

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained poor. The government continued to penalize the peaceful religious activities of all groups, but it particularly targeted Muslims who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam. Systematic restrictions on religious activities remained in place as the government continued to enforce the 2011 law On Religious Activities and Religious Associations (religion law). That law bans unregistered religious activities, requires official examination of all religious materials, and places restrictions on religious education, proselytization, and religious events.

The government continued to control and penalize independent religious activity and expression concerning religion, especially as it pertained to Islam. For example, in May, a worshiper at a Shymkent mosque beat another worshiper, breaking his ribs, because the latter said “amen” during prayers—which is prohibited in state-controlled mosques. When the mosque’s imam reported the incident to local police, authorities arrested the victim for allegedly invading his attacker’s personal space. In June, Judge Niyazbek of the Shymkent Specialized Interdistrict Court found the victim guilty of violating Article 73(1) of the Administrative Code, which penalizes the intentional infliction of slight damage to health, and sentenced him to 10 days of administrative detention. In November, the Shymkent Interdistrict Criminal Court sentenced a woman who identifies as a “neo-Tengri follower” to two years of “restricted freedom” for posting TikTok videos in which she expressed hatred for Muslims. Her sentence is a form of probation that includes limitations on freedom of movement under Article 174(1) of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the incitement of hatred.

Officials also continued to penalize the religious activities of Protestant Christians. In March, police raided Valter Murau’s home in the

Zhambyl region, where he leads a Baptist congregation, as worshipers gathered for Sunday services. Police filmed participants during the raid and later charged and fined Mirau and two congregants under Article 489 of the Administrative Code, which penalizes the leadership of and participation in unregistered religious associations. Courts at the district and regional levels rejected all of Mirau’s and his congregants’ appeal attempts. Police also raided another Baptist congregation in Zhambyl in April, fining three church members under Article 489, along with a second Protestant church during its Sunday services. That same month, the Almaty Religious Affairs Department charged Protestant Christian Sergei Orlov under Article 490 of the Administrative Code for marking International Women’s Day by speaking to a group of church members about women in the Bible.

Throughout the year, military officials [rejected](#) the conscientious objection of Jehovah’s Witnesses, detaining at least six young Witnesses for days at a time in some cases. In June, authorities in Atyrau detained one Witness for two days, allegedly subjecting him to torture and subsequently forcing him to sign a paper that he had not endured any such abuse.

In January, local press reported that the government was planning amendments to the religion law that would further tighten the space for religious freedom, including by banning religious face coverings in public places and headscarves in schools, increasing membership thresholds for registration, and introducing vague legal terms into official usage such as “destructive religious movement” and “religious radical.” The government had not moved forward with the amendments as of the end of the year, but security officials began to actively arrest individuals according to those proposed legal terms, claiming that they were “religious radicals” or members of a “destructive religious movement.”

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA);
- Include in all forthcoming [C5+1](#) proceedings discussion of religious freedom and the need for substantive progress toward compliance with international freedom of religion or belief standards among the Kazakh and other regional governments; and

- Engage with Kazakh Ministry of Education officials on the protection of freedom of religion or belief in public educational institutions according to international standards through the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Raise Kazakhstan’s religious freedom conditions and advocate for the release of those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs by conducting relevant hearings, including with the assistant

secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, and delegation visits through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and

- Link Kazakhstan’s eligibility for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status to the removal of restrictions on freedom of movement related to peaceful religious activities, according to Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah’s Witnesses](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and Appendix 2**

Background

According to a 2021 census, more than 69 percent of Kazakhs adhere to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Other Muslim groups in Kazakhstan include Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Seventeen percent of the population identify as Christian, most of whom are Russian Orthodox but who also include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups in Kazakhstan include Jews, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. A small percentage of individuals identify as atheist or prefer not to share their religious affiliation.

The Kazakh government exercises extensive control over the religious lives and practices of its population, carried over from its pre-independence experience under the Soviet Union. Its efforts to maintain such strict control—generally under the guise of maintaining secularism or combating a vague conception of “extremism”—most commonly target Muslims whose beliefs deviate from the state's preferred interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islam or who otherwise practice their beliefs independently from the state-controlled Muftiate. Also known as the Muslim board, the Muftiate is a Soviet-era relic agency that regulates the practice of Islam.

Administrative Fines for Religious Activity

Authorities continued to fine individuals for their peaceful religious activities throughout the year. In February, police charged a Kyrgyz man for transporting “prohibited religious literature” while riding a train from Kyrgyzstan, for which the Merki District Court in Zhambyl later fined him 258,000 tenge (\$518). In another instance, Turkistan International Airport officials fined a man 184,600 tenge (\$370) for returning from the United Arab Emirates with 35 religious books in his luggage. In May, Astana police fined the owner of an unregistered mosque 184,600 tenge (\$370) for violating the religion law. In July, the Mamlut District court found a man guilty of violating Administrative Code Article 453 for traveling from Russia with a book written by a former leader of Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic movement that is outlawed as “extremist” in Kazakhstan. The court fined him 258,000 tenge (\$518) and ordered that the book be confiscated and destroyed. Officials later confirmed that the book was burnt. The Astana Akimat Religious Affairs Department lodged a case against film director Nurtas Adambay under Article 490 of the Administrative Code for quoting the Qur'an in a video he posted to his Instagram. Earlier in the year, courts in Atyrau fined two individuals each 129,220 tenge (\$260) under the same article for quoting the Qur'an on their social media pages. In October, Kostonai region officials warned residents to protect themselves from “destructive religious movements,” reminding them that anyone who distributes unauthorized religious materials is liable for administrative penalties.

State Regulation of Religious Symbols in Schools

A Ministry of Education decree prohibits students from wearing religious symbols to class, which schools often interpret as a ban on schoolgirls wearing Islamic headscarves, or hijabs. School administrators across the country suspended and expelled girls for wearing hijabs to class throughout the 2024 school year. As of July—representing the most recent available reporting—parents had filed at least 13 lawsuits for their children's exclusion from class for their religious choice to wear hijabs. In one such case, Bolat Musin sued the Nazarbayev Intellectual School in Karaganda for expelling his daughter, Anel, because she wore a headscarf to class. In June, the Karaganda Administrative Court partially satisfied his claim by recognizing the right to education in the constitution, agreeing that the school had illegally expelled his daughter, and ordering her reenrollment. Other courts throughout Kazakhstan came to the same conclusion in similar cases. However, in July, the Nazarbayev Intellectual School appealed the decision and refused to reenroll Anel. In September, the Supreme Court of Kazakhstan found that it violated the right to education for a school to refuse students entry. The court later appeared to backtrack by clarifying that the Ministry of Education can mandate school uniforms and that parents are responsible for complying with such requirements—including the prohibition on religious symbols in schools. Following the Supreme Court ruling, authorities resumed fining parents whose children wore headscarves to class.

Key U.S. Policy

In April, an official delegation from Kazakhstan visited Washington, DC, to engage in the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group with officials from the U.S. Department of State and USCIRF, during which U.S. officials raised concerns regarding religious freedom conditions in that country. In May, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu met with First Deputy Foreign Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Akan Rakhmetullin for the sixth annual United States-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue; the parties discussed shared priorities, including religious freedom. In June, then U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev discussed the bilateral trade relationship, including the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which was initially intended to penalize Soviet Bloc countries for discriminatory emigration policies targeting Jews. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhanced regional security, and human rights, with an emphasis on disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor related human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion during that meeting.