



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

April 2025

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN TALIBAN-CONTROLLED AFGHANISTAN

Stephen Schneck
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Vice Chair

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Asif Mahmood

Erin D. Singhsinsuk
Executive Director

USCIRF's Mission

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

On March 19, 2025, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing: [Religious Freedom in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan](#). USCIRF Chair Stephen Schneck and Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik led the hearing, which included testimony from U.S. government and United Nations (UN) officials as well as members of the Afghan diaspora and civil society organizations. Witnesses discussed current religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan under the de facto Taliban authorities as well as potential policy options for the U.S. government. Commissioner Asif Mahmood also participated in the hearing.

Chair [Stephen Schneck](#) opened the hearing by emphasizing the dire state of religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan. He discussed the Taliban's repressive crackdowns against those perceived to have violated its narrow interpretation of Islam, resulting in arbitrary detention, disappearances, floggings, and—in some cases—public execution. He highlighted that both the Taliban and Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) consider Christian, Ahmadiyya Muslim, and Baha'i communities to be converts from Islam, and therefore apostates, placing them at great risk of violent persecution.

Vice Chair [Meir Soloveichik](#) offered additional comments, noting that the Taliban's strict religious edicts impact all Afghans, regardless of faith. He recounted that the group has attempted to restructure Afghanistan's education sector to conform with its interpretation of Islam. He explained that one of the anticipated objectives of the hearing was to identify potential policy options for the U.S. government and likeminded partners to advance religious freedom in Afghanistan.

UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan [Richard Bennett](#) summarized current religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan, including an explanation of the destructive impact of the "morality law" from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV). He discussed the potential role of the international community in holding the Taliban accountable and further explained the proliferation of ISIS-K attacks that target religious minority communities. In terms of policy recommendations, he emphasized the continued importance of documenting the Taliban's religious freedom abuses and supporting civil society organizations in the country.

Rina Amiri, former Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, echoed Special Rapporteur Bennett's concerns, emphasizing the unprecedented nature of the Taliban's narrow interpretation of Shari'a. She cautioned that enforcement of religious edicts like the MPVPV's "morality law" risks fueling an even more radicalized ideology that could make Afghanistan a regional and global threat. She further explained that many religious minority communities have withdrawn from public displays of worship for fear of reprisal.

[*Metra Mehran*](#), Afghanistan Advocacy Fellow at Amnesty International, emphasized the plight of the minority Hazara Shi'a community, noting that both the Taliban and ISIS-K have targeted the community through violent attacks. She further explained that the Taliban has replaced hundreds of imams with others of whom it approves in an effort to make all religious teachings in the country align uniformly with its specific interpretation of Islam. She offered several recommendations to the U.S. government, including the integration of religious freedom protections into diplomatic engagement, the State Department's continued designation of the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern, and recognition of the link between religious freedom and security.

[*Fereshta Abbasi*](#), Researcher at Human Rights Watch, emphasized that the Taliban is failing to protect Afghanistan's religious minorities from violence, even as it seeks to enforce its own version of religious law. She explained that ISIS-K has conducted more than 20 attacks against Shi'a communities since the Taliban seized control of the country in 2021, vowing to provide security and stability. Regarding recommendations, she echoed the need for the international community to hold the Taliban accountable for its actions, such as by issuing sanctions that include travel bans on high-ranking Taliban officials.

[*Joseph Azam*](#), Board Chair of the Afghan American Foundation, provided additional context and recommendations for the U.S. government, emphasizing the necessity of linking the issue of what he termed "gender apartheid" facing Afghan women to broader discussions on human rights and religious freedom. His policy recommendations included urging Congress to prioritize pathways for refugee resettlement for Afghan religious minorities as well as imposing targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for religious persecution. He further emphasized the need to leverage diplomatic pressure on regional partners who engage directly

with the Taliban, including Pakistan and Qatar, while simultaneously ensuring that any such engagement with the group is contingent on measurable improvements to religious freedom conditions. Finally, he reiterated the importance of maintaining humanitarian assistance while ensuring that it reaches Afghanistan's most vulnerable populations.

[*Kate Clark*](#), Co-Director and Senior Analyst at the Afghanistan Analysts Network, provided additional context on the Taliban's organizational structure and ideological motivation. She explained that the Taliban derives all decision-making and edicts from its "divinely appointed" ruler, Hibatullah Akhundzada. She argued that the Taliban is not responsive to either "carrots" or "sticks" when it comes to international pressure or engagement. Regarding policy recommendations, she emphasized the importance of supporting civil society organizations and individuals working to document the Taliban's religious freedom violations.

Following witness testimonies, Chair Schneck led a question-and-answer session to discuss potential policy options for the U.S. government. During this session, witnesses explained the role and utility of UN-led meetings to engage with Taliban officials on human rights and religious freedom issues. They emphasized, however, the need for substantially more attention and action on these issues, proposing the establishment of a working group on human rights in Afghanistan. They further explained the utility and effectiveness of targeted sanctions on Taliban officials, including travel bans, arguing that they serve as a strong signal to the Afghan people that the U.S. government is indeed paying attention to their actions and conditions in Afghanistan.

Chair Schneck concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimony.



Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino
Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai
Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum
Policy Analyst

Guillermo Cantor
Director of Research and Policy

Mingzhi Chen
Supervisory Policy Advisor

Andrew Hamm
Public Affairs Associate

Sema Hasan
Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer
Chief Administrative Officer

Kirsten Lavery
*Supervisory Policy Analyst and
International Legal Specialist*

Veronica McCarthy
Public Affairs Specialist

Hilary Miller
Policy Analyst

Nora Morton
Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre
Policy Analyst

Katherine Todd
Policy Analyst

Scott Weiner
Supervisory Policy Analyst

Kurt Werthmuller
Deputy Director of Research and Policy

Nathan Wineinger
Chief of Public Affairs

Jean Wu
Policy Analyst

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan legislative branch agency 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.