

TURKMENISTAN

TIER 1 | USCIRF-RECOMMENDED COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2018, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained largely unchanged. Turkmenistan is widely considered the most closed of the former Soviet states, and this was reflected in the range and severity of the government's religious freedom violations in 2018. For the first time in four years, the government resumed its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to military service. The government continued to be suspicious of all independent religious activity and maintained 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 bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. Persons accused of criminal religious offenses may be tried in closed-regime courts in which the sentences remain secret. Many of those convicted are disappeared in the state's prison system and are presumed to be held without any contact with the outside

world; some are held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison where prisoners routinely die from torture and starvation. However, the full extent of religious persecution is unknown due to the nearly complete absence of independent news media and the threat of retaliation by the government against communities, family members, and individuals who publicize human rights and religious freedom violations.

In light of these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations, in 2019 USCIRF again finds that Turkmenistan merits designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC since 2014, most recently in November 2018. At the same time, the State Department used a waiver against any related sanctions on Turkmenistan "as required in the 'important national interest of the United States.'" USCIRF recommends that the State Department redesignate Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Lift the waiver on taking action as a consequence of Turkmenistan's CPC designation to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its continuing violations of religious freedom;
- Identify Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, freeze those individuals' assets, and bar their entry into the United States, as delineated under the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#) and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- Press for at the highest levels and work to secure the immediate release of individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations and urge the government of Turkmenistan to desist immediately from the practice of "disappearing" prisoners and account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and
- Ensure continued U.S. funding for Radio Azatlyk, the Turkmen service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), so that uncensored information about events inside Turkmenistan, including those related to religious freedom, continues to be disseminated.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Turkmenistan

GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic

POPULATION

5,411,012

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Technically a secular state with complete religious freedom. In practice, the government gives preference to Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity.

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

89% Muslim (primarily Hanafi Sunni)
9% Orthodox Christian (Russian and Armenian)
2% Other (including Protestants, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, and Baha'is)

*Estimates compiled from the CIA World Factbook and the U.S. Department of State

BACKGROUND

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who enforces a cult of personality and demands that the population conform to his personal whims, such as mandating the color of privately owned cars. The country's first post-Soviet president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006, also presided over his own personality cult that included renaming the months of the year in his honor and mandating his semi-autobiographical moral treatise, the *Ruhnama*, as required reading in Turkmenistan's schools, universities, and government offices. After assuming the presidency in early 2007, Berdymukhamedov rolled back some aspects of Niyazov's cult, set up two new official human rights commissions, registered 13 religious minority groups, and eased police controls on internal travel.

Over time, however, President Berdymukhamedov has done little to reform oppressive Turkmenistan laws, rein in the all-powerful state security apparatus, or place curbs on his personal power. In fact, a new 2016 constitution removed the presidential age limit and President Berdymukhamedov was reelected in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote in an election that international observers widely regarded as unfair. With few—if any—

checks and balances, the government of Turkmenistan in 2018 continued to impose an information blackout, including by strictly controlling electronic communications; it also harasses and imprisons journalists. On May 9, authorities detained an RFE/RL journalist, Soltan Achilova, threatening her with trumped-up drug charges and forcing her to renounce her employment with RFE/RL before she was released.

The country is adjacent to northern Afghanistan, which is home to approximately 250,000 ethnic Turkmen, some of whom the Turkmenistan government alleges sympathize with Islamist extremist groups. As a result, the government continued to be concerned about religious extremism spreading into Turkmenistan. The Afghan border is also the site of periodic clashes with various armed groups, including smugglers and Taliban militants.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2018

Government Legal Control over Religious Activities

Although the constitution guarantees religious freedom, the separation of religion and state, and equality before the law, Turkmenistan law and policies violate these guarantees. In May 2018, various government

participants in the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council's [Universal Periodic Review of Turkmenistan](#) remained concerned that legislation, especially the 2016 law on religious freedom, restricted freedom of religion and belief, in particular citing barriers to religious education, the registration of religious groups, and the importation and distribution of religious literature. The 2016 law raised the group registration requirement minimum from five to 50 adult citizen founders, rendering smaller congregations illegal. In addition, the law also continued several restrictive provisions from the previous legislation, including: intrusive registration criteria, prohibition of any activity by unregistered groups, the requirement that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans on worship in private homes and private religious education, and prohibition of wearing religious garb in public except by clerics. More recently, the government has stepped up enforcement of its unofficial ban on full beards for men under 40, which it views as an indicator of Islamist extremism. Young men are routinely stopped on the street by police and forced to shave or pay a fine.

The Commission for Work with Religious Organizations and Expert Analysis of Resources with Religious Information, Published and Printed Production (CWRO), which reports to the Cabinet of Ministers, must approve registration applications before they are sent to the Justice Ministry. It is illegal for unregistered groups to rent, purchase, or build places of worship. Justice Ministry officials can attend any religious event of a registered religious community and ask its members about the nature of their religious activities. Registered religious communities must undergo re-registration every three years, and religious activity is not permitted in prisons or in the military.

According to the Turkmenistan government, as of January 2018, there were 131 registered religious organizations, including 108 Muslim (103 Sunni and five Shi'a), 12 Orthodox Christian, and 11 others. The Working Group of the UN Universal Periodic Review [affirmed](#) that in 2017 Turkmenistan approved the registration

of five new groups; however, registration applications from certain Shi'a Muslim groups, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Protestant congregations, and Jehovah's Witnesses have faced numerous rejections. Non-Muslim communities led by ethnic Turkmen have proven especially difficult to register. In January 2018, at least six evangelical churches reportedly had been waiting for registration since 2016 and were forced to conduct worship services in secret, where they were subject to arrest and raids. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, between September 2017 and August 2018, authorities carried out the following against their members: five police raids and searches of religious meetings and private homes, 17 detentions by authorities, two severe beatings by police, and 12 fines imposed for religious activity.

In addition, the Turkmenistan government imposed unspecified conditions on the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by requiring religious leaders and believers to cooperate closely with the Ministry of National Security's secret police.

Punishment for Religious Activities

The Turkmenistan government subjects religious adherents to harsh penalties, such as imprisonment, forcible treatment with drugs, and alleged torture. In recent years, Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained, fined, imprisoned, or internally

exiled for their religious beliefs and activities.

Politically sensitive trials often take place in a closed regime, with the sentence remaining secret. Once convicted, prisoners are routinely subjected to brutal and inhumane conditions,

including starvation, alleged torture, and infectious disease. The most politically sensitive prisoners, including some religious prisoners, are subjected to "disappearance" in the state prison system. Oftentimes, death announcements by authorities are made after a lengthy period of the prisoner being incommunicado. Most of the "disappeared" are believed to be held in Ovdan-Depe, a prison also known by its official designation, AN-T/2, in the Karakum Desert. In December

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2016, the UN Committee Against Torture stated that it was “gravely concerned” about the use of torture to extract confessions, the deaths of “numerous” prisoners in Ovadan-Depe, and the “impunity” of state officials involved in torturing detainees.

Disappearances were pursued most widely in the early 2000s under the reign of then President Niyazov. The practice has tapered but has continued under President Berdymukhamedov, whose administration has upheld the sentences and conditions of those previously “disappeared” and resisted providing information about prisoners to international organizations and the UN. Against this backdrop, there have been some positive steps taken in recent years. In 2016, authorities started to hand over the bodies of “disappeared” prisoners to their families for burial. In June 2018, the government provided limited family visits to certain “disappeared” prisoners at Ovadan-Depe, including a few individuals accused of Islamist extremism.

Muslims

Because of the government’s information blackout, no accurate numbers of religious prisoners exist. In 2018, sources in Turkmenistan informed the UN’s [Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances](#) that among the approximately 120 disappeared prisoners, 30 individuals were held on charges of Islamist extremism, most with sentences between eight and 25 years. In a few cases, those charged with religious extremism are members of nonviolent religious communities or people refusing to cooperate with security agencies. In several cases, those given sentences of between two and a half and three years on suspicion of extremism were then resentenced to longer terms while in prison, allegedly for more serious crimes, and the details of the sentences were unknown. According to sources, four prisoners held on religious charges have died in prison.

In 2016, Turkmenistan officials detained more than 150 businessmen and former teachers and graduates of joint Turkish-Turkmen secondary schools

associated with the movement of Turkish Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen, who is currently based in the United States. In February 2017, 18 of the detained individuals were sentenced to between 12 and 25 years in prison on charges of belonging to an unnamed terrorist group. The arrests reportedly were a “goodwill” gesture to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has blamed Gülen for the 2016 attempted coup against his government. Several of those convicted were reportedly transported to Ovadan-Depe Prison. In December 2017, the UN’s [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) ruled that the 18 cases had major irregularities and were in fact arbitrary.

In 2018, no new information became available about Annamurad Atdaev, a Muslim prisoner of conscience who disappeared in January 2017 after being charged with “inspiring religious, national, and social hatred.” Atdaev’s disappearance occurred while authorities transferred him to a regime prison; he is believed to be held in Ovadan-Depe Prison, though his precise whereabouts were unknown at the end of the reporting period.

In July 2018, the 12-year sentences of five men convicted in 2017 of convening a prayer group devoted to discussing the works of the late Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were upheld in a court of appeals. At the end of the reporting period, four of the men were held at Ovadan-Depe Prison even though their sentences called for them to serve time in labor camps.

Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses

In 2018, the Turkmenistan government regularly raided homes and places of worship of both registered and unregistered religious minorities, confiscating literature and temporarily

detaining believers. In addition to incarcerations with significant jail time, Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses were jailed as short-term prisoners of conscience for periods up to 15 days. In recent years, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported being taunted,

threatened, expelled from schools, and removed from their jobs. Ethnic Turkmen Protestants also reported

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being summoned before community leaders, accused of betraying their “ancestral faith,” and pressured to renounce Christianity. However, reports of persecution are limited and incomplete because authorities tightly control information and communities fear retaliation if they publicize violations of their rights.

Conscientious Objectors

Turkmenistan has no civilian alternative military service for conscientious objectors. Although by law those who refuse service can face up to two years’ jail time, between 2014 and 2017 the dozen or so citizens prosecuted by Turkmenistan authorities typically received only suspended sentences or terms of “corrective labor,” under which the state withholds a portion of the convicted person’s salary.

The UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have repeatedly deemed the prosecution of conscientious objectors to be a violation of their human rights and have urged Turkmenistan to introduce a nonmilitary service alternative. In May 2018, the UN Working Group on Turkmenistan’s Universal Periodic Review [urged](#) the government “to recognize the right to conscientious objection to military service,” which the Turkmenistan government rejected, citing its law on universal military service.

In 2018, the Turkmenistan government increased the frequency of prosecutions and reintroduced jail time for conscientious objectors after a break of four years. Since January 2018, authorities imprisoned 10 Jehovah’s Witnesses for refusing military service. Nine of the men received one-year sentences and one, 19-year-old Mekan Annayev, received a two-year sentence. According to Forum 18, when Annayev initially declined military service in 2017 he was subject to “explanatory work” conducted by the chief imam of the city of Turkmenbashi. At his trial in June 2018, the presiding chief judge in Turkmenbashi denounced Annayev and all Jehovah’s Witnesses as “traitors.” In July, Jehovah’s Witness Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov was tried for conscientious objection in the

Gurbansoltan Eje district of Dashoguz Region in a conference hall of the district military conscription office rather than a courtroom.

Government Interference in Internal Religious Affairs

The Turkmenistan government interferes in the leadership and organizational arrangements of religious communities. The Sunni Muftiate (Muslim Spiritual Administration) continued to be under tight government control. The Justice Ministry names the chief mufti and senior muftiate officials, who also function as officials for the CWRO and thereby oversee the activities of other religious communities. The muftiate appoints imams, including at the district level, and district imams appoint local

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mullahs, with all appointments subject to secret police vetting. Sermons by imams at Friday prayers convey state messages, the Justice Ministry forbids imams from discussing certain topics, and Friday prayers end with a short prayer for the president.

Aside from basic education in some Sunni mosques and churches of the Moscow Patriarchate Russian Orthodox Church (MPROC), formal religious education is almost completely banned. Religious groups cannot arrange lectures, courses, or training programs. The sole exception is a small Sunni Muslim theological section in the history faculty of Ashgabat’s Turkmen State University that is authorized to train imams.

Restrictions on Houses of Worship

Registered religious communities are eligible to own property but require the approval of the CWRO and local government authorities to build places of worship. In practice, religious communities face major difficulties in securing leases for religious services and for building or acquiring places of worship. In the capital, Turkmenistan authorities have demolished at least eight of Ashgabat’s 14 mosques without compensation to the religious communities.

State Control of Religious Literature

Turkmenistan continued to ban most religious publications and state authorities routinely confiscated religious literature. Because very little literature is produced in Turkmenistan, it is difficult to acquire copies of religious books such as the Qur'an and the Bible. In December 2018, authorities detained a Turkmenistani woman for 24 hours for trying to bring copies of the Qur'an back from Turkey. She was eventually released, but the texts were confiscated. Only registered groups can legally import religious literature, but only under tight censorship. The CWRO must review and stamp "approved" on all religious texts; documents without a stamp are subject to confiscation and individuals to fines or imprisonment. Although the MPROC can sell approved religious texts, Protestant churches have been unable to register a Bible Society to promote and sell Christian scriptures.

State Restrictions on Foreign Travel and Religion

The Turkmenistan government continued to restrict the movement of its citizens across international borders, especially when it suspects religious activity as the purpose of travel. The only exception to this policy is for the approximately 110,000 individuals with dual Russian-Turkmenistan citizenship, mainly Russian Orthodox, who usually meet coreligionists abroad and undertake clerical training. Muslims, however, are not permitted to travel abroad for religious education. In 2018, the government stated that it routinely allows more than 1,500 people to travel to Mecca for the hajj pilgrimage each year, though this assertion belies reported figures from previous years; for example, in 2017, only 160 people reportedly made the hajj, the lowest number since 2009.

In January 2018, all women returning from Turkey to Turkmenistan reportedly were summarily detained for questioning about their religious convictions at the Ashgabat International Airport, especially those with Turkish residency permits or those who wore the hijab.

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Authorities also confiscated the women's cell phones and checked their social media accounts.

The government also continued to monitor and harass its citizens abroad, especially students. In June 2018, students returning to Turkmenistan were reportedly required to visit the offices of the Ministry of National Security for "prophylactic conversations," during which authorities sought to reconstruct their circles of friends and acquaintances and inquired about their religious activity.

At a secret trial during the spring of 2018, Omriuzak Omarkulyev was found guilty of high treason and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Omarkulyev had been a second-year student at Osmaniye Korkut Ata University in Turkey and the leader of an informal Turkmen student group that was monitored by the Turkmenistan Embassy in Ankara. He was invited back to Turkmenistan by authorities on the pretense of being trained to take part in pre-election activities in Ashgabat in February 2018. He was subsequently prevented from boarding a flight to Turkey for a week before being arrested and charged and sentenced in closed trial, and is believed to be held in Ovadan-Depe Prison at the end of the reporting period.

U.S. POLICY

For more than a decade, U.S. policy in Central Asia has been dominated by the Afghan war, with human rights and religious freedom remaining low on the list of regional priorities. However, the drawing down of U.S. forces in the region could impact the status quo.

The United States has security and economic interests in Turkmenistan due to its proximity to Iran and Afghanistan and its large natural gas reserves. Despite its neutral status, Turkmenistan has allowed the Northern Distribution Network to deliver supplies to U.S. and international troops in Afghanistan, as well as the refueling of U.S.

flights with nonlethal supplies at Ashgabat International Airport. During counterterrorism operations over the past year, U.S. Special Operations Forces reportedly

have been allowed to enter Turkmenistan on a “case-by-case” basis with Turkmenistan’s permission.

In July 2018, a U.S. delegation [attended](#) the C5+1 Ministerial in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which brought together the foreign ministries of the five Central Asian states and the United States for discussions on various multilateral issues. However, these discussions have historically focused on regional cooperation, U.S. investment, counterterrorism, and environmental concerns more than human rights issues.

The Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) are a regular mechanism for the United States and Turkmenistan to discuss a wide range of bilateral issues, including regional security, economic and trade relations, social and cultural ties, and human rights. Although no ABC sessions were held in 2016 and 2017, they resumed in October 2018 with a [visit](#) to Ashgabat by Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for

Central Asian Affairs Emilia A. Puma. As part of the dialogue, the delegations reportedly discussed human rights issues.

In recent years, U.S. participation alongside other nations at the UN has provided another important platform to address concerns over Turkmenistan’s human rights and religious freedom record. In May 2018, as part of the UN’s Universal Periodic Review, the United States made [explicit recommendations](#) to lift practices that “restrict freedoms of religion or belief, expression and movement.”

In November 2018, the State Department redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA, a designation it first made in 2014. However, in light of its ongoing security cooperation with the United States, the State Department granted a waiver on taking any action as a consequence of the CPC designation in consideration of U.S. national interest.