

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government maintained strict control over all aspects of religious life and prosecuted individuals who did not adhere to it. Authorities routinely targeted devout, peaceful Muslims as “extremist” because of their appearance, possession of unapproved religious materials, or disciplined religious practice. The government perceived such forms of religiosity as foreign and divergent from its conceptions of traditional Turkmen religious practice. Police and officials from the Ministry of National Security reportedly [interrogated](#) Muslim women—particularly those who went to mosque, wore hijab, or prayed with *tasbeih* (Islamic prayer beads)—and searched their phones to determine if they belonged to “radical” religious groups. Police in Dashoguz reportedly [detained](#) “en masse” men with beards—a sign of religiosity for many Muslim men—and forced them to shave at police stations. In a separate instance, a man was blocked from boarding his flight until he shaved his beard. In August, police in Turkmenbashi and other regions [raided](#) Muslim homes, seizing religious literature. That same month, law enforcement reportedly detained an elderly Muslim man for teaching Islam to dozens of children without state approval.

Muslim prisoners of conscience remained jailed under unsubstantiated national security pretenses for engaging in peaceful religious activities. USCIRF has [identified](#) at least nine prisoners—though this number is [suspected](#) to be greater—serving between 12 and 15 years in prison for a range of reasons connected to the exercise of their freedom of religion or belief. In a positive development, Turkmen officials provided USCIRF with information about the latest whereabouts and statuses of these nine prisoners. Concerns remained, however, about the wellbeing of such prisoners given the notoriously inhumane living [conditions](#) of prisons in Turkmenistan,

especially Ovadan-Depe Prison, where [allegations](#) of torture, medical neglect, and enforced disappearance persisted.

Turkmenistan targeted its Muslim citizens living abroad. In August, Russian authorities deported Turkmen Muslim [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#) to Turkmenistan in violation of a 2017 European Court of Human Rights decision to suspend his extradition. Turkmen officials placed Bekiev, who had lived in Russia since 2009, on the country’s wanted list in 2015 after accusing him of promoting Islamic extremism to other Turkmen citizens in Russia. In October, a Turkmen court reportedly sentenced Bekiev to 23 years in prison. Earlier in the year, Russian officials also [detained](#) Bekiev’s brother Tachmyrat Bekiev in St. Petersburg.

Exiled Turkmen activists claimed that the state retaliated against their family members living in Turkmenistan. Hamida Babajanova alleged that in April 2023, Ashgabat airport officials [prohibited](#) her mother Yakutjan Babajanova from boarding a plane to Saudi Arabia to go on Umra. At the time, authorities provided no explanation to Babajanova, despite her having all the required paperwork. Babajanova was eventually allowed to travel five months later. Moreover, people applying to go on Hajj reportedly must [prove](#) they have no relatives with criminal records or pay a bribe to falsify such records.

The government has still not allowed Jehovah’s Witnesses to register, nor has it provided an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. While authorities in the past have imprisoned Jehovah’s Witnesses for refusing to serve in the military, no Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned in 2023. However, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported nearly a dozen instances in which police briefly detained, questioned, or ordered Jehovah’s Witnesses not to share their beliefs with others.

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;
- Encourage Turkmen authorities to extend an official invitation for an unrestricted visit by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; and
- Raise religious freedom and other human rights concerns with Turkmen counterparts, including at C5+1 meetings, and urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide an acceptable civilian alternative to military service.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise ongoing religious freedom issues through hearings, meetings, letters, congressional delegation trips abroad, and other actions for community representatives to inform the U.S. government and/or public of existing conditions.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List: [Turkmenistan](#)

Background

Turkmenistan has an [estimated](#) population of 5.6 million. According to the U.S. government, 89 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni); nine percent is Eastern Orthodox, which largely means either Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic; and the remaining two percent includes small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is, Roman Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Protestants, and Jews.

Turkmenistan remains one of the world's most repressive countries, making documenting religious freedom violations challenging. The state has [deprived](#) its citizens of virtually all political and civil rights and [imprisoned](#) civil society activists for their work and perceived criticism of authorities. Turkmenistan [ranks](#) at the bottom for press freedom, as no independent media exists within the country, and journalists risk [criminal prosecution](#) and other forms of [retribution](#) for their work. Turkmen citizens, furthermore, faced significant obstacles communicating with the outside world. The government has [blocked](#) foreign media, social media, and messaging websites and rendered unblocked websites practically useless due to internet speeds that were among the slowest in the world. Turkmens living abroad risked [deportation](#) or retaliation against their families members who remained in Turkmenistan if they criticized the Turkmen government or raised concerns about human rights.

Legal Framework for Controlling Religious Activity

While Turkmenistan's 2016 religion law [established](#) the country as a secular state and guaranteed the right to freedom of religion, it ultimately provides the government a comprehensive legal basis to systematically restrict religious activities. Only registered religious organizations are legally allowed to practice. In order to register, religious groups must submit an application to the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), which oversees all religious affairs in Turkmenistan. During the review process, SCROEERIR determines if a religious group's goals and activities "contradict Turkmenistan's constitution." This vague standard allows the government to deny registration to religious groups on an arbitrary basis. Furthermore, religious organizations must acquiesce to SCROEERIR's all-encompassing power to regulate a community's religious affairs, including the appointment of religious leaders, the importation and publication of religious literature, and building houses of worship.

Recognized religious communities must reregister every three years and are prohibited from receiving foreign financial support, conducting religious education and worship in private, and wearing religious garb, with the exception of government-approved clergy. The government forbids unregistered religious organizations from engaging in religious activities, producing or distributing religious materials, proselytizing, and gathering for religious services, even in private residences.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

Documenting arrests of religious prisoners of conscience in 2023 proved difficult due to Turkmenistan's vast repression. However,

several Muslims sentenced in years prior because of their peaceful religious activities remained in prison throughout the year. Authorities leveraged vague accusations of inciting religious enmity or attempting to violently change the constitutional order, prosecuting individuals in trials that lacked any semblance of transparency or due process. In 2013, authorities arrested and sentenced [Bahram Saparov](#) to 15 years in prison for organizing unregistered religious meetings to teach about Islam at the homes of his followers. After his initial sentencing, prison authorities brought additional charges against Saparov, resulting in two additional 15-year sentences that he is serving concurrently with his first. He is now expected to be released in 2031. Authorities arrested approximately 20 others from his religious community as well, but many of their sentences remain unknown. In 2017, Turkmen authorities arrested and sentenced [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetdurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) to 12 years in prison each for studying the works of Muslim theologian Said Nursi.

Muslims who exercise their right to practice or discuss their religion when living outside of Turkmenistan have faced imprisonment for those religious activities upon returning home. In 2016, Turkmen authorities arrested and sentenced [Annamurad Atdaev](#) to 15 years in prison after he returned to Turkmenistan from Egypt where he had been studying at al-Azhar University. In 2018, Turkmen authorities detained and sentenced both [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) to 15 years in prison for possessing religious materials and discussing religious topics with other Turkmens living in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States engaged with the government of Turkmenistan on a range of issues, including border and regional security, economic cooperation, and efforts to curb methane emissions. In April 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov to discuss the bilateral relationship. In September, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden [met](#) with Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedow among other Central Asian heads of state at a C5+1 meeting on the margins of the UN General Assembly. In November, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) the launch of Business 5+1 to promote economic security and development between the United States, Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian states. During Turkmenistan's Universal Periodic Review at the UN, the United States [commended](#) Turkmenistan for its efforts to work with Jehovah's Witnesses on a mutually agreeable alternative civilian service. However, it also recommended Turkmenistan address its vast repression of civil society and provide greater transparency concerning prisoners and the prison system. In FY 2023, the U.S. government obligated around \$3.2 million for [programs](#) in Turkmenistan.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States," which it has done since 2014.