

KEY FINDINGS

In 2025, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained poor. During the year, authorities abused, imprisoned, detained, and fined individuals for their peaceful religious activities under the guise of combating “extremism,” largely targeting Muslims who deviated from the state’s preferred interpretation of Islam. Officials regularly employed the 2011 law On Religious Activities and Religious Associations (religion law) to prevent or interfere in the activities of minority religious communities, particularly Christians. The religion law bans unregistered religious activities, requires official examination of all religious materials, and places restrictions on religious education, proselytization, and religious events.

In 2025, the Kazakh government continued to use the 2005 law On Countering Extremism (extremism law) to target the peaceful religious activities of Muslims who deviate from the state’s preferred interpretation of Islam. The law contains a broad definition of extremism that is not limited to acts involving violence or calls to violence. This definition provided authorities with wide discretion to arbitrarily penalize peaceful religious activities. For example, USCIRF monitors the case of one freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) victim—Anatoli Zernichenko—who is imprisoned for his peaceful religious activities on unjustified “extremism”-related charges.

During the year, former FoRB victims reported restrictions on their religious activities following their release from prison. For example, one former FoRB victim reported that an official threatened him with further punishment if he attended Friday prayers or gave customary greetings. Another former FoRB victim reported that a National Security Committee (NSC) officer questioned him twice about his religious habits and threatened to return him to prison after he stayed at his local mosque following Friday prayers. Courts and probation officers can impose restrictions on prisoners, which are particularly common in “extremism” cases. Some former FoRB victims reported facing additional restrictions after

serving their sentences, including bans on opening a bank account, traveling outside the former prisoner’s hometown, and visiting public places. These post-prison restrictions apply to FoRB victims released this year, including [Dadash Mazhenov](#) and [Abdukhalil Abduzhabbarov](#). Other FoRB victims released in 2025 include [Beket Mynbasov](#) and [Ernar Samatov](#).

The government continued to regulate the distribution of religious materials as part of its work to prevent “extremism.” The Ministry of Culture and Information conducted online monitoring activities, blocking access to over 3,000 “extremist” materials. In August, the NSC Border Service reported that 18 individuals illegally brought a total of 678 religious materials across the border, which officials confiscated. Additionally, the NSC periodically arrested individuals who illegally distributed literature that “promoted religious discord.” However, reports of the arrests included few details, in accordance with Kazakh law, making it difficult to know if the literature incited violence. For example, in June, the Zhambyl District Court found four individuals guilty of violating Criminal Code Article 174.1, which penalizes the incitement of discord, sentencing the men to two years in prison.

During one violent incident, officials physically abused Jehovah’s Witness Daniyar Tursynbayev for his peaceful religious activities. In August, police arrested Tursynbayev, an Uzbek citizen and lawful resident of Kazakhstan, where he lives with his Kazakh wife and daughter. Officials attempted to coerce him into admitting ownership of an Instagram account that contains hate speech. When Tursynbayev refused, officers beat and threatened to murder him. After six hours of detainment, officials released him. In September, Kentau officials charged Tursynbayev under Administrative Code Article 490.3, which penalizes unauthorized missionary activity. In November, a Kentau City Court judge ordered Tursynbayev’s deportation from Kazakhstan, a ruling the Turkestan Regional Court annulled upon Tursynbayev’s appeal.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Include Kazakhstan on the Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA); and
 - Link future U.S. security assistance and bilateral trade policies to improvements of religious freedom in Kazakhstan, including in any memorandums of understanding related to the critical mineral sector and raising concerns through the [Minerals Security Partnership Forum](#).
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Kazakhstan’s religious freedom conditions and advocate for the release of those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs by conducting relevant hearings and delegation visits through the bipartisan Senate Central Asia Caucus, Helsinki Commission, and Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission; and
 - Condition Kazakhstan’s eligibility for Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) status to the removal of restrictions on freedom of movement related to peaceful religious activities, according to Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment).

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Press Release:** [Religious Freedom in Kazakhstan Remains Poor despite Government Claims](#)
- **Hearing:** [Laws Regulating Religion in Central Asia](#)
- **Country Update:** [Kazakhstan](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief** [Victims List](#) and [Appendix 2](#)

Background

Over 69 percent of Kazakhs adhere to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Other Muslim groups in Kazakhstan include Shi'a and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Seventeen percent of the population identify as Christian, most of whom are Russian Orthodox but who also include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups in Kazakhstan include Jews, Baha'is, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. A small percentage of individuals identify as atheist or prefer not to share their religious affiliation. Article 22 of the constitution guarantees the right to freedom of conscience, a right that the government does not uphold in practice.

Legislative Amendments Related to FoRB

Throughout the year, the Kazakh government passed minor amendments to the religion law and related legislation. In January 2025, the government amended the religion law to state that an objective is to "ensure the right to freedom of conscience." However, the amendments maintained problematic provisions that violate FoRB, such as registration requirements, and other restrictions on religious practices. Also in January, the government approved Administrative Code amendments that decreased penalties for individuals who violate the religion law under Article 490. The amendments decrease the maximum fine by half and allow authorities the option to issue a warning rather than a penalty. While this is a positive change, the law still allows authorities to issue fines for peaceful religious activities, albeit in smaller amounts. The continuation of such penalties, even if reduced, remains in violation of Kazakhstan's international human rights commitments.

In a particularly concerning legislative development, in June, Kazakhstan amended the law On Prevention of Crimes to ban "clothing in public places that prevent the recognition of the face." While the amendment's language does not explicitly mention "religious" face coverings, this seems to be the ban's intention in practice. The secular Kazakh government views growing religiosity, partly represented by an increase in the popularity of religious head coverings, as a sign of "extremism" and a national security threat. Tension between the government's secular aspirations and the piousness of Kazakh people has led to further FoRB restrictions, such as the face covering ban. In the lead-up to the passage of the amendment, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev promoted Kazakh national clothes over "black clothes that cover the face." Further, he insisted that Islamic face coverings are foreign and incompatible with Central Asian culture. Additionally, the Religious Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, or *Muftiate*, a quasi-independent organization, supported the ban, stating that face coverings are "not reflected in the traditions of our people."

In June, a USCIRF delegation visited Kazakhstan and held a productive dialogue with Kazakh officials that showed a willingness to address legal concerns related to FoRB. However, there has not yet been progress towards these reforms.

Targeting of Minority Religious Groups

Throughout the year, officials enforced the religion law to obstruct the activities of minority religious groups. While most minority religious communities, such as Buddhists and Jews, are officially registered and permitted to practice their faith within the legal framework, unregistered groups, often Christians, are particularly restricted. For example, small Christian groups struggled to obtain mandatory registration due to the burdensome 50-person membership threshold. Unregistered groups noted the government's prohibition on proselytizing, conducting missionary activities, and holding religious gatherings—activities necessary to grow membership numbers to reach the legal minimum. Such restrictions allowed authorities to reject the registration of application of small religious groups that they found "unfavorable." During 2025, authorities rejected applications from a Protestant church in Astana multiple times due to bureaucratic concerns, including membership numbers. The number of unregistered churches is unknown, as they are forced to operate underground. One leader of a Baptist church reported that he wants to obtain state registration but cannot because of membership requirements. Despite such cases, Kazakh officials informed USCIRF that the membership requirements are appropriate because there are no religious communities in Kazakhstan with fewer than 50 members. Authorities have also restricted Christian charity efforts, such as Samaritan's Purse's Operation Christmas Child program.

Kazakh officials targeted Jehovah's Witnesses during 2025, including locally registered communities. Officials allegedly targeted Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activities based on neighbors' complaints, which police seemingly fabricated at times. For example, in Shymkent, NSC officials raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in a rented facility in July. Officials alleged that they interrupted the meeting due to a complaint from neighbors, but there was evidence that the officers arrived at the facility before the neighbor made a report. Following the incident, authorities charged one Witness under Administrative Code Article 490.1.1, which penalizes unauthorized religious meetings. In August, a court dismissed the case. In February, Atyrau police detained five Witnesses, including two minors, for sharing their religious beliefs. While detained, police interrogated and refused the detainees' requests for water and to contact legal representation.

Key U.S. Policy

Throughout the year, U.S. officials engaged with the Kazakh government to discuss topics of mutual interest, such as trade and national security. However, reports from the meetings did not indicate that human rights or FoRB were discussed. In June, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with Kazakhstan Deputy Prime Minister-Foreign Minister Murat Nurtleu to discuss Kazakhstan's sovereignty and the expansion of investment opportunities, particularly in the technology and critical minerals sectors. In November, President Donald J. Trump [met](#) with President Tokayev to discuss trade deals and Kazakhstan's decision to join the Abraham Accords.

In October 2025, the U.S. Congress confirmed Julie Stuftt to be ambassador of the United States to Kazakhstan. During Stuftt's nomination hearing, U.S. Senator Steve Daines (R-MT) called for the repeal of Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions on Kazakhstan.