

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2024, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained dire. The government maintained strict control over all religious activities and particularly targeted Muslims who adhered to a form of Islam that differed from the state's preferred interpretation. USCIRF continued to follow related cases, such as those of 10 Muslim men whom the government imprisoned for their peaceful religious activities. Laws continued to systematically limit religious activities, such as the 2016 religion law that prohibits unregistered religious activity and heavily restricts religious materials, education, and ceremonies. Additionally, the 2015 extremism law defines "extremism" using vague terms such as "the incitement of enmity," permitting authorities to arbitrarily prosecute peaceful religious activities.

Authorities continued to harass Christians, in particular Protestants and Jehovah's Witnesses, preventing them from obtaining registration that would allow them to operate legally. In July, a state-affiliated mosque official from Lebap told mosque attendees that authorities would "lock up" the Protestant pastor of an unregistered church. Ministry of National Security (MNS) officials then visited the pastor's home and demanded information about his relatives, whom anonymous callers subsequently threatened. In January, police in Sakar [raided](#) a Jehovah's Witness home, detaining five people and interrogating them for eight hours.

Migration Service and border officials continued to restrict individuals from leaving the country for religious purposes. For example, in January, border guards blocked civil rights activist and lawyer Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev from traveling to Iran for a funeral. MNS officials later told Allaberdyev that officials were monitoring him and that he was banned from leaving the country for five years. Additionally, Migration Service officials at the Ashgabat Airport stopped a Protestant pastor from leaving Turkmenistan, without explanation.

As in years past, officials exploited religious practices to strengthen the cult of personality of former president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, interfering in Turkmen's religious lives. Gurbanguly is the chairman of the People's Council and father of the current president, Serdar Berdimuhamedow; in practice he continues to wield substantial power under his self-styled moniker of *Arkadag*, or "protector." This religious exploitation assumed a variety of forms; for example, in the ethnically diverse cities of Balkanbat and Turkmenbashi, authorities interfered in wedding ceremonies by warning couples to adhere to Turkmen tradition and adopt only Turkmen music for entertainment—including songs from Gurbanguly's personal repertoire. Ahead of Ramadan, officials in Lebap told government employees to honor the *Arkadag* by fasting. However, officials imposed different religious expectations on youth in another region of the country and guarded the entrances of schools with water, forcing every student to drink before entering to ensure they were not participating in the Ramadan fast.

Officials harassed state employees who outwardly expressed their faith through beards or religious head coverings, threatening them with termination. In one instance, an official told state employees that they should work as a unified people, which included wearing similar clothes. Such harassment also extended beyond state employees. Leading up to the Berdimuhamedows' vacation to Avaza, local police forced bearded men to shave and women to remove their hijabs, claiming simply that "this is a thing that the president doesn't like." Also, in October, Ashgabat police harassed, detained, and interrogated women for wearing hijabs. While detained, security confiscated the women's personal belongings, told them they were banned from traveling abroad, and lectured them about Turkmenistan's nature as a secular country—emphasizing that those who would like to cover their heads should do so in the "Turkmen style."

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);
 - Lift the existing waiver, or do not issue a waiver, releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the CPC designation;
 - 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 (FoRB) standards by the Turkmen and other regional governments; and
 - Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmen government agencies, such as the MNS, 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.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Turkmenistan's religious freedom conditions by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits, including through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Implores State Department to Lift Waiver amid Turkmenistan's Treatment of Muslims and Others during Ramadan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)**

Background

Of Turkmenistan's [estimated](#) population of 5.7 million, 93 percent of the population is Muslim (mostly Sunni); six percent is Eastern Orthodox, mostly Russian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic; and the remaining one percent includes small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shi'a Muslims, Baha'is, Roman Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Protestants, and Jews.

Turkmenistan is widely considered one of the world's most closed-off countries. The insular state's [poor](#) human rights records—with a severe lack of [press freedom](#) and internet access—makes it difficult and dangerous to report on religious freedom.

Ramadan Restrictions

In March, Tajik terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) opened fire on concertgoers at the Crocus City Hall venue in Moscow, Russia, killing over 130 people and injuring hundreds. In response, the government of Turkmenistan tightened its internal security measures, including further restrictions on peaceful religious activities—especially for Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan.

In Ashgabat mosques, authorities detained and questioned worshipers who “appeared extremist.” Police then interrogated the detainees about their religious habits, calling some of them “Wahhabi” and adding them to undefined “blacklists.” In some cases, officials forced other male worshipers to shave their beards, in alignment with government restrictions on outward markers of religiosity. In Turkmenbashi, Balkanbat, and Cheleken, security services interrogated young worshipers, particularly bearded men and women wearing hijabs, to investigate suspected links to “extremism.” In the Balkan region, security officials prohibited all individuals under the age of 50 from worshiping in mosques and questioned whether fasting was necessary during Ramadan. Additionally, officials shaved men's beards—under threat of sending them to Ovadan-Depe Prison without trial—and forced them to drink alcohol.

Such restrictions remained prevalent across the country. In Turkmenbashi, authorities closed shops selling religious clothing and confiscated their merchandise. In the city of Mary, officials imposed a particular religious interpretation by banning the sale of alcohol during Ramadan and seizing alcoholic merchandise without warning. In Lebap, law enforcement increased its presence in and around mosques, as officials ordered worshipers to leave the mosque immediately following prayers. The imam of the mosque used his pulpit to bolster the influence of and support for the ruling family. Ahead of Eid al-Fitr, Balkan region imams announced that worshipers would require special access cards to enter mosques, which they could only obtain after submitting personal information to mosque authorities. Security officials also increased their use of video surveillance of worshipers in and around mosques.

Status of FoRB Prisoners

In 2024, USCIRF documented 10 cases of Muslim men who remained in prison on murky “extremism”-related charges for their peaceful

religious activities. The actual number of such imprisonments may be higher. The known prisoners include [Bahram Saparov](#), whom authorities arrested and sentenced to 15 years in 2013 for organizing unregistered religious meetings. Prison officials tortured Saparov so severely that his face became unrecognizable. The fates of the 20 other Muslims whom authorities arrested on the same day as Saparov remain unknown. [Annamurad Atdaev](#) is serving 15 years in prison after authorities arrested him in 2016 following his return from Egypt, where he studied Islam. [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetsurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) continued to serve 12-year sentences for meeting to discuss the writings of Said Nursi and praying. Moreover, [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) are serving 15-year sentences for holding religious discussions.

Limited press freedom and repressive human rights conditions in the country make it extremely difficult to obtain information about the status of prisoners or their detention conditions. However, in January 2024, human rights activists confirmed that [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#)—sentenced to 23 years in prison in late 2023 for conducting religious classes—is serving his sentence in the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, known for its inhumane conditions, including torture, medical neglect, and enforced disappearances.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, the U.S. government continued to engage with the Turkmen government on a range of issues but failed to consistently raise FoRB and broader human rights concerns. In April, the United States and Turkmenistan [held](#) the 10th Annual Bilateral Consultations in Ashgabat. Officials discussed issues of common concern such as the environment, economy, security cooperation, and human rights, particularly as it pertained to labor rights. In July, Elizabeth Rood was [sworn](#) in as U.S. ambassador to Turkmenistan. In September, then U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with the foreign ministers of Turkmenistan and the other four Central Asian states under the auspices of C5+1 to discuss critical minerals, business partnerships, enhancing regional security, and disability rights. Neither religious freedom nor broader human rights appear to have represented significant points of discussion. In October, then Deputy Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia at the United States Agency for International Development Anjali Kaur [met](#) with Turkmen officials to discuss economic and climate issues. In November, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) met with President Serdar Berdimuhamedov during a visit to Turkmenistan to discuss the U.S.-Turkmen bilateral relationship, particularly trade, security, and climate change.

On December 29, 2023, the State Department last [re-designated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.