

Thank you for the invitation to testify at USCIRF about religious freedom in Tajikistan. My remarks will focus on U.S.-Tajikistan relations and the governments use of transnational repression.

U.S. Relations with Tajikistan

Tajikistan's importance to the United States has waxed and waned over the 31 years of bilateral relations. Given the country's small size and limited resources, security concerns have always been at the forefront of relations. Early efforts, during the country's civil war from 1992 to 1997, aimed at bringing the war to an end and preventing the country from becoming a haven for terrorists. Tajikistan became more important once more with the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, with which Tajikistan shares an 833 mile border. While Tajikistan never hosted U.S. troops, the U.S. focused on bolstering border security and counter-terrorism. U.S. security assistance peaked at \$35 million in 2014 gradually declined to \$9 million in 2022.¹ During the first two decades of independence the U.S. was the country's largest donor, donating \$1 billion in humanitarian aid.² But over time its role has been overtaken by other patrons, most notably China. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, improved relations with Uzbekistan since 2016 and authoritarian Tajikistan's continued close relations with Russia and China, the country's importance to the U.S. is now on the decline.

Despite efforts to raise human rights issues and support civil society, the human rights situation has continued to deteriorate. Emomali Rahmon, who has ruled since 1992, has consolidated his power by extending his family's control over the economy, banning opposition groups and cracking down on civil society and the media. These latter efforts have led his government to put pressure on a number of USAID projects and Radio Free Europe's service in Tajikistan.

Given limited U.S. interest and leverage over Tajikistan, compounded by its closer relations with Russia and China, addressing severe violations of religious freedom remains an uphill struggle. A number of options remain. First, private pressure rather than public shaming seems to have worked in cases where individuals have been released. Continued raising of human rights issues, including specific cases and general policies violating religious freedom, during meetings with Tajik officials, will signal that the U.S. continues to view this matter as important. Second, while Tajikistan has been classified as a "country of particular concern" for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) since 2016, it has waived the application of sanctions on national security grounds. But given that U.S. security interests and leverage have decreased, I would argue that targeted sanctions could now be applied to individuals within the State Committee on National

¹ <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>

² <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/98-594.html>

Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs. Convening an expert working group with stakeholders from academia, civil society and human rights organizations, could be a useful first step in compiling the necessary evidence on individual violators of religious freedom. Third, in promoting alternatives to Tajikistan's "assertive secularism" we need to get more imaginative, looking to examples of state-religion relations and tolerance of difference from countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Albania.

Transnational Repression

Despite its small size, Tajikistan is one of the most prolific users of transnational repression, the targeting of citizens abroad, in the world. According to Freedom House's dataset of 854 incidents since 2014, Tajikistan has the third-most direct, physical cases in the world in our dataset.³ By 2018, Tajikistan government had issued 2,528 Red Notices (arrest requests) through Interpol, which was 2.3% of the total in circulation at the time.

I have compiled my own dataset of publicly reported cases of transnational repression in Tajikistan, numbering 89 incidents, with 45 people being forcibly returned. Russia is the main site of Tajikistan's global campaign, accounting for over two thirds of entries. The data points to the increasing frequency of the use of transnational repression by the government, with 71 of the events occurring since 2014 and 22 in the past three years. Spikes in the data occur when the government cracks down at home, such as when it banned the Islamic Renaissance Party in 2015 and during the crackdown in the Pamirs since late 2021. Just under half of the cases can be considered as related to religion, either directly via accusations of religious extremism, or indirectly by targeting minority groups like the Ismaili population of the Pamirs, which account for 12 incidents.

As much of the targeting is taking place in adversarial regimes such as Russia and Belarus, there is a limit to what the United States government can do directly beyond raising concerns with the Tajik government over these practices. Here in the United States, the Department of Homeland Security can ensure that it does not follow in the footsteps of Germany and Austria, who extradited IRPT members Abdullo Shamsiddin and Hizbullo Shovalizoda, who were sentenced to seven and 20 years in prison respectively. This includes granting asylum to those fleeing religious persecution and ensuring that the U.S. justice system is not corrupted by authoritarian regimes. The Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act provides some protections against the abuse of Interpol on U.S. soil by requiring a valid extradition request and arrest warrant for the individual, ending the practice of detaining individuals solely based on an Interpol Red Notice. Such measures could go some way to addressing the problem.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to the discussion today.

³ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>