



# TURKMENISTAN

## Key Findings

In a climate of pervasive government information control, particularly severe religious freedom violations persist in Turkmenistan. Police raids and harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continued. The country's laws, policies, and practices violate international human rights norms, including those on freedom of religion or belief, and new administrative code provisions increased the penalties for most "illegal" religious activities. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service, and at least one Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector is known to be detained. In light of these severe violations, USCIRF recommends in 2015 that the U.S. government again designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In July 2014, the State Department designated Turkmenistan a CPC for the first time. USCIRF has recommended CPC designation for Turkmenistan since 2000.

## Background

Turkmenistan has an estimated total population of 5.1 million. Official Turkmen data on religious affiliation are not available; the U.S. government estimates that the country is about 85 percent Sunni Muslim, nine percent Russian Orthodox, and a two percent total that includes

number of ethnic Turkmen. The small number of Shi'a Muslims is mostly ethnic Iranians, Azeris, or Kurds on the Iranian border or on the Caspian Sea. The Jewish community consists of approximately 400 Jews.

Turkmenistan is the most closed country in the former Soviet Union. The country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006, oversaw one of the world's most repressive and isolated states. Turkmenistan's public life was dominated by Niyazov's quasi-religious personality cult set out in his book, the *Ruhnama*, which was imposed on the country's religious and educational systems. After assuming the presidency in early 2007, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov ordered the release of 11 political prisoners, including the former chief mufti; placed certain limits on Niyazov's personality cult; set up two new official human rights commissions; and registered 13 minority religious groups. He eased police controls on internal travel and allowed Turkmenistan to become slightly more open to the outside world.

Since that early period, President Berdimuhamedov has not reformed the country's oppressive laws, maintains a state structure of repressive control, and has reinstated a pervasive presidential personality cult. Turkmenistan's constitution purports to guarantee religious freedom, the separation of religion from the state, and equality regardless of religion or belief.

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Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and evangelical Christians. While most Russians and Armenians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church, a significant number attend unregistered religious meetings as do an increasing

The 2003 religion law, however, contradicts these provisions. Despite minor reforms in 2007, this law sets intrusive registration criteria and bans any activity by unregistered religious organizations; requires that the government be informed of all foreign financial

support; forbids worship in private homes; allows only clerics to wear religious garb in public; and places severe and discriminatory restrictions on religious education. The government-appointed Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) supervises religious matters; it controls the hiring, promoting, and firing of Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy; censors religious texts; and oversees the activities of all registered groups. CRA members include only government officials and Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox Church representatives. A new demonstrations law enacted in March 2015 potentially allows for limited public rallies, including by registered religious organizations. Rallies must be at least 200 meters from government buildings and cannot be funded by individuals or foreign governments, RFE/RL reported.

A new Internet law was published in December 2014; it is now illegal for citizens to insult or slander Turkmenistan's president in web postings, RFE/RL reported. While the law states there are plans to ensure free access to the worldwide web for Turkmen Internet users, in 2015 the Turkmen government reportedly has engaged in a campaign to dismantle private satellite cables.

In 2014 and early 2015, Turkmen border guards reportedly were killed by the Taliban on the Turkmen-Afghan border. This region of Afghanistan also reportedly includes some Turkmen who allegedly are Islamic State sympathizers, giving rise to concern about possible religious radicalism spreading across the border into Turkmenistan.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions 2014–2015 Punishments for Religious and Human Rights Activities**

In January 2014, new administrative code provisions increased the penalties for most "illegal" religious activi-

ties, for religious and human rights activities. In recent years, Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses were detained, fined, imprisoned or internally exiled for their religious beliefs or activities. Most religious prisoners of conscience are held at Seydi Labor Camp in the Lebap Region desert, where they face harsh conditions, including torture. The government of Turkmenistan denies the International Committee of the Red Cross access to the country's prisons.

An unknown number of Muslim prisoners of conscience remain jailed. In February 2015, five prisoners convicted of "Wahhabism" were sent to Seydi Labor Camp, where reportedly prison guards brutally beat them. The NGO Forum 18 News Service could not determine if the five men were jailed for non-violent religious practice or for crimes, since in Central Asia the term "Wahhabi" is commonly used to describe any devout Muslim. In December 2014, a group of about 10 Muslim religious prisoners were transferred from that labor camp to the high-security prison in Ovadan-Depe. Reports have faded of a dissident imam who spent years in a psychiatric hospital; this news drought also applies to dozens of other political and religious prisoners, according to the NGO coalition known as "Prove they are Alive."

On a positive note, in October 2014 two known religious prisoners of conscience were released under presidential amnesty from a labor camp in eastern Turkmenistan, Forum 18 reported. In February 2015, Protestant Umid Gojayev, imprisoned at Seydi Labor Camp for "hooliganism," also was freed under amnesty.

### **Government Control over Religious Activities**

The secret police, anti-terrorist police units, local government, and local CRA officials continued to raid registered and unregistered religious communities. It is illegal for unregistered groups to rent, purchase, or

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for religious and human rights activities.*

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ties. The government continues to impose harsh penalties, such as imprisonment, forced drug treatment, and

construct places of worship, and even registered groups must obtain scarce government permits. A decree

banned publication of religious texts inside Turkmenistan and only registered groups can legally import such texts. In September 2014 in Dashoguz, Jehovah's Witness Bibi Rahmanova was detained for a month and physically abused for distributing religious texts; she received a four-year suspended sentence on trumped-up charges of assaulting a police officer, according to Forum 18. Forum 18 also reported that a Protestant outside Ashgabat was fined in September 2014 after a relative was

Ruslan Narkuliyev was released, Forum 18 reported.

### Registration of Religious Groups

Since 2005, some small religious groups have been registered, such as the Baha'i, several Pentecostal groups, Seventh-Day Adventists, several Evangelical churches, and the Society for Krishna Consciousness. In 2010, Turkmenistan told the UN Human Rights Committee there were 123 registered religious groups,

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found to have electronic versions of religious texts. The religion law also bans private religious education.

The government continues to deny international travel for many citizens, especially those travelling to religious events. For the approximately 110,000 mainly Russian Orthodox who have dual Russian-Turkmen citizenship, it is easier to meet with their coreligionists abroad and for clerical training. Muslims, however, are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education, and the government also restricts *hajj* participation. In 2014, it requested a quota of 650 Turkmen Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, according to Forum 18. While this number was an increase over the usual 188, it is still less than a seventh of the country's quota. Muslims often must wait up to 11 years to reach the top of the *hajj* waiting list.

### Conscientious Objectors

Turkmen law has no civilian alternative to military service for conscientious objectors. Reportedly such a bill was drafted in 2013 but not enacted. Those who refuse to serve in the military can face up to two years of jail. Until 2009 the Turkmen government had given suspended sentences, but since then conscientious objectors have been imprisoned. Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Soyunmurat Korov is being involuntarily held in an Ashgabat military hospital. On a positive note, in October 2014, six imprisoned conscientious objectors were amnestied and released by presidential order, and in February 2015, Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector

100 of which are Sunni and Shi'a Muslim and 13 Russian Orthodox. Some groups have decided not to register due to the onerous and opaque process, while certain Shi'a Muslim groups, the Armenian Apostolic Church, some Protestant groups, and the Jehovah's Witnesses have faced rejection of numerous registration applications.

### Government Interference in Internal Religious Affairs

The Turkmen government interferes in the internal leadership and organizational arrangements of religious communities. In early 2013, the President named a new Grand Mufti. The government also has replaced imams who had formal Islamic theological training from abroad with individuals lacking such education, as it is official policy not to name imams if they have had foreign theological training. Local secret police officers reportedly require Muslim and Orthodox clerics to report regularly on activities.

### U.S. Policy

For the past decade, U.S. policy in Central Asia was dominated by the Afghan war. The United States has key security and economic interests in Turkmenistan due to its proximity to and shared populations with Afghanistan and Iran, and its huge natural gas supplies. Although officially neutral and in the Northern Distribution Network for the delivery of supplies to U.S. troops and International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan,

the country has allowed U.S. flights with non-lethal supplies to refuel at the Ashgabat International Airport.

The United States is training Turkmenistan's fledgling navy, and holding exchange programs on English language and naval administration. During counterterrorism operations, U.S. Special Operations Forces reportedly have been allowed to enter Turkmenistan on a "case-by-case" basis, with the Turkmen government's permission. The U.S. government also has encouraged a joint Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India project, known as "TAPI," to construct a major gas pipeline, scheduled to begin in 2015. This project could help stabilize the Turkmen gas export market and create economic and political bonds with energy-poor South Asian markets.

Initiated five years ago by the State Department, the Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABC's) are a regular mechanism for the United States and Turkmenistan to discuss a wide range of bilateral issues, including regional security, economic and trade relations; social and cultural ties; and human rights. As part of the ABC process, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Nisha Desai Biswal led an interagency delegation to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in January 2014 for the third U.S.-Turkmen ABC. While in Ashgabat, Assistant Secretary Biswal met with senior Turkmenistan officials, but it is not in the public record if she also met with representatives of civil society or religious groups. Religious freedom concerns traditionally have been raised in these forums.

The United States funds programs in Turkmenistan that support: civil society organizations; training on legal assistance; Internet access and computer training; capacity building for civil servants, as well as exchange programs. In recent years, however, the Turkmen government has barred many students from participating in U.S.-funded exchange programs and in 2013 it ordered the Peace Corps to stop its 20-year-operations in the country. The U.S. government continues to support three American Corners that provide free educational materials and English language opportunities in Dashoguz, Mary, and Turkmenabat. The American Corners Program is a worldwide Department of State-sponsored initiative that was started over 10 years ago.

The State Department announced the designation of Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern" in late July 2014 when it released its annual report on inter-

national religious freedom. The State Department cited "concerns about the detention and imprisonment of religious minorities, the rights of religious groups to register, the lack of public access to registration procedures, and restrictions on importing religious literature." In September 2014, a waiver of a Presidential action was tied to the designation.

## Recommendations

The recent CPC designation positions the U.S. government to negotiate commitments to improve religious freedom, while establishing a pathway to eventually de-list Turkmenistan based on concrete reforms. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate Turkmenistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Negotiate a binding agreement with the government of Turkmenistan under section 405(c) of IRFA to achieve specific and meaningful reforms, with benchmarks that include major legal reform, an end to police raids, prisoner releases, and greater access to foreign coreligionists; should an agreement not be reached, the waiver of Presidential actions should be lifted;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains active contacts with human rights activists and press the Turkmen government to ensure that every prisoner has greater access to his or her family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and a lawyer;
- Raise concerns about Turkmenistan's record on religious freedom and related human rights in bilateral meetings, such as the ABCs, as well as appropriate international fora, including the UN and OSCE; encourage the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) to enhance the human rights aspect of its work;
- Urge the Turkmen government to agree to another visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as visits from the Rapporteurs on Independence of the Judiciary and on Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for their visits;
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to increase radio broadcasts and Internet programs

to Turkmenistan on religious freedom, including the informative new Islam and Democracy website, as well as information on human rights and basic education, to help overcome decades of isolation;

- Continue to press for resumption of the U.S. Peace Corps program; and
- Use funding allocated to the State Department under the Title VIII Program (established in the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983) for research, including on human rights and religious freedom in former Soviet states, and language training.