

## Testimony to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom

### Religious Freedom in Afghanistan: Three Years After the Taliban Takeover

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Thank you for giving me the opportunity to present this testimony on the critical issue of religious freedom in Afghanistan. The human rights of religious minorities and others who do not conform to the interpretation of Islam prescribed by the Taliban are under serious threat.

The Taliban follow an ultra-conservative Sunni interpretation of Islam. Yet approximately 10 to 15 percent of Afghans are Shia, and there are a significant number of Sufi, small numbers of Ahmadis, and some Hindus and Sikhs. The Taliban have not stated that Shia or Sufi practices are forbidden. However, they do not consider Ahmadis to be Muslims, and in the past, they have persecuted some of their leaders. Most of Afghanistan's population of non-Muslims also live under threat of persecution, in particular Bahai, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Christians, who practice their faith secretly or have gone into hiding. An unknown number of Afghans consider themselves agnostic or atheist or otherwise do not practice Islam or any other religion. Taliban authorities view anyone who has left Islam as having committed apostasy, a crime they believe should be punished by death.

The Taliban are also failing to protect Afghanistan's religious minorities from violence. The Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), the armed extremist group that is the Islamic State's (ISIS) affiliate in Afghanistan, has continually attacked Shia, Sufi, and non-Muslims in Afghanistan. The ISKP has repeatedly carried out more than 20 suicide bombings and other armed attacks against Shia communities since 2021, in particular targeting ethnic Hazaras, which has resulted in killing and injuring thousands of people.

The Hazara people are not only discriminated against on the basis of their religious beliefs but also face ethnic persecution. They have faced discrimination and abuse by successive Afghan governments for over a century.

We cannot overstate how horrendous these attacks have been. ISKP claimed responsibility for killing 14 men in Daikundi province, a predominantly Hazara area, on September 12, 2024, the latest attack on the Hazara community in Afghanistan.

On April 29, 2024, a gunman opened fire on worshippers inside the Shia Sahib-u-Zaman Mosque in Guzara district, Herat province, killing six people. On [January 6, 2024](#), ISKP

claimed responsibility for an attack on a passenger bus in the Dasht-e Barchi area, a predominantly Hazara neighborhood in Kabul, that killed at least 5 people and wounded 20.

The Taliban have condemned ISKP attacks and provided some families of victims with minor financial payments. The authorities have also vowed to protect vulnerable groups from attacks in the future, but there are a few signs that authorities are taking active or significant steps to do so.

Reports from Afghanistan indicate that Christians and other religious minorities who are suspected of converting from Islam face threats of violence, forced conversion, and imprisonment. These religious minorities often operate in secret, living in constant fear of being outed and subjected to brutal punishments. They are denied the freedom to gather, worship, or express their beliefs openly.

The Taliban's interpretations of Sharia and the new rules and policies they have announced cannot be found in any other Islamic country. Almost all of their rules severely restrict Afghans' fundamental human rights.

This is the situation that Afghans are enduring today under Taliban rule. The entire population is being forced to live according to ultraconservative interpretations of one branch of a single religion. Afghanistan is a nightmare for religious freedom—and other fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, the Taliban's refusal to recognize Afghanistan's religious diversity and their decision to limit the practice of faith to a single, state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam run counter to the rights to thought, conscience, belief, and religion. These policies contribute to an atmosphere of fear, exclusion, and intolerance.

The US government—which has made serious missteps in Afghanistan over the past 20 years—can nevertheless make important contributions to human rights, particularly the rights of religious minorities.

The US should take immediate and sustained action to hold the Taliban accountable for their violations and ensure that religious freedom is restored for all Afghans, regardless of their faith. Religious minorities and those who diverge from the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islam live under constant threat of persecution, violence, and death.

Recommendations:

- Encourage the international community to press the Taliban to uphold its obligations under international human rights law, including religious freedom, and ensure access to justice for victims of religious persecution.
- Sanctions, including travel bans, should target high-ranking Taliban officials who are responsible for persecuting religious minorities and enforcing laws that curtail religious freedom.
- Applying Global Magnitsky sanctions to individuals within ISIS/ISKP who are responsible for attacks against the Hazara and other minority communities.
- Provide asylum and resettlement opportunities for individuals at serious risk of persecution due to their religion, particularly those from religious minority groups.