



Reports

Dennis P. Petri and Kyle Wisdom

The Violent Incidents Database:
A Social Innovation for Religious Freedom

The Growing Sophistication of Religious
Freedom Monitoring

2025 / 5

International Institute
for Religious Freedom



International Institute
for Religious Freedom

**Internationales Institut für Religionsfreiheit
Institut International pour la Liberté Religieuse
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The International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF) was founded in 2007 with the mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective. The IIRF aspires to be an authoritative voice on religious freedom. We provide reliable and unbiased data on religious freedom – beyond anecdotal evidence – to strengthen academic research on the topic and to inform public policy at all levels. Our research results are disseminated through the International Journal for Religious Freedom and other publications. A particular emphasis of the IIRF is to encourage the study of religious freedom in university institutions through its inclusion in educational curricula and by supporting postgraduate students with research projects.

The IIRF has a global presence with academic and advocacy partners on all continents. We perform original research and in collaboration with our partners. The IIRF is also a “meeting place” for all scholars that take an interest in religious freedom.

We understand Freedom of Religion and Belief (FoRB) as a fundamental and interdependent human right as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In line with CCPR General Comment No. 22, we view FoRB as a broad and multidimensional concept that needs to be protected for all faiths in all spheres of society.



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Dennis P. Petri and Kyle Wisdom

The Violent Incidents Database: A Social Innovation for Religious Freedom

The Growing Sophistication of Religious Freedom
Monitoring

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Introduction

When considering research and political attention for religious freedom, we have really come a long way. For a long time, secularization theory¹ was dominant in social sciences. Back in the nineteenth century, German sociologist Max Weber observed that an essential feature of modernization was what he called the “disenchantment of the world,”² meaning that rational and scientific explanations for both natural and social phenomena would gradually replace explanations rooted in religion. In his footsteps, halfway through the twentieth century, Peter Berger predicted that religion would not disappear completely, but would cease to play a relevant role³ in social and political life.

The dominance of secularization theory discouraged not only the study of religion and its role in society; it also discouraged⁴ the study of religious freedom violations. This resulted in a self-reinforcing spiral, as scholars did not research the topic of religious freedom, and therefore, no significant violations were identified, further discouraging research. The influence of secularization theory⁵ also had a strong impact on policy-makers who received their training in academic institutions with little sensitivity for religion, further aggravating the structural lack of attention for the needs of religious minorities.

This all started to change in the 1990s when a growing number of faith-based groups started to demand attention for religious discrimination. A particularly successful effort was the adoption of the International Religious Freedom Act⁶ in the United States in 1998, as a result of a strong interfaith lobby.⁷ The IRFA institutionalized religious freedom into the political agenda by creating several institutions and tools, such as the U.S. Commission on International Religious

¹ Dhima, K., & Golder, M. (2021). Secularization Theory and Religion. *Politics & Religion* 14(1): 37–53. <https://mattgolder.com/files/research/religion.pdf>

² Green, J. E. (2005). Two Meanings of Disenchantment: Sociological Condition vs. Philosophical act—Reassessing Max Weber’s Thesis of the Disenchantment of the World. *Philosophy and Theology* 17(1/2), 51–84. https://www.polisci.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/Green.Disenchantment_1.pdf

³ Reaves, D. (2012). Peter Berger and the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization. *Denison Journal of Religion* 11, Article 3, 11–19. <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol11/iss1/3>

⁴ Fox, J. (2001). Religion as an Overlooked Element of International Relations. *International Studies Review* 3(3), 53–73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3186242>

⁵ Petri, D. P., & Buijs, G. J. (2019). The societal relevance of religious freedom research: Notes for academia, public policy and vulnerable religious groups. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 12(1/2), 7–16. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/83/116>

⁶ H.R.2431 – 105th Congress (1997–1998): International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. (1998, Oktober 27). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/105th-congress/house-bill/2431>

⁷ Hertzke, A. D. (2004). *Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742508040/Freeing-God%27s-Children-The-Unlikely-Alliance-for-Global-Human-Rights>

Freedom,⁸ the Ambassador for International Religious Freedom⁹ and the annual International Religious Freedom reports of the U.S. State Department.¹⁰

From that moment on, religion and religious freedom became key ingredients of U.S. foreign policy.¹¹ Then U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, famously declared in 2013: “If I went back to college today, I think I would probably major in comparative religion, because that’s how integrated it is in everything that we are working on and deciding and thinking about in life today.”¹²

Academics finally caught on. They came around to the fact that all the empirical evidence in the world contradicted secularization theory.¹³ On the contrary, religion was not going away. Religious freedom monitoring developed into an entirely new field of study. After experimenting with very rudimentary ratings of religious freedom, academics started to develop increasingly sophisticated datasets to track freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).¹⁴

These datasets can be categorized into three groups depending on their methodologies. First, there are the socio-metric tools, which are based on the coding of narrative sources such as the International Religious Freedom reports of the U.S. State Department. These tools include the Government Restrictions Index and the Social Hostilities Index issued by the Pew Research Center,¹⁵ as well as the advanced Religion and State Project directed by Dr. Jonathan Fox at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.¹⁶

The second type of FoRB datasets are expert-opinion based. These include the World Watch List¹⁷ of Open Doors International, which only focuses on Chris-

⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (n.d.) <https://www.uscirf.gov>

⁹ United States Department of State. (n.d.). Leadership – Office of International Religious Freedom. <https://www.state.gov/leadership-office-of-international-religious-freedom/>

¹⁰ United States Department of State. (2023). International Religious Freedom Report. <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>

¹¹ Klocek, J., & Bledsoe, S. (2020, November 12). Three Things You Thought You Knew About Freedom of Religion or Belief: An ever-growing amount of data on global religious restrictions challenges us to rethink best practices for promoting religious freedom. *The United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/11/three-things-you-thought-you-knew-about-freedom-religion-or-belief#:~:text=Religious%20restrictions%20can%20fuel%20conflict,is%20political%20stability%20and%20peace>

¹² University of Minnesota: College of Liberal Arts – Religious Studies. (n.d.). <https://cla.umn.edu/religious-studies/undergraduate/religious-studies-major-minor#:~:text=%20If%20I%20went%20back%20to,Kerry%2C%20August%207%2C%202013>

¹³ Philpott, D. (2009). Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion? *Annual Review of Political Science* 12. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.053006.125448>

¹⁴ Petri, D. P. (2019). A human security approach to religious freedom The religious minorities vulnerability assessment tool. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 12(1/2), 69–83. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/88/105>

¹⁵ Pew Research Center. (2024, March 5). Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down: 14th annual report includes a look at countries that restrict religious practices and grant benefits to religious groups at the same time. <https://pewresearch.org/?p=69363>

¹⁶ Religion and State Project. (n.d.). <http://religionandstate.org>

¹⁷ Open Doors International. (n.d.). World Watch List. <https://opendoorsanalytical.org>

tians. The Varieties of Democracy dataset,¹⁸ which quickly became very popular among political analysts, also includes a question of religious freedom. There is also a small pilot currently being developed by the Human Rights Measurement Initiative¹⁹ that uses a similar expert-opinion based methodology. A third category of FoRB datasets are surveys, such as the Anti-Defamation League Global 100,²⁰ that tracks antisemitic attitudes.

The most important of these tools are accessible in a user-friendly manner by the Global Religious Freedom Data Spectrum,²¹ a project that was initially started by 21Wilberforce²² and is now maintained by the International Institute for Religious Freedom. The 2023 data spectrum collates and integrates eleven different FoRB tools with filters, scores and summaries linked to various nations. It can be used to quickly analyze or reference how a particular country has been scored across different measurement categories.

Introducing the Violent Incidents Database

So far, however, there has not been a FoRB dataset that is events-based, with the exception of the now discontinued religion pilot that used to be part of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED).²³ Events-based data are important, both for advocacy and research, because they are based on hard facts—events that have actually occurred—rather than on interpretations made by experts or the attitudes in the population.

That is precisely where the Violent Incidents Database (VID) of the International Institute for Religious Freedom proposes to make a difference.²⁴ It was created to collect, record and analyze violent incidents concerning violations of religious freedom in all continents around the world based on the systematization of data contained in public reports, mainly in media. This events-based FoRB tool is available for any researcher or organization to use. It is meant to compliment the previously mentioned FoRB datasets.

The VID constitutes a social innovation for religious freedom because it complements other FoRB datasets by presenting evidence that is, in a sense, undeniable. This open-source and dynamic repository operates on an events-

¹⁸ Varieties of Democracy. (n.d.). <https://v-dem.net>

¹⁹ HRMI Rights Tracker. (n.d.). Right to freedom of religion and belief: Are people able to practise, express, or change their religion and beliefs freely? <https://rightstracker.org/metric/religion>

²⁰ Anti-Defamation League. (n.d.). The ADL Global 100: Index of Antisemitism. <https://adl.org/adl-global-100-index-antisemitism>

²¹ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (n.d.). Global Religious Freedom Data Spectrum. <https://iirf.global/global-religious-freedom-data-spectrum/>

²² 21Wilberforce. (n.d.). <https://21wilberforce.org>

²³ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. (n.d.). ACLED-Religion. <https://acleddata.com/acleddata/religion/>

²⁴ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (n.d.). Violent Incidents Database. <https://iirf.global/vid/>

based framework,²⁵ ensuring continuous updates and corrections to provide accurate and up-to-date information. It is publicly accessible and searchable, and meant to be a public good to be used and maintained by everyone in the FoRB community.

This project initially began as a regional initiative by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America.²⁶ The International Institute for Religious Freedom extended the coverage of the rest of the world in 2023, thanks to a generous grant from Global Christian Relief.²⁷ Data on Nigeria is provided by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa.²⁸ The VID now has close to 7,000 records.

To give some parameters,²⁹ the expansion included a two-year period from November 2021 to December 2023. Researchers with regional experience and linguistic specialties were hired and trained to monitor assigned countries. The VID researchers submitted recorded incidents along with sources to a supervisor who would give approval to add new incidents to the database. These incidents were then analyzed by another researcher who would double-check the incidents, verify the sourcing, and approve the new records for admission to the database.

Database collection efforts were adjusted in 2023 to fit with the Religion and State's categorization of religions, but do not largely differ from the previous structure. To the original categories: geographical location, date of incident, summary, nature of the incident, responsible actor, religion of victim(s), additional information, and web sources we have refined the religious categories as well as including the religion of the responsible actor. The actor's religion is often not named in the primary sources we rely upon, though we include it where possible. The religion categories have been adjusted to follow the religious minorities codes used in the Religion and State Project.

The VID cannot claim exhaustive coverage. The data included in the VID is based on reports published in digital media available on the internet, but there may be cases of underreporting or overreporting. Many incidents are never made public or do not receive sufficient attention from authorities or media. Even though we aim to collect data for all religions, we have found that some religious traditions do a better job at keeping track of violent incidents than

²⁵ Petri, D. P., & Flores, T. (2021). The Violent Incidents Database of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 14(1/2), 157–164. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/120/150>

²⁶ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.). <https://olire.org>

²⁷ Boyd-MacMillan, R. (2024, January 12). Persecution Trends to Watch in 2024: examples of Christian persecution today. *Global Christian Relief*. <https://globalchristianrelief.org/?p=80795>

²⁸ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (2024). 4-Year Report on Killings and Abductions in Nigeria (Oct 2019–Sep 2023) now online. <https://orfa.africa/#nigeria-violence-overview>

²⁹ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (2023). Incident Reporting Guide: Violations of the Right to Religious Freedom https://iirf.global/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Incident_Reporting_Guide.pdf

others. The self-reporting feature allows anyone to report incidents through an online form which is then evaluated by the reviewing team.³⁰

There are also times when incidents reported in the media are incorrect. We do not have the capacity to verify all incidents listed, though we do have a quality control and vetting process. However, where reports are flagged up as being false or incorrect, we retroactively correct entries with errors or remove them. If anyone finds a case is missing or was erroneously reported, the IIRF team can be contacted.

Part of the added value of the VID is that it distinguishes between several categories of state and non-state actors, it tracks the religions of the victims and the perpetrators where possible, and records the subnational location where the incidents occurred,³¹ which are all things most FoRB datasets fail to do. The VID is not a substitute for any of the other FoRB tools. Rather, it should be viewed as a complement that brings visibility to undetected religious freedom violations.

The VID is still in development, but it has already been used in publications by the United States of Peace³² and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.³³ It was presented at the IRF Summit in January 2024³⁴ and featured in a Universal Periodic Review report by the U.N. Human Rights Council on Nigeria,³⁵ as well as referenced in two country reports by the U.S. State Department. It serves as a powerful tool for monitoring and advocacy because successful advocacy and awareness-raising rely on factual information.

³⁰ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (n.d.). Violations of religious freedom online form. <https://iirf.global/vid/online-form/>

³¹ Klocek, J., & Petri, D. P. (2023). Measuring Subnational Variation in Freedom of Religion or Belief Violations: Reflections on a Path Forward. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 21(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2023.2200278>

³² Klocek, J., & Bledsoe, S. (2022). Global Trends and Challenges to Protecting and Promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief. *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, No. 510. <https://usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/sr510-protecting-promoting-freedom-religion-belief.pdf>

³³ Petri, D. P.; Flores Chiscul, T., Klocek, J., Muga Gonzáles, R., & Bordón Lugo, M. (2023). Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America. *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/religious-freedom-indigenous-communities-latin-america>

³⁴ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (2024, February 18). The IIRF participates at the IRF Summit in Washington D.C. *IIRF News*. <https://iirf.global/?p=4565>

³⁵ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (2024, February 29). United Nations Human Rights Council includes ORFA's submission in report about Nigeria. *IIRF News*. <https://iirf.global/?p=4604>

Evidence of Undetected Religious Freedom Violations in Latin America

When examining religious freedom violations in Latin America, many immediately think of discrimination perpetrated by communist and authoritarian governments such as Cuba,³⁶ Venezuela,³⁷ or Nicaragua.³⁸ These are indeed significant trends deserving attention. However, there is also a substantial amount of religious discrimination instigated by non-state actors. In the following discussion, we will delve into the roles played by organized crime and indigenous authorities, utilizing data from the Violent Incidents Database (VID) to highlight the quantitative impact of these phenomena.

Some vulnerability arises from religious behavior that poses a threat to certain non-state actors.³⁹ Field research conducted in the state of Tamaulipas in 2014 illustrates this issue vividly. A young pastor initiated a football team to steer local youth away from involvement with drug cartels. Tragically, one of the youths was killed for renouncing his role as an informant and errand boy. Subsequently, the pastor began receiving death threats. This serves as an example of how an event can be linked to socially motivated religious behavior,⁴⁰ rather than solely religious identity or church activity.

Many instances of religious freedom violations may not be immediately visible, especially when perceived as conflicts between religious groups tied to ethnic identity. Purely religious conflicts are rare, so the challenge is to identify their religious component. Merely examining identity without considering behavior, as demonstrated in this story, can result in overlooking critical nuances.

Moreover, national-level analysis may erroneously assume that violations occur uniformly across a nation-state when, in reality, they may be localized, as is the case with certain organized crime or drug cartels. Addressing these religious freedom violations necessitates a holistic approach, incorporating regional data that also encompasses non-state actors. The recurrence of this trend is a fact corroborated by data from the VID.

³⁶ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.). Country Profile Cuba. <https://olire.org/monitor/country-reports/cuba/>

³⁷ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.). Country Profile Venezuela. <https://olire.org/monitor/country-reports/venezuela/>

³⁸ Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America. (n.d.). Country Profile Nicaragua. <https://olire.org/monitor/country-reports/nicaragua/>

³⁹ Petri, D. P. (2021). The regulation of religion by organized crime: Conceptualization of an underexplored phenomenon through a case study in Northeast Mexico. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 14(1/2), 123–141. <https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/118/148>

⁴⁰ Petri, D. P., & Glasius, M. (2022). Vulnerability and Active Religious Behavior: Christians and Crime Syndicates in Mexico. *Human Rights Quarterly* 44(3), 514–536. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hrq.2022.0025>

| Countries | Killings | (Attempts) to destroy, vandalize / desecrate places of worship or religious buildings | Abductions | Sexual assaults /harassment | Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse) | Attacked houses / property of faith adherents | Attacked shops, businesses, institutions of faith adherents | Forced to leave Home | Forced to leave Country |
|-------------|----------|---|------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Colombia | 35 | 98 | 3 | 10 | 346 | 12 | 2 | 115 | 62 |
| El Salvador | 12 | 16 | 2 | 0 | 38 | 7 | 10 | 15 | 17 |
| Honduras | 29 | 17 | 6 | 7 | 40 | 7 | 0 | 17 | 0 |
| Mexico | 46 | 129 | 28 | 14 | 130 | 12 | 6 | 103 | 15 |

Source: Violent Incidents Database. Incidents from 2021–2023.

In a recent report commissioned by USCIRF on “Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America,”⁴¹ attention was drawn to various threats to the religious freedom of indigenous communities, distinguishing between external and internal threats⁴² that affect collective and individual dimensions of religious freedom, respectively.

Concerning the collective dimension, there are five main areas of concern: lack of recognition of ancestral land ownership, state absence and organized crime, extraction of natural resources by legal and illegal companies, breakdown of the social fabric, and dispossession by appropriation. Violations of individual religious freedom⁴³ in indigenous communities were identified as forced conversion, contributions to patronal feasts, construction of places of worship, proselytism and religious education, and renunciation of ancestral practices leading to expulsion from communal property. Again, the VID shows the quantitative impact of these trends.

⁴¹ Petri, D. P.; Flores Chiscul, T., Klocek, J., Muga Gonzáles, R., & Bordón Lugo, M. (2023). Religious Freedom for Indigenous Communities in Latin America. *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/religious-freedom-indigenous-communities-latin-america>

⁴² International Institute for Religious Freedom. (2024, June 3). Challenges to religious communities in European secular states and beyond. *IIRF Webinars*. <https://iirf.global/?p=4631>

⁴³ Petri, D. P. (2023). Challenges to individual religious freedom in the Indigenous communities of Latin America: The case of the Nasa (Colombia). *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 16(2), 117–139. <https://doi.org/10.59484/DMVP2918>

| Countries | (Attempts) to destroy, vandalize or desecrate places of worship or religious buildings | Arrests / detentions | Forced Marriages | Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse) | Attacked houses / property of faith adherents | Forced to leave Home | Forced to leave Country |
|-----------|--|----------------------|------------------|--|---|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Argentina | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Chile | 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Colombia | 0 | 46 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mexico | 1 | 61 | 0 | 29 | 85 | 396 | 40 |

Source: Violent Incidents Database. Incidents from 2021–2023.

It is these very incidents, which may go undetected in other FoRB datasets, that the violent incidents database aims to capture. The VID is not an instrument that should stand alone. Rather, it complements the growing set of tools available to monitor religious freedom across the globe. The International Institute for Religious Freedom is pleased to make this information available as a part of its mission to promote religious freedom for all faiths from an academic perspective.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ International Institute for Religious Freedom. (n.d.). Vision & Mission. <https://iirf.global/about/vision-mission/>

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