



Religious Freedom in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan

Opening remarks as prepared for delivery

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing, *Religious Freedom in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan*. My name is Stephen Schneck and I am chair of the Commission. I want to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us today and for offering your testimony as we learn more about the alarming and distressing conditions for religious freedom for Afghanistan's people.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations

to the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this virtual hearing.

Today's hearing will focus on religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan under de-facto Taliban rule. These conditions have significantly deteriorated since 2021. Over the last year alone, the Taliban has strengthened and centralized its rule and has conducted a repressive crackdown against those perceived to have violated the group's narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam. Immediately following its rise to power, the Taliban re-established the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice to oversee the enforcement of their religious edicts. These edicts include a religious ban on employment for women and prohibit women and girls from attending schools and universities. Human rights activists, minorities, and religious leaders who have vocally criticized the Taliban's policies have faced arbitrary detention, disappearances, public floggings, or—in extreme cases—public execution. Others have been forced to flee the country.

While many Afghans attempted to flee to neighboring countries immediately following the 2021 takeover, small groups of Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs have stayed in Afghanistan. Smaller numbers of Ahmadiyya and Shi'a Muslims also continue to reside there. However, it remains incredibly dangerous to belong to a religious minority in Afghanistan today. Both the Taliban and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K, consider Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, and Baha'is

converts from Islam, and therefore they are deemed apostates. This “offense” is punishable by death. As a result, these communities often remain hidden in a desperate attempt to protect themselves and their families.

Causing further alarm, in 2024 the Taliban published a new so-called “morality law” that forbids all “non-Islamic” religious ceremonies, prevents association with those considered “non-believers,” and criminalizes wearing or “popularizing” crosses and other symbols deemed “un-Islamic.” And it bears stressing that “un-Islamic” impacts Muslims who disagree with the Taliban in addition to Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and others. Simultaneously, ISIS-K has carried out an increasing number of lethal attacks targeting religious minorities, specifically the ethnic Hazara Shi’a community and their mosques. During the month of Muharram, Taliban security forces conducted arbitrary house searches in Shi’a majority areas and neighborhoods, which involved beatings, destruction of property, and unlawful killings. Several bombings against Shi’a mosques also occurred throughout the year.

In light of these disturbing developments and trends, we will also hear about resettlement for Afghans fleeing this reign of terror. We are facing a high level of uncertainty regarding the future of U.S. policy toward refugees and asylum seekers, which could impact over 200,000 individuals fleeing religious persecution and repression. Additionally, we are concerned about the uncertainty regarding the

extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for Afghanistan or the legal uncertainty for Afghan nationals present in the United States under humanitarian parole. We are looking forward to hearing more from our witnesses on this issue and on potential ways forward for U.S. policymakers.

I would now like to give the floor over to USCIRF Vice Chair Meir Soloveichik to talk more about our hearing today.

Meir Soloveichik, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you very much, Chair Schneck. I'd also like to welcome everyone to today's hearing and add my thanks to our witnesses for sharing their insight.

As emphasized, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan remain exceptionally concerning. Since 2022, USCIRF has recommended that the Secretary of State designate Afghanistan as a Country of Particular Concern, for ongoing, systematic, and egregious religious freedom violations under de-facto Taliban rule. Most recently, in December 2023, the State Department redesignated the Taliban as an Entity of Particular Concern, or EPC, for particularly severe religious freedom violations.

USCIRF is concerned by the Taliban's expanding efforts to censor religious ideas that differ from its own interpretation of Islam, and the pursuit of restructuring

Afghanistan's education sector to impose that ideology. Significantly, in March 2024, Taliban officials announced they may *never* reopen secondary schools for Afghan girls, despite global criticism from Muslim clerics and many others.

During today's hearing, we seek to better understand the numerous ways in which the Taliban has systematically imposed and enforced its particular interpretation of Sunni Islam, and potential ways that the U.S. government can join with like-minded partners to better protect freedom of religion or belief for all Afghans.

Panelists will provide an overview of the United States' strategy to deter the Taliban's persecution of religious minorities, including its use of targeted sanctions. Panelists will also discuss additional options for U.S. policy and how the U.S. government and international community can better work to protect Afghan religious minority communities, particularly women and children who are facing specific violations of their religious freedom.

Thank you again for being here. I will now turn the floor back over to Chair Schneck.

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair

Thank you, Vice Chair Soloveichik. I would now like to introduce our witnesses.

First, we will hear from Richard Bennett, who currently serves as United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan. Our next witness is Rina Amiri [REE-na Ah-

MEER-ee], who served as the U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights under the Biden Administration. On our second panel, we will hear from Metra Mehran [MEE-tra May-RAHN], an Afghanistan Advocacy Fellow at Amnesty International. Then we will hear from Fereshta Abbasi [feh-RESH-tah a-BAS-ee], who is a researcher in the Asia division at Human Rights Watch who is documenting ongoing abuses in Afghanistan. Our next witness is Joseph Azam, the Board Chair of the Afghan-American Foundation. Lastly, we will hear from Kate Clark, the Co-Director and Senior Analyst at the Afghanistan-Analysts Network.

Thank you all for being here. Mr. Bennett, you may begin your testimony.