

KEY FINDINGS

In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan remained relatively the same as last year as the government failed to introduce meaningful reform and continued to restrict religious activity. In January, new amendments to the country's expansive religion law came into force that did not include substantive reforms and preserved many provisions that systematically violate freedom of religion or belief. Throughout the year, the government continued to prohibit unregistered religious activity, require state approval for religious literature, and restrict missionary activity, among other undue limitations.

The government continued to suppress groups and individuals it perceived as following "nontraditional" religions, along with Sunni Muslims who do not subscribe to the state's interpretation of Islam. By the end of the year, at least 10 Muslim men were still imprisoned on charges related to their online religious activity, including discussing their beliefs and sharing religious content. Those in prison include five men sentenced due to their participation in a WhatsApp conversation on Islam in 2019, despite a 2021 United Nations (UN) Working Group opinion that called for their release. In March, an Atyrau court [found](#) Sarsen Netekov and Nurlan Atalykov guilty of belonging to the [Tablighi Jamaat movement](#), sentencing both men to a year of restricted freedom and blocking their bank accounts. In July, authorities imprisoned

[Anatoli Zernichenko](#) for posting excerpts from religious texts on his private Instagram page.

Kazakhstan also maintained an official ban on women and girls wearing a hijab in public schools in the face of continued calls by activists and parents to rescind the ban. In October, an Almaty school [barred](#) a Muslim schoolgirl who wears a hijab from attending class for a month, stating that religious garb did not comply with uniform regulations issued by the Ministry of Education. In addition, Ahmadiyya Muslims remained unregistered as a religious association due to official discrimination. As in years past, authorities issued over 140 administrative fines for religious offenses throughout 2022, primarily targeting Muslims.

Non-Muslim religious minorities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant Christians, also encountered restrictions on religious activities, including raids on unauthorized meetings, [negative publicity](#) from state-sponsored groups, and forced official apologies for missionary activities. In a positive development, the official Financial Monitoring Agency [removed](#) several Jehovah's Witness associations and members of the Church of Scientology from a secret list of "high-risk" entities that prevented them from accessing banking services for the past few years. It remains unclear how many other organizations and individuals may be included on this list, as Protestant churches have reportedly [experienced](#) similar issues.

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);
 - Continue to engage with the government of Kazakhstan to revise the 2011 religion law, as amended in 2021, and other relevant legislation to comply with international human rights standards, including repealing or amending registration requirements, ending all expert mandatory review of religious materials, and removing or reducing administrative fines for religious activities;
 - Provide training to law enforcement and local officials in line with international human rights standards through programs such as the Workshop on Inclusive Governance to protect religious freedom; and
 - Call for Kazakhstan to release all those imprisoned due to their religious activities or beliefs immediately, permit all incarcerated individuals to practice their religion, and investigate and cease all torture.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Advocate for religious freedom reform and other measures aimed at improving the human rights landscape in Kazakhstan through the Congressional U.S.-Kazakhstan Caucus.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Kazakhstan's Religion Law Amendments](#)
- **Podcast:** [Religious Prisoners of Conscience in Kazakhstan](#)
- **Special Report:** [Tolerance, Religious Freedom, and Authoritarianism](#)

Background

According to a 2021 census, Kazakhstan is [home](#) to more than 19 million people, with 69.3 percent of Kazakh citizens [identifying](#) as Muslim. Most Muslims in Kazakhstan are Sunni, although other sects of Islam—such as Shafi'i Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadiyya groups—are also represented. Christians [comprise](#) 17.2 percent of the population and are mostly Russian Orthodox. Other Christian denominations include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses, among others. Eleven percent of Kazakhs did not [indicate](#) any religious affiliation, and two percent of Kazakhs are atheist. Additional religious groups [represent](#) about 0.2 percent of the population and include Jews, Buddhists, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha'is, Scientologists, and others.

The state gives preferential treatment to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, [recognizing](#) the "historical role" of both in the country and placing them in the unofficial category of "traditional" religions. The government heavily regulates religious groups it considers "threatening," including Muslim groups, Evangelical Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses, in an ostensible effort to combat extremism.

Religion Law Amendments

In December 2021, Kazakhstan [passed](#) amendments to its 2011 law, On Religious Activities and Religious Associations, which came into force in early January. After soliciting recommendations to improve religious freedom in the context of meetings carried out through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Religious Freedom Working Group, Kazakhstan adopted amendments touted as liberalizing but that included little notable reform. While the amendments included switching from a permission-based system to a "notification-based" system for religious groups seeking to hold events outside their registered place of worship, it changed little in practice. Religious groups are still effectively required to seek permission from local authorities and provide in-depth details about the nature of their event.

Authorities have applied the "notification" amendment to the regularly scheduled meetings of groups that rent their religious facilities. Authorities mostly enforced the amendment for larger meetings and events, such as when police disrupted the annual commemoration of Jesus Christ's death, a widely observed occasion, in three Jehovah's Witness communities across Kostanay region. Yet, in Aqmola region, police also disrupted a typical, smaller meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses. In all cases, authorities stated that no one submitted the required notification for the event.

Targeting of Muslims

The state often targets Sunni Muslims who practice Islam independently from the state, particularly for the distribution of religious materials and online religious activities. Officials often use questionable or false claims of "extremism" or terrorism charges to detain, arrest, and imprison Muslims. In particular, Kazakhstan continued to target individuals [affiliated](#) with the Tablighi Jamaat movement and other Muslim groups on its list of prohibited foreign organizations deemed extremist. Released prisoners have faced continued punishments and endure long bans on religious, social, and financial activities. Of the 10 individuals known to be imprisoned on such

charges, all identify as Sunni Muslim. Despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's 2021 opinion that [called](#) for the release of eight individuals jailed in 2019 for participating in a WhatsApp discussion about Islam, five of the men remained imprisoned at the end of 2022. In February, the Kyzylorda Regional Court [rejected](#) a petition for early release submitted by one of those men, [Bolatbek Nurgaliyev](#), claiming he violated prison rules when he prayed in his free time.

In June, a local court [sentenced](#) Sunni Muslim [Anatoli Zernichenko](#) to seven years in prison on charges under Penal Code Article 256 for the "propaganda of terrorism or public calls to commit terrorism" after he posted religious content on social media. The court ordered that he pay a fine equivalent to six months' average local wages. The state relied on "expert" theological analysis to support the final verdict. In another case, reports [claimed](#) prison officials tortured religious prisoner [Dadash Mazhenov](#), beating him and allegedly breaking his jaw.

Attitude toward China's Ongoing Genocide

Kazakhstan continued to hold an at-times ambiguous position with respect to neighboring China's ongoing genocide of Uyghurs and other ethnic Turkic Muslims. In an October session of the UN Human Rights Council, Kazakhstan [voted against](#) a motion to discuss human rights abuses against Uyghurs and Muslims in Xinjiang. Notably, the police continued to [disrupt](#) individuals protesting the detention of Uyghur and ethnic Kazakh family members in China. In mid-September, just prior to a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kazakh authorities in Almaty region detained several protesters who regularly advocated for the Chinese government to release their relatives. Authorities charged those detained with violating the legal procedures for holding peaceful assemblies.

Key U.S. Policy

In 2022, while the United States and Kazakhstan collaborated on key issues regarding security, development, and human rights, engagement on religious freedom matters was less of a focus. The U.S. government continued to [provide](#) economic assistance through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to strengthen Kazakhstan's capacity for governance in key areas, including the legal enabling environment, the energy sector, and the health sector. In May, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Kazakhstan to meet with government officials and civil society and discuss President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's reform agenda, human rights, and women's empowerment. In response to the government of Kazakhstan's violent management of [protests in January](#) 2022, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [called](#) for an international investigation into the state-sponsored violence and a review of U.S. security assistance to the country in light of Kazakhstan's human rights abuses. In November, U.S. Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price [noted](#) that Kazakhstan's November presidential election lacked meaningful political competition; he also expressed U.S. government support for President Tokayev's proposed reforms, including protection of human rights. In December, both sides [came together](#) for the U.S.-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue, where officials discussed human rights conditions in Kazakhstan. Public reporting did not indicate whether representatives discussed religious freedom issues.