

— *State of the* —
GOLDEN DOOR

*Evaluating U.S. Refugee Resettlement and Asylum in
Light of Global Christian Persecution*

Opening Letter

September, 2026

from Myal Greene, president and CEO of World Relief,
and Ryan Brown, president and CEO of Open Doors US

The environment into which we release this, the fourth edition of this report, most closely mirrors that into which the [first edition](#) was released six years ago.

In 2020, 80 million people around the world had been forced to flee their homes by persecution, war or violence, and more than 280 million Christians faced persecution and discrimination on account of their faith. In the United States, the refugee resettlement program had undergone significant retrenchment, narrowing the number of Christians arriving from top countries known for persecution by 90% compared to arrivals five years before.

Since then, the number of those forced to flee their homes due to persecution, violence and human rights violations has ballooned, peaking in the last two years and settling at 117 million according to the UN's [latest update](#) in Spring 2026. The number of Christians facing persecution on account of their faith is at an all time high: [388 million](#), representing about 14% of Christians around the world.

Of course, not every Christian or religious minority experiencing persecution will be under attacks sufficiently threatening to force them to leave their home, or beyond that, their country of origin. The reasons someone finds him or herself seeking refuge in a third country are multifaceted, and religious beliefs are just one of five grounds of persecution rec-

ognized in the international legal definition of a refugee.

However, it's undeniable that a significant percent of those who are refugees have made the excruciating decision to leave their home because of credible threats on account of their religion.

Not every refugee will seek refuge in a third country, and the U.S. is only one of many countries that receives refugees. That said, throughout its 250-year history as a nation, the U.S. has, for many, represented a "golden door" to freedom, including religious freedom, as described by Emma Lazarus and inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. This report's iterations have shown over the years how the U.S.'s refugee resettlement and asylum processes have provided needed haven for Christians and other religious minorities who have had to flee their homes.

This year, however, the U.S. has not been a haven to Christians — or any other religious minority. With less than one month remaining in the federal fiscal year, not a single religious minority refugee has been resettled in 2026 from any of the top countries of concern for religious persecution. The "golden door" to those fleeing religious persecution has been effectively closed.

As with the three previous editions of this report, this fourth edition is not intended to

endorse or disparage a particular administration or political party. Both of our organizations are nonpartisan.

Rather, this report is intended to draw the U.S. church's attention to the ways in which our country's refugee and asylum policies have direct implications for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. It also seeks to educate candidates for political office and sitting lawmakers on the impact of those same policies. In the lead-up to the midterm congressional elections, the report further aims to demonstrate to policymakers that concern for persecuted Christians is deeply held among many of their Christian constituents, and that refugee and asylum policies have direct consequences for members of the global body of Christ.

Further, as we took care to note in previous editions, our concern is not limited to the persecution of Christians, but of anyone experiencing persecution. We believe that all human beings are created in God's image, with inherent dignity, and as such, are worth protecting. We also take seriously the Old Testament command to welcome the stranger, as well as Jesus' admonition to care for the neighbor, illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan, as extending beyond those who happen to share the same ethnic or religious characteristics.

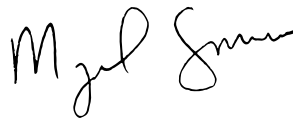
We are not alone in that conviction. Recent polling by Lifeway Research found that 70% of evangelical Christians [believe](#) the U.S. has a moral responsibility to accept refugees, regardless of whether those refugees are Christian. Even more recently, 82% of Protestant pastors [agreed](#).

When we titled the first edition of the report "Closed Doors," we believed the phrase accu-

rately captured the posture of the U.S. as reflected in the refugee and asylum policies at the time. In subsequent editions, we changed the title to "State of the Golden Door" to more objectively reflect evolving conditions. There are many reasons we could have returned to the original title for this edition. Instead, we chose to retain the newer name, holding onto the hope that the U.S. can again remember why it has historically adopted policies that offer refuge to those fleeing persecution and danger.

Our prayer is that this report would challenge the U.S. church to consider how its public witness can be marked by solidarity with fellow Christians facing extreme persecution around the world, and equip believers to advocate and pray on their behalf.

Myal Greene



President + CEO
World Relief

Ryan Brown



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Introduction

The world is facing a crisis of displacement. Globally, among the 117 million displaced persons, approximately 41.6 [million people](#) were categorized as refugees by the United Nations refugee agency at the end of 2025, along with an additional 9 million asylum-seekers around the world. Seventy percent of refugees were in protracted situations, meaning they had been displaced for at least five years with no immediate solution in sight. Thirty-nine percent were children. More than seven out of ten refugees came from just six countries: Afghanistan, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Venezuela.

Many of these refugees faced dangerous conditions in their home countries due to their religion, including many persecuted Christians. [One in seven Christians](#) (over 388 million) face high levels of persecution or discrimination. Key aspects of the persecution Christians face today include religious nationalism, authoritarian regimes, ethnic/clan oppression and organized crime/corruption. In addition, many Christian refugees often flee political and economic pressures alongside serious religious persecution.

Throughout its history, the U.S. has grown through the arrival of individuals and families fleeing persecution of a variety of kinds. These personal and communal experiences motivated our founding fathers to enshrine protections for speech and religion into our founding documents.

While the nation's posture towards immigrants has ebbed and flowed over the years, the period following World War II marked a

more thoughtful, intentional effort to protect refugees. In part, this reflected a reckoning with the moral failure of having refused some refugees in the early days of the Holocaust, as well as a resolve to further enshrine the nation's founding ideals of religious liberty. In 1980, the U.S. codified its commitment to refugee resettlement through the passage of the Refugee Act, which established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. This has served as the primary mechanism for refugees to seek safety in the U.S. ever since.

As the history of this report can attest, the U.S.'s legacy as a haven for refugees and asylum seekers has become increasingly inconsistent in the last few years. In FY2021, only 11,411 refugees were admitted. By FY2024, the number of refugees increased dramatically, to more than 100,000. Yet this year, with just one month remaining in the federal fiscal year, the total number of individuals resettled through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program is on track to fall near FY2021's historic low, somewhere between 11,000 and 16,000.

Alongside the stark decline in overall refugee resettlement, those persecuted on account of their faith have been deprioritized — even shut out altogether. In FY2020, the top-mentioned priority identified in President Trump's [annual refugee determination](#) was for refugees with a well-founded fear of persecution related to their religion. By contrast, the FY2026 refugee determination solely allocates admissions to ethnic minorities from one country where there is no significant record of religious persecution. Only three refugees were resettled from a country on the Open Doors World



Watch List, and those individuals were not religious minorities. We can conclude with a high degree of confidence that in FY2026, no refugees experiencing religious persecution will be resettled in the U.S.

The U.S. has long upheld religious freedom as a core principle, both at home and abroad, and multiple members of the current administration have repeatedly reaffirmed that commitment. Our hope is that the following pages will illustrate the increasingly urgent need to realign that commitment with the U.S.'s refugee and asylum policies.

Global Persecution of Christians

Today, across the world, one in seven Christians currently face persecution or prejudice from repressive governments and social environments. These threats — which span from restrictions on worship, to harassment, to death — appear today in authoritarian states like North Korea, Eritrea and Iran, as well as in states like Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen, which see high degrees of conflict between militant factions. More than 388 million Christians suffer under persecution in total, an all-time high.

The [Open Doors 2026 World Watch List](#), a research-based annual report tracking the levels of religious freedom for Christians worldwide, identifies prevailing global conditions which allow for persecution to occur. In addition to state-sponsored oppression, civil war and instability often create environments in which Christians cannot express their faith without significant risk to their lives. In the past year, at least 4,849 Christians have been killed for their faith, while thousands more have been arrested and imprisoned. Additionally, more than 224,000 Christians were also forced to flee their homes on account of persecution — a significant increase from previous years.

Aside from totalitarian regimes like North Korea and Eritrea, which have long stifled religious freedom, persecution in areas like Syria and Nigeria has rapidly escalated over the last year. Ongoing terror attacks against Christian individuals and congregations caused Syria to leap from #18 to #6 on the World Watch

List, while extremist violence in Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African (SSA) states has rendered 14 SSA countries unsafe enough to be placed on the World Watch List. In fact, the 3 states with the maximum score for violence are all sub-Saharan.

States where religious persecution is most severe frequently have high degrees of displacement. A common response to religious violence is migration, which often initially results in internal displacement, but which regularly leads to the need for cross-border migration as threats continue to grow. Three of the top six origin countries for refugees around the world have an “Extreme” persecution rating: Sudan (#4), Syria (#6) and Afghanistan (#11). Historically, many of the countries that have produced large numbers of refugees have also been among the leading countries of origin for refugees resettled in the U.S. In other words, U.S. refugee resettlement has often provided a pathway to safety for people fleeing countries where religious persecution is especially severe.

Perhaps one day these areas of the world will be safe for Christians to freely express their faith. However, until then, we bear a responsibility to provide a safe haven for the persecuted church across the world. This mission begins with an awareness of where our help is most needed, paving the way for further advocacy, with the eventual goal of securing freedom of worship for Christians worldwide.

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

Under an [international convention](#) to which the U.S. is a party, a refugee is defined as someone outside of his or her country of origin who is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of specific grounds.

While most refugees hope to return home if and when it is safe, that often remains impossible. In those cases, local integration in the country where they first sought refuge, known as a second country, presents another durable option. In rare cases, third-country resettlement may be a possibility, and the U.S. has historically been the top country to welcome refugees through this pathway.

For centuries, people fleeing persecution and violence have sought refuge in what is now the U.S., from those escaping religious persecution in England during the 17th century to families displaced by violence during the [Mexican Revolution](#) in the early 20th century. Congress passed its first legislation specifically for refugees, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, to support European refugees in the aftermath of World War II. In the decades that followed, the U.S. also welcomed many people fleeing Communist regimes in China, Cuba, Hungary and other countries.

In response to an influx of refugees following the Vietnam War, Congress passed the landmark Refugee Act of 1980, establishing the foundations of the modern American resettlement program. The 1990 Lautenberg Amendment facilitated the refugee admissions process for historically persecuted religious



Karungu spent 16 years as a refugee in Uganda. He applied to the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program in 2018 and was resettled in the U.S. in 2024.

minority groups, first from the former Soviet countries and later from Iran. Following 9/11, the U.S. has also [welcomed individuals](#) from countries including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, Syria, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, among many other countries.

Since the U.S. codified its commitment to refugee resettlement through the passage of the Refugee Act, the Refugee Admissions Program has been the primary mechanism for refugees to seek safety in the U.S. The law mirrored the international definition of a refugee, determining that those fleeing credible threats of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular group, could qualify as a refugee with proper documentation and screening.

Since then, the U.S. has [welcomed](#) nearly 3.7 million refugees. On average, the nation has resettled an average of about 73,500,

with more than 200,000 arriving in a single year in 1980 and several other years exceeding 100,000. In recent years, this number has plummeted.

In early 2025, the incoming administration **halted** all refugee resettlement via executive order, with only very narrow exceptions. And while the program was never officially restarted, the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2026 set a new precedent. Disregarding the traditional international legal definition of a refugee, individuals identified outside of their country of origin who have a well-founded fear of persecution, it instead made a provision for resettling 7,500 white South Africans, mostly of the Afrikaner heritage, whom it describes as “victims of unjust racial discrimination.” In June 2026, the ceiling was increased to 17,500, but still with the same singular focus on one population group.

Notwithstanding the hardship that some South Africans have experienced, South Africa is not known to be a country which restricts religious liberty, so any hardship experienced is unlikely to be religiously motivated.

Because the three individuals resettled this fiscal year who were not from South Africa were not members of religious minorities in their country of origin, we can confidently conclude that, thus far in FY2026, no refugees experiencing religious persecution were resettled in the U.S. Barring a significant change in U.S. policy in the final month of the federal fiscal year, we anticipate that FY2026 will be the first year in at least a quarter century, and likely in the entire history of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, in which persecuted religious minorities have been completely shut out.



Maguno was born in DR Congo and spent 30 years in a refugee camp in Tanzania before being resettled in the U.S. as a refugee.

Methodology

Data on the religious demographics of resettled refugees was obtained from the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center through FY2024, prior to this data being removed from the Refugee Processing Center website. This religious demographic data was not released for FY2025 or FY2026 YTD refugee admissions. A Freedom of Information Act request filed in late 2025 for religious demographics of refugees resettled in FY2025 has thus far not been processed. As such, the data for FY2025 are estimates calculated based on the FY2024 percentages of refugees from each country who were Christians, which were multiplied by the refugee admission numbers for those countries for FY2025. For FY2026 YTD, at least through July 2026, there had only been three refugees accepted from a country (Afghanistan) on the 2026 Open Doors World Watch List, and it was confirmed that they were not Christians or other religious minorities.

Data on the approval rates for asylum applications were calculated by comparing the number of asylum decisions by immigration judges each fiscal year for each country on the 2026 Open Doors World Watch List with the number of asylum grants. Both figures were obtained through [TRAC's database](#) of records from immigration court decisions collected through FOIA requests.

PHOTO VIA UNSPLASH

TESTIMONY

SHAMLO

📍 AFGHANISTAN

Growing up under the Taliban, repression was a constant aspect of Shamlo's life. Even after the U.S. military intervention and establishment of a new government, converting from Islam to Christianity could mean imprisonment or even death. So when he was introduced to Jesus by a professor and eventually joined an underground church, he tried to be very cautious about discussing his faith. One time when he did speak out, arguing for compassion across ethnic and religious lines and attributing the teachings to Jesus, he was later assaulted by masked bikers who nearly severed off his hand. Despite many surgeries, he still bears scars from that attack.

When the Taliban retook control of the country in 2021, Shamlo knew that he and his family were in extreme danger, especially as he and his brother had worked for the U.S. He went into hiding for weeks, often unable to eat because of the stress, before escaping to a refugee camp in the United Arab Emirates. He and his wife lived in a single cramped room for almost three years, along with their daughter after she was born in the camp in 2023.

Then after much waiting, Shamlo and his family were approved for resettlement to the U.S. They arrived in July 2024, along with more than 14,000 Afghans welcomed to the U.S. that year. Shamlo treasures the kindness of Americans who helped welcome him and the religious freedoms he has here, even as he keeps his faith quiet to protect extended family members who still live under increasingly oppressive Taliban rule.

A few months after his arrival, refugee resettlement to the U.S. was paused in entirety, which he grieves. "If we are going to follow Jesus," Shamlo said, "we should care about our brothers and sisters all across the world — anyone fleeing persecution to find protection and refuge."

Shamlo's name has been changed to protect his identity.

Source: [Seeking Refuge: The Humanitarian Face of the Global Refugee Crisis](#)

Operation PARRIS

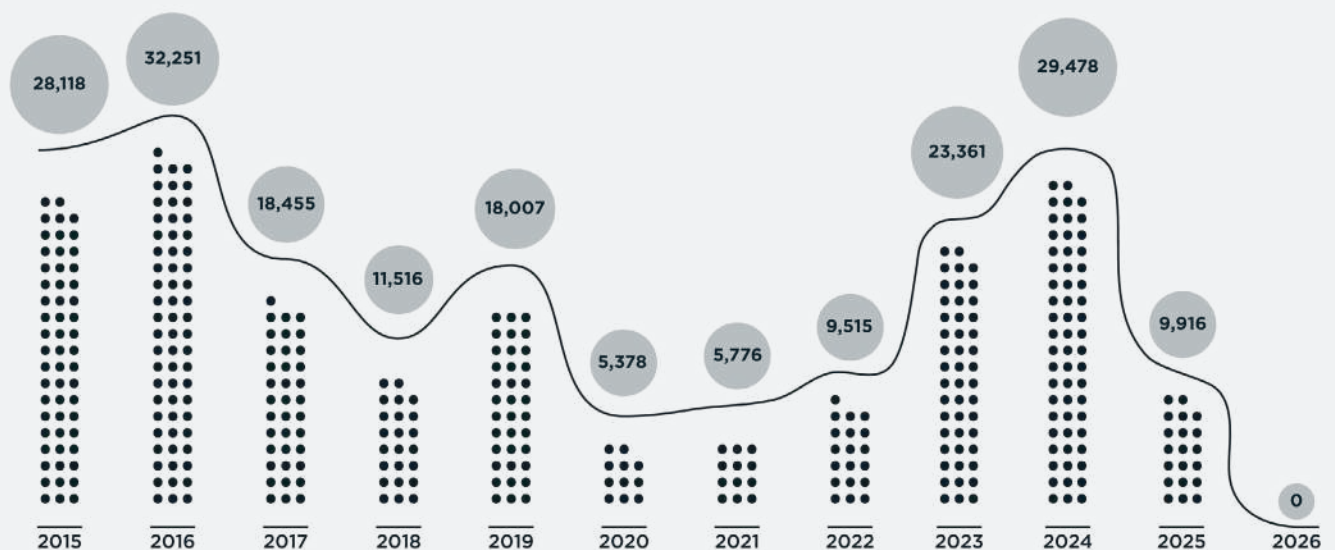
Refugees are some of the most thoroughly-vetted immigrants who come to America, as noted in [a report](#) by the Heritage Foundation, being admitted through an extensive process that often takes years. Once they have been present in the U.S. for a year, refugees are allowed and required to apply for “adjustment of status” to become Lawful Permanent Residents (“green card” holders). The precise timing of this step has historically not been understood to be rigid, but refugees are generally motivated to follow the procedure in a timely fashion. Revocations of refugee status have historically been very rare, occurring in cases of fraud or serious misrepresentation, and require a formal proceeding and due process for the refugee.

However, in November 2025, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced their [intention](#) to reopen the cases of approximately 230,000 refugees admitted under the previous administration, while also pausing green card processing for refugees who entered during the same time period. Then in January, DHS [announced](#) Operation PARRIS (Post-Admission Refugee Reverification and Integrity Strengthening) which they claimed would root out fraud in the ref-

ugee resettlement program. They began in Minnesota, specifically targeting 5,600 refugees who had not yet received green cards. Through Operation PARRIS, around [150 refugees](#) were detained, some through door-to-door arrests, and transferred to Texas for re-interviews. A number of these refugees were released in Texas without transportation back to Minnesota, and in some cases without their documentation.

The administration’s policies were quickly challenged in court. [U.H.A v Bondi](#) halted Operation PARRIS’s arrests and detentions in Minnesota, criticizing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for detaining refugees for lacking green cards while simultaneously preventing refugees from receiving them. An additional lawsuit seeking to prevent similar tactics nationwide, [Jean A. v Noem](#), is still ongoing but did enforce a nationwide pause on the policy until the case is decided. In light of the cases, DHS has shifted from detentions to call-in letters for re-interviews across the country. The policy continues to cause fear for refugees and their families, employers and communities, including for many whose refugee designation was based upon religious persecution.

Refugee Resettlement for Persecuted Christians Plummet



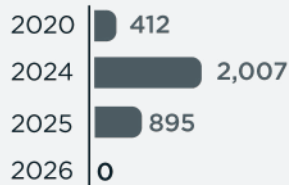
Arrival of Christian Refugees from the 50 Countries on the Open Doors 2026 World Watch List.

All data is provided by the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center through the end of fiscal year 2025, which ended on September 30, 2025. 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. Note that numbers vary in some cases from those reported in the first edition of this Closed Doors 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 Open Doors World Watch List have changed in some cases from the 2026 list used for this report compared to the 2020 report used in the first edition of this Closed Doors report. As noted in the section on methodology on page 9, figures for FY2025 are estimates, because religious demographics of refugees resettled in FY2025 have not been publicly released.

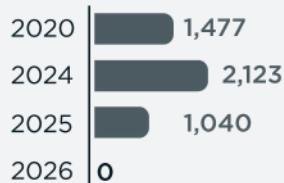
Number of Christian Refugee Arrivals from
Selected Countries: 2020, 2024, 2025, 2026



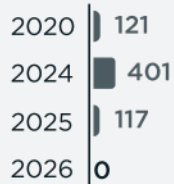
↓ **ERITREA**
#5 World Watch List



↓ **BURMA/
MYANMAR**
#14 World Watch List



↓ **IRAQ**
#18 World Watch List



↓ **DR CONGO**
#29 World Watch List



Christianity isn't the only religion impacted. Since 2024, refugee resettlement from **all of these groups** has flatlined, decreasing by

↓ 100%

- Jewish refugees
- Sabeen-Mandean refugees
- Ahmadiyya Muslim refugees
- Bahá'í refugees
- Zoroastrian refugees
- Muslim refugees from Burma (including most Rohingya)
- Yazidi refugees



PHOTO VIA UNSPLASH

TESTIMONY

SAW SHINING

📍 BURMA
(MYANMAR)

Saw Shining first arrived in Minnesota over 15 years ago as a refugee, having fled his home in Burma and spent decades in a Thai refugee camp. He joined a community of mostly Christian Karen people, members of a persecuted ethnolinguistic group from southeastern Burma. Living in Minneapolis, Saw Shining became a pastor of a congregation including other Karen Christians. Eventually, he also became a naturalized U.S. citizen.

When he and the Karen community heard President Trump's calls for aggressive immigration enforcement, they thought that those without a criminal record would be safe, especially given their legal status as refugees. However, as Operation PARRIS rolled out, it soon became clear that even some immigrants who were lawfully present and had not been charged with crimes were being targeted for detention. Overnight, the community became fearful of law enforcement, evoking memories of encounters with police in Burma and Thailand, where refugees were closely monitored and kept apart simply due to their status as refugees.

Out of caution, members of the Karen community in Minneapolis who were older or

spoke less English began to stay at home, even those that were American citizens like Saw Shining's parents. Nevertheless, between 30 to 50 lawfully present Karen refugees who had not yet received their green cards were detained during Operation PARRIS. One member of his previous church was separated for three weeks from her five-month-old baby — whom she had been breastfeeding prior to her detention — while she was being reinterviewed in Texas. While all members of the community have returned after judicial orders, call-in letters have continued to arrive for reinterviews.

Amidst the suffering they were facing, leaders at his church were grateful to find that others churches in Minnesota and across the country wanted to help, but they were deeply troubled by the events. "What happened [during Operation PARRIS] was really hard for our Karen people. We are not Thai or Burmese citizens; we are U.S. citizens. This nation is ours, and we must love, care for and support our Constitution. We do not want to become stateless again."

The U.S. Asylum Process

In addition to refugees who are screened and approved from a second country after fleeing their own, many people also arrive in the U.S. and seek asylum. An asylum seeker is someone who arrives in the U.S. (whether on a non-immigrant visa, humanitarian parole or by arriving at the border) and claims to meet the definition of a refugee — having a well-founded fear of persecution in their country of origin on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or membership in a particular social group. Whereas refugees are processed outside of the U.S. and are then invited to rebuild their lives on a permanent basis within the U.S., arriving on flights coordinated by the U.S. government, asylum seekers make their own way to the U.S. and are seeking recognition of their status as refugees after arrival in the country.

The Refugee Act of 1980 formalized the process by which an asylum seeker who has reached the U.S. can make a claim and be allowed to remain permanently once their claim is approved. Unlike refugees, there is no legal limit on the number of asylum seekers that can be approved each year. In the Refugee Act and as a party to an international convention, the U.S. has pledged not to turn away people who can demonstrate they meet the necessary conditions for asylum.

There are two main asylum pathways. The first is an “affirmative” claim, when the individual submits a claim to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). The other is a “defensive” claim, when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security seeks to deport someone and the person pleads asylum at a removal hearing in front of an immigration judge.

While many asylum seekers come from countries geographically close to the U.S., such as Mexico and Central America, many come from elsewhere in the world. In FY2020, 89% of encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border, including both those apprehended by Border Patrol after having entered unlawfully and those without a visa who arrived at a lawful port of entry, were people from Mexico or Central America. By FY2024, the Mexican and Central American share of all encounters had fallen to 51% and remained under 60% in FY2025. Memorably for many in the U.S., during the first several years of the 2020s, there was a surge in the number of people making the dan-



gerous journey from South American countries like Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru through Panama's Darien Gap to the U.S.-Mexico border. Additionally an increasing number of people from overseas countries such as Ukraine, India and China have gotten visas to Latin America and made their way to the U.S. border from there. In addition to these nations, many come to the U.S. wishing to seek asylum from top countries on the World Watch List.

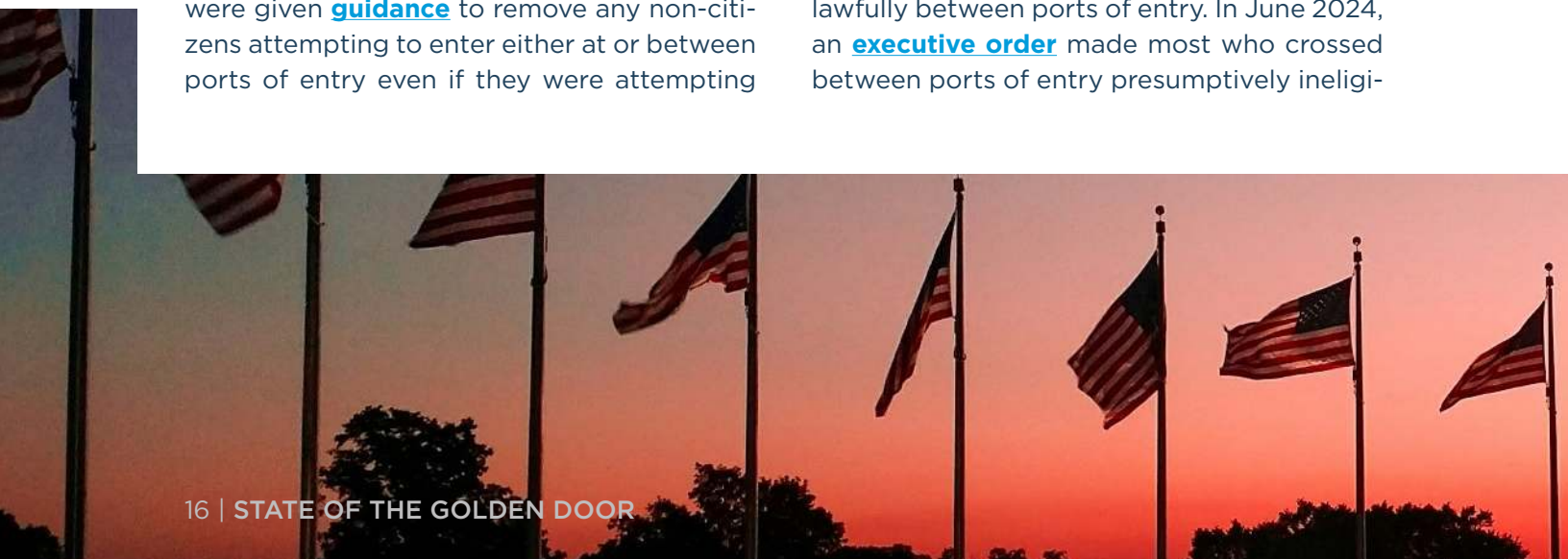
Since the start of the second Trump administration, the asylum process has been effectively shut down for individuals who arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border. By implementing a series of executive orders and reinstating old policies, the administration has eliminated previous pathways to asylum, complicated existing processes, determined to re-examine asylum applications made under previous administrations and attempted to prevent new asylum applications altogether.

The president began by proclaiming a [state of national emergency](#) at the U.S. southern border and authorizing the use of Department of Defense (DOD) resources to enforce immigration law. [In a separate order](#), the president declared an ongoing "invasion" at the southern border, and enforcement officials were given [guidance](#) to remove any non-citizens attempting to enter either at or between ports of entry even if they were attempting

to seek asylum. In fact, the order explicitly prohibited people who are attempting to enter or who are already present from invoking asylum status as protection from this order.

Federal judges [have since ruled](#) that by denying individuals the opportunity to even apply for asylum, the order had violated the law. While the case has been appealed and the government seeks a hearing before the Supreme Court, in the meantime, the order has remained partially in effect, allowing the U.S. government to effectively ignore all asylum seekers at the southern border.

U.S. law establishes the right of any individual who arrives in the U.S. to seek asylum "whether or not at a designated port of arrival." In the past, asylum seekers were permitted to make a claim at a lawful port of entry with few restrictions. But since 2016, first the Obama administration and then subsequent administrations have implemented "metering" policies that limit the number of individuals who are allowed to seek asylum at ports of entry on a given day. This prevents asylum seekers from physically setting foot in the U.S. and thus keeping them from making an asylum claim. The effect was that individuals would often wait in unsafe conditions on the Mexican side of the border or would cross unlawfully between ports of entry. In June 2024, an [executive order](#) made most who crossed between ports of entry presumptively inelig-



ble for asylum, which pushed people to the CBP One app, an online platform that beginning in January 2023 allowed individuals who arrived at the border to request an appointment at a lawful port of entry to begin the process of requesting asylum. The CBP One app was shut down in January 2025 and has not been replaced with any other process by which to request a lawful entry to begin an asylum request.

In June 2026, the Supreme Court ruled in *Mullin v. Al Otro Lado* that individuals must physically step foot on U.S. soil to count as having arrived in the U.S. to make an asylum claim and that metering policies that physically prevent individuals from reaching U.S. soil were permissible. Without an ability to reach a lawful port of entry and with asylum requests halted by the declaration of emergency for those who cross between ports of entry, asylum requests for those who arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border have effectively been suspended entirely.

Obtaining asylum has also become increasingly difficult for those already present in the United States with pending applications. USCIS **paused** adjudication of all affirmative asylum applications for several months, and it continues to challenge a **court order** to adjudicate affirmative asylum requests. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detains some asylum seekers when they appear for

their scheduled immigration court hearings, and the administration recently **announced** it will remove some affirmative asylum applicants' right to a USCIS interview and channel more applicants into the defensive process in immigration court.

Further, due to various directives by the administration, the approval rate for asylum cases has gone down dramatically in the past year. That means for people who get the chance to defend an asylum claim in court, the chances of it being granted are slim. In cases before immigration judges, the grant rate for asylum was 47.5% in FY2023, but by FY2025 it had fallen to just 23.5%, an unprecedented low. In FY2026 YTD, the rate has gone down even further to only 7.7%.

The religious demographics of asylum requests or asylum grants are not available, nor are we aware of data on what share of defensive asylum requests relate to religious persecution. However, among **affirmative asylum applications**, 8.1% of all granted asylum requests — 1,050 cases — were based on religious persecution in 2023, not including others based on multiple grounds of persecution.

While data is not publicly available on the religious demographics of those who seek asylum defensively, it's clear that as the overall asylum approval rate has plummeted, Christians fleeing religious persecution are



much less likely to be approved as well. Overall, 17,157 individuals (of all religious backgrounds) from the countries on the World Watch List were granted asylum by immigration judges in FY2023, accounting for 58% of all asylum decisions for individuals from these fifty countries. But in FY2025, the approval rate declined to 26% for individuals from these countries. During the first nine months of FY2026, the approval rate for these countries had declined further, to just 10%.

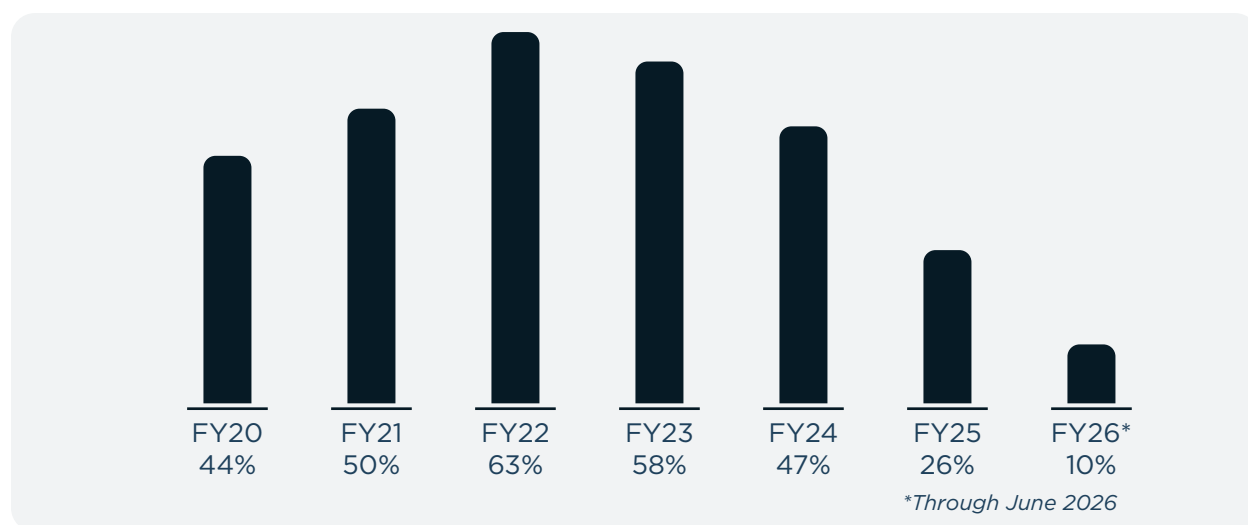
Specific countries that rank high on the World Watch List for Christian persecution such as Iran (#10), India (#12) and China (#17) have been particularly affected by the stark decline in asylum approval rates in immigration court. For each year from FY2020 to FY2024, at least 62% of asylum decisions for Indian nationals were approvals, but for FY2026, the asylum approval rate has dropped to just 6%.

Iran has historically had very high rates of asylum approvals before immigration judges, above 80% from FY2020 through FY2024, but for FY2025 and FY2026 year-to-date, it

has fallen to just 38%, with most Iranian asylum applicants being denied.

Rates of asylum approval for Chinese nationals have fallen from as high as 88% in FY2022 to just 29% thus far in FY2026.

The decrease in approved asylum cases coincides with a dramatic increase in the number of asylum claims being adjudicated. FY2025 saw 121,936 decisions, the highest ever, likely due to the speed at which cases were being decided. In the past, immigration judges would only hear two or three dozen cases at a time at initial “master” hearings. Now, in immigration courts like Chicago, Boston and Dallas, judges are holding [“mega master”](#) hearings that sometimes include 100 or more applicants at a time. These hearings are overwhelming courthouses and making it more difficult for asylum seekers to get a fair trial. In attempts to speed up the process, hearings originally scheduled for as late as 2029 are being moved up. While people are supposed to be notified of their hearing being rescheduled, oftentimes they are not adequately given notice or advised of their options. This



Asylum approval rate in immigration court for individuals from the 50 countries on the World Watch List

leads to many people not showing up for their hearing and receiving a removal order even if they might have had a credible case.

The administration has also directed immigration judges to summarily dismiss asylum (or “pretermitt”) cases if an application is incomplete or if a case is deemed not to have sufficient information. This expedites the process, but it denies a full and fair hearing to those seeking asylum. Reports [show](#) judges are dismissing these cases for failing to answer every question on the 12-page asylum form, labeling them “legally insufficient,” rather than giving applicants a chance to fill in missing information as was the practice previously. 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 — [at least 21% of applicants](#) — are forced to navigate complex legal documents often in a foreign language and are about four

times less likely to be granted asylum based on FY2025 rates.

Asylum cases can be difficult to win even without these complications. For many people who have legitimately fled persecution, producing documentary evidence is not always easy, in part because contexts conducive to persecution often do not have the infrastructure to corroborate accounts or the authority structures themselves may be corrupt.

Unlike criminal or civil courts, immigration courts are under the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) within the Department of Justice and are subject to executive authority. That means that immigration justices are subject to administration directives. In 2025, EOIR trimmed about a quarter of all immigration judges, firing [over 100](#), most of whom tended to approve a relatively high percentage of asylum cases.

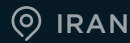


Yousif is an Afghan Christian who fled Afghanistan with his wife and child after the fall of Kabul.

The experience of asylum seekers in 2025 and 2026 has been unpredictable and chaotic. While the leaders of both World Relief and Open Doors US affirm the need to ensure secure borders and the need for reforms to the asylum system, those goals cannot come at the cost of legitimate asylum applicants’ safety and right to a fair process. Ultimately, reforms must ensure the timely adjudication of claims while filtering out those without legitimate claims seeking to abuse the system. The combination of changes outlined here have together, functionally discontinued the asylum system in the U.S. This means, in turn, that for those asylum seekers with legitimate concerns of persecution on account of their faith, the U.S. may not offer the safety it has for many years promised to provide.

TESTIMONY

ARA



Featured Image: Pastor Ara prays with supporters outside the White House.

Despite the threats of torture and death for Muslim converts to Christianity, Ara Torosian was committed to sharing the gospel and smuggling Bibles into Iran. After being discovered and spending two years under house arrest, he fled his homeland and was resettled in the U.S. in part through the Lautenberg program, which presumes eligibility for refugee status for individuals of certain religious minority groups that have faced a history of persecution in Iran or the former Soviet Union. He is now a pastor at Cornerstone Church, an evangelical congregation in West Los Angeles where many members are Iranian refugees who also benefited from the U.S.' commitment to welcome persecuted Christians and others oppressed for their religion.

That commitment is now under unprecedented threat. Resettlement of refugees fleeing from persecution, including from religious persecution, has been paused since President Trump took office. The administration has also closed the Resettlement Support Cen-

ter in Austria, where Iranian religious minorities were processed through the Lautenberg pipeline before arriving in the U.S. More than 14,000 persecuted Iranians [who had already been approved](#) for resettlement have now been left in limbo.

At Cornerstone, Iranian asylum seekers Reza and Marjan were detained by DHS in June 2025. A second family was also detained, including their 3-year-old daughter. With the help of World Relief, Ara traveled to Washington, D.C. just a few weeks later, where he prayed, fasted and met with members of Congress and the administration to advocate for his congregants and other Iranian Christian asylum seekers in detention.

The family with the 3-year-old was released shortly after Ara returned to Los Angeles, and received asylum in July. Marjan was released after around four months and granted asylum, while Reza was held for nine months and received protections from being deported to Iran. However, he was not granted asylum, nor provided transportation from his detention center in El Paso, Texas, back to Los Angeles. Instead, his church raised money for his airfare to return home. He is not protected from deportation to a third-party country and his situation remains tenuous.

Overall, more than 19 members of Ara's church have experienced detention in the U.S. since June 2025, including five children under 12, some of whom were separated from their parents. These numbers will only rise as more and more Iranian asylum-seekers join his church each week. "I did not become an American citizen simply to enjoy freedom, but to defend it," Pastor Ara noted. "If my voice cannot be used for those who are still suffering because of their faith, then I have misunderstood the blessing America gave me."

Non-refoulement & Deportation Agreements

The principle of non-refoulement, established in international law and in U.S. statute, states that countries will not deport anyone (especially refugees and asylum seekers) back to nations where their “life or freedom would be threatened” on account of “race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

To avoid explicitly violating the principle of non-refoulement, the Department of State has made arrangements with third countries to allow the U.S. to deport would-be asylum seekers to these other countries rather than back to the asylum seeker’s home country. As a result, over **21,000 people** have been deported to countries to which they have never been, have no connections in, and in some cases, do not even speak the language. The U.S. currently has third-country removal agreements with **35** nations, most of which are in Africa or Central America. Since these agreements are not public, the exact details of this process is unclear, but some agreements have resulted in people being repatriated by the third country back to the country where they initially fled persecution.

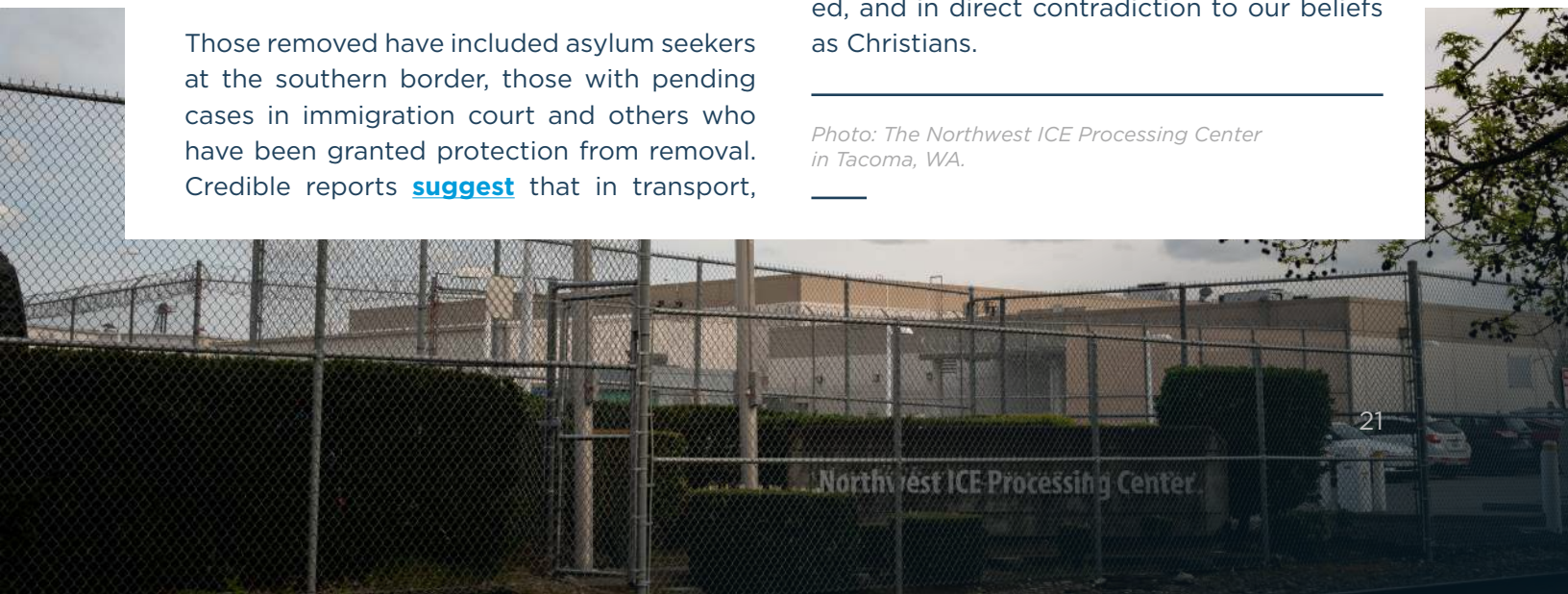
Those removed have included asylum seekers at the southern border, those with pending cases in immigration court and others who have been granted protection from removal. Credible reports **suggest** that in transport,

individuals have been shackled, held in primitive conditions and threatened with being sent back to their home country. Furthermore, when people are being sent to countries where they have almost no resources, it renders them extremely vulnerable to abuse and injustice.

These third-country deportations have impacted persecuted Christians. In **an incident** in February 2025, an Iranian woman who converted to Christianity and fled fearing persecution made it into the U.S. only to have her claims for asylum ignored. She was subsequently sent to a detention camp in Panama’s jungle. There, she was held, along with several other Iranian Christians who had sought asylum in the U.S., only to be turned away.

These policies have been repeatedly challenged in court — both in the U.S. and in the third countries themselves. However, as of 2026, the deportations continue. World Relief and Open Doors US firmly believe that returning someone to a place of persecution — however indirectly — is a stark violation of the principles on which our nation was founded, and in direct contradiction to our beliefs as Christians.

Photo: The Northwest ICE Processing Center in Tacoma, WA.



Join Us in Action

This report is an appeal to American Christians, and reflects our conviction that believers in the U.S. have an important role to play in the global Body of Christ. While we may not face the atrocities endured by our brothers and sisters, we can join in their suffering and lift our voices on their behalf.

Join us by praying:

- For Christians around the world facing persecution, that they would be protected from danger, upheld and sustained, and that ways might be opened for them to worship and practice their faith freely, in peace.
- For those persecuted of any faith, that their dignity and worth might be recognized and honored by all.
- For the global church, that we would be a credible witness, standing in solidarity with the vulnerable and the persecuted.
- For those in positions of governmental authority, in the seats of power in the U.S. and around the world, that justice would be pursued and rights would be upheld.
- For candidates seeking positions of authority, that each would recognize the connection between the violations of religious freedom and forced migration, advocate for those persecuted for their faith and embrace rhetoric that affirms the dignity of all and does not degrade.

Join us by advocating to your elected officials:

- To consistently and continuously prioritize the advancement of religious freedom, at home and abroad, and to exercise diplomatic influence to urge all countries to curb and eliminate religious persecution and discrimination.
- To reopen the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, set an annual ceiling at a historically consistent level and invest in the overseas processing and domestic resettlement infrastructure towards meeting this goal.
- To ensure that those persecuted for their faith continue to have access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program alongside those persecuted for other reasons recognized by U.S. and international law, including once again setting a priority category for individuals fleeing religious persecution within the FY27 Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions.
- To rehabilitate and restore asylum processing to simultaneously provide increased capacity while enabling the timely consideration and approval of legitimate asylum claims.
- To reform our border and asylum processes in ways that preserve security while ensuring due process for those who profess to flee persecution.

About World Relief & Open Doors US



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.

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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.

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