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AFGHANISTAN

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

By [Niala Mohammad](#), Senior Policy Analyst and [Zack Udin](#), Researcher

Religious Minorities in Afghanistan

The Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan in August in the wake of the United States' withdrawal from the country has left many Afghans concerned for their future. Despite initial statements from the Taliban that it had reformed some elements of its ideology, Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban's harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and adherents of other faiths or beliefs are at grave threat. Before the takeover, USCIRF recommended in its [2021 Annual Report](#) that the U.S. Department of State re-designate the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern, or EPC, "for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." The State Department has [designated](#) the Taliban as an EPC every year since its first set of EPC designations in 2018, and most recently in December 2020.

Although most non-Muslim Afghans fled after the Taliban previously consolidated control of the government and ruled between 1996 and 2001, small populations of religious minorities, including Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, and Jews, remained. Many religious minority community members practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of [reprisal](#). The Taliban consider conversion from Islam to another religion apostasy, which could be punishable by death according to their interpretation of [Shari'a](#) or Islamic law. Hazara Shi'a Muslims, labeled heretical by the Taliban along with other non-Sunni Muslims, faced [targeted violence](#) and many fled as refugees to neighboring Iran and Pakistan. Pursuant to the Taliban's [interpretation](#) of Islam, [women](#) were [banned](#) from many activities, including receiving an education and working, had their healthcare restricted, were forced to wear burqas and travel with male relatives when in public.

Religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan have deteriorated since the Taliban [seized](#) control of the country on August 15, 2021. In September 2021, despite promises to form an "inclusive" government, the Taliban [announced](#) an all-male, religiously, and ethnically homogenous cabinet. Also in September 2021, the Taliban [reinstated](#) the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which uses a notoriously violent hardline Islamist policing system. The ministry recently [banned](#) barbershops from shaving or trimming men's beards and warned hair salons not to give Western-styled haircuts. USCIRF has received credible reports that the Taliban regime and rival militant group Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) also present in Afghanistan have intimidated, threatened, and targeted members of religious minority communities and carried out [violent attacks](#). Even before the Taliban took control of the country, in June 2021, [Mawlawi Ayaz Niazi](#)—a respected Sunni religious leader of the Wazir Mohammed Akbar Khan Mosque who espoused pro-government, anti-Taliban sentiments—was assassinated.

The Taliban’s Strict Interpretation of Islam: When the Taliban previously ruled Afghanistan from [1996](#) to [2001](#), they enforced their strict interpretation of Shari’a [based on](#) the Qur’an, according to [Hanafi](#) jurisprudence. Crimes for which Islamic law provides no fixed punishment were dealt with ad hoc. Religious rules were ruthlessly enforced by the religious police under the control of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. In practice, this meant that infractions were often met with gruesome, public punishments carried out by Islamic police and shadow Shari’a [courts systems](#):

Offense	Punishment
Adultery/Fornication	Stoning to death; Flogging*
Apostasy and/or Atheism	Death
Defamation	Flogging*
Drinking Alcohol	Flogging*
Gambling/Betting	Flogging*
Highway Robbery	Crucifixion, Death, Amputation, Exile
Homosexuality	Execution by various methods
Immodest Dress	Beatings; Flogging*
Murder	Execution by various methods
Other Infractions	Beatings; Flogging*
Theft	Amputation

*Number of lashes varies based on severity of crime

While laws against [apostasy](#) and proselytization remained in place in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, the Taliban has indicated that the implementation of [harsh punishments](#) such as public executions, cutting off hands, and lashings, will return under the reinstated Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The Taliban said in September 2021 that they will [continue](#) punishments in accordance with Shari’a. However, punishments recently meted out according to the Taliban interpretation of Shari’a law have been inconsistent due to discrepancies among member interpretations and infighting. A Taliban official recently said that while strict punishments will [return](#), these punishments may not occur in public.

Hazara Shi’a Persecution

Hazaras are Afghanistan’s [third-largest](#) ethnic group, following Pashtuns and Tajiks. Although pockets of Shi’a Muslims exist within all of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups, the majority of ethnic Hazara—thought to be decedents of Mongol [soldiers](#)—are Shi’a Muslims with some that follow the Ismaili sect within Shi’a Islam. The Hazara Shi’a have faced [attacks](#) by both the Taliban and the ISIS-K over the last 30 years and now face the prospect of more violence with the Taliban back in power.

There has been a recent resurgence of attacks targeting the Hazara community. In the first half of 2021, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) [documented](#) 20 attacks targeting Hazaras, which left a total of 143 dead and 357 injured. In early July, after the

Taliban took control of Ghazni province in their advance toward Kabul, villagers from Mundarakht left for shelter in the mountains during fighting between the Taliban and government forces. As some of the villagers returned to gather food and supplies, Taliban forces [massacred](#) nine Hazara Shi’a men over the course of three days; six were shot and three were tortured to death. In September 2021, Hazara activists claimed that at least [1,200 Hazara Shi’a](#) were evicted from their homes in Daykundi province as the Taliban fighters seized their properties. Shortly after, in [October 2021](#), there were confirmed reports that the Taliban killed 13 Hazaras in Daykundi province. On October 8, 2021, ISIS-K [attacked](#) a Shi’a mosque in Kunduz province that killed at least 46 worshipers and wounded dozens more.

In August 2021, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum issued a [press release](#) stating its grave concern about the Shi'a minority, warning that Hazaras face “a risk of crimes against humanity or even genocide.” For more information on the threat to the Hazara community, please refer to USCIRF’s Spotlight September 2021 episode “[Hazara Community Threatened in Afghanistan](#).”

The Targeting and Exodus of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews

Both in 1996 and 2021, large numbers of Afghans—including many members of religious minorities—sought to leave the country as the Taliban began consolidating control of the government. Thousands of Hindus and Sikhs [fled](#) in 1996, causing the population to dwindle from [250,000](#) to a few hundred today. Hindus and Sikhs who remained were [forced](#) to wear yellow tags to denote their non-Muslim status and pay *jizya*, a tax levied by the Taliban in some areas on non-Muslims. Both Hindus and Sikhs increasingly fled to India and Pakistan due to persecution and repeated threats by terrorist groups. Those who remained have been forced to abandon their houses of worship, holy sites, and [burial grounds](#).

Recent years have seen a resurgence in targeted violence against these communities, such as the [2018 suicide bombing](#) in Jalalabad that claimed the lives of 17 Hindus and Sikhs and the [2020 terror attack](#) at the Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib Sikh temple in Kabul that resulted in the deaths of 25 Sikhs, including women and children. In addition, Sikhs and Hindus are subject to harassment, physical assaults, abduction, land grabbing, looting, and pressure to convert. For more information regarding the conditions of Sikhs and Hindus preceding the Taliban’s takeover, refer to [USCIRF’s Conversation on the Exodus of Religious Minority Communities in Afghanistan in June 2021](#).

As the Taliban advanced toward Kabul in August, some Hindus and Sikhs took [refuge](#) in a Sikh temple in the capital while others tried to flee. As of October 2021, a little under 250 Hindus and Sikhs remain in the country following an evacuation effort by India. Nearly [140](#) Hindus and Sikhs who attempted to leave were not able to access the airport after the August 26 suicide bomb attack near the front gates. USCIRF received reports that just days after the takeover, armed Taliban representatives went to the Sikh Gurdwara in Karte Parwan in Kabul to urge Sikh and Hindu community members not to leave Afghanistan. Also in October 2021, the Sikh community shared videos of their [Gurdwara in Karte Parwan](#) being vandalized and ransacked by alleged members of the Taliban.

Additionally, the last reported Jewish person in Afghanistan, [Zebulon Simantov](#), finally [left](#) the country in September out of fear of persecution by the Taliban, leaving behind what had been the last operating synagogue in Kabul.

Practicing Faith in Fear: Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha’is, and Nonbelievers

Afghan Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha’is, and nonbelievers are unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly because they face dire consequences, including death, if discovered by the Taliban.

Ahmadi Muslims are not recognized by either the Sunni or Shi’a Muslim faiths and have experienced a long history of persecution in Afghanistan, including public stoning in the early 19th and 20th centuries. Today, Afghan Ahmadi practice their faith in secret due to continued societal persecution and discrimination. [Estimates](#) for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Afghanistan range from 450 to 2,500, with most adherents residing in Kabul.

Afghanistan has no long-established Christian denominations and traditions; since Afghan Christians converted from Islam, all are [considered](#) “apostates” according to Afghan law, which requires the courts to rely on Hanafi Shari’a jurisprudence. Converts who already faced ostracization and the threat of honor killings by family and village members are now at [heightened risk](#) with the Taliban in power. According to the Afghan House Church Network and International Christian Concern (ICC), there are an [estimated](#) 10,000 to 12,000 Christian converts throughout the country who have practiced underground over the past 20 years. Societal actors, the former Afghan government, and the Taliban often view conversion as an attempt to flee Afghanistan by seeking refugee status as a member of a persecuted religious community.

According to reports received by USCIRF, the Taliban have reportedly gone door-to-door looking for U.S. allies, former government workers, rights activists, and Christian converts. Christians have received threatening [phone calls](#), while one leader of a house church network received a [letter](#) on August 12 from Taliban militants threatening him and his family. Some Christians have turned their [phones off](#) and moved to undisclosed locations.

In Afghanistan, followers of the Baha’i faith have faced persecution both before and after the Taliban were in power. In 2007, the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts of the Supreme Court [declared](#) the Baha’i faith to be blasphemous and their followers to be [infidels](#). The Baha’i community has lived in secret since this ruling.



Nonbelievers—who [lived](#) in fear even under the Western-backed government—are worried that their neighbors may turn them in to the Taliban. Atheism and agnosticism are [considered](#) apostasy and is punishable by death, according to the Taliban’s interpretation of Islam.

Afghanistan’s small Uyghur Muslim community—thought to number around 2,000 to 3,000 and many are second- and third-generation Afghan citizens—has [expressed](#) fear that the Taliban could deport them to China where they face egregious persecution, which the U.S. government has [designated](#) as genocide and crimes against humanity. There are concerns that the Chinese government could use its economic and geopolitical leverage to [pressure](#) the Taliban to deport these Uyghurs. Just prior to the Taliban’s military takeover of Afghanistan, a top Taliban delegation traveled to China to meet with Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in July 2021. The Taliban previously deported Uyghurs at the request of the Chinese government in 2000.

Conclusion

Afghanistan’s religious minorities and others who do not share the same religious beliefs as the Taliban are in danger of falling afoul of the Taliban’s hardline Islamist beliefs. While religious freedom conditions in the country were poor under the previous government, these conditions have already worsened and have become dire under the Taliban and are likely to continue to deteriorate. To protect members of vulnerable religious communities against the threats outlined in this factsheet, USCIRF [called on](#) the State Department to expand its Priority 2 (P-2) designation granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members to explicitly include members of Afghan religious minorities in recognition of the severe risk of persecution they face from the Taliban.

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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 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.