

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational “black hole” with an [abysmal record](#) on freedom of the press. This landscape makes it difficult to chronicle the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate. Nevertheless, the available information presents a bleak picture.

The government continued to be suspicious of all independent religious activity and maintained a large surveillance apparatus that monitors believers at home and abroad. Turkmenistani law requires religious groups to register under intrusive criteria, strictly controls registered groups’ activities, and bans and punishes religious activities by unregistered groups. Persons accused of criminal religious offenses may be tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Convicts often are disappeared in the state’s prison

system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. Many religious prisoners are believed to be held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat. Ovadan-Depe was built to house high-level political dissidents and enemies of the state, and its prisoners routinely die from harsh conditions that include torture and starvation. In 2019, Akmyrat Soyunov and Eziz Hudayberdiyev, two alleged followers of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen, reportedly [died](#) in this prison. The closed informational environment of Turkmenistan makes it impossible to determine how many other religious prisoners the government is holding under similar conditions, or how many have likewise died in its custody in 2019.

The government also continued its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to military service, and it intensified punishment for them in 2019, arresting seven conscientious objectors during the year and imposing the harshest prison sentence known to date.

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 waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation, and take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under IRFA Section 405(a)(22);
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistani 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
- Press at the highest levels to secure the identification and immediate release of individuals imprisoned in Turkmenistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations, and urge the government of Turkmenistan to desist immediately from the practice of “disappearing” prisoners; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and close the prison at Ovadan-Depe.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Commission delegation:** OSCE HDIM in Warsaw in September 2019
- **Legislation Factsheet:** [Registration Laws](#)
- **Briefing:** [Freedom of Religion or Belief and Security: New Policy Guidance from the OSCE](#)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who enforces a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage, and who demands that the population conform to his personal whims. Since taking power in 2007, President Berdymukhamedov has steadily consolidated his grip on power and the ostentation of his cultic image. A new 2016 constitution removed the presidential age limit and Berdymukhamedov was reelected in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote in an election widely regarded as unfair. Turkmenistan's primary security concerns relate to its long border with Afghanistan and the government's fears about extremist infiltration and influence on the domestic Turkmen population. The government effectively leverages this perceived threat to maintain its iron grip over every aspect of Turkmenistani society, including religion. The majority of the population—around 89 percent—is Sunni Muslim, with Orthodox Christians as the second-largest group, comprising around 9 percent of the population. These statistics are more a reflection of ethnicity than of actual religious practice; Turkmen ethnic identity includes cultural Islam, but the secular government's Soviet-type approach to religion strictly regulates and often discourages active religious practice.

The 2016 Religion Law asserts that Turkmenistan is a secular state with religious freedom. However, it requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice under intrusive criteria (including having 50 adult citizen founders), prohibits any activity by unregistered groups, requires that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans worship in private homes and private religious education, and prohibits the wearing of religious garb in public except by clerics. All religious activity is overseen by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), which approves the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, the import and publication of religious literature, and the registration of all religious organizations. The law does not specify the criteria for gaining SCROEERIR approval, which enables arbitrary enforcement. The registration process requires religious organizations to provide the government with detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Registered communities must reregister every three years, and religious activity is not permitted in prisons or the military.

Conscientious Objectors

In 2018, after a four-year moratorium, Turkmenistan resumed its practice of imprisoning conscientious objectors to compulsory military service. This practice has not only continued in 2019, but penalties have also become more severe. Seven of the 10 conscientious objectors currently known to be in prison were arrested in 2019 and charged under article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. In July 2019, authorities sentenced 19-year-old [Bahtiyar Atahanov](#) to four years in prison, the harshest sentence to date for conscientious objection. Most sentences are between one and two years; however, the military forcibly

conscripted Atahanov before he was charged, which allowed the courts to treat him as an active-duty soldier in dereliction of his duty. In November 2019, a court sentenced [Serdar Dovletov](#) to three years for “fraudulently” attempting to evade service. All those charged for conscientious objection are Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to comply with compulsory military service on religious grounds. There is no civilian alternative to military service available to conscientious objectors in Turkmenistan. David Petrosov and Selim Taganov, two Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in September and October 2019, respectively, attempted to obtain alternative service, but the military refused their requests.

Government Control and Suppression of Islam

All religious activity is under tight government control in Turkmenistan, but Islam faces particular scrutiny. Unlike its approach to other faiths, the government directly controls the practice of Islam by appointing religious leaders and dictating the content of sermons and prayers. The state-mandated content for imams regularly includes prayers for President Berdymukhamedov, asking not only for his health and long life, but also for God to punish his enemies. Sermons include [tributes to the president](#), reminding the congregation that all that is good in their lives derives from Berdymukhamedov's “wise policies.” Unlike in previous years, there was no public announcement from the state-controlled Muslim Board marking the start of Ramadan in 2019 and no guidelines published for the traditional tithe. In fact, the state-controlled media made no mention of the observance. Citizens [reported](#) being afraid to celebrate the holiday, concerned they would be labelled as extremists. In early 2019, there were scattered reports of police summoning and questioning individuals about whether their ultimate loyalty was to God or the president. In January and February, authorities in the capital city of Ashgabat forcibly detained and shaved an unknown number of young men under 40. Police in Lebap Region reportedly detained a young man with a beard for several days and forced him to drink alcohol.

Key U.S. Policy

The government of Turkmenistan engages in a number of border and regional security programs with the U.S. government, as well as educational and cultural exchanges. Turkmenistan enjoys most-favored-nation trading status with the United States and receives U.S. foreign aid to strengthen the security of its border with Afghanistan. Although cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, the U.S. government has prioritized security concerns related to the ongoing war in Afghanistan in its policy with the country. The State Department has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014, and [redesignated](#) it in December 2019, but has repeatedly used a waiver against any related sanctions “as required in the ‘important national interest of the United States.’” This waiver effectively neutralizes the consequences of Turkmenistan's CPC designation, removes any incentive for the government to reform its brutal policies, and lends credence to the regime's claims that these policies are warranted by security concerns.