

# TURKMENISTAN

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

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained poor. The government continued to use a restrictive legal framework to control the activities of all religious groups, with a particular focus on independent Muslims who deviated from the state’s preferred interpretation of Islam. The 2016 law On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations, or religion law, prohibits unregistered religious activity and heavily restricts authorized religious activity, including religious materials, education, and ceremonies. Additionally, the 2015 law On Countering Extremism, or extremism law, defines “extremism” using vague terms such as “the incitement of enmity.” This broad definition allows authorities to arbitrarily prosecute peaceful religious activities. The president of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimuhamedow, and his father and former president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, continued to lead Turkmenistan through a cult of personality. During the year, efforts to shift religious devotion toward these leaders were a key driver of many of the government’s freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations.

USCIRF has identified 10 FoRB victims in Turkmenistan, specifically Muslim men who remained imprisoned throughout 2025 for their peaceful religious activities on baseless “extremism” charges. [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 Mammetdurdyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) are serving 12-year sentences for meeting to discuss the writings of Said Nursi and praying. Shamyradow reportedly suffers from health issues and is no longer able to stand. [Kemal Saparov](#) and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#) are both serving 15-year sentences for holding religious discussions. [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#) is serving a 23-year prison sentence for conducting religious classes. Finally, authorities sentenced [Bahram Saparov](#) to 15 years in prison in 2013 for organizing unregistered

religious meetings. While in prison, officials reportedly tortured Saparov. Notably, the actual number of FoRB victims in the country is likely underreported. For example, 20 other Muslims were arrested on the same day as Saparov, but their fates remain unknown.

In 2025, the government used religious leaders to promote its official agenda. For example, Ministry of National Security (MNS) officials recruited local state-paid Muslim religious leaders to report on those who adhere to religious beliefs outside of the state-sanctioned form of Islam, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, “Krishnas,” and those from “radical Islamic groups.” During Ramadan, imams in Ashgabat increasingly used their pulpits to praise President Berdimuhamedow and his policies. The imams claimed that opposing the government’s policies is similar to engaging in sedition, going against a ruler chosen by God, and opposing Islam.

Throughout the year, the Turkmen government continued to target religious Muslims who attend mosque. At the same time, officials forced its people to pay for the construction of new, expensive mosques. For example, authorities forced outwardly religious Muslims to pick cotton on state-owned land without pay in preparation for Turkmenistan’s annual Harvest Festival. In Balkan Region during October, authorities detained those under 50 years old who attend mosque, including women who wear headscarves and bearded men. Police reportedly demanded that dozens of such individuals pick cotton each day until the end of the harvest under threat of imprisonment on charges of membership in a “banned religious group.” These incidents of forced labor targeting those perceived as religious occurred amid a deepening economic crisis, making it difficult for citizens to afford the rising costs of food. Also in 2025, authorities coerced citizens to pay for the construction of an opulent mosque in the city of Arkadag, forcing citizens to pay for one of the Berdimuhamedows’ extravagant vanity projects over basic necessities.

### 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;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmen 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
- Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies, including in the energy and critical minerals sectors, to improvements of religious freedom in Turkmenistan.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Highlight 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

- **Hearing:** [Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia](#)
- **Spotlight Podcast:** [The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia](#)
- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom under a Leadership with a Cult of Personality](#)
- **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. Article 18 of the Turkmen constitution guarantees the right to FoRB, but the government restricts this right through various legislation.

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

As in years past, authorities forcibly targeted Muslims, including women and children, during Ramadan. This year in the city of Balkanabat, police and MNS officials increased their presence around mosques and targeted women and teenagers during Ramadan prayers. For example, police detained women working in the government and forcibly removed their headscarves. Additionally, authorities forced them to resign from their positions under threat of imprisonment. At times, officials summoned the women's bosses to the police station late at night to report that their employee is a member of a "radical religious group." In a separate incident, officials detained teenagers attending mosque during Ramadan night prayers that take place past the curfew mandated by an official schedule for Turkmen children. While detaining the teenagers, officials called their school principals and parents, threatening to fine and punish parents in the case of future "violations."

During the year, Turkmen officials responded to global security threats by cracking down on rights at home, particularly targeting religious activities during major holidays such as Ramadan. For example, in Dashoguz during Ramadan, MNS officials questioned young people who recently studied abroad in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Officials were allegedly concerned with the religiosity of such individuals and their potential connection to Syria, where some Central Asians held high-level positions at the time. Authorities physically abused and forcibly shaved the beards of some of the young men detained for questioning. In one such case, security officials hit a detainee with a copy of the Criminal Code and forced him to shave his beard without any shaving cream, resulting in cuts on his face. In another instance, officials forced a man to drink vodka and eat pork—two actions typically contrary to Islamic beliefs—while mocking him. According to a July 2025 report, MNS officials and police officers in Ahal Region additionally summoned men with beards to a police station for interrogation. While detained, officials asked the men about their religious activities and forced them to shave their beards. One detainee reported that officers beat him, shaved off half his beard, and forced him to choose between drinking alcohol or eating pork.

## Targeting of Religious Minorities

In 2025, during Lent, which coincided with Ramadan, authorities obstructed religious services in Dashoguz and ordered worshippers

not to practice their faith in public. Police officers threateningly told Orthodox Christians to "remember [that they] live in a Muslim state" and to refrain from drinking alcohol during Ramadan. Police also increased their presence around churches during the holy month.

In 2025, the Turkmen government increasingly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly for their conscientious objection. The Turkmen constitution mandates military service for all men, with no legal alternative available for conscientious objectors. In January 2025, the Mary Regional Court heard the appeal of 21-year-old Jehovah's Witness and conscientious objector [Arslan Wepayew](#), who had been detained since November 2024, reducing his two-year prison sentence to two years of corrective labor. While detained, Wepayew suffered from seizures, unstable blood pressure, headaches, and chest pains. Also in January, prosecutors lodged a criminal case against another conscientious objector, Agabek Rozbayew. The Shabat District Court sentenced Rozbayew to one year and six months of corrective labor, with 20 percent of his wages to be garnished by the state.

Officials also targeted Jehovah's Witnesses for adhering to their faith in other ways, which at times escalated into violence. For example, in March, Dashoguz Region police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their faith. While detained, police slapped the Witnesses to coerce them to write a repentance statement. Later, police physically assaulted them and threatened to charge them under Criminal Code Article 189, which penalizes the incitement of religious hatred. In January, Balkan Region police summoned a female Jehovah's Witness to the local mayor's office where three Muslim religious leaders and a mayor's office representative ordered her not to share her faith. Also in 2025, in Ashgabat, school authorities attempted to coerce a Jehovah's Witness student to place his hand over his heart during the national anthem, an action against the beliefs of Witnesses. The following day, the principal called a meeting with the student's parents, which police joined, to warn him about the "possible negative consequences of his actions."

## Key U.S. Policy

During the year, bilateral engagements between the governments of the United States and Turkmenistan included discussion of FoRB. In August, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov and U.S. Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs John Mark Pommersheim [led](#) a session of the United States-Turkmenistan Annual Bilateral Consultations, during which they discussed the advancement of religious freedom. In November, President Donald J. Trump [met](#) with President Serdar Berdimuhamedow through the C5+1 format to discuss U.S.-Turkmen relations, including new opportunities for trade and transportation in the Central Asia-Caucasus Region.

The U.S. Department of State last [redesignated](#) Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA for particularly severe violations of religious freedom on December 29, 2023. Any presidential action taken as a result of this designation terminates by the end of 2025 unless expressly reauthorized by law.