

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained dire. The Tajik government continued to severely repress the country's Muslim majority. Children under the age of 18 are barred from visiting mosques and all other public religious activities except for funerals. Private religious education is banned, and children are only allowed to receive religious instruction from their parents at home. Since 2014, the government has appointed all imams, required them to wear state-issued religious garments, and strictly dictated their sermons. People under the age of 35 are not allowed to perform the Hajj.

The government enforced restrictions on how Muslims mourn the dead, including a ban on wearing black clothes. In June, police stopped a woman wearing a black dress to mourn the death of her son and detained her for seven hours at a police station, where she was [beaten](#) to the point of unconsciousness. After her family saw her injuries and complained to the police, they were threatened with 15 days of jail time. In addition, police sometimes harassed individuals wearing hijabs or beards as a symbol of Islamic piety and [blocked](#) them from entering government buildings.

In 2022, the Tajik government implemented [new methods](#) of persecution specifically aimed at the country's minority Ismaili Shi'a Muslim population, including the imprisonment of a prominent religious leader, closure of a religious school and other community activities, and [shuttering](#) of religious bookstores that sold Ismaili literature and other materials.

In Tajikistan, the government punished alleged extremism and terrorism without requiring acts that involved violence or incitement of imminent violence. Charges are often arbitrarily issued against religious individuals and their trials lacked due process and procedural safeguards. The Tajik government continued to imprison multiple individuals on lengthy prison sentences for peacefully expressing their faith, including those who veered from the

state-scripted sermons, preached without an official appointment by the government, provided religious education, or attempted to share their faith publicly. In August, Ismaili Muslim cleric [Muzaffar Davlatmirov](#) was sentenced to five years in prison on "extremism" charges after officiating funeral services for protesters killed by the government. The Tajik government continued to target anyone with ties to the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a moderate Islamic political party banned in Tajikistan since 2015, including through the use of [transnational repression](#) and requests for [extradition](#) from other countries. One of the founders of the IRPT, 80-year-old [Zubaydullo Rozik](#), was placed in special punishment cells twice over the past year for teaching religion to other prisoners, which is illegal in Tajik prisons.

The government continued to require the registration of all religious communities. Unregistered religious communities cannot legally convene religious meetings or assemblies, own or use property for religious purposes, produce or import religious literature, receive donations, carry out charitable work, or invite foreign persons to participate in religious activities. In May, government officials told Protestant Christian leaders that the government would not [register](#) any new churches. Like the restrictions placed on Muslims, children of Christian families cannot attend church or other related activities such as religious camps. In August, the government demanded that all non-Muslim communities fill out [questionnaires](#) detailing information about the community's employees and their families and any financial contributions the community receives. In September, the [United Nations Human Rights Committee](#) (UNHRCtee) [determined](#) that Tajikistan's refusal to register Jehovah's Witnesses violated Articles 18(1) and 18(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantee protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan 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), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Condition U.S. security assistance to the Tajik government on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law and the improvement of conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajik officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Tajik 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 the Tajik government at the highest levels to identify and immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience, including those imprisoned on religious grounds; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajik prisons.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Vice Chair Nury Turkel Calls on Tajikistan to Release Shamil Khakimov](#)
- **Podcast:** [The Persecution of Muslims in Tajikistan](#)

Background

President Emomali Rahmon has ruled Tajikistan since 1992, centering power in the hands of his family. Tajikistan faced multiple crises in 2022, including increased [economic hardship](#) due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, ongoing [security challenges](#) from Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) in neighboring Afghanistan, increased [drug trafficking](#) along the Tajik-Afghan border, and the [continuation](#) of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict throughout the year.

The country's [population](#) is predominantly Muslim, with around 86 percent adhering to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and approximately four percent identifying as Ismaili Shi'a, a group that primarily resides in the mountainous eastern part of the country known as the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox, but other Christian communities include Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians also make up small communities.

UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders [Mary Lawlor](#) conducted a two-week-long [official visit](#) to Tajikistan in November and December but was denied access to the GBAO. Lawlor concluded that the situation for human rights defenders, including those working on behalf of religious freedom, is deteriorating as they face "harassment, threats, criminalization, closed unfair trials, and imprisonment."

Legal Framework for Controlling Religion

Tajikistan's legal environment for freedom of religion or belief sharply declined after the adoption of several highly restrictive laws beginning in 2009. Its [Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Unions](#) requires religious organizations to complete burdensome registration applications to operate legally. Applicants [must secure](#) an attestation from local government officials confirming that at least 10 persons over 18 years old in their locality are members. Applicants must then submit detailed information to the government's Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies, including the organization's planned activities, founders and structure, and basic tenets and attitudes toward education, family, marriage, and health. The government exercises broad discretion to deny applications and strip religious organizations of their registration. The administrative and penal codes provide for large fines and prison terms for religion-related charges such as organizing or participating in "unapproved" religious meetings.

Tajikistan maintains additional legal barriers severely curtailing the right to freedom of religion or belief. The [Law on Parental Responsibility](#) bans minors from any organized religious activities except funerals. The [Law on Military Duty and Service](#) provides for mandatory military service with no exemption for conscientious objectors. Conscripts [must](#) either serve two years in the armed services or pay a substantial fine and take a month-long course in military preparedness.

The GBAO and Repression of Ismaili Shi'as

In 2022, the Tajik government increasingly repressed the country's Ismaili Shi'a population, who are primarily ethnic Pamiris located in

the GBAO. Authorities [cracked down](#) on civil society in the GBAO following protests in mid-May over the government's decision not to investigate the death of an activist in police custody. The government arrested over 200 people, imprisoned Pamiri journalists and repatriated them from Russia, and began country-wide suppression of Pamiris that included repression of their freedom of religion or belief.

In May in the capital Dushanbe, authorities began pressuring staff at the Ismaili *tariqa* (school), officially registered with the government since 2012, to cease all religious and secular educational activities. In September, the government [forcibly closed](#) the school along with all the bookstores in Dushanbe selling religious literature. Islamic religious studies are now only taught in one school that remains open in the capital. In addition, authorities shut down [development projects](#) funded and created by the Ismaili religious leader, Europe-based [Aga Khan](#), including schools, summer camps for children, banks, and telecommunications.

Religious Prisoners of Conscience

In August, Ismaili Muslim cleric Muzaffar Davlatmirov received a [five-year prison sentence](#) on "extremism" charges. Following the government's violent crackdown in the GBAO, Davlatmirov gave sermons calling on people to remain peaceful but also [criticized](#) the authorities' use of force. After authorities killed three local informal leaders in the May protests, Davlatmirov led their religious services and gave *janaza* (funeral) prayers. The secret police arrested him on July 26 and sentenced him in private court proceedings only eight days later.

Since February 2019, Jehovah's Witness [Shamil Khakimov](#) has been in prison for "inciting religious hatred." Tajik authorities [targeted](#) the nonviolent 71-year-old for sharing his faith in public and have denied him access to adequate medical care. In November 2022, the Khujand City Court [rejected](#) Khakimov's request for transfer to a specialized hospital to treat signs of gangrene in his legs and poor eyesight, again disregarding UNHRCtee requests for Khakimov to receive proper medical treatment.

Key U.S. Policy

In February, the United States and Tajikistan [celebrated](#) 30 years of diplomatic relations. Since recognizing Tajikistan's independence in 1991, the U.S. government has [provided](#) over \$1.8 billion in assistance to promote economic development, education, and health as well as regional security, including joint military exercises and \$330 million in security assistance to combat terrorism and narco-trafficking. The U.S. government has pledged an additional \$60 million in security assistance over the next two years. In May, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [visited](#) Tajikistan to discuss bilateral cooperation on economic and security issues.

On November 30, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States." It has designated Tajikistan as a CPC each year since 2016.