

TURKMENISTAN

USCIRF-RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

KEY FINDINGS

In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world. Government control of religion is highly restrictive, with the state appointing Muslim clerics, surveilling and dictating religious practice, and punishing nonconformity through imprisonment, torture, and administrative harassment. 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 treat all independent religious activity with suspicion, maintaining 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 punishes religious activities by unregistered groups, which are effectively banned. In March 2021, authorities in the region of Dashoguz posted notices in residential buildings [warning](#) residents not to participate in unregistered religious activity. Sources continue to report official harassment of religious individuals, including local police detaining groups of bearded men and [forcing them to shave and drink alcohol](#) to prove they are not “extremists.” In the city of Mary, a man was arrested for “[sorcery](#)” apparently linked to his practice of traditional medicine.

Persons accused of criminal religious offenses are often tried in closed-regime courts where sentences remain secret. Convicts are often disappeared in the state’s prison system and presumed to be held without contact with the outside world. On December 1, 2021, the Prove They Are Alive campaign published an updated [list of disappeared prisoners](#), which now includes 162 individuals.

Of these, 58 individuals are vaguely accused of “Islamic extremism,” including many affiliated with Kurdish theologian Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen, an influential Turkish preacher heavily influenced by Nursi’s moderate teachings. The authorities hold many religious prisoners 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](#).

[COVID-19 restrictions](#) have made public religious practice even more difficult than normal. Periodic lockdowns limited most in-person public activity, but mosques and other religious facilities were even more stringently targeted, remaining [closed](#) when parks and restaurants were allowed to open. Inexplicably, the government continued to [deny the existence of the virus](#) in Turkmenistan even as it imposed these measures. Large mandatory [public mourning](#) ceremonies in regional mosques for President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow’s father, who died on April 18, were a notable exception to the rule. Senior male officials and some in the private sector were [ordered to shave their heads](#) and wear skullcaps for a month-long mourning period, while women in state offices were ordered to wear black.

Online activity remained limited by blocked internet access and extremely slow network speeds. On January 12, 2022, after the reporting period, President Berdimuhamedow instructed the head of the Ministry for State Security to further increase [state control of the internet](#) and restrict public access to internet sources that “threaten the constitutional order.”

President Berdimuhamedow’s May 9 [pardon of all 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) imprisoned for their conscientious objection to military service was one significant positive development.

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), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
- Take presidential action to limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under [IRFA Section 405\(a\)\(22\)](#) to hold the government of Turkmenistan accountable for its particularly severe violations of religious freedom;
- Impose targeted sanctions on Turkmenistan 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
- Urge the government of Turkmenistan to provide an acceptable civilian alternative to military service and to cease imprisoning citizens for conscientious objection.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Factsheet:** [Controlling Civil Society’s Purse Strings](#)
- **Press Statement:** [USCIRF Welcomes Amnesty of Jehovah’s Witness Prisoners in Turkmenistan](#)

Background

Turkmenistan is a highly authoritarian country under the rule of President Berdimuhamedow since 2007, enforcing a cult of personality that proliferates his image in golden monuments and fawning official coverage. The 2016 Constitution removed the presidential age limit and Berdimuhamedow was “reelected” in 2017 with 97 percent of the vote. On February 11, 2022, the 64-year-old president, who is rumored to be in bad health, announced the [nomination](#) of his 40-year-old son, Serdar, to the presidency, to be confirmed at snap “elections” currently scheduled for March 12, 2022. This managed transition comes at a moment of significant political and social fragility amid the ongoing pandemic and the August 2021 takeover of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan. For several years, the government has been extremely concerned about the possibility of [mass unrest](#) amid a crippling economic decline, and it is rapidly implementing an “anti-terrorist plan” that includes the installation of facial recognition cameras and “smart city” technology in public places, including small businesses. The government typically [charges its critics](#) with terrorism, targeting their families and friends if it cannot extradite them from abroad. This has not stopped it from hosting [official visits from the Taliban](#), with whom it maintains relatively cordial relations in pursuit of regional economic connectivity and especially a proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline to transport Turkmen gas to southern ports.

The majority is Sunni Muslim (89 percent), while Orthodox Christians represent the second-largest group, comprising around nine percent. Although the 2016 Religion Law asserts that Turkmenistan is a secular state with religious freedom, it requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice under intrusive criteria, mandates that the government be informed of all foreign financial support, bans private religious education and worship, and prohibits the public wearing of religious garb except by clerics. The State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) oversees all religious activity, including registrations, the appointment of religious leaders, the building of houses of worship, and the import and publication of religious literature. The registration process requires religious organizations to provide detailed information about founding members, including names, addresses, and birth dates. Recognized communities must reregister every three years, and religious activity is forbidden in prisons and the military.

Targeting Religious Holidays

Although the government continued to deny the existence of [COVID-19 in Turkmenistan](#), the country’s mosques have been largely closed as a “[prophylactic](#)” measure since 2020—a restriction that did not apply to public memorials for President Berdimuhamedow’s father in the month following his death on April 18, 2021. Large [public gatherings](#) in honor of Turkmenistan’s [national horse and national dog](#) also remained unaffected by the general moratorium on public assembly.

In stark contrast, Turkmenistani authorities appeared to [target Muslim religious holidays](#) deliberately in 2021. During the festival of Eid al-Fitr in May, mosques remained closed even though cafes,

restaurants, and parks were allowed to remain open. On May 13, worshipers who attempted to commemorate the holiday by praying outside the main mosque in the city of Mary were forcibly dispersed. On July 21, during the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, police in Lebap conducted [raids](#) on private homes in at least four cities, demanded that residents turn over all religious literature, and said that only possession of the Qur’an was permitted in Turkmenistan.

Jehovah’s Witnesses and Conscientious Objection

Although not technically banned, Jehovah’s Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally. Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a “sacred duty” incumbent on everyone. After 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against [conscientious objection](#), Turkmenistan imprisoned at least 25 Jehovah’s Witnesses under Article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. In early 2021, Turkmenistan continued this trend, again conscripting Ruslan Artykmuradov, a 20-year-old Jehovah’s Witness who previously served time in prison for his conscientious objection. In an unexpected development, on May 9, 2021, President Berdimuhamedow [pardoned](#) all 16 Jehovah’s Witnesses who remained imprisoned for their conscientious objection. Although mass presidential amnesties are a regular state ritual in Turkmenistan, they rarely include religious prisoners. It is notable that the pardons did not include any Muslim religious prisoners despite occurring during the month of Ramadan.

Despite the presidential pardon, conscientious objection remains illegal in Turkmenistan, and Jehovah’s Witnesses—or any believers who refuse military service for religious reasons—face legal jeopardy. Although the government did propose a non-combat alternative service option to Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2021, it was perceived as too closely affiliated with the military and rejected by community representatives.

Key U.S. Policy

The United States engages with the Turkmenistan government in border and regional security programs, along with educational and cultural exchanges. Turkmenistan enjoys most-favored-nation trading status and receives direct U.S. assistance to strengthen the security of its border with Afghanistan. On November 12, 2021, President Joseph R. Biden sent a [letter](#) to President Berdimuhamedow expressing gratitude for assistance and cooperation offered during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although the U.S. government is cognizant of the deplorable state of human rights in Turkmenistan, it has prioritized security concerns.

The U.S. Department of State has designated Turkmenistan as a CPC under IRFA since 2014 and [redesignated](#) it on November 15, 2021, but it 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 security concerns warrant its harsh repression of religious freedom.