

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2020, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Restrictive state policies have “[virtually extinguished](#)” the free practice of religion in the country, where the government appoints Muslim clerics, surveils and dictates religious practice, and punishes nonconformity through imprisonment, torture, and administrative harassment.

Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational “black hole” with an [abysmal record](#) on freedom of the [press](#). Despite the state’s iron grip on the media, in September President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov [lashed out](#) at journalists and threatened to demote responsible officials for not adequately reporting “on the country’s successes.” This landscape makes it difficult to chronicle the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. Nevertheless, the available information presents a bleak picture.

The government continued to treat all independent religious activity with suspicion, maintaining a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmenistan law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups’ activities, and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups, which are effectively banned. There were reports during the year of the authorities [raiding](#) several Protestant meetings and subsequently fingerprinting participants, forcing them to write confessions that they had

attended an illegal religious gathering, and threatening them with the loss of their children and their employment. The government accelerated its ongoing [persecution](#) of Jehovah’s Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service, sentencing at least five more members to prison in 2020, which brings the current known total to 11. These include two Jehovah’s Witnesses, Vepa Matyakubov and Kamiljan Ergashov, who in January and February, respectively, received [sentences](#) of two years imprisonment for their conscientious objection. In August, two brothers, Sanjarbek and Eldor Saburov, received two-year prison sentences for the same charge—their [second time](#) to face conviction for this offense, having already served out their first criminal sentences. In September, [yet another](#) Jehovah’s Witness, Myrat Orazgeldyev, was imprisoned for “avoiding mandatory military service.” Most conscientious objectors are held at the [Seydi Labor Camp](#), where overcrowding, harsh climatic and health conditions, physical abuse, and a high mortality rate are the norm.

Persons accused of criminal religious offenses are often tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Convicts are often disappeared in the state’s prison system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. The authorities likely hold many religious prisoners at the notorious [Ovadan-Depe Prison](#), located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and starvation.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under [IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#) to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights-related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide a civilian alternative to military service and to release and pardon all those convicted for conscientious objection.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Issue Update: [The Global Persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- Issue Update: [Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan’s Gulag](#)
- Op-Ed: [Lift the National Security Waiver on Turkmenistan](#) (in *Eurasianet*)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Berdymukhamedov since 2007, enforcing a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage. The 2016 Constitution removed the presidential age limit and Berdymukhamedov was “reelected” in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote. Sources report that the government is extremely concerned about the possibility of [mass unrest](#) amid a crippling economic decline, and it is rapidly implementing an “anti-terrorist plan” that includes the installation of facial recognition cameras and “smart city” technology in public places, including small businesses. The government typically [charges its critics](#) with terrorism, targeting their families and friends if it cannot extradite them from abroad.

A majority 89 percent of the population are Sunni Muslim, while Orthodox Christians represent the second-largest group, comprising around 9 percent. Although the 2016 Religion Law asserts that Turkmenistan is a secular state with religious freedom, it requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice under intrusive criteria, mandates that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans private religious education and worship, and prohibits the public wearing of religious garb except by clerics. The State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) oversees all religious activity, including registrations, the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, and the import and publication of religious literature. The registration process requires religious organizations to provide detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Recognized communities must reregister every three years, and religious activity is forbidden in prisons and the military.

Government Control of Religion

In addition to this strict framework of registration, Muslims continued to face particular scrutiny in 2020. The government maintained its practice of appointing senior Islamic leaders and dictating the content of sermons and prayers. Sermons include [tributes to the President](#), reminding the congregation that all that is good in their lives derives from Berdymukhamedov’s “wise policies.” Although the government denied the existence of coronavirus in Turkmenistan, all mosques have been closed as a “[prophylactic](#)” measure since July—a restriction that did not apply to the President’s dedication of a mosque in November or to its large accompanying feast.

The personality cult of President Berdymukhamedov functions as a virtual state religion. In 2020, the President published his alleged 53rd book, *The Spiritual Life of the Turkmens*, which prescribes correct national belief and culture and is [celebrated](#) in state media as a work “of particular value in the spiritual and moral education of youth.” Berdymukhamedov noticeably adopted a more pious appearance in public, including at the [dedication](#) of massive prestige mosques in February and November, when he delivered speeches about the

necessity of protecting national values and culture. State media increasingly refers to him as [Hajji](#), in reference to his completion of the Umrah pilgrimage to Mecca, and emphasized at his 63rd birthday celebration that he is now the same age that the Prophet Muhammad was when he died. However, the state frowns on open religious piety among regular citizens and the civil service; in February, state employees in the Lebap region were [forbidden](#) outright from attending Friday prayers or praying at work, and the state employees were warned that they would lose their jobs if they entered a mosque.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Although not technically banned, Jehovah’s Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally. The government has arrested and imprisoned many Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service, for which there is no civilian alternative available; Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a “sacred duty” incumbent on everyone. Since 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against conscientious objection, Turkmenistan has imprisoned at least 25 Jehovah’s Witnesses under Article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. Although 14 of those prisoners have since been released after serving their one-year sentences, 11 others remain [imprisoned](#). In September, President Berdymukhamedov [pardoned](#) more than 800 prisoners but did not include a single Jehovah’s Witness among them. In October, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights sent an [open letter](#) to the Turkmenistani Human Rights Ombudsman requesting an end to the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses for conscientious objection.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States engages with the Turkmenistan government in border and regional security programs, along with educational and cultural exchanges. Turkmenistan enjoys most-favored-nation trading status and receives direct U.S. assistance to strengthen the security of its border with Afghanistan. Although the U.S. government is cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, it has prioritized security concerns related to the ongoing war in Afghanistan. In October, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale participated in a virtual [trilateral meeting](#) with counterparts from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, where they discussed strengthening cooperation on regional security, economic growth, and development. The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014, and [redesignated](#) it on December 2, 2020, but has repeatedly used a waiver against any related sanctions “as required in the ‘important national interest of the United States.’” This waiver effectively neutralizes the consequences of Turkmenistan’s CPC designation, removes any incentive for the government to reform its brutal policies, and lends credence to the regime’s claims that security concerns warrant its harsh repression of religious freedom.