



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: AFGHANISTAN

October 2019

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*To advance international
freedom of religion or
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confronting threats to this
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Promoting Religious Freedom in Afghanistan

By Harrison Akins, Policy Analyst

Overview

In recent months, U.S. officials and Taliban representatives have met in Doha, Qatar, to negotiate a peace agreement to end the 18-year-old Afghan conflict, with President Donald J. Trump bringing the current negotiations to a sudden end in early September 2019. As both parties work toward a desperately sought peace in Afghanistan, however, a series of terrorist attacks by both the Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) have rocked the country. In this precarious security environment, Afghanistan's religious minorities, in particular its Shi'a Muslim community, continue to be targets of violence.

During discussions with Taliban representatives, U.S. officials, led by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad, prioritized international counterterrorism. They pushed the Taliban to sever any relationship with al-Qaeda and halt the country's use as a base for international terrorism. However, any peace agreement and future governance framework must also take into consideration religious freedom concerns and ensure the security of Afghanistan's religious minorities. As U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) Commissioner and former chair Tenzin Dorjee *noted* following a July 2018 terrorist attack by ISKP against the country's Sikh and Hindu communities, "This attack is yet another reminder of the crucial link between security and religious freedom."



Conditions for Religious Minorities

After the Taliban seized control of the Afghan government in 1996 and implemented its harsh, fundamentalist vision of Islamic law, religious minorities—both Shi’a Muslims (largely from the Hazara ethnic group) and non-Muslim communities—experienced persistent attacks, socioeconomic exclusion, and legal persecution. Many members of the Sikh and Hindu communities fled the country, causing a population of more than 200,000 in the early 1990s to drop to only 3,000–7,000 today. The Taliban also denounced the country’s Shi’a Muslims, who comprise as much as 19 percent of the total population, as infidels and incited and committed violence against them, such as the 1998 [Mazar-i-Sharif massacre](#) in which as many as 2,000 Hazara Shi’a civilians were killed. After the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, the Shi’a community has experienced a resurgence in its sociopolitical standing, with many of its members holding key positions in government, media, and private industry. Similarly, Hindus and Sikhs, despite their small numbers, have been employed in government service and been represented in the Afghan parliament since 2016.

Despite some positive developments since 2001, Afghanistan’s religious minorities still face tremendous hurdles. A number of lingering issues hamper religious freedom, such as the criminalization of ambiguously defined “anti-Islamic content,” the 2007 Supreme Court decision declaring the Baha’i faith blasphemous, and ongoing social discrimination against religious minorities. Besides institutional restrictions, the most pressing concern for religious minorities in recent years

has consistently been physical security. As the anti-United States and anti-government Taliban insurgency intensified following the group’s ouster from power, religious minorities increasingly found themselves the target of violence. In its [2019 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that U.S. Department of State designate the Taliban as an “Entity of Particular Concern,” or EPC, due to severe violations of religious freedom within territory under its control and its continued attacks against religious minorities. With the emergence in 2015 of ISKP, an offshoot from Taliban forces, attacks against religious minorities have intensified as their houses of worship, markets, and neighborhoods have been targeted. In July 2018, for example, an ISKP suicide bomber in Jalalabad [killed](#) 19 people and wounded 20 more, largely members of the Hindu and Sikh communities, on their way to meet with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani. The victims included the only Sikh candidate in the October 2018 parliamentary elections. During 2018, according to the State Department’s [Annual Report on International Religious Freedom](#), there were 19 further attacks targeting Shi’a Muslims resulting in 223 civilian deaths with another 524 injured, a 34 percent increase from the previous year.

Recent 2019 incidents include:

- [August 17, 2019](#): In a Hazara Shi’a neighborhood in Kabul, the capital, an ISKP suicide bomber targeted the wedding reception of a Hazara couple, killing 63 people and wounding 182.

- [July 6, 2019](#): In the central province of Ghazni, ISKP fighters claimed an attack against a Shi'a mosque. An explosion from a planted bomb killed two people and injured 20.
- [March 21, 2019](#): In an ISKP-claimed attack in Kabul, three bombs exploded near a Shi'a shrine and cemetery as Shi'a Muslims gathered to celebrate Nowruz, the Persian New Year, killing six people and wounding another 20.
- [March 7, 2019](#): A memorial service for an ethnic Hazara leader, Abdul Ali Mazari, who was killed in 1995 by the Taliban, was shelled by ISKP forces, killing three people and wounding 20. The service was held in Kabul's predominantly Hazara neighborhood of Dasht-e-Barchi with numerous Afghan politicians and officials attending, including Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah and former president Hamid Karzai.
- [March 6, 2019](#): A Sikh shopkeeper in Kabul was kidnapped and murdered; his mutilated body was found in a graveyard two months later.

U.S.-Taliban Peace Talks

In the latest rounds of peace talks with Taliban leadership in Doha, to which the Afghan government was not invited, the United States prioritized its counterterrorism interests. In establishing the conditions for a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, U.S. negotiators sought to ensure that the country does not again become a base of operations for international terrorist groups and pushed the Taliban to enter into power sharing talks with the government. While officials raised the importance of engagement between the Taliban and Afghan government on a wide range of issues, little has been publicly said about the protection of religious freedom for religious minorities in these negotiations.

Any peace agreement with the Taliban must include a sustainable security framework that protects Afghanistan's religious minorities. Yet several challenges could impede negotiators on both sides from attaining this outcome. The foremost limitations have been the Taliban's unwillingness to agree to a ceasefire or engage with the Afghan government, considering it to be merely a puppet of the United States. Throughout negotiations with U.S. officials, Taliban forces continued to target the government. Taliban representatives have pressured for a full withdrawal of U.S. troops and the creation of an Islamic state in line with the group's own vision of a Shari'ah-based government, the same type of regime under which religious minorities suffered in the past. Adding further limitations on U.S. influence, President Ghani, who was sidelined in the discussions between the United States and the Taliban, recently pushed back against foreign interference in Afghan domestic politics, [arguing](#), "Our future cannot be decided outside, whether in the capital cities of our friends, nemeses or neighbors. The fate of Afghanistan will be decided here in this homeland. We don't want anyone to intervene in our affairs."

The Afghan government faces its own limitations in protecting religious freedoms, including the lack of political control over its sovereign territory and absence of government oversight for religious institutions. The Taliban continues to control significant tracts of land, limiting the government's influence in uniformly protecting religious freedoms for religious minorities. A [report](#) by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction found that, as of October 2018, the territory under direct control of the Afghan government represented only 63.5 percent of the total Afghan population. The government also has limited influence over many of the country's mosques and madrassa networks. According to the State Department's 2017 [Country Reports on Terrorism](#), only 5,000 of 160,000 mosques and associated madrassas in the country were officially registered with the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Education. The Afghan government's lack of oversight has [resulted](#) in these institutions being used as a key recruiting ground for the Taliban and to propagate teachings in line with the Taliban's extremist ideology.



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The Trump administration has expressed its commitment to promoting religious freedom around the world. At the July 2019 Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo *stressed* in his remarks that “religious freedom must be upheld, protected, and advanced.” It is imperative that the issues of religious freedom and security for Afghanistan’s religious minorities are likewise prioritized during future peace talks and not overlooked as a point of compromise to the Taliban. USCIRF’s 2019 *Annual Report* provided several recommendations focused on the physical protection of religious minorities in Afghanistan, protecting the legal rights of religious minorities to freely practice their religion, and promoting interfaith tolerance and understanding.

Concurrent with any future negotiations with the Taliban, the U.S. government should integrate religious freedom issues into its wide range of security and development programs and continue to press the Afghan government to acknowledge and address the threat to religious freedom from both the Taliban and ISKP. The U.S. government needs to assist the Afghan government to expand its efforts to provide security to religious minorities and institutionalize these security efforts as a precursor to its pursuit of intra-Afghan talks. As the United States negotiates its exit from Afghanistan, it should continue to push for the Taliban to engage with key Afghan political stakeholders and work with those stakeholders to ensure that protections for religious freedoms are an integral part of any future governance framework rather than being discarded for the sake of short-term political gains.

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