

AFGHANISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan worsened as the Taliban took control of the country on August 15. Despite initial statements from the Taliban that they had reformed some elements of their 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 risk of grave danger. Reports indicate that the Taliban continue to persecute religious minorities and punish residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law. USCIRF has received credible reports that religious minorities, including nonbelievers and Muslims with differing beliefs from the Taliban, were harassed and their houses of worship desecrated. By year's end, the one known Jew and most Hindus and Sikhs had fled the country. Christian converts, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyya Muslims practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal and threats from the Taliban and separately from the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K).

In [September 2021](#), despite promises to form an "inclusive" government, the Taliban announced an all-male and religiously and ethnically homogenous government cabinet. The Taliban also [reinstated](#) the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which uses a notoriously [violent](#) hardline Islamist policing system. Since September 2021, the ministry has banned practices it deems un-Islamic, including wearing Western-style haircuts and listening to music. The ministry also imposed a [new dress code](#) as well as [work](#), education, and [travel restrictions](#) on women.

Prior to the Taliban taking over, the government of Afghanistan under then President Ashraf Ghani faced difficulties maintaining

territorial control and security, impacting the safety of religious minority communities, particularly Shi'a Muslims (including ethnic Hazaras), Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha'is, and Christian converts, all of whom are at greater risk of persecution from the Taliban and ISIS-K.

The [United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan](#) (UNAMA) [documented](#) at least [20](#) attacks targeting Shi'a Hazaras in the first half of 2021. After the Ghani administration lost control in August, there was a resurgence of Taliban and ISIS-K attacks targeting the Shi'a community. During their time in power from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban discriminated against and violently [persecuted](#) the Shi'a Hazara community, which they labeled as heretical. In early [July](#), after the Taliban took control of Ghazni Province in their advance toward Kabul, Taliban fighters massacred nine Shi'a Hazara men there. In [September 2021](#), Taliban fighters are reported to have forcibly evicted at least [2,800 Shi'a Hazaras](#) from their homes in Daikundi and Uruzgan provinces and seized their properties. Shortly afterward, in [October 2021](#), there were confirmed reports that the Taliban killed 13 Shi'a Hazaras in Daikundi Province.

ISIS-K—which maintains a presence primarily in [Kunar and Nangarhar provinces](#)—also targeted religious minority communities. In October 2021, [ISIS-K took responsibility](#) for two separate attacks on Shi'a mosques in Kunduz and [Kandahar](#), killing scores of Shi'a worshippers during Friday prayers. According to reports, ISIS-K made marginal gains in territory during 2021, although not to the extent of what it controlled when designated as an "entity of particular concern" by the U.S. Department of State prior to 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Afghanistan under the *de facto* rule of the Taliban as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, for engaging in systemic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Expand the existing [Priority 2 \(P-2\) designation](#) granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members, explicitly including Afghan religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution;
- Incorporate protections for freedom of religion or belief into dialogue between the U.S. government and the Taliban, continue to publicly condemn ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Taliban and ISIS-K, and emphasize to Taliban leadership the close relationship between religious freedom and overall security; and
- Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or banning their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities—citing specific religious freedom violations—and coordinate with allies to impose similar sanctions.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Create by law a P-2 designation for members of religious groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Calls on the State Department to Prioritize Refugee Resettlement of Afghan Religious Minorities](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Religious Minorities in Afghanistan](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: Update on At-Risk Religious Communities in Afghanistan](#)
- **Event:** [USCIRF Conversation: The Exodus of Religious Minority Communities in Afghanistan](#)

Background

Afghanistan is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns (42 percent), Tajiks (27 percent), Hazaras (nine percent), Uzbeks (nine percent), Turkmen (three percent), and Baloch (two percent). Historically, the nation was religiously diverse, but the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban consolidated control of the government in 1996. The country's current [population](#) is approximately 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a, including Ismailis and Ahmadis), with the few remaining non-Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and others) comprising the remaining 0.3 percent. By the end of 2021, there appears to be no remaining Jews in Afghanistan. Gathering statistics on religious communities that practice in secret is difficult but estimates for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Afghanistan range from 450 to 2,500. There are an estimated [12,000](#) Christian converts throughout the country.

The Taliban takeover and U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in [August](#) led to mass panic, with a violent crackdown on [civil society, targeted killings, beatings and detentions](#), severe restrictions on [women's rights](#), diminished local [media](#) presence, mass exodus, and violent targeted attacks claimed by ISIS-K on [Kabul Airport](#) and houses of worship.

Exodus and Persecution of Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews

Afghanistan's overall instability has led to the near [extinction](#) of religious minorities, particularly the Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh communities. While the last known remaining Jew left Afghanistan in September 2021 out of fear of persecution by the Taliban, the Hindu and Sikh community population [dwindled](#) to 140 at the end of 2021, a near extinction of the once robust community. Soon after the takeover, armed Taliban representatives went to the Sikh gurdwara in Karte Parwan in Kabul to [urge Sikh and Hindu](#) community members to "not feel fear or anxiety" in an attempt to assure them of their safety in Afghanistan. In October 2021, however, videos of alleged Taliban members vandalizing and ransacking the Sikh [gurdwara in Karte Parwan emerged](#). Sikhs and Hindus have felt [pressured to leave Afghanistan](#) and take refuge in India due to the lack of safety and [security](#) following the Taliban takeover and ongoing targeted attacks on their houses of worship.

Practicing Faith in Fear

Christians, Ahmadiyya 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 or ISIS-K. Ahmadiyya Muslims are not recognized by either the Sunni or Shi'a Muslim faiths and have experienced a [long history](#) of [persecution](#) in Afghanistan. Today, Ahmadis practice their faith in secret due to continued societal persecution and discrimination. According to the Ahmadiyya Muslim community [leader](#), some Ahmadis were [detained](#) in 2021.

Afghans who converted to Christianity from Islam over the past 20 years are considered "apostates," a crime punishable by death according to the [Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam](#). Converts, who already faced ostracization and the threat of honor killings by family and village members, are at [heightened risk](#) following the Taliban takeover. USCIRF received reports that the Taliban have gone door to door looking for Christian converts. Christians have received threatening [phone calls](#), and one leader of a house church network received a threatening [letter](#) in August from Taliban militants. Some Christians have [turned off their phones](#) and moved to undisclosed locations.

In Afghanistan, followers of the [Baha'i faith](#) have faced persecution, exacerbated by a [2007](#) ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court that declared the Baha'i faith blasphemous and its followers infidels. Since then, the Baha'i community has lived in secret.

Key U.S. Policy

Following the Taliban takeover, over [120,000](#) Afghans, including religious minorities, were evacuated to the [United States and ally countries](#). Additionally, masses fearing persecution at the hands of the Taliban fled to neighboring countries, including [Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran](#), where they continue to face uncertainty. In response to the crisis, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security created a government-wide program, [Operation Allies Welcome](#), to coordinate efforts to support vulnerable Afghan populations. In August 2021, the State Department announced a [P-2](#) designation for certain Afghan nationals and eligible family members.

The Taliban takeover prompted the [U.S. government](#) and other international actors to [halt aid](#) programs, suspend financial assistance, freeze billions in Afghan central bank assets, and impose stringent sanctions on the Taliban. Despite these restrictions, in [October 2021](#) the United States announced more than \$144 million in humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. This additional funding brought total U.S. humanitarian aid in Afghanistan and for Afghan refugees in the region to nearly \$474 million in 2021.

While the United States has not recognized the Taliban regime as the government of Afghanistan, in [November 2021](#) a U.S. delegation met with Taliban representatives. The U.S. officials emphasized the importance of the Taliban fulfilling its public commitments, including protecting the rights of all Afghans, particularly women, girls, and religious minorities. In [December](#), the State Department designated a Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights to support vulnerable populations in Afghanistan.

On November 15, the State Department [designated](#) the Taliban as an "[entity of particular concern](#)," or EPC, under IRFA for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department caveated that the Taliban's designation is based on information analyzed as of August 15, 2021, before its takeover as the *de facto* governing authority. ISIS-K was not designated as an EPC, as the State Department [determined](#) in 2020 that it lost control of the territory it previously controlled.