



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

### USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

July 2023

## TAJIKISTAN: POLICY OPTIONS FOR A COUNTRY OF PARTICULAR CONCERN

Abraham Cooper  
*Chair*

Frederick A. Davie  
*Vice Chair*

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David Curry  
Susie Gelman  
Mohamed Magid  
Stephen Schneck  
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Eric Ueland  
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Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

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

On July 20, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a virtual hearing on [\*Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern\*](#). Led by USCIRF's Chair Abraham Cooper, the hearing brought together several witnesses to discuss religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan and share relevant policy recommendations for the U.S. government.

Chair [\*Abraham Cooper\*](#) opened the hearing by noting the significant need for reform in Tajikistan and commanding the government for permitting the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Nazila Ghanea to conduct an official visit to the country. He continued to discuss religious freedom concerns in Tajikistan, such as overly restrictive laws that target all religious groups and particularly impact the Sunni Muslim majority, prohibitions on youth and women attending public religious services, registration requirements for religious organizations, and limits on religious education.

Vice Chair [\*Frederick Davie\*](#) then outlined religious persecution aimed at the country's Ismaili Shi'a Muslim population, which is largely located in the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO). In the process of targeting protesters and conducting large-scale military operations in the region, the government has also closed religious schools, community centers, and religious bookstores associated with the Ismailis and their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan.

[\*Nazila Ghanea\*](#), UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, shared findings from her recent trip to Tajikistan. Ghanea noted that the space for religious freedom in Tajikistan is small and that the government often cites national security as the reason for restricting religious practices in the country. She discussed the types of restrictions on religious freedom that exist in Tajikistan such as the ban on women and children from entering mosques or participating in religious activities outside of funerals. Additionally, she noted that Tajikistan refuses to recognize conscientious objection and does not provide alternative civilian service options. Authorities also continue to closely surveil and target persons in GBAO, especially following the recent unrest in the region.

[\*Bakhtiyor Safarov\*](#), Founder of Central Asia Consulting and a human rights defender, testified that the government continues to blame Muslims—specifically the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)—for the civil war of 1992, portray religious leaders as morally corrupt, stigmatize religious practices, interfere in religious affairs, and forcibly assimilate Pamiri Shi'a Muslims.



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*Edward Lemon*, President of the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs and Research Assistant Professor at Texas A&M, raised the issue of transnational repression and stated that Tajikistan is one of the most prolific users of transnational repression in the world. He added that the number of people who are targeted abroad increases when there are crackdowns at home, such as those that followed the 2015 banning of the IRPT and the widespread protests in GBAO in late 2021.

*Felix Corley*, Editor of Forum 18 News Service, highlighted additional restrictions on religious freedom in Tajikistan. An April 2023 presidential decree denied the families of those killed in alleged anti-terrorism operations the possibility of burying their dead with the religious rites they would have chosen or even knowing where they are buried. In August 2022, non-Muslim religious communities were ordered to reveal full details of all employees and their families. Observers fear that this information will be used in the future to identify and target members of religious minority communities. Tajikistan also regularly jails Muslims and others on fabricated “extremism” charges.

Vice Chair Davie concluded the hearing by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.

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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.