

# AFGHANISTAN

## USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, as they have since the Taliban seized control of the country in August 2021. In contrast to its pledges for change and inclusivity upon its seizure of power, the Taliban has since ruled Afghanistan in a deeply repressive and intolerant manner—essentially [unchanged](#) from its previous era in power from 1996 to 2001. Its rigorous enforcement on all Afghans of its harsh interpretation of Shari'a violates the freedom of religion or belief of religious minorities; women; [members](#) of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community; and Afghans with differing interpretations of Islam, such as predominantly Shi'a Muslim members of the ethnic Hazara community. Taliban leaders have further issued a series of [decrees](#) specifying acceptable behaviors under their interpretation of Islam, particularly targeting [women](#) by restricting their freedom of movement, dress, education, participation in sports, right to work, and healthcare. The group's Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) enforces what its officials deem religiously appropriate conduct through a notoriously violent and hardline Islamist policing system that has been especially [harsh](#) and progressively worsening toward [Afghan women](#).

Despite continued promises to protect all ethnic and religious communities residing in Afghanistan, the Taliban's de facto government has been unable or unwilling to provide religious and ethnic minorities safety and security against [radical Islamist violence](#), particularly in the form of attacks by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and factions of the Taliban itself. In April, for example, ISIS-K bombed several religious sites,

including [Sahib Khalifa Mosque](#), a Sufi house of worship in Kabul, killing almost [50 worshipers](#), and [Mawlawi Sekandar Sufi Mosque](#) in Kunduz Province, killing 33 people. Much of the related violence has targeted Hazara villages, schools, and places of worship, such as a [series of attacks](#) in April against the Seh Dokan Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif and twin bombings at Abdul Rahim Shahid High School in the Shi'a-dominated area of Kabul. That same month, the Taliban [tortured](#) and killed a Hazara midwife in Mazar-e-Sharif, amputating her legs, stabbing her, and shooting her 12 times. In August, an [attack](#) on a Shi'a Muslim neighborhood in Kabul during the holy days of Muharram left [eight people](#) dead. These existential threats led several members of Parliament in the United Kingdom, along with a group of key scholars and advocates, to warn in their unofficial [inquiry](#) in August of an imminent threat of genocide facing the Hazara community.

The Taliban also either actively targets, discriminates against, or outright denies the existence of many vulnerable religious minorities such as [Christians](#)—who the Taliban falsely [insist](#) do not exist in the country—as well as Ahmadiyya Muslims, Baha'is, and nonbelievers. Members of these groups are unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly because they face dire consequences, including death, if discovered by the Taliban or ISIS-K. The Taliban reportedly assured the Sikh and Hindu communities of their safety shortly following the group's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021; however, several subsequent incidents of vandalism and violence led many to flee the country in 2021 and 2022, leaving behind fewer than 100 Hindus and Sikhs.

### 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 systematic, 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 to explicitly include Afghan religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution;
  - Integrate protections for freedom of religion or belief into all potential dialogue with the Taliban; continue to clearly and 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

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Afghanistan](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Afghanistan: One Year since the Taliban Takeover](#)
- **Podcast:** [Deteriorating Religious Freedom Conditions in South Asia](#)
- **Factsheet:** [Overview of Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution Globally](#)

## Background

Afghanistan is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Balochs. Historically, the nation was religiously diverse, but the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban seized control in 1996, and many of those who remained subsequently fled the country following the U.S. withdrawal in August 2021. The country's current [population](#) of over 38 million 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. Statistics for smaller groups are difficult to substantiate as most members are now reportedly in hiding; however, estimates for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community range from 450 to 2,500, and as many as 10,000 to 12,000 [Christians](#) likely lived in Afghanistan at the beginning of the year. The country's reported last remaining Jew, Zebulon Simentov, left in 2021.

## Policing Society and Restricting Women

The Taliban has placed many other restrictions on Afghan society based on the regime's interpretation of religious law, such as the [banning of music](#). In January 2022, a video [emerged](#) from Paktia Province in which Taliban members humiliated two local musicians and burned their instruments. As a result of such incidents—including several executions and attacks since August 2021—many [artists](#), entertainers, and musicians have fled Afghanistan, while those remaining hide their trade in fear; the Artistic Freedom Initiative [reports](#) that around 3,000 performers have requested help to leave.

However, the Taliban has focused its most disastrous, sweeping, and repressive policies against the country's women in an effort to implement its vision of religious law that excludes Afghan women from all opportunities and aspects of public life. In May, the MPVPV issued a [decree](#) stating that women in Afghanistan must cover their faces in public, ideally wearing a [burqa](#), and warned women not to wear colorful clothing, high-heeled shoes, perfume, or anything ostensibly meant to attract the opposite sex. Secondary schools for girls remained [closed](#) throughout 2022, contingent on plans for the Taliban to set [Islamic and cultural](#) conditions for female students aged 12 and older, according to [statements](#) from the group. Furthermore, the de facto government [announced](#) in December a complete ban on women attending universities, prompting a series of [protests](#) across the country by male and female students as well as widespread international condemnation, including from the [United Nations \(UN\) Security Council](#), the [Organization of Islamic Cooperation](#), and many [Muslim-majority countries](#). Days later, the Taliban demonstrated its recalcitrance by announcing yet another ban—this time on [women's](#)

[employment](#) with local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—leading to similar international [outrage](#) and the [suspension](#) of activities by a number of organizations. The UN joined in temporarily closing some of its aid programs in Afghanistan, [warning](#) of “life-threatening consequences” from the Taliban's actions.

## Key U.S. Policy

While the United States has not recognized the Taliban regime as the official government of Afghanistan, a [U.S. government delegation](#) met with Taliban representatives in Qatar in June, underscoring U.S. commitment to the Afghan people in the wake of the deadly earthquakes that hit eastern Afghanistan earlier that month. U.S. officials emphasized the importance of the Taliban fulfilling its public commitments, including protecting the rights of all Afghans. The officials also expressed concern regarding the ongoing presence of al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan that continue to target religious minorities and those with differing beliefs. In [August](#), U.S. drone strikes killed al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, and the [U.S. Department of State](#) accused the Taliban of grossly violating the [2020 Doha Declaration](#).

Refugee resettlement remains one of the most crucial but challenging U.S. policy issues regarding Afghanistan. At present, only Afghan nationals who meet a highly limited set of conditions, such as working directly for U.S. authorities or U.S.-funded programs or for NGOs or media outlets based in the United States, have [priority status](#) for resettlement. Efforts to extend the program to other communities and individuals at particular risk since the Taliban's return to power have largely stalled. As of the end of 2022, and despite recognition from [Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken](#) and [some members of Congress](#) regarding the horrendous conditions that religious minorities and other especially vulnerable populations face in Afghanistan, no specific legislation or policy initiative has yet emerged that would [extend](#) the crucial P-2 designation to those communities. Many such vulnerable families are reportedly among the [thousands](#) of displaced Afghans who by the end of 2022 still remained [in limbo](#) at the Emirates Humanitarian Centre in Abu Dhabi, awaiting U.S. processing in cooperation with United Arab Emirates authorities.

On November 30, the State Department [redesignated](#) the Taliban as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under IRFA for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom. However, the State Department did not designate Afghanistan as a CPC, likely due to its nonrecognition of the Taliban as the de facto governing authority; it also did not designate ISIS-K as an EPC due to the group's lack of territorial control—its [horrific campaign of violence](#) against Afghan religious minorities notwithstanding.