



UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in Tajikistan:
Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern

Remarks as Prepared:

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Chair

Good morning, everyone and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing on *Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern*. Thank you very much to our distinguished witnesses for taking the time out of their busy schedules to join us today and for coming to offer their insight on how the United States can support religious freedom in Tajikistan.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

I would like to start off by saying that USCIRF was very glad to hear that Tajikistan allowed United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, to conduct an official delegation to the country this past Spring. She is our first witness this morning, and I am very interested to hear her observations and initial recommendations arising from her visit. Given the opening her trip has afforded, we at USCIRF believe the government of Tajikistan has a unique opportunity to reform laws and policies that severely constrict religious practice and expression. Similarly, the U.S. government has an opportunity to look for new ways to engage Tajikistan to lift religious freedom restrictions and allow religious communities to worship more freely.

Since 2012, USCIRF has recommended the U.S. government designate Tajikistan as a country of particular concern, or CPC, for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The State Department has agreed with our recommendation since 2016, and each year since has designated the country as such in recognition of its severe repression and control of all religious expression in the country, regardless of religious affiliation. Tajikistan is one of only four countries currently designated as a CPC that the U.S. government has chosen not to take any corresponding punitive action, choosing to waive presidential action that should accompany the designation, in the national interests of the United States.

Since 2009, the government of Tajikistan has passed and enforced a web of laws controlling and restricting religious expression and practice. Though the most widespread group affected in the country is the Sunni Muslim majority, the government similarly targets religious minorities such as Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Youth under the age of 18 and women are prohibited from attending public religious services. In effect, this means women are not permitted to attend prayers at the mosque. It means if you are a Muslim man and would like to go to a religious service you must leave your wife and children at home. It means you are not permitted to worship publicly as a family or to teach your children what it means to worship together as a member of a faith community.

All religious communities in the country are required to register, but many groups' registration applications are not accepted by the government, in particular Christian groups. Unregistered religious communities cannot legally convene religious meetings or assemblies, which then forces these groups to worship in secret at great risk to themselves. In addition, religious education outside of the nuclear family is banned, religious literature must be approved by the state, and any religious gathering or expression outside of the state's regulation is met with fines and prison sentences. These are just a few of the circumstances facing people of faith in Tajikistan, which our witnesses will share about in much more detail.

I will now turn the floor over to Vice Chair Fred Davie for his opening remarks.