



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY UPDATE: TURKMENISTAN

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Religious Prisoners in Turkmenistan's Gulag

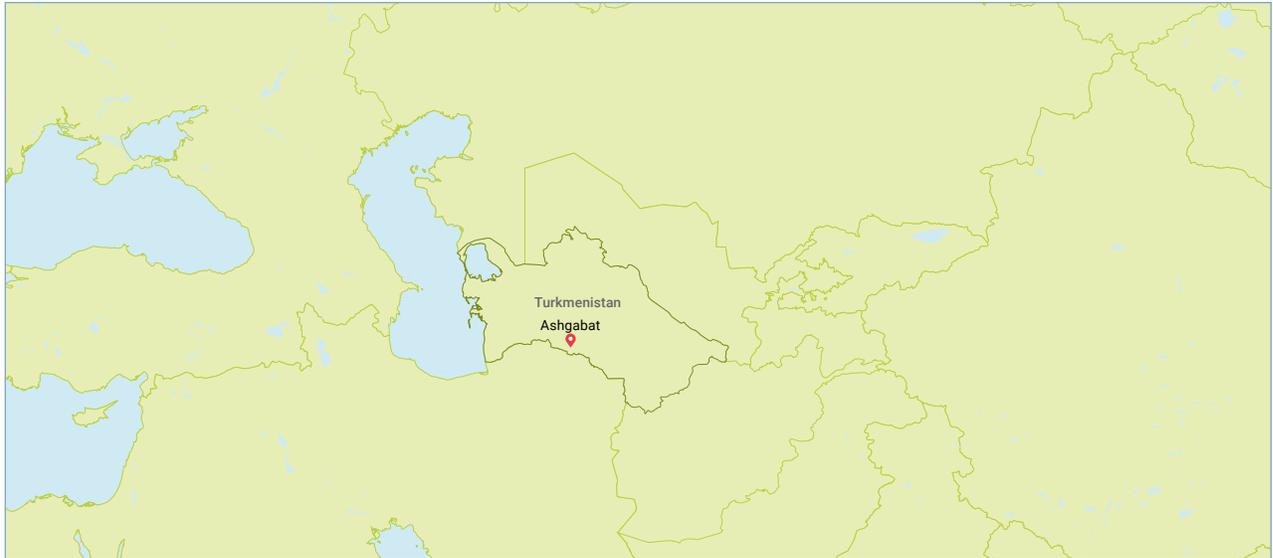
By Jason Morton, Policy Analyst

Overview

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has recommended the U.S. government designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) since 2000, making the country one of the oldest on USCIRF's list of violators. In the 20 years since USCIRF first made this recommendation, Turkmenistan has made no substantial progress; it remains a perpetrator of systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Beginning in 2014, the U.S. Department of State has implemented this recommendation and designated Turkmenistan as a CPC, yet every year the State Department has also included a national security waiver that negates the punitive consequences of this designation. In its 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF once again recommended Turkmenistan for CPC status and called upon the State Department to remove the waiver and hold the regime to account for its many violations, including those detailed in this report.

Turkmenistan's dystopian gulag is an unwelcome home for large numbers of peaceful religious prisoners alleged by that government to represent a national security threat. The country is a repressive dictatorship and the one former Soviet state that most resembles its Stalinist past. It is also an informational "black hole," with an abysmal [record](#) on press freedom and an all-pervasive cult of personality surrounding President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, rivaling that of any authoritarian leader, past or present. It is a deeply corrupt, oil- and gas-rich nation plagued by food shortages, where citizens must line up to receive basic staples.

The most repressive feature of this neo-Stalinist state is its vast network of prisons and labor camps, where religious and political prisoners are remanded after closed trials—or after the authorities simply abduct and disappear them. The international campaign Prove They Are Alive! [considers](#) enforced disappearances as the country's "most acute human rights problem," which targets individuals the regime considers dangerous, including "religious activists." The campaign has documented more than 120 such disappearances, including victims who have been held in complete isolation for more than 16 years, and it has registered almost 30 deaths—although the real numbers of both dead and disappeared are likely many times higher. The government accused 32 of those disappeared of "Islamic extremism," at least four of whom are [known](#) to have died.



Prison Conditions

Religious prisoners in Turkmenistan face deplorable conditions in a massive gulag system. The most infamous and secretive of these prisons is the Ovadan-Depe facility, on which [construction](#) began in the remote Karakum desert northwest of the capital of Ashgabat in 2002. Intended to house so-called “enemies of the state,” Ovadan-Depe is known to contain many individuals vaguely charged with “religious extremism” as well as followers of the Turkish Muslim theologians Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen. That prison complex continued to expand until at least 2010, when a nearby village was apparently evacuated and dismantled to maintain secrecy.

Torture and inhumane conditions are [reported](#) throughout the prison system, and they are particularly deplorable in Ovadan-Depe. Prisoners describe being allowed to bathe only infrequently and never with warm water, even in winter. Temperatures in the desert fluctuate between 122°F in the summer to -4°F in the winter, but most prisons provide neither heating nor air conditioning to their populations. Some prisoners claim that they are never provided with a change of underwear, and toilets are contained in cells shared by numerous prisoners, without privacy, and sometimes without plumbing. In Ovadan-Depe, even the elderly are forbidden to sit or lie down during the day, and medicine is rarely available without a bribe. Exercise consists of a weekly 10–15 minute walk, during which the prisoner must wear a hood that prevents them from seeing anything but the floor.

Prisoners across the system are subjected to severe beatings resulting in broken bones, psychological trauma, and death. There are [reports](#) of sexual humiliation and of prisoners held crouched in punishment cells where it is impossible to move or stand up completely. Prisoners affiliated with Muslim theologian Fethullah Gülen were kept naked in dark cells between interrogation sessions that included savage torture. Jehovah’s Witnesses report being targeted by guards for their religious beliefs, and are regularly subjected to beatings and solitary confinement in “punishment cells.” [Prisoners](#) are told to forget their names and refer to themselves by numbers, and are mocked by prison officials as “pederasts” and “pigs.” Their diet often consists primarily of wheat porridge, frequently seasoned with dirt and gravel, bread, and sometimes a vegetable. The bodies of dead prisoners returned to their families [reportedly](#) often show signs of starvation.

Finally, corruption is widespread and prisoners often must pay for basic necessities or go without them. One prisoner recently [claimed](#) the prison stopped providing toilet paper, soap, and toothpaste three years ago, forcing prisoners to pay for those basic necessities. Medicine is often available only for a fee and costs twice as much as it does on the outside. Meanwhile, so-called “VIP prisoners,” often former officials, live in [relative comfort](#) with refrigerators, air conditioners, and private rooms that they procured with bribes. Those prisoners who have money can [allegedly](#) procure nearly anything, from alcohol and drugs to deferential treatment and lavish accommodations.

Muslim Prisoners

Muslims whom the government has vaguely or falsely accused of “Islamic extremism” represent a disproportionately high number of those who disappeared or are serving harsh sentences at Ovadan-Depe and other facilities like it. On March 9, 2013, for example, the authorities arrested and later convicted at least 20 Muslims in a closed trial. Three are known to have [died](#) in custody, and one of the bodies returned to relatives was still “[blue from beatings](#).” An anonymous visitor later [described](#) the group’s leader as “barely recognizable” because of the weekly beatings he endured at Ovadan-Depe. In February 2015, Muslim prisoners similarly convicted of “extremism” suffered broken bones and serious internal injuries after guards at the infamous Seydi Labor Camp beat them. Former prisoners at the camp, located in the northeast of the country, describe torture and solitary confinement as routine.

Among Turkmenistan’s religious prisoners are many followers of the Kurdish theologian Said Nursi, and the Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. Nursi was the author of popular commentaries on the Quran and known for his advocacy of science and the modernization of Islamic learning. Gülen, whose own teachings are highly influenced by Nursi, operated a network of prestigious schools in Turkmenistan that reportedly provided the highest quality [education](#) in the country until they were [shut down](#) in 2011 for [allegedly](#) promoting religion.

In October 2016, after the government of Turkey accused Gülen and his followers of orchestrating an attempted coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the government of Turkmenistan arrested 18 individuals who had been teachers, graduates, or supporters of Gülen-affiliated schools. All were subjected to lengthy interrogations and torture. Their collective sentences [totaled](#) 333 years, with many serving their sentences at at Ovadan-Depe.

Between May and June 2017, at least five individuals were arrested for reading the commentaries of Said Nursi and [sentenced](#) to 12 years, with at least four years to be served at Ovadan-Depe. Like those affiliated with the Gülen schools, they were charged under Article 177, “incitement of social, national, ethnic, racial or religious hostility.” In 2019, it was [revealed](#) that at least two of the 18 Gülenist prisoners subsequently died in custody under unknown circumstances. There were later [reports](#) that a third prisoner was in serious condition, but his fate is unknown.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Although the Jehovah’s Witnesses are not technically banned in Turkmenistan, the government is conducting an ongoing crackdown on conscientious objection to military service. There is no civilian alternative to military service available to conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan, and Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a “sacred duty” incumbent on everyone. Furthermore, all of the accused are Jehovah’s Witnesses who refuse to serve for religious reasons. Since 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against conscientious objection, Turkmenistan has imprisoned at least 22 Jehovah’s Witnesses, charging them 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 been released after serving out their one-year sentences, eight others remain [imprisoned](#) at the Seydi Labor Camp.

Even when the regime seeks to advertise its benevolence, its efforts do not extend to these objectors. Between March and May 2019, President Berdymukhamedov [pardoned](#) almost 3,000 prisoners, but none of them were Jehovah’s Witnesses. Furthermore, not only has Turkmenistan accelerated its prosecution of conscientious objection, it has made the penalties for it more severe. There are numerous reports of torture and inhumane treatment under those conditions; one recent report found that police in an northeastern village [threatened](#) to shove a flagpole down the throat of a Jehovah’s Witness in an attempt to make him kiss the flag.

Further examples of this ongoing crackdown abound. In July 2019, authorities sentenced 19-year-old [Bahtiyar Atahanov](#) to four years in prison—the harshest sentence to date for conscientious objection. Although most sentences range between one and two years, the military forcibly conscripted Atahanov before he was charged, which allowed the courts to treat him as an active-duty soldier in dereliction of his duty. He reported being beaten and threatened in attempts to coerce his service. Subsequently, in November 2019, a court sentenced [Serdar Dovletov](#) to three years for “fraudulently” attempting to evade service. David Petrosov and Selim Taganov, two Jehovah’s Witnesses imprisoned in September and October 2019, respectively, attempted to obtain alternative service, but the military refused their requests.

The authorities hold most conscientious objectors at the [Seydi Labor Camp](#), where overcrowding, harsh climatic conditions, and physical abuse are the norm and lack of access to proper food and hygiene leads to tuberculosis,

skin diseases, and a high mortality rate. Some Jehovah's Witnesses reported that, upon arrival at Seydi, they are subjected to 10 days of solitary confinement and beatings. Others reported that the guards target them for their religion, giving them difficult labor assignments or sending them to punishment cells where they can spend up to a month in a concrete cell without a bed and only a bucket for a toilet.

Hope for Reform?

In early 2018, more than 30 relatives of prisoners held at Ovadan-Depe for "Islamic extremism" were allowed to [visit](#) their loved ones for the first time. The visits lasted approximately 40 minutes and prison authorities allowed family members to hold those conversations through a protective window. While some reported a significant deterioration in the appearance of their relatives, the ability to conduct regular visits and deliver packages to them has been a new and welcome change. Previously disappeared prisoners are among those to have received visits, and most of the prisoners able to receive visitors are religious prisoners charged with "extremism." However, observers [caution](#) that these prisoners do not represent all of those so charged; many are still inaccessible and unaccounted for. This modest improvement was ongoing until at least January 2020, but the advent of COVID-19 has ended both visitation and the delivery of packages. Although in 2019 several released prisoners [reported](#) improved food and decreased violence at AN-K/6 prison in the city of Tejen, more [recent testimonies](#) have described a subsequent decline in conditions at other facilities. The lack of an independent monitoring agency in Turkmenistan, and the inability of international monitors to gain access to the prisons, makes it extremely difficult to determine real conditions across the system.

In September 2018, the government of Turkmenistan began to actively engage in dialogue about a future visit from the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) and accepted many of the recommendations related to disappearances and related issues during the 2017 Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Turkmenistan at the UN Human Rights Council. Yet observers have complained that progress has subsequently unraveled as the government no longer responds to inquiries from the WGEID or shows any indication of the extent of its commitment to the implementation of UPR recommendations. In February 2020, USCIRF learned that the government of Turkmenistan again agreed to a visit by the WGEID, including a series of capacity building trainings for authorities by working group experts. The trip was

initially proposed for April 2020, but has been postponed because of COVID-19, despite the government's claim that Turkmenistan remains free of the virus.

Nevertheless, these developments indicate the insular dictatorship of Turkmenistan is not immune to international criticism; pressure must be maintained, however, in order to be effective. The governments of neighboring [Kazakhstan](#) and [Uzbekistan](#) have recognized the value of engaging with the international community and embracing a more inclusive approach to religion and subsequently working toward reform, and there is hope that this will have a spillover effect in the region. For now, however, Turkmenistan remains largely intransigent. While the State Department has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC since 2014, it has included a national security waiver every year, which negates the punitive consequences required by [IRFA](#). The waiver, ostensibly granted to maintain Turkmenistan's support for the dwindling U.S. presence in Afghanistan, only bolsters the regime's claims that security concerns necessitate its brutal repression of society. Yet there is little evidence that President Berdymukhamedov's neo-Stalinist state—which has [refused](#) to even acknowledge the receipt of U.S. assistance—is at all concerned with American interests or the wellbeing of its own citizens.

Recommendations

The U.S. government should:

- Re-designate Turkmenistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under IRFA in 2020 for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom;
- Lift the national security waiver on taking action as a consequence of Turkmenistan's CPC designation and take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under International Religious Freedom Act ([IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#)), 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, Section 7031\(c\) of the State Department's Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Act](#), and related executive orders, citing specific religious freedom violations;



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- Urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide a civilian alternative to military service, and to release and pardon all those convicted for conscientious objection; and
- Press at the highest levels to secure the identification and immediate release of individuals imprisoned in Turkmenistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and urge the government of Turkmenistan to desist immediately from the practice of “disappearing” prisoners; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; allow a visit from the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID); and close the prison at Ovadan-Depe.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.