



Reports

Dennis P. Petri

Actions against places of worship
in 2022–2023 (VID)

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

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Actions against places of worship in 2022–2023 (VID)

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Actions against places of worship in 2022–2023 (VID)

Out of 4338 incident records (rows) in the Violent Incidents Database (VID) in 2022–2023, 489 involved attempts to vandalize, desecrate or destroy places of worship (roughly 11.27 % of all incidents).

The religion most affected by attempts of vandalism, desecration or destruction of religious sites and buildings is Christianity. Up to 89 % of all recorded attacks were aimed at Christian locations, followed by Islam at 3 %, Judaism at 2 %, Hinduism and Buddhism at 1 % each, and the “other” category at 3 %. Organized crime, government officials and normal citizens made up the top three known categories of perpetrators of such attacks, at 18 %, 9 % and 8 % respectively. At the time of writing this report, the database is still being updated; as such, data might be incomplete and require further processing and review.

According to data in the VID, Ukraine had the most attacks against places of worship with 642 religious sites either completely or partially destroyed. Region-wise, Latin America was prone to similar attacks, with Mexico, Argentina and Colombia taking the second, third and fourth countries with most attacks on places of worship. Another region with high attacks is the Indian subcontinent. Although not included in the top 10 countries by attempts table below, Pakistan was also a country in which a considerable number of attempts to place— 16 to be exact. In addition, the Palestinian Territories and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) also had a sizable number of events did take place within their borders (52 and 38 respectively).

(Please note that each record in the database may include within it more than one attempt on a site.)

Top 10 countries by attempts made on religious sites/buildings – Country	Sum of (attempts) to destroy, vandalize or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings
Ukraine	642
Mexico	124
Argentina	55
Colombia	54
Palestinian Territories	52
China	38
Brazil	22
India	22
Nicaragua	19
Honduras	17

The correlations between the categories of the perpetrators to the religious sites attacked may be intuitive at first glance. Attacks on Ukraine by Russia during the war have led to the desecration and destruction of many places of worship,

leading to high attempts as shown by the table above. Next, Latin America, a predominantly Christian area, has been associated in recent decades with cartels, organized crime, and less than tolerant regimes. Speaking of less than tolerant regimes, the PRC seeks to control the activities of religions it officially recognizes by enforcing strict policies—including Sinicization—on them, and controlling the appointment of religious leaders. In the Indian subcontinent with a midrange amount of attempts there was a fair share of disputes that encompassed both religious and nationalistic aspects. We can see the altercations in the Palestinian Territories between Israeli forces and civilian population—which might or might not have ties to militia groups—make its appearance in this list as well.

The VID's aim is to shine a light on the unique religious aspects of incidents, and it is for this reason that it is imperative to dive deeper and explore some of these attempts of violence against places of worship.

The war in Ukraine and the occupation of parts of its territory by Russia led to the desecration and destruction of many religious sites within the country. Churches of many denominations including Catholic, Orthodox and Latter-Day Saints churches were destroyed during the war. The Transfiguration Orthodox Cathedral was seriously damaged by explosions during an attack by the Russian military on the city of Odessa—the roof of the church was completely destroyed. In Kherson, the Saint Catherine's Cathedral was seriously damaged by a fire caused by explosions during a Russian military attack on the city (Gigova, 2023; *Russian Shelling Hits a Landmark Church in the Ukrainian City of Kherson*, 2023).

Following the large-scale terrorist attack perpetrated against Israel on October 7, 2023, by Hamas and other groups, the Israeli Air Force began a series of bombardments that have also led to the destruction of religious sites. These sites were targeted on the suspicion they were being used as bases, hideouts or sites of rocket launching; subsequently, some were damaged or destroyed inadvertently as a result of an attack against another target. Deliberate attacks on places of worship without valid reasons is in violation of international conventions of war, of which Israel has adopted. A record dated to December 8, 2023 indicates that “Israeli attacks have resulted in the total destruction of 66 mosques and partial damage to 146 others, accounting for approximately 20 % of all mosques in the Gaza Strip.” According to records contained in the VID, at least 10 churches were also destroyed in Gaza.

Turning to the Indian subcontinent, incidents are aimed mostly at Christian sites, and are predominantly perpetrated by mobs of ordinary people or political groups with ethno-religious leanings. Examples of can be observed in the records such as one that occurred in Chhattisgarh, India on January 2, 2023. The report details how “A mob allegedly made up of right-wing Hindu groups were protesting against the alleged conversion of Christian missionaries. The mob also attacked police sent to stop the incident. The mob demolished another three churches in the villages namely Kodagaon, Bandapal and Amasara.” A similar event took place on August 16, 2023, in Pakistan where a mob of several hundred people attacked a Christian settlement after alleged “blasphemy” by

two individuals, leading to several churches houses and a cemetery being vandalized during the incident. The Evangelical Fellowship of India, in a report on 2023, recorded 2 church destructions and 40 attempts to interrupt religious services. However, the incorporation of these records into the database is problematic as the methods of collection and categorization of the initial report and VID's are not fully aligned.

In countries, such as China and Vietnam where religions are heavily controlled and the governments have Marxist ideologies, raids on places of worship which do not satisfy government regulations are commonplace. To cite just one example from July 2023: “An iron wall has been erected against the Grand Mosque of Shadian in Honghe of Yunnan province. Its characteristic dome will be demolished and the minarets will be rebuilt in ‘Chinese’ style” (Guangyao, 2023).

As stated previously, Mexico is a country in which the most attacks took place, many of which by political pressure groups and organized crime. Catholicism suffered a large number of attacks on its religious sites and buildings. On one occasion a mob of women, belonging to a Feminist collective “entered the Shrine of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad in Guadalajara, Jalisco state, scratching the exterior walls with words such as “legal abortion”, “pedophiles”, “rapists” and “abettors”. In another incident, thieves stole the tabernacle of the temple of the “Hospitalito” in Irapuato (*Obispo de Irapuato advierte ‘actos sacrílegos’ tras robo en templo del Hospitalito*, 2022; Prensa, n.d.).

Interestingly enough, the United States and Portugal were the only “Western” countries to have more than 10 attacks within their territories (13 and 12 respectively). Christian sites were the most targeted in these countries, followed by Muslim sites and Jewish sites. In most cases, the affiliations of the perpetrators were unknown. A small number of attacks carried out by gun carrying individuals against Jewish synagogues in the United States are included in the VID. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported 8,873 antisemitic incidents in 2023 and 3,698 the year before in the United States. Most of these records could not be included in the VID because they refer to hate crimes, which in most cases the VID does not track, or because the data collection methods of the ADL are not fully aligned with those of the VID. Although hostile actions against places of worship made up roughly 11.27 % of all incident report records in the VID in 2022–2023, only seven of those attempts effectively ended with closure of sites. When looking at the category of “Closed places of worship or religious buildings” regardless of whether attempts of vandalism were made, one can observe that only 70 records indicating closure are found (roughly 1.61 % of all records) and that 10 % of those involved vandalism or desecration, following the trend observed in the rest of the data. Furthermore, 88.5 % of all records of closure indicated closure of Christian sites (predominantly affiliated with the Catholic Church), with government forces being responsible for 92 % of all cases. Of the 227 sites reported as closed in 2022–2023, it appears that most of them were in countries in which democracy is suppressed to varying degrees by the government such as Nicaragua (181 sites), Indonesia (3 sites), Angola (3 sites), Algeria (2 sites) and the Dominican Republic (1 site); or, in outright nondemocratic

countries such as China (23 sites) Vietnam (3 sites) and Cuba (1 site). Italy is a surprising exception to the pattern: one such incident was recorded in Rome, where a church's meeting place—which was initially a storefront—was closed after years of legal battles due to suspicions of using the building's status as a religious site for tax evasion purposes.

Closed places of worship or religious buildings by country

Country	Closed places of worship or religious buildings
Nicaragua	181
China	23
Vietnam	3
Angola	3
Indonesia	3
Haiti	2
Sri Lanka	2
Algeria	2
Italy	1
Slovenia	1
Russia	1
Dominican Republic	1
Sudan	1
Kyrgyzstan	1
Cuba	1
Venezuela	1

The fact that closures accounted for only 1.52 % of records in the database raises concerns of underreporting of incidents. The locations in which such incidents happened corroborate the suspicion. Most of the countries enforce varying degrees of control over media within their borders and are less tolerant towards dissent and reporting of wrongdoings committed by the government. China's "great firewall" is perhaps the best example of control over access to information with many media sites as well as social media sites being blocked and substituted by domestic sites, making the Chinese Internet closer to an intranet rather than Internet.

The Violent Incidents Database (VID) and the open-source approach to data collection it employs aid in exploring and understanding of incident of hostilities toward places of worship by providing a higher degree of data granularity to its users as well as the ability to compare cases across time and location. As this database continues to grow, its benefits grow accordingly, providing a more complete picture of various types of Freedom of Religious Beliefs violations. This report has made clear that in the timeframe of inquiry, Christianity was the

most targeted religion. Such insights merit further exploration and analysis by academics and by governmental bodies.

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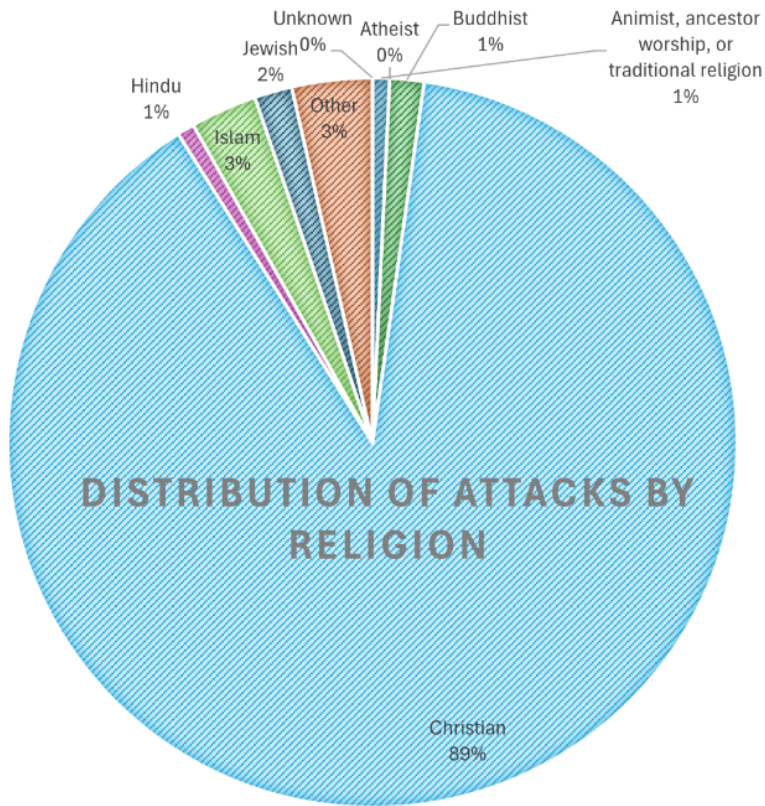
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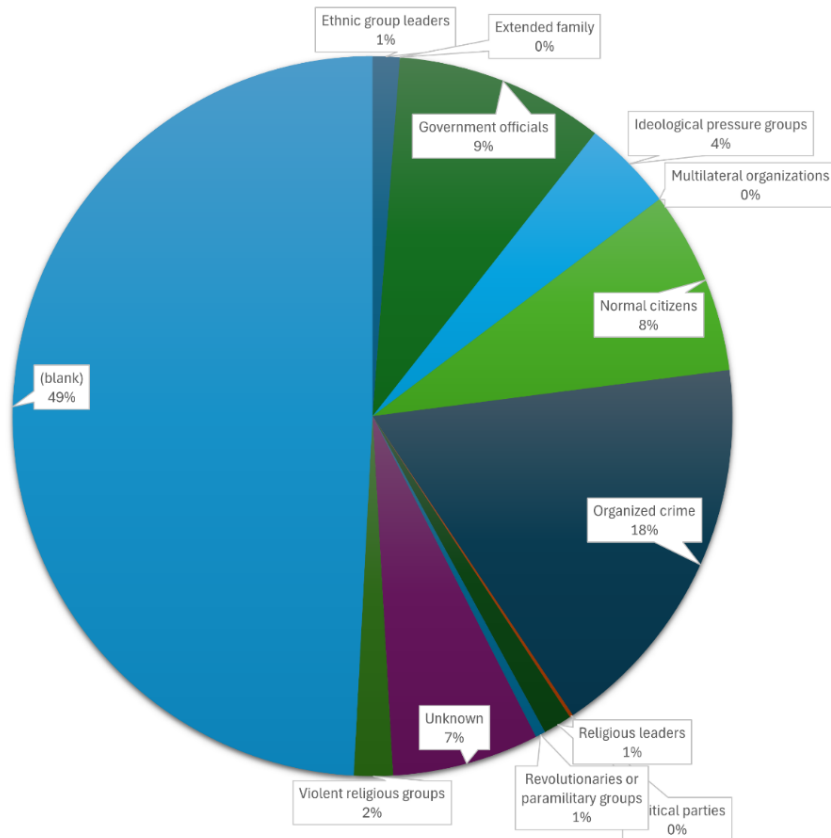
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Annexes



Distribution of attacks by responsible actor's category



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