

# AFGHANISTAN

## USCIRF–RECOMMENDED FOR COUNTRIES OF PARTICULAR CONCERN (CPC)

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate under Taliban rule. De facto Taliban authorities continued to enforce a strict interpretation of Shari'a, violating freedom of religion or belief for all Afghans holding a different interpretation of Islam and for members of religious minority groups. The Taliban expanded and enforced [dozens](#) of edicts and decrees based on their religious interpretation to restrict Afghans' movement, dress, employment, and education, disproportionately impacting religious minorities as well as women and girls.

Under the Taliban, the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) harshly enforced this interpretation of Shari'a. Throughout the year, Taliban officials conducted [hundreds](#) of public floggings and detentions across the country after finding individuals guilty of offenses deemed illicit or immoral, without due process. They detained a number of journalists, women's rights activists, and religious minorities. In October 2023, Taliban authorities [released](#) French-Afghan journalist Mortaza Behboudi after 284 days in jail. Behboudi, who is Hazara Shi'a, was held on charges of espionage. The same month, after detaining him for seven months, the Taliban [released](#) Matiullah Wesa, an outspoken advocate for the education of Afghan girls. Prior to his arrest, Wesa had repeatedly called on the Taliban to reverse its decree barring girls from pursuing education beyond sixth grade. In December, the Taliban [announced](#) that it would allow girls of all ages to attend Islamic schools (*madrassas*), 13,500 of which are government controlled and employ teachers approved by the Taliban's Ministry of Education.

The Taliban continued to enforce [restrictions](#) on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the country. In addition to prohibiting employment of Afghan women, the Taliban in September [detained](#) 18 NGO workers, accusing them of promoting Christianity. Under Taliban rule, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians face severe restrictions, including on their dress and [appearance](#), and

have been prohibited from celebrating their religious holidays publicly. In March, the Taliban's Religious Affairs Ministry [directed](#) imams throughout the country to instruct Afghans to refrain from celebrating [Nowruz](#), [claiming](#) the holiday is against Shari'a.

Shi'a Muslims also continued to face harassment, violence, and interference with their right to worship. In February 2023, a governor in Badakhshan issued a letter [prohibiting](#) marriages between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The Taliban additionally banned the teaching of the Shi'a Jafari school of jurisprudence, forcing private universities to [remove](#) all religious books that do not conform to the Sunni Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The Taliban declared April 21 as Eid al-Fitr and instructed police to force Shi'a Muslims to break their fast at vehicle checkpoints. In July, citing security concerns, Afghanistan's Council of Shi'a Scholars published a [declaration](#) advising mourners to limit their activities marking Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. The declaration called on mourners to refrain from street processions during Ashura, where Shi'a Muslims commemorate the death of Imam Hussain. The same month, Taliban members prevented Shi'a residents from publicly celebrating Eid al-Adha. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), several Shi'a clerics were [killed](#) in targeted attacks throughout October, November, and December.

Increased [attacks](#) by terrorist groups, including the Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), continued to threaten Afghanistan's religious minorities and the country's overall stability. While ISIS-K attacks throughout the year focused primarily on Taliban members, terrorists also targeted Afghanistan's Shi'a communities, including Hazaras. In October, an [attack](#) on the largest Shi'a mosque in Baghlan resulted in the death of [17](#) worshipers. In November, an [explosion](#) in a Shi'a Hazara majority neighborhood near Kabul killed seven people; ISIS later claimed responsibility for the attack.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Designate Afghanistan under the de facto rule of the Taliban 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);
- Expand the existing Priority 2 (P-2) designation granting U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) access for certain Afghan nationals and their family members to explicitly include Afghan

religious minorities at extreme risk of religious persecution;

- Integrate protections for freedom of religion or belief into all potential dialogue with the Taliban, continue to clearly and publicly condemn ongoing and severe atrocities committed by the Taliban and ISIS-K, and emphasize to Taliban leadership the close relationship between religious freedom and overall security; and
- Impose targeted sanctions on Taliban 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 coordinate with allies to impose similar sanctions.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Create by law a P-2 designation for members of religious groups at extreme risk of persecution by the Taliban.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Issue Update:** [Religious Freedom and Women's Rights in Afghanistan](#)

## Background

In August 2021, the Taliban returned to power after two decades. Despite attempts to project a more moderate stance, it has imposed a strict interpretation of Islamic law that purposefully undermines the human rights of women and religious and ethnic minorities, including their right to religious freedom. The country's population is [estimated](#) at 39.2 million and is composed of a wide range of ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and Balochs. The country is 99.7 percent Muslim (84.7–89.7 percent Sunni and 10–15 percent Shi'a) and less than 0.3 percent other religions. Many religious minorities fled Afghanistan following the Taliban's 2021 takeover, but small communities of Christians, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs remain. An [estimated](#) 50 Hindus were in Afghanistan in 2021, while eight Sikhs and fewer than 10,000 Christians remained in 2023, despite the Taliban's previous [claim](#) that no Christians are present in the country. The Taliban considers Afghans who convert from Islam to Christianity as "[apostates](#)" and as such subject to the death penalty.

The Taliban has rejected Afghanistan's 2004 constitution, viewing it as "insufficiently" Islamic and failing to recognize God's commands as the basis for law and policy. While the Taliban has not introduced a formal written constitution for Afghanistan, reports indicate the drafting process is "ongoing." In the absence of a constitution, the Taliban has professed that its interpretation of Shari'a and the Qur'an are the basis for law in the country.

In July 2023, a new law [dissolved](#) the Office of the State Secretary General and put in its [place](#) the Directorate General of Supervision and Pursuit of Decrees, which is responsible for monitoring the implementation of edicts in both public and private institutions. The new law also granted the Taliban's Supreme Leader total authority to oversee the "correct" implementation of laws, rules, and decrees. In September, Taliban officials announced their establishment of *ulema shuras* (councils) throughout all 34 provinces, none of which included representation from Shi'a Muslims or women.

## Restrictions on Women

In 2023, the Taliban established, expanded, and implemented a series of edicts and [decrees](#) to further restrict the rights of Afghan women and girls in society, including their dress, movement, access to education, and employment. In April, the Taliban [prevented](#) Afghan women from reporting to work at the United Nations (UN), expanding its 2022 decrees forbidding women from working in offices or for NGOs. In March, [UN experts](#) released a statement calling for schools to reopen for girls across Afghanistan and for the lifting of restrictions on female educators, stating that the Taliban has "no justification to deny the right to education, on any grounds, including religion or tradition." Secondary schools for girls remained closed. However, in August, the Taliban [barred](#) 100

Afghan girls from leaving for the United Arab Emirates to complete their university education. In October, the Kandahar religious police mandated to women's *madrassas* that the only acceptable form of hijab is the burqa.

These edicts have had severe impacts on women in Afghanistan. In March 2023, the Taliban [announced](#) that under its interpretation of Shari'a, women's divorces were invalid. This decree, coupled with the elimination of domestic violence shelters throughout the country, leaves Afghan women susceptible to abusive or harmful marriages. In December, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported that the Taliban [detains](#) women to "protect" them from gender-based discrimination. The Taliban also arbitrarily detained women throughout the year for participating in peaceful protests against its restrictive policies, such as the [education ban](#) and the closure of [beauty salons](#). The absence of women's participation in the workforce and in education has had direct consequences in the distribution of humanitarian aid and increased the risk of poverty and [child marriage](#).

## Key U.S. Policy

In 2023, key issues for U.S. policymakers included refugee resettlement and the relocation of Afghans who worked for the U.S. government, NGOs, or media outlets. U.S. policy also focused on addressing protection of women's rights. In March 2023, the U.S. Department of State's special representative for Afghanistan joined a multilateral [statement](#) with relevant special envoys condemning the Taliban's human rights violations, including against religious minorities. The statement expressed concern and called for the immediate reversal of the restrictive bans on education and employment for women.

While the United States does not recognize the de facto Taliban authorities as the official government of Afghanistan, several U.S. delegations have participated in conversations with Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar. In April, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan met with Afghan civil society and political leaders, journalists, and human rights activists to discuss current challenges in the country. The same month, U.S. officials [participated](#) in a UN-organized meeting in Doha focused on potential ways to engage with the Taliban on key human rights issues, including women's and girls' rights, minority rights, and inclusive governance. In December, the U.S. mission to the UN voted in [favor](#) of a Security Council resolution calling for the creation of a UN special envoy for Afghanistan to increase engagement with Taliban officials. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$812 million for programs in Afghanistan.

In December, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [issued](#) targeted sanctions against Taliban officials Fariduddin Mahmood and Khalid Hanafi for repressing the rights of Afghan women and girls. On December 29, 2023, the State Department [redesignated](#) the Taliban as an entity of particular concern (EPC) for particularly severe religious freedom violations.