

Testimony Before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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Chair Schneek, Vice Chair Soloveichik, and esteemed members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the dire state of religious freedom in Afghanistan. It is an honor to contribute to this crucial discussion, especially at a time when Afghanistan faces one of the worst religious freedom crises in modern history.

The Current Reality in Afghanistan

Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Afghanistan has become one of the most repressive countries in the world for religious minorities. The Taliban's strict and exclusionary interpretation of Sharia law leaves no room for religious diversity, and as a result, individuals from minority faiths—including Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, and others—live in constant fear. Reports of forced conversions, targeted killings, the closure of places of worship, and the complete erasure of non-Sunni Islamic and non-Muslim religious practices from public life paint a grim picture of the reality on the ground.

The Taliban's rule has systematically dismantled any previous efforts to create a more pluralistic society. The limited religious freedoms that once existed have been entirely rolled back. Under the Taliban's governance, any deviation from their strict interpretation of Islam is met with harsh punishment. Individuals who express beliefs outside of Taliban orthodoxy are frequently detained, tortured, or executed extrajudicially. Apostasy and blasphemy laws are wielded as tools of repression, leaving no room for dissent or religious diversity.

For those who practice their faith in secret, the danger is immense. Conversion from Islam is punishable by death, making it nearly impossible for Afghan Christians and others to live openly. Reports from underground Christian communities indicate that believers are in hiding, constantly changing locations to avoid detection. The few remaining members of historic religious communities, such as Sikhs and Hindus, have been forced to flee, and there is a real risk that Afghanistan will soon be devoid of any religious diversity.

The Nexus Between Religious Persecution and Gender Apartheid

The persecution of religious minorities in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the Taliban's broader system of gender apartheid. Women and girls from religious minority backgrounds are uniquely vulnerable, facing both faith-based and gender-based oppression. Under Taliban rule, women already face immense restrictions on their freedom—barred from education beyond primary school, prohibited from working in most sectors, and required to adhere to strict dress codes. For women from religious minority communities, the dangers are even more acute.

Reports indicate that young girls from Sikh and Christian families have been abducted, forcibly converted, and married to Taliban members. These women are stripped not only of their religious identity but also of their autonomy and dignity. The Taliban's legal system, which denies women basic rights, offers no recourse for victims of forced marriage, rape, or abduction. In many cases, families who attempt to reclaim their daughters are threatened or attacked.

Additionally, religious minority women are disproportionately affected by Taliban policies that restrict movement. Because they lack the male guardians required to accompany them in public, many are effectively imprisoned in their homes. In cases where they attempt to flee, they are often denied access to asylum and international protection due to bureaucratic barriers that fail to account for their unique vulnerability.

The intersection of gender and faith in Afghanistan's oppressive system compounds the suffering of those who are already marginalized. Without international intervention, these abuses will continue unabated, leading to the complete erasure of religious minorities from Afghanistan's social fabric.

The Broader Impact of Religious Persecution

The persecution of religious minorities in Afghanistan does not exist in isolation; it has broad implications for regional stability, human rights, and global security. A state that systematically oppresses religious minorities fosters an environment of intolerance that can serve as a breeding ground for extremism. The Taliban's harboring of terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS-K, further exacerbates these concerns. These groups have launched targeted attacks against Shi'a Muslims, particularly the Hazara community, as well as Sufi Muslims and other minority sects. If left unchecked, this persecution could have destabilizing effects beyond Afghanistan's borders.

Furthermore, Afghanistan's treatment of religious minorities sends a message to other authoritarian and extremist regimes around the world. If the international community fails to act, it sets a dangerous precedent that religious persecution can occur with impunity.

Recommendations for U.S. Congressional Action

Given this alarming reality, and at your request I would like to offer a few recommendations that I hope our Congress will consider as a way to take decisive action to support religious freedom in Afghanistan:

1. **Prioritizing Persecuted Religious Minorities for Refugee Resettlement:** The U.S. should streamline pathways for Afghan religious minorities through the Priority 2 (P-2) refugee designation and expand humanitarian parole options. Congress should also support increased funding for NGOs assisting with evacuations. By expediting these pathways, the U.S. can prevent further loss of life and offer refuge to those facing imminent danger, much like previous efforts that successfully resettled Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities.

2. **Targeted Accountability Measures:** Congress should urge the U.S. government to impose sanctions and restrictions on Taliban officials responsible for religious persecution and work with international partners to hold them accountable. The Global Magnitsky Act has been an effective tool in targeting human rights abusers in other contexts, such as Myanmar's military leadership. Applying similar measures in Afghanistan would increase pressure on the Taliban and deter further violations and serve as an essential tool in pushing for religious freedom and human rights protections in Afghanistan.
3. **Support for Underground Religious Networks and Civil Society:** The U.S. should fund efforts that assist underground religious communities in Afghanistan with humanitarian aid, secure communication channels, and legal resources. Lessons from past international efforts—such as supporting underground Christian communities in North Korea—demonstrate that external assistance can enable persecuted groups to sustain their faith communities under hostile regimes.
4. **Leverage Diplomatic Pressure on Regional Partners:** The U.S. must work with countries that have diplomatic leverage over the Taliban—such as Pakistan, Qatar, and others—to press for basic protections for religious minorities. Congress should also ensure that any engagement with the Taliban is conditioned on measurable improvements in human rights, including religious freedom.
5. **Ensure Continued USCIRF and State Department Monitoring:** Afghanistan should remain a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), and Congress should support robust funding for USCIRF and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom to track ongoing violations. Continued documentation of human rights abuses will be essential for any future accountability efforts, much like the U.S. response to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, which led to genocide determinations and targeted sanctions.
6. **Humanitarian Assistance with Safeguards for Religious Minorities:** Any humanitarian aid provided to Afghanistan must be carefully monitored to ensure it reaches all vulnerable populations, including religious minorities. Aid programs should be designed to prevent Taliban interference and discrimination in distribution, much like international efforts in Syria that provided aid through trusted local organizations rather than government-controlled channels.

Conclusion

The U.S. has a moral and strategic interest in ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a completely monolithic and repressive state. Protecting religious freedom is not just about individual rights; it is about the stability and future of the region. The Taliban's systematic campaign against religious minorities is not only a violation of fundamental human rights but also a harbinger of greater extremism and insecurity in the region.

Congress has the power to take meaningful action. The voices of those persecuted cannot be heard within Afghanistan, but we have the responsibility to amplify their plight on the global stage.

I urge you to join me in urging Congress to act with focus to uphold the fundamental right to religious belief and practice for all Afghans.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to your questions.