Chicago, Illinois, where he could stay temporarily with a family friend. At their church in suburban Chicago, Fernando got connected to World Relief, which helped him find **legal representation, access to English classes and other support.**

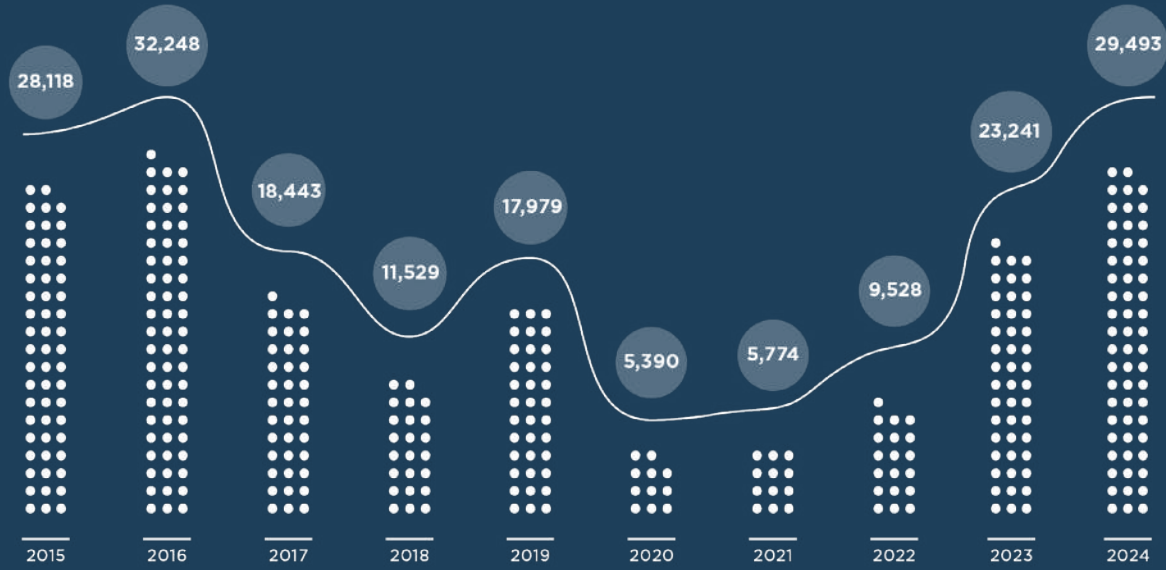
It took more than a year, but Fernando recently was granted employment authorization, allowing him to **lawfully work and support himself and his family** while he awaits further court hearings that will determine his eligibility to stay permanently in the United States.

"The adjustment to life in the United States has been very difficult," Pastor Fernando acknowledged, "but I am grateful to be safe and to be alive. **I pray that the United States will continue to offer refuge to those persecuted because they seek to follow Jesus.**"

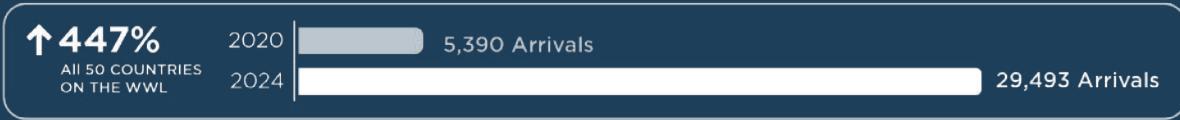
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Resettlement of Persecuted Christian Refugees on the Rebound



Arrival of Christian Refugees from the 50 Countries on the Open Doors 2024 World Watch List



↑ 44%
BURMA/
MYANMAR
#17 World Watch List



↑ 231%
IRAQ
#16 World Watch List



↑ 387%
ERITREA
#4 World Watch List



↑ 415%
IRAN
#9 World Watch List



Number of Christian Refugee Arrivals, FY20 to FY24

All data is provided by the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center through the end of FY24, which ended on September 30, 2024. Religious affiliation provided by the Refugee Processing Center is self-reported. Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious groups that self-identify as Christians are included in that category, even though some Christians would classify them as a distinct religious tradition. The Refugee Processing Center's data categorizes Yezidis as a distinct, non-Christian religious tradition from FY12 through FY22, but includes Yezidis as Christians for FY23 and FY24; we have continued to categorize Yezidis as a distinct, non-Christian religious tradition. Note that numbers vary in some cases from those reported in the first and second editions of this report because (a) these figures are reported based on the federal government's fiscal year, not the calendar years that were used in the first edition, and (b) because the countries on the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List have changed in some cases from the 2020 and 2023 reports used in the first and second editions of this report, respectively.

While this report focuses primarily on the effects of changes to U.S. refugee and asylum policy on persecuted Christians, various other religious minority groups that have faced religious persecution also have been resettled to the U.S. as refugees. **As Christians, we believe that all people have the right to religious freedom, and that religious minorities of any sort — not just those who share our Christian faith — should be protected.**

Compared to 2020, the number of refugees resettled in 2024 has increased:

↑ **186%**
AMONG JEWISH REFUGEES

↑ **5,100%**
AMONG SABEAN-MANDEAN REFUGEES

↑ **627%**
AMONG AHMADIYYA MUSLIM REFUGEES

↑ **579%**
AMONG BAHÁ'Í REFUGEES

↑ **975%**
AMONG ZOROASTRIAN REFUGEES

↑ **944%**
AMONG MUSLIM REFUGEES FROM BURMA
Including most Rohingya

↑ **940%**
AMONG YEZIDI REFUGEES



TESTIMONY: **FARIDA**

📍 ALGERIA



IMAGE BY MOUNIR ABDI

In 2011, **Farida** had a dream that **changed the trajectory of her life**. She dreamed that she entered a church and received a blessing from a priest. She woke up and resolved to read the gospels, then ultimately made the decision to follow Jesus.

Farida was overjoyed by her newfound faith, but she also knew that to convert from Islam to Christianity was illegal — potentially punishable by death — under the Algerian Ministry of Religion’s interpretation of Islamic law. She eventually revealed her conversion to her father. **He shocked her by discreetly revealing that he, too, was a Christian.**

Farida’s husband, however, responded violently to her decision, which led to the first persecution she experienced. When she responded by seeking a divorce, he threatened to take their children, since for Farida to tell them about Jesus also would have been illegal. Farida was terrified she would lose her children.

She encountered a sympathetic believer at the Polish embassy who was able to help

Farida and her children escape to Poland, and then, since she spoke French, she continued on to France. After several months, she was accepted for resettlement to the United States. A Catholic priest from Modesto, California, whom Farida providentially met when he was visiting France, agreed to help. Farida and her children arrived in California in January 2024, welcomed by this priest, the staff of World Relief Modesto and a Christian family who hosted her when she first arrived.

The adjustment to a new country and a new language has not been easy, but Farida is thankful to be safe and with her children. **She has become passionate about helping American Christians understand the persecution under which so many of their brothers and sisters in Christ around the world live.**

Here and throughout this report, some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still be at risk of persecution for their faith.

The U.S. Asylum Process

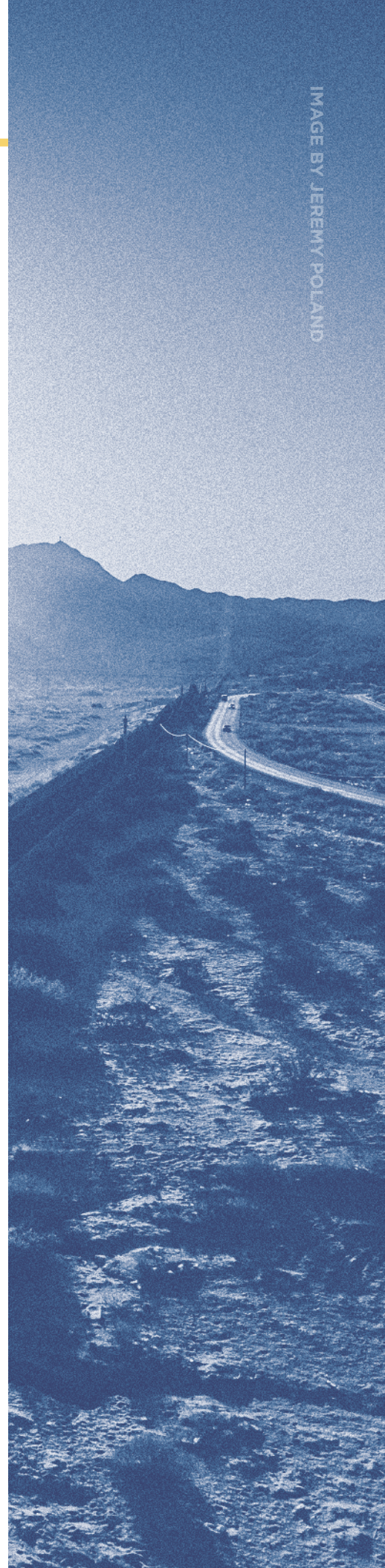
Whereas refugees who are resettled to the U.S. are identified and screened abroad — and subject to the annual ceiling on refugee resettlement set by the president — the Refugee Act of 1980 also formalized the process by which an individual who reaches the U.S. can request asylum. An asylum seeker is someone who professes to meet the definition of a refugee — having fled his or her country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group — but whose claim has not yet been verified by an appropriate governmental authority. Because asylum seekers have not been given an official status yet, they are often vulnerable to hardship, exploitation and injustice as they wait to be recognized by a host country.

Under current U.S. law, there is no limit on the number of individuals who can receive asylum each year. The U.S. has committed itself, both in the Refugee Act and as a party to an international convention, not to return someone who can establish that they qualify for asylum to a situation of potential danger.

Because one must physically reach the United States to request asylum — whether on an airplane, a ship or by reaching a land border — it has generally been accessible only to those who are geographically proximate to the U.S. or who are among the relatively few who qualify for a tourist or other non-immigrant visa, which is generally necessary to board an airplane.

Increasingly over the past several years, however, individuals from South American countries such as Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have made an extremely treacherous journey through Panama’s Darien Gap to reach the U.S.-Mexico border. And a growing number of individuals from the Eastern Hemisphere who have found countries in Central or South America that would grant them visas then made the journey north. In FY20, 89% of **encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border** — which includes both those apprehended by the Border Patrol after having entered unlawfully and those without a visa who reported to a lawful port of entry — were individuals from Mexico or Central America. By FY23, the Mexican and Central American share of all encounters had fallen to 53%.

An individual in the United States may request asylum either “affirmatively,” submitting a request to the United States Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) within the Department of Homeland Security if they are already present lawfully in the U.S. on a temporary



basis, or “defensively,” when facing a removal hearing before an immigration judge, as is usually the case for those who arrive without a visa at the U.S. border. In **FY21**, just 16,628 individuals (not including spouses or minor children of principal applicants) were granted asylum either by USCIS or by an immigration judge, the lowest number in decades. This was largely the result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to shutdowns of U.S. embassies and USCIS offices and to a near-total halt on processing of asylum applications for those who came through the U.S.-Mexico border under public health restrictions known as Title 42. However, the number of asylum approvals also was on a steep decline even before the COVID pandemic because of increasingly restrictive policies limiting access to asylum.

By FY22, the total number of individuals granted asylum more than doubled to 36,615. While full data is not yet available for FY23 and FY24, particularly for affirmative asylum approvals from USCIS, the number of approvals by the **immigration courts increased** from 25,417 in FY22 to 35,122 in FY23. As of August 2024, the number of FY24 asylum approvals in immigration court was on track to be like 2023.

Asylum cases can be difficult to win, even when the asylum seeker has legitimately fled

persecution. This is because the burden of proof in an asylum case is on the asylum seeker, and often they lack documentary evidence of what they claim to have experienced. While an asylum seeker has the right to an attorney at their own expense, they are not generally provided with an attorney by the immigration court. Those without representation — who are generally seeking to navigate a complex law in a foreign language — **are at least 2.5 times less likely** to be granted asylum by an immigration judge than those represented by counsel.

While comprehensive data on the religious demographics of asylum seekers or on the particular legal ground(s) of persecution on which asylum requests were based are not readily available, it is clear that asylum has been an important tool for persecuted Christians able to escape their countries of origin and reach the United States. Just among affirmative asylum decisions made by USCIS, the share of all asylum approvals based on religious persecution has been at least 13.2% and as high as 19.5% in the most recent years for which **data** is available.

For asylum decisions made by the immigration courts, specific data on the religious demographics of applicants is not publicly available. However, in FY23, more than **15,800 individuals** were granted asylum by U.S. im-



migration judges from the 50 countries on the 2024 World Watch List, accounting for about 59 percent of the cases adjudicated from those countries. More than 40 percent of those asylum approvals came from just two populous countries, India (#11 on the 2024 World Watch List) and China (#19). Another 22 percent came from the four countries on the 2024 World Watch List in Latin America.

In recent years, the U.S. asylum system has become increasingly associated with U.S. border policy. In **December 2023**, the Border Patrol made 249,741 apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border, the highest number on record. In recent years, many if not most of those apprehended have not sought to evade the Border Patrol to sneak into the United States, as was much more common a decade ago, but to turn themselves in to the Border Patrol in order to begin an asylum process.

The language of longstanding **U.S. asylum law** allows an individual who reaches the United States to seek asylum “whether or not at a designated port of arrival.” Previously, most asylum seekers who arrived via land border would seek asylum at a lawful port of entry, without crossing unlawfully, but beginning **in 2016 under the Obama administration** and expanded in subse-

quent administrations, **“metering” policies** have limited the number of individuals who are allowed to seek asylum at ports of entry on a given day, leading to long waits in what are often dangerous communities on the Mexican side of the border. An increasing number of individuals have crossed the border unlawfully between ports of entry to seek out a Border Patrol agent and begin an asylum request.

Since January 2023, the primary and usually sole way to begin an asylum request at a port of entry is by using an app known as CBP One. Currently, there are 1,450 CBP One appointments available daily at different ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border, allowing an individual who is physically present in Mexico (but not, if they are non-Mexican, in their country of origin) to request an appointment at which they could initially present their request for asylum.

Some individuals, of course, do not have access to a smartphone or to a place to charge their phone battery in order to access the app. For those who do, the number of individuals trying to secure these appointments dramatically exceeds the daily number available, such that individuals often wait several months — sometimes as long as **eight to nine months** as of August 2024 — to successfully secure an appointment, through this lottery-like



system. Not surprisingly, many have instead crossed the border unlawfully, particularly when informed (sometimes by a profit-motivated smuggler) that U.S. law allows asylum requests regardless of one's mode of entry.

This situation has clearly become dysfunctional, with so many individuals being apprehended by the Border Patrol and insufficient governmental capacity to either quickly adjudicate claims or to detain those apprehended that individuals have been routinely background checked and then given an

immigration court date in the interior of the United States. Some will eventually be granted asylum, but based on recent court data, most likely will not — though it could take many years before they receive a final decision. Overwhelmed immigration judges are also dismissing an unprecedented number of immigration court cases without issuing a final decision.

Individuals released into the U.S. are allowed under the law to be present while they await their final court disposition but are never-



TESTIMONY: MUSTAFA

📍 AFGHANISTAN

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 was like a death sentence for **Mustafa** and his young family. Their Christian faith and Mustafa's job with the U.S.-backed Afghan government **put their lives in grave danger nearly overnight**. At first, they hid and prayed in their home for two days. One night, the Taliban tore through their neighborhood. They had nowhere to run, so Mustafa and his wife fell to their knees and prayed for God's protection. **Miraculously, the Taliban inexplicably bypassed their home.**

The roads to Kabul airport were already controlled by the Taliban, so the family traveled by bus to Pakistan. They then caught a flight to Brazil — one of few countries offering humanitarian visas to Afghans at the time. Still feeling unsafe, they began a perilous trek north to the United States, including passing through the infamous Darien Gap in Panama. **"I saw the presence of God in every single step of my journey** — all the way. I felt the

presence of God when I was escaping from Afghanistan. God protected me ... The same thing in the Panama jungle ... We just prayed and **God saved us.**"

Once they reached the U.S.-Mexico border, Mustafa faced a complicated legal process to request asylum. Through a few God-ordained connections, Mustafa discovered World Relief Southern California, whose staff and volunteers came alongside his family to provide legal assistance, temporary housing and a supportive community.

As of this writing, Mustafa's asylum case is still pending, but having seen God rescue them over the past three years in miraculous ways, **he is confident God will provide again.**

Here and throughout this report, some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still be at risk of persecution for their faith.



theless ineligible to apply for employment authorization until at least five months after submitting an asylum application. Identifying and paying for a legal representative to complete an asylum application can take months, so many individuals are ineligible to work lawfully for a year or more.

Hundreds of thousands of individuals — some with very strong asylum claims, including those who had fled persecution on account of their religion, but also likely many without strong cases, who may have fled economic hardship or other situations that would not in themselves qualify an individual for asylum — are living in cities throughout the U.S. legally barred from working to provide for themselves. Not surprisingly, individuals have either turned to unauthorized work or have faced homelessness, straining resources in municipalities around the United States.

Members of Congress have proposed competing changes to existing law to resolve this situation, but partisan gridlock has stymied those efforts.

In June 2024, the Biden-Harris administration implemented a **new regulation**, reinterpreting existing law such that most individuals who cross the border unlawfully are presumed to be ineligible for asylum, with very limited exceptions. That regulation faces legal challenges from those who argue that this policy



A migrant family stands in a shelter in Mexico where they live while waiting for their appointment to cross the border.

contradicts the clear language of the existing statute, but it is in effect as of the publication of this report. The number of apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border has dropped significantly, to the lowest levels since September 2020, likely as a result of this new rule as well as increased border enforcement by the Mexican government under diplomatic pressure from the United States.

This new policy of the Biden-Harris administration, however, has left those with genuine asylum claims — including those persecuted because of their faith in Jesus — at profound risk. Many wait for months in shelters on the Mexican side of the border, often operated by under-resourced local churches, for the opportunity to seek asylum through the CBP One app. Having fled persecution in their countries of origin, they now face **horribly high rates of violence, extortion and kidnapping in some Mexican border communities**, especially for women and children. On **September 30, 2024**, the Biden-Harris administration updated these regulations to further restrict the situations in which someone who crosses the border between ports of entry could apply for asylum.

Leaders of World Relief and of Open Doors US have affirmed the need for reforms to improve border security and the asylum process, both to ensure faster access to permanent protection for those who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution and to deter those without a genuine fear of persecution from misusing the asylum process.

However, we have also insisted that we must never simply give up on our nation's moral and legal commitment to asylum. Our nation should never return someone who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution to a situation of danger or even martyrdom. Any proposal that ends asylum altogether or rolls back due process would be a betrayal of our nation's commitment to offer refuge to those persecuted because of their faith.

TESTIMONY: **SOUZAN**

📍 IRAN



IMAGE BY ELNAZ ASADI

Souzan held a Bible study in her home. A seemingly benign, everyday activity.

Except... Souzan lived in Iran. She had been **secretly teaching the Bible** in her home for years when one of her friends brought two new friends. Souzan didn't know these new people, and she wasn't sure of their motives. Did they want to learn about the Bible and become Christians, or what was their purpose? Soon, both she and her husband began to notice that **they were being watched.**

Given the well-documented repression of the Iranian regime toward Christians and other religious minorities, they knew that they could be imprisoned or worse. They made the difficult decision to sell their businesses and their possessions and escape to Indonesia, where they were able to obtain visas. They hoped to stay in Indonesia for just a short time, but they ended up there for **twelve years**, where they struggled since they were ineligible to work lawfully and support themselves.

Finally, Souzan and her daughter and son were approved for resettlement to the United States. They arrived in Spokane, Washington, on September 26, 2023.

“My life in Iran was very good ... I live like rich people ... But we cannot go to church. We cannot pray,” reflects Souzan. **“I chose the freedom — free to pray, free to go anywhere. Especially for my children.”**

Souzan and her two children were **three of 342 Iranian Christians resettled to the U.S.** in FY23, an increase of 533 percent from FY20, when just 54 Iranian Christians were resettled.

Here and throughout this report, some names have been changed to protect the safety of individuals who may still be at risk of persecution for their faith.



TAKE ACTION

We believe that U.S. Christians have an important role to play in standing with persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ, and with others who face persecution, both in prayer and in advocacy.

We encourage you to pray:

- For persecuted Christians throughout the world, that they would be protected from danger, allowed to practice their faith freely and strengthened to persevere despite hardship.
- For persecuted and displaced people of any faith, that their dignity and value would be affirmed by all.
- For the global Church, that we would stand in solidarity with those who are persecuted so we can be a credible witness standing with those in situations of vulnerability.
- For those in positions of governmental authority, both in the U.S. and in other countries, that they would pursue justice and respect the religious freedom and other human rights of all.
- For those pursuing positions of authority in upcoming elections, that each candidate would understand and articulate the connections between religious freedom and forced migration, advocate for the protection of those persecuted for their faith and consistently employ rhetoric that affirms their dignity.

We encourage the U.S. government, and for you to advocate for your elected officials:

- To consistently prioritize the advancement of international religious freedom, and to leverage diplomatic influence to urge all countries to reduce religious persecution and discrimination.
- To sustain the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program, both consistently setting the annual refugee ceiling at a high level such as 125,000 and investing in the overseas processing and domestic resettlement infrastructure to ensure that this goal is met.
- To ensure that those persecuted for their faith continue to have access to the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program alongside those persecuted for other reasons.
- To sustain and continue to improve the Welcome Corps private sponsorship process, which allows everyday Americans to name specific refugees abroad for resettlement, allowing Americans to stand with specific individuals and families who have fled persecution on account of their faith.
- To reject changes to asylum processing that reduce access to due process and present new barriers to those with credible fears of persecution from accessing protection in the United States.
- To reform our border and asylum policies in ways that both improve security and protect due process for those who profess to be fleeing persecution.

ABOUT WORLD RELIEF & OPEN DOORS US

world relief 

World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization whose mission is to boldly engage the world's greatest crises in partnership with the church. The organization was founded in the aftermath of World War II to respond to the urgent humanitarian needs of war-torn Europe. Since then, for 80 years, across 100 countries, World Relief has partnered with local churches and communities to develop sustainable, locally-driven solutions to some of our world's greatest problems, including partnering with the U.S. State Department and with thousands of local churches to resettle more than 300,000 refugees to the United States since 1979.

Learn more at www.worldrelief.org.

 **OpenDoors**

Open Doors US is part of the global ministry of Open Doors. Open Doors originated in 1955 when its founder, Brother Andrew, began smuggling Bibles to Christians behind the Iron Curtain. Now, Open Doors works in more than 70 countries, supplying Bibles; training church leaders; providing practical aid, emergency relief, and long-term support; and strengthening Christians who suffer persecution and discrimination for their faith.

For more information, visit OpenDoorsUS.org.



