

**Statement for the Record from the Sikh Coalition
United States House Committee on
Oversight and Accountability
Faith Under Fire: An Examination of Global Religious Persecution**

October 25, 2023

The Sikh Coalition respectfully submits this statement for the record in connection with the above-referenced hearing before the United States House Committee on Oversight and Accountability. As a civil rights organization that represents the Sikh community in the United States and addresses hate-related backlash attacks, we write to address our concern about the religious freedom threats Sikhs face from the government of India. We would like to ensure that religious freedom and democracy are mutually advanced here in the United States and abroad.

By way of background, the Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh American civil rights organization in the United States. We were founded in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, in response to a torrent of hate crimes against Sikhs throughout the United States. Our mission since then has been to work towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America can freely practice their faith without bias and discrimination.

In recent years, we have also expressed concern with Democratic backsliding in the United States; however, this concern is far from unique to the United States. As Sikhs, we remain deeply concerned about the authoritarian turn underway in India, which is both ostensibly the world's largest democracy and home to the vast majority of the global Sikh population. Most Sikhs in South Asia, who live in the state of Punjab, India, have faced systemic oppression such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extra-judicial punishment, violence¹ and a decade of enforced “disappearances.”² The historical experience of our community in India³ has left Sikhs all too aware of how authoritarianism, discrimination, and prejudice can lead to tragedy on the scale of genocidal violence.⁴ Not only are Sikhs a target of religious oppression, so are Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, Christians, and others.

¹ “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/17/protecting-killers/policy-impunity-punjab-india>; “Dead Silence: the legacy of human rights abuses in Punjab.” *Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights*, May 1, 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/India0594.pdf>.

² Romesh Silva, Jasmine Marwaha, and Jeff Klingner, “Violent Deaths and Enforced Disappearances During the Counterinsurgency in Punjab, India A Preliminary Quantitative Analysis”, *Ensaaf* (January 2009), available at <https://ensaaf.org/publications/reports/descriptiveanalysis/>.

³ “WELL-FOUNDED FEAR: Understanding Legal Challenges and Best Practices for Sikh Asylum Applicants and Their Attorneys.” *The Sikh Coalition*, Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021.11.01-asylum-report.pdf>.

⁴ Remembering 1984.” *The Sikh Coalition*, Jun. 1, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/remembering-1984-4>.



India's decline in press freedom,⁵ willingness to use excessive force against peaceful protestors,⁶ arrest and detention of dissidents,⁷ and efforts to curtail the free flow of information,⁸ all directly affect these minority communities.

I. Alarming Trend of Authoritarianism and Targeting of Sikhs

In recent years, numerous Sikh civil rights organizations around the world, including the Sikh Coalition, have been concerned at the increasing frequency with which Sikhs are being targeted in India as well as other countries, including the United States. When Sikhs and other religious minorities peacefully dissent, the response from the Indian government has too often been marked by attempts to suppress freedoms of expression through internet shutdowns, media censorship, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, escalation of violence, and characterizations of peaceful dissidents as terrorists. Actions like these contradict human rights freedoms and risk exacerbating civil unrest and alienation of an entire religious minority community.

In March of this year, Indian authorities executed weeks-long massive mobilizations of paramilitary and police forces, conducted multiple coordinated arbitrary arrests with brutal violence, imposed mobile internet data blackouts, blocked SMS services, censored media, and disproportionately targeted Sikhs and political dissenters across Punjab.⁹ Similar oppressive tactics were also displayed during the Farmers' Protests that began in September 2020.¹⁰

This is the fifth year in a row that India has chosen to rely on internet shutdowns to control largely peaceful protests and create a shield of impunity.¹¹ Moreover, the Indian government and its intelligence services have demonstrated a pattern of suppressing and intimidating dissidents and aid organizations by issuing indiscriminate and vague legal notices, auditing financials, and even arresting individuals on artificial charges and detaining them for unreasonably long periods.¹² Since

⁵ "With raids, arrests and hostile takeovers, India press freedom continues to decline." *NPR*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalists-modi-bbc-documentary>.

⁶ "India: Excessive use of force, arbitrary detention and punitive measures against protestors must end immediately." *Amnesty International*, Jun. 14, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/india-excessive-use-of-force-arbitrary-detention-and-punitive-measures-against-protestors-must-end-immediately/>.

⁷ "Indian activist's arrest spotlights crackdown on dissent." *The Associated Press*, Mar. 9, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/india-media-social-media-crime-arrests-f9331e556a1faf26eced6c05c40a71de>.

⁸ "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender." *Access Now*, Mar. 20, 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>.

⁹ Anisha Singh [Letter to U.S. Sec. of State Antony Blinken Re: Support for Sikhs and Democratic Norms in India during March 2023 civil unrest]. Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Support-for-Sikhs-and-Democratic-Norms-in-India-March-21-2023.pdf>

¹⁰ "Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern." *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html>; "India: Government must stop crushing farmers' protests and demonizing dissenters." *Amnesty International*, Feb. 9, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/india-government-must-stop-crushing-farmers-protests-and-demonizing-dissenters/>.

¹¹ "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender." *Access Now*, Feb. 28, 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>.

¹² "As Farm Law Protests Continue, NIA Sees 'Anti-National' Plot, Summons Activists." *The Wire*, Jan. 16, 2021, <https://thewire.in/rights/nia-summons-activists-linked-to-farm-law-protests-%20suspects-conspiracy-against-india>.



2020, India has regressed further down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. It is now ranked among the worst for global press freedom with the likes of Russia, China, and Iran.¹³ India has expelled foreign journalists due to work critical of Mr. Modi,¹⁴ and imprisoned a growing number of journalists in-country for their reporting.¹⁵

Broader actions by the Indian government to censor certain aspects of the country's national conversation evoke grave concerns of fostering a climate that could lead to mass violence against Muslims, Sikhs, and other minorities,¹⁶ especially given that India is considered a country at high risk for mass killings.¹⁷ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) Chair Abraham Cooper also stated that "Religious freedom conditions in India have notably declined in recent years. Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Dalits, and Adivasis are experiencing increased levels of attacks and acts of intimidation."¹⁸ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Amnesty International, which monitor human rights conditions worldwide, were forced to shut offices across India after being financially paralyzed by the Indian government.¹⁹ Oxfam and Khalsa Aid have also been subjected to raids by the Indian government.²⁰ Similarly, the offices of BBC and other media organizations were subject to government raids.²¹

Additionally, social media users critical of India's draconian policies routinely have their accounts restricted at the request of the government.²² Any criticism of the Modi government can lead to bans and attacks by trolls. Individual users have been targeted for something as trivial as sharing a BBC documentary that is critical of Mr. Modi;²³ there have also been coordinated campaigns to restrict

¹³ "India: Media freedom under threat." *Reporters Without Borders*, Mar. 5, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/india-media-freedom-under-threat>.

¹⁴ "VICE journalist Angad Singh deported from Delhi." *The Hindu*, Aug. 25, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/vice-journalist-angad-singh-deported-from-delhi/article65810246.ece>.

¹⁵ "They Can Target Anybody': India's War on Free Press Is in High Gear." *TIME*, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6202430/zubair-modi-muslims-target-media-free-press/>.

¹⁶ "India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Jul. 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>.

¹⁷ "Rising Mass Atrocity Risks in India." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Mar. 30, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/rising-mass-atrocity-risks-in-india>; "India: 2022-23 Statistical Risk."

¹⁸ "USCIRF Reiterates Concerns on Religious Freedom in India, Calls for Release of Religious Prisoners of Conscience," U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Oct. 3, 2023, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/uscifr-reiterates-concerns-religious-freedom-india-calls-release#:~:text=%22Religious%20freedom%20conditions%20in%20India,attacks%20and%20acts%20of%20intimidati> on.

¹⁹ "Amnesty to halt work in India due to government 'witch-hunt'." *The Guardian*, Sep. 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/amnesty-to-halt-work-in-india-due-to-government-witch-hunt>.

²⁰ "How the Indian Government Uses Raids to Silence Critics." *Time*, Feb. 14, 2023, <https://time.com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/>.

²¹ Id.

²² "Twitter accused of censorship in India as it blocks Modi critics." *The Guardian*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/05/twitter-accused-of-censorship-in-india-as-it-blocks-modi-critics-elon-musk>.

²³ "India bans BBC documentary on PM Modi's role in Gujarat riots." *CNN*, Jan. 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/business-india/india-modi-bbc-documentary-twitter-youtube-censorship-intl-hnk/index.html>.



trending topics that peacefully acknowledge India's genocidal violence against Sikhs in 1984.²⁴ When American social media companies such as Meta and Twitter do not comply with takedown requests, their employees risk arrests and raids in India.²⁵ Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey alleged that the Indian government threatened to "shut Twitter down" if they did not censor accounts commenting on the Farmers Protest.²⁶ We are deeply alarmed by the attempts by India's attempts to silence journalists, advocates, and nonprofits around the world. The United States government must advocate for press freedom as well as a safe 're-opening' of India for international NGOs that have been legally threatened or erroneously banned from monitoring and reporting on India's human rights abuses.

Congress must continue to ensure independent and bipartisan analysis of international religious freedom issues in India and around the world by taking the following steps:

1. Permanently reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Prior human rights reports on India from the Department of State, spanning at least a decade, indicate longstanding concerns regarding India's major human rights issues concerning "police and security force misconduct, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape."²⁷ The Commission's painstakingly detailed analysis and recommendations further lend legitimacy to persistent recommendations in the past four years that India should be designated as a Country of Particular Concern. Recommendations made by USCIRF ensure that countries such as India are put on notice that they cannot operate with impunity.
2. Designate India as a Country of Particular Concern based on longstanding human rights concerns to hold nations accountable for their actions.
3. Develop and support initiatives to counteract online suppression tactics, including promoting digital literacy, assisting affected communities in safeguarding their online presence, and collaborating with international partners to combat internet censorship and cyber threats.

II. Transnational Repression

Beyond chilling discourse and peaceful dissent online, India appears to have taken aggressive steps to target religious minorities on a global scale, including those living here in the United States, through threats and intimidation.

Last month, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau confirmed that "Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a potential link" between the Indian state and the

²⁴ "Sites Blocked, Hashtags Banned: Are Sikhs Being Silenced Online?" *The Quint World*, Jun. 12, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/sikh-banned-social-media-siyasat-punjab-operation-bluestar-ghallughara-facebook-instagram>.

²⁵ "Elon Musk's Twitter Widens Its Censorship of Modi's Critics." *The Intercept*, Mar, 28, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/03/28/twitter-modi-india-punjab-amritpal-singh/>.

²⁶ "Jack Dorsey: India threatened to shut Twitter and raid employees." *BBC*, Jun. 13, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65886825>.

²⁷ "India 2011 Human Rights and Labor Report: India." *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, May 24, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/186675.pdf>.



arbitrary extra-judicial killing of Sikh Canadian Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia last June.²⁸ Prime Minister Trudeau's national security advisor previously named India as a "top source of foreign interference in Canada,"²⁹ and these concerns were publicly raised by Prime Minister Trudeau at the G20 Summit in New Delhi last month.³⁰ In response to Prime Minister Trudeau's statement on India, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh, who is also a Sikh Canadian, received death threats on online platforms for calling on Canada to include India in a foreign interference inquiry.

Most urgently, recent public reporting indicates that immediately following the assassination of Mr. Nijjar and in the weeks since, law enforcement agencies notified some Sikh Americans of potential threats against their lives.³¹ The Sikh Coalition has further confirmed this information with trusted Sikh community members and allied organizations. The Sikh Coalition has also received reports from individuals in the United States receiving threatening messages after attending peaceful protests critical of the Indian government. We are also aware of instances of Indian government agents stopping individuals arbitrarily and with false charges to elicit information about Sikh communities in the United States. And finally, we have been notified of situations in which individuals in the United States who have expressed criticism of the Indian government have had their family members in India face harassment at the hands of Indian authorities. Regrettably, many individuals are understandably reluctant to come forward due to the very real fear of reprisal against themselves or their loved ones abroad. There are also barriers in community reporting incidents as the ability to identify transnational repression and appropriately report such matters to local and federal authorities is not well known.

It is also unclear to what extent such threats against the Sikh community arise directly from the Government of India or hateful Hindu Nationalism that is enabled by the Government of India. In particular we are concerned to observe the proliferation of extremist Hindu supremacist ideology

²⁸ Paula Newton and Rhea Mogul, "India expels Canadian diplomat in tit-for-tat move as spat over assassinated Sikh activist deepens," CNN, Sep. 19, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/18/americas/canada-hardeep-singh-nijjar-india-intl/index.html#:~:text=Canada's%20accusation%20that%20India%20may,between%20the%20two%20countries%20p lunging>.

²⁹ "India among top actors for foreign interference in Canada: national security adviser," CTV News, Jun. 5, 2023, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/india-among-top-actors-for-foreign-interference-in-canada-national-security-adviser-1.6428213>.

³⁰ "Trudeau leaves India after aircraft issues delayed departure from rocky G20: Canadian prime minister's time at G20 summit in New Delhi highlights growing tensions between India and Canada," Al Jazeera, Sep. 12, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/12/trudeau-leaves-india-after-aircraft-issues-delayed-departure-from-rocky-g20>.

³¹ Murtaza Hussain, "FBI Warned Sikhs in the U.S. About Death Threats After Killing of Canadian Activist," *The Intercept*, September 23, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/23/sikhs-fbi-canada-india-nijjar/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWe%20have%20also%20received%20messages,%2C%E2%80%9D%20Dhami%20told%20The%20Intercept>.



within the United States³² have targeted Sikhs in Connecticut,³³ Muslims in New Jersey,³⁴ and even state legislators in California who have spoken out about caste discrimination in the United States.³⁵

Hindu Nationalists and White Supremacists are also worryingly becoming further aligned to advance their respective agendas of prejudice in establishing racially pure societies.³⁶ Supporters have embraced the Aryan race mythology as well as fascism, while White Supremacists have admired Hindu Nationalists promoting Islamophobia and the ideals of a caste system.³⁷ The cross-pollination of extremist ideologies to inspire bigoted acts of hatred has become a growing threat for religious minorities around the world.³⁸ The importation of extremist Hindu nationalist ideology into the United States has the potential to spur more violence and unrest against Sikh and Muslim communities, which are already one of the most targeted communities for hate violence in the United States.³⁹

The Sikh Coalition, along with other members of the Sikh community in the United States, firmly believes that the extent of harassment, threats, and intimidation is even more widespread than currently reported. This week, more public reporting has indicated that at least one gurdwara (Sikh house of worship) was targeted with intimidation and threats from an individual claiming to be a representative of the Indian government.⁴⁰ Additionally, California State Assemblymember Dr. Jasmeet Kaur Bains, received threats after introducing a resolution to classify violence experienced in by the Sikh community in Punjab as a genocide. These disturbing reports highlight that Sikh Americans of all walks of life are being targeted, whether they are dissidents, elected officials, or

³² What's fueling the rise in Hindu nationalism in the U.S." *NBC News*, Jun. 27, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/modis-popularity-grows-india-hindu-nationalism-rising-us-rcna90680>.

³³ "Norwich Sikh independence celebration is criticized by Indian residents." *The Connecticut Day*, Jun. 26, 2022, <https://www.theday.com/local-news/20220626/norwich-sikh-independence-celebration-is-criticized-by-indian-residents/>.

³⁴ "Billboard Truck Displays Hateful, Anti-Islamic Messages Targeting NJ Mosques." *NBC New York*, Dec. 2, 2022, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/billboard-truck-displays-hateful-anti-islamic-messages-targeting-nj-mosques/3980506/>; "Disruption at Edison's India Day Parade rattles Muslim participants." *New Jersey.com*, Aug. 16, 2023, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2023/08/16/disruption-at-edisons-india-day-parade-rattles-muslim-marchersfront-headline/70596258007/>.

³⁵ "Lawmaker Faces Violent Threats for Trying to Make California the First State to Ban Caste Discrimination." *TIME*, Mar. 29, 2023, <https://time.com/6267016/aisha-wahab-interview-caste-discrimination/>

³⁶ "Hindu Supremacists in a White World." *Oxford Academic*, Jun. 23, 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/90/4/805/7205783>.

³⁷ "Why white supremacists and Hindu nationalists are so alike." *Al Jazeera*, Dec. 13, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/13/why-white-supremacists-and-hindu-nationalists-are-so-alike>

³⁸ "New Zealand attacks offer the latest evidence of a web of supremacist extremism." *The Washington Post*, Mar. 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/new-zealand-suspect-inspired-by-far-right-french-intellectual-who-feared-nonwhite-immigration/2019/03/15/8c39fba4-6201-4a8d-99c6-aa42db53d6d3_story.html; and "Racism In America Should Not Take Center Stage in the Global Fight Against White Supremacy." *TIME*, Jul. 20, 2021, <https://time.com/6082168/white-privilege/>.

³⁹ "Latest Hate Crime Data Is at an All-Time High", *The Sikh Coalition*, Mar. 13, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/latest-hate-crime-data-is-at-an-all-time-high/>.

⁴⁰ "California Sikhs report threats, troubling incidents to FBI following assassination in Canada," *The Sacramento Bee*, Oct. 19, 2023, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article280306154.html#storylink=cpyhttps://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article280306154.html>.



houses of worship within the country. This pattern of intimidation and harassment is deeply troubling and poses a significant threat to the safety and well-being of the Sikh American community.

Concerns of transnational repression and the rapid expansion of Hindu nationalist hate ideology, specifically the targeting of Sikhs, extend beyond Canada and well before these recent events in the United States. The Department of Homeland Security's most recent threat assessment for 2024 has identified the threat of transnational interference as a risk to our own national security.⁴¹ Similarly, the White House's National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism has committed to intensify efforts to reduce foreign support and the transnational links that help fuel antisemitism in the United States.⁴² Congress must also further understand the issue through congressional hearings and develop policy solutions that adequately protect domestic religious minority communities against all foreign and transnational threats.

In light of the growing body of evidence and credible reports of transnational repression propagated by the government of India, The Sikh Coalition recommends the following action:

1. Encourage the Federal Bureau of Investigations, DHS, and Department of State to fully investigate the scale and scope of transnational repression targeting religious minorities in the United States and abroad.
2. The United States government must publicly condemn dangerous propaganda narratives from other nations that attempt to portray entire religious minority communities as violent extremists or terroristic threats.
3. Pass the Transnational Repression Policy Act to establish U.S. policy to hold foreign governments and individuals accountable when they stalk, intimidate, or assault people within the United States and United States citizens in foreign countries.
4. Hold all governments accountable through multilateral diplomatic discussions to emphasize the importance of sovereignty, democracy, freedom of speech, and the human and civil rights of religious minorities and peaceful dissidents; and
5. If Canada's allegations against India are proven true, the United States must publicly condemn India's arbitrary extrajudicial killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar and encourage multilateral sanctions on those who were involved in his murder under the Global Magnitsky Act. This would send a clear message that the U.S. will not tolerate violations of religious freedom and human rights.

Conclusion

As a beacon of democracy and protector of human rights, the United States has a responsibility to denounce these injustices and ensure that our partnerships are aligned with our core values. In this moment, it is essential that our government and civil society work together to push for inclusive religious freedom, meaningful civil rights protections, and accountability for human rights violations

⁴¹ "Homeland Threat Assessment 2024," Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Sep. 13, 2023, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/23_0913_ia_23-333-ia_u_homeland-threat-assessment-2024_508C_V6_13Sep23.pdf.

⁴² "The U.S. National Strategy To Counter Antisemitism." *The White House*, May 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>



in India. The United States must take concrete action to uphold democratic values and human rights with our allies and partners. To counter the alarming trend of authoritarianism and targeting of religious minorities, the United States must continue to support the documentation efforts of the USCIRF by permanently reauthorizing it. Designating India as a Country of Particular Concern based on longstanding human rights concerns is a crucial step in holding nations accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, transnational censorship by the Indian government poses a grave risk not only to press freedom but also to the safety and operation of international NGOs. The impact of India's democratic backsliding extends to religious minority diaspora communities in the United States, necessitating comprehensive policy solutions to safeguard against foreign and transnational threats. With the alignment of extremist ideologies and the potential for increased violence against Sikh and Muslim communities in the United States, it is imperative that Congress conducts hearings and develops measures to meaningfully protect domestic religious minority communities and preserve our nation's security and pluralistic society.

The United States government must also be prepared to swiftly and forcefully condemn narratives of discrimination, hate speech, or other attempts to falsely portray entire minority religious communities as extremists, as well as explore the establishment of international agreements or frameworks that promote responsible behavior in cyberspace and deter foreign interference. While these challenges are immense and complex, we know that the United States has demonstrated leadership on both civil rights and democracy before.

