

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government controls all aspects of religious life and expression, dictating and surveilling religious practice and punishing nonconformity through administrative harassment, imprisonment, and torture.

The government of Turkmenistan is an extremely authoritarian regime with an [abysmal record](#) on [human rights](#) and [freedom of the press](#). As a result, the country is largely closed off from the rest of the world, making it difficult for accurate information to flow into or out of its borders. The government's tight hold on society and information also makes it difficult to document the full scope of the ongoing religious freedom violations, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. In addition to the closed-off nature of the country, those who can get information out often do so at great risk to their lives and liberty. Turkmenistan's diaspora community and citizens in exile are often unwilling to share information about the government's religious freedom violations for fear of retaliation against them or their families. Nevertheless, the available information continues to present a [bleak picture](#).

During the year, the government continued to treat all independent religious activity with suspicion, maintaining a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmen law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups' activities, and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups, which are banned.

Persons accused of criminal religious offenses are often tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Prisoners of conscience are often disappeared in the state's prison system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. The authorities hold many religious prisoners at the notorious [Ovadan-Depe Prison](#), located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house

high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and [starvation](#). In October, five Muslims who are serving 12-year prison sentences for meeting to study the writings of Turkish Muslim theologian Said Nursi were [transferred](#) to a strict-regime labor camp.

Turkmenistan [maintains](#) its compulsory two-year military service requirement, described as a "sacred duty" in Turkmenistan's constitution, and does not offer alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. As USCIRF's [past reporting](#) shows, Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned under Turkmenistan's criminal code for conscientious objection. Although all those imprisoned were granted [amnesty](#) in 2021, the government conscription office continued to [summon](#) Jehovah's Witnesses for compulsory military service in 2022. In March, the United Nations Human Rights Committee [found](#) that Turkmenistan violated Articles 9(1) and 18(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by imprisoning a Jehovah's Witness for his conscientious objection to compulsory military service.

Online activity remained limited by blocked internet access and extremely slow network speeds. In January, then President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow instructed the head of the Ministry for State Security to further increase [state control of the internet](#) and restrict public access to internet sources that "threaten the constitutional order." In March, then President Berdimuhamedow ostensibly handed government leadership over to his son Serdar in managed ["elections"](#) while giving himself the position of speaker of the Senate. This transition did not bring any improvements in conditions for human rights and individual freedoms; if anything, they [worsened](#). Throughout the year, Gurbanguly remained active in government leadership, and in January 2023 he was appointed ["national leader,"](#) making clear he still controlled the Turkmen government.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Turkmenistan 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), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under [IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#) to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistan government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/or barring their entry into the United States under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations; and
- Urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide an acceptable civilian alternative to military service.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Podcast: [Turkmenistan's Tight Grip on Religious Freedom](#)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly repressive country ruled since 2007 by Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who enforces a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage. During 2022, the year his son Serdar nominally took over as the country's president, space for civil society continued to shrink, most directly affecting women and internet users. Women were [banned](#) from sitting in the front seat of cars and were required to adhere to strict dress codes, though enforcement did weaken during the year. Internet access and government censorship of information continued to worsen with the government's increased [curtailing](#) of VPNs and incredibly slow broadband, earning Turkmenistan's mobile and fixed broadband speeds a [ranking](#) of 177th out of 179 countries as of January 2023.

Turkmenistan holds the fourth-largest natural gas reserves in the world, which is vital to its geopolitical relations with [Russia](#), [China](#), Iran, and [potentially Europe](#). Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, European Union countries have sought new sources of natural gas to decrease their dependence on Russia, including from Turkmenistan.

The majority of the population is Sunni Muslim, at 89 percent, while approximately nine percent of the [population](#) is Eastern Orthodox, typically Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic. There are small communities of Shi'a Muslims, Roman Catholics, Protestant Christians, and Baha'is.

Legal Framework for Controlling Religious Activity

Although Turkmenistan's 2016 religion law asserts that the country is a secular state with religious freedom, it requires all religious activity to be registered with the state under intrusive criteria, mandates that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans private religious education and worship, and prohibits the public wearing of religious garb except by clerics. The State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) oversees all religious activity, including registrations, the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, and the import and publication of religious literature.

Registration of Religious Organizations

Turkmen law [requires](#) all religious organizations to register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) by sending applications to SCROEERIR to operate legally. The process is burdensome and designed to allow for significant government interference in the functioning of religious organizations. The MOJ will register an organization only if SCROEERIR has endorsed the application and the organization's goals or activities do not "contradict Turkmenistan's constitution," giving

the government latitude to arbitrarily deny registration applications. SCROEERIR must approve all individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, each of whom under law must have "appropriate religious education." In addition, the process requires religious organizations to provide detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Recognized communities must reregister every three years.

Even if successfully registered, religious organizations enjoy little legal protection. If a court finds that a religious organization is violating Turkmenistan's constitution, it may suspend the group's activities. The law further provides that MOJ officials may attend any religious event held by a registered organization and question its leaders about the organization's activities. Registered organizations may import religious literature only with SCROEERIR approval.

Unregistered religious organizations are forbidden from conducting religious activities, producing or disseminating religious materials, proselytizing, and gathering for religious services, even in private residences. [Reports indicate](#) that registering churches is [very difficult](#) and that Turkmenistan's Christian minority has been largely driven underground. Although not technically banned, Jehovah's Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally. Religious activity is forbidden in prisons and in the military.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States [engaged](#) with the government of Turkmenistan on a variety of issues such as border and regional security programs, efforts to mitigate climate change, trade, and educational and cultural exchanges; U.S. foreign assistance served to reinforce these objectives. Turkmenistan also enjoys most-favored-nation trading status.

In September, the commander of the Montana National Guard traveled to Turkmenistan for talks on reviving the [state partnership program](#) facilitating collaborative military trainings between the United States and Turkmenistan. In November, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Turkmenistan to [discuss](#) cooperation on a wide range of bilateral and regional issues.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA but kept in place a waiver of the sanctions that should accompany the designation based on the "important national interest of the United States," as it has done since 2014. The waiver effectively neutralizes the consequences of Turkmenistan's CPC designation, removes any incentive for the government to reform its brutal policies, and lends credence to the regime's claims that security concerns warrant its harsh repression of religious freedom.