



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: AFGHANISTAN

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom in Afghanistan

By Niala Mohammad, Senior Policy Analyst

Introduction

Religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan have drastically deteriorated since the Taliban seized control of the country on August 15, 2021. The Taliban's harsh enforcement of its religious interpretation on all Afghans violates the freedom of religion or belief of religious minorities; women; members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community; Afghans with differing interpretations of Islam; and Afghans who follow no religion. Despite continued promises to protect all ethnic and religious communities residing in Afghanistan, the Taliban de facto government has been unable to provide safety and security to religious minorities against attacks from Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K). While some religious minority communities face the threat of extinction, others struggle to practice their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal. Despite publicly committing to change and inclusivity, the Taliban has continued to rule Afghanistan in a similar manner to the way it ruled the country from 1996 to 2001.

This country update analyzes the severe decline of freedom of religion or belief since the Taliban's 2021 takeover.

Restrictions on the Basis of Religion

The Taliban's practices remain *unchanged* after two decades out of power. Based on the group's strict religious interpretations, it has reintroduced and enforces harsh restrictions on all Afghans, including those with differing interpretations of Islam.

In September 2021, the Taliban *reinstated* the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV), which includes a notoriously violent hardline Islamist policing system, previously disbanded in 2001. The MPVPV's morality police have been particularly *harsh* toward *Afghan women* in their enforcement of what they deem as Islamically appropriate dress and behavior. Taliban leaders have issued a series of *decrees* specifying acceptable behaviors under their interpretation of Islam, particularly targeting *women* by restricting their freedom of movement, dress, education, participation in sports, right to work, and healthcare. In May 2022, the MPVPV issued a *decree* stating women in Afghanistan must cover their faces in public, ideally wearing a *burqa*, and further warned women not to wear colorful clothing, high-heeled shoes, perfume, or anything meant to attract the opposite sex. If a woman



does not follow the [rules](#), her “[male guardian](#)” will be visited and advised, and eventually jailed and sentenced if she does not comply. Women who work in government offices and do not follow the new decree will be fired. Furthermore, secondary schools for girls remain [closed](#) and will be opened only once the Taliban sets [Islamic and cultural](#) conditions for female students aged 12 and older, according to [statements](#) issued by the [Taliban](#) in March 2022.

The Taliban has placed many other restrictions on Afghan society based on the regime’s interpretation of religion, such as the [banning of music](#). Under the Taliban in the 1990s, music and other forms of entertainment were strictly forbidden. Performing, selling, or even listening to music at home or during wedding festivities was considered an offense. In August 2021, the spokesman for the Taliban, [Zabihullah Mujahid](#), confirmed music would not be allowed in public spaces, stating, “music is forbidden in Islam ... but we’re hoping that we can persuade people not to do such things, instead of pressuring them.” However, since retaking Afghanistan during the past year, the Taliban targeted musicians and artists, and even those who play music in their [cars](#), accusing them of violating the group’s vision of Islam. In fact, just prior to seizing power in July 2021, the Taliban executed a popular comedian in [Kandahar](#) Province, and in August 2021 after it resumed power, the Taliban executed a folk singer in [Baghlan](#) Province. In October 2021, gunmen who identified themselves as Taliban attacked a wedding in [Nangarhar](#) Province to stop music from being played, killing at least two people,

and injuring 10 others. In January 2022, a video emerged out of [Paktia Province](#) in which Taliban members were shown humiliating two local musicians and burning their instruments. As a result, many [artists](#), entertainers, and musicians have [fled](#) Afghanistan while those remaining hide their trade in fear.

The Taliban regime has also issued [warnings](#) to [barbers](#) and hair salons not to give Western style haircuts to men or to shave or [trim beards](#), saying it is forbidden in Islam. [Government employees](#) working under the de facto Taliban administration have been told to wear beards and traditional clothing or risk being fired or beaten for not adhering to the group’s conception of Islamically appropriate standards. Taliban members have reportedly [flogged](#) and threatened young Afghans for wearing Western style clothing.

Despite [promises](#) to [form](#) an “[inclusive](#)” [government](#), the Taliban in September 2021 [announced](#) an all-male and religiously homogenous government cabinet. The presence of religious minorities and women has been increasingly diminished from the political and public sphere.

Shi’a Muslims

Although the Taliban has said it would not interfere with [Shi’a worship](#) and would protect all ethnic and religious groups, the group has been responsible for the deaths of dozens of [Hazara](#) Shi’a over the past year, as well as mass forced displacements of Hazara people. Upon taking control of [Ghazni Province](#) in July 2021, the Taliban killed

nine Hazara men. In September 2021, Hazara activists claimed that Taliban fighters evicted at least 1,200 Hazara Shi'a from their homes in Daykundi Province and seized their properties. Shortly after, in October 2021, there were confirmed reports that the Taliban killed 13 Hazaras in [Daykundi Province in August](#).

On October 8, 2021, ISIS-K attacked a Shi'a mosque in Kunduz province, killing at least 46 worshipers and wounding dozens more. A week after the incident, ISIS-K attacked another Shi'a mosque, this time targeting the Shi'a community in Kandahar. In April 2022, a [series of attacks](#) targeted the Hazara Shi'a community including the Seh Dokan Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif and twin bombings at the Abdul Rahim Shahid High School in the Shi'a-dominated area of Kabul. In April 2022, the [United Nations \(UN\) reported](#) that the Taliban tortured and killed a midwife in Mazar-e-Sharif, amputating her legs, stabbing her and shooting her 12 times — simply because she was a woman and a Hazara. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released a [report](#) in July 2022 outlining the human rights situation in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. UNAMA recorded 2,106 civilian casualties (700 killed, 1,406 wounded) between August 2021 and June 2022, with most civilian casualties attributed to targeted attacks by ISIS-K against ethnic and religious minority communities in places where they go to school, worship, and go about their daily lives. During Ashura observances, [UMAMA](#) also called for greater security for ethnic and religious minorities. In [August 2022](#), an attack on a Shi'a Muslim neighborhood in Kabul during the holy days of Muharram left [eight people](#) dead after a bomb hidden in a cart went off near a local mosque. Members of the Shi'a religious minority community complained that [mobile and internet services](#) were [cut off](#) on Ashura causing panic within the Shi'a Muslim community.

In 2022, the de facto Taliban administration removed [Ashura](#) and [Nowruz](#) as national public holidays from the Afghan calendar but have allowed minority communities to publicly commemorate these holidays without punishment. Furthermore, the Taliban declared August 15 as a [national holiday](#) in the country to mark the first anniversary of the victory of the Afghan *jihad* [holy war] against the American military and its allies' occupation.

Sufis

Afghanistan has a deep-rooted history of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Nevertheless, the Taliban views Sufi teachings as in [conflict](#) with the Taliban's strict understanding of Islam, and both the Taliban and ISIS-K have violently [targeted](#) the Sufi community. In April 2022, [Sahib Khalifa Mosque](#), a Sufi house of worship in Kabul, was attacked, resulting in the deaths of almost [50 worshipers](#) and injuring dozens of others. Also, in [April 2022](#), Mawlawi Sekandar Sufi Mosque in Kunduz Province was attacked during Friday prayers, killing 33 people. In August 2022, a bomb blast inside [Siddiquiya Mosque](#) in Kabul killed a renowned Afghan scholar and preacher of Sufi Islam.

Sikh, Hindu, and Jewish Communities

Although the vast majority of non-Muslims fled after the Taliban consolidated control of the government between 1996 and 2001, small populations of religious minorities, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, remained. An increase in attacks over the past year by ISIS-K has [decimated](#) religious minority communities. The last reported Jewish person in Afghanistan, [Zeblon Simantov](#), left the country in September 2021 out of fear of persecution by the Taliban, leaving behind what had been the last operating synagogue in Kabul.

The Taliban's seizure of Afghanistan has led to a rapid decline and near [extinction](#) of the already small Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities. Just days after the takeover, armed Taliban representatives went to the Sikh Gurdwara in Karte Parwan in Kabul to urge Sikh and Hindu community members not to leave Afghanistan. In October 2021, the Sikh community shared videos of alleged members of the Taliban vandalizing and ransacking their Gurdwara in Karte Parwan. In June 2022, ISIS-K again attacked the [Sikh Gurdwara](#) in Kabul, this time killing two people. Currently, there are fewer than 100 Hindus and Sikhs left in Afghanistan. If the remaining members of the Sikh and Hindu communities can obtain the appropriate travel documentation, only a handful will choose to remain behind to care for the gurdwaras and temples in the country.

Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, and Baha'is

The Taliban and ISIS-K consider Afghan Christians, Ahmadis, and Baha'is to be converts from Islam. These minority communities practice their faith in hiding since the Taliban's strict interpretation of Hanafi jurisprudence deems conversion from Islam to another religion as apostasy and punishable by death.

While the Taliban has acknowledged the existence of the Sikh and Hindu faiths in Afghanistan and declared that adherents are free to practice these religions according to their beliefs, the regime has denied the existence of a Christian community, despite [reports](#) of an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Christians in the country. [Inamullah Samangani](#), a Taliban spokesman, has stated "There are no Christians in Afghanistan. A Christian minority has never been known or registered here."

Leaders of the Afghan Christian population have expressed deep concern for the safety and well-being of their community. The head of the Afghan House Church Network stated during an episode of [USCIRF Spotlight](#) in January 2022, "The Taliban, their plan eventually is the elimination of Christianity, and they have been very open about that." Organizations such as [International Christian Concern](#) and [Open Doors USA](#) report Christians are under extreme threat in Afghanistan with the Taliban going door to door to seek them out and identify anyone who has converted from Islam.

In [November and December](#) 2021, the Taliban detained 28 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kabul. According to members of the community, the Taliban falsely accused them of belonging to ISIS-K. All those detained were released by July 2022; however, the community fears that these individuals now face increased threat of being targeted since they have been identified.

In Afghanistan, followers of the Baha'i faith have faced persecution both before and after the Taliban attained power. In 2007, the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts of the Supreme Court declared the Baha'i faith to be blasphemous and their followers to be infidels. The Baha'i community has lived in secret since this ruling and are reluctant to reveal their religious identities to anyone.

U.S. Policy and Conclusion

Following the Taliban's seizure of the country, over [120,000 Afghans](#), including religious minorities, were evacuated to the United States and ally countries. Additionally, many others fled to neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, and India, where they continue to face uncertainty and discrimination. In response to the crisis, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security created a government-wide program, Operation Allies Welcome, to coordinate efforts to support vulnerable Afghan populations. In August 2021, the U.S. Department of State announced a [Priority 2 \(P-2\) designation](#) for certain Afghan nationals and eligible family members for resettlement through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). USCIRF has called on the State Department to expand its P2 designation to members of religious minority groups in Afghanistan at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban.

The Taliban takeover prompted the U.S. government and other international actors to halt aid programs, suspend financial assistance, freeze billions of dollars in Afghan central bank assets, and impose stringent sanctions on the Taliban. Despite these restrictions, the United States has given [over \\$774 million](#) in humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan since August 2021, and more than [\\$4.6 billion](#) since 2002.

While the United States has not recognized the Taliban regime as the official government of Afghanistan, in June 2022, a [U.S. government delegation](#) met with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, underscoring their commitment to the Afghan people in the wake of the deadly earthquakes that hit eastern Afghanistan. U.S. officials emphasized the importance of the Taliban fulfilling its public commitments, including protecting the rights of all Afghans. The officials also expressed concern regarding the continuing presence of al-Qaida, ISIS-K, and other terrorist organizations in Afghanistan who continue to target religious minorities and those with differing beliefs. In [August 2022](#), U.S. drone strikes killed al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul, and the [State Department](#) accused the Taliban of grossly violating the [2020 Doha Declaration](#). Also in [August](#), senior Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader [Omar Khalid Khorasani](#), was killed in a blast in eastern Afghanistan, along with three other members of the Pakistani Taliban. Since its de facto rule, the Taliban has brokered peace talks between the TTP and the Pakistani government.



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On November 15, 2021, the State Department designated the Taliban as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The State Department cautioned that the Taliban’s designation is based on information analyzed as of August 15, 2021, before it became the de facto governing authority. ISIS-K was not designated as an EPC, as the State Department determined in 2020 that group had lost the territory it previously controlled.

USCIRF continues to urge the U.S. government to incorporate protections for freedom of religion or belief into dialogue with the Taliban, and to continue to publicly condemn ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Taliban and ISIS-K. In its [2022 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended the State Department designate Afghanistan — under the de facto rule of the Taliban — as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by IRFA.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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