

KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan did not improve as the government continued to enforce a religion law that restricted the activities of all religious groups and penalized individuals from groups considered “nontraditional.”

In May, a USCIRF delegation visited Kazakhstan to assess the religious freedom situation and meet with government officials, religious communities, human rights defenders, and other members of civil society. The visit confirmed that the Kazakh government continued to violate Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as Kazakhs tried to exercise their faith. For example, authorities continued to penalize unauthorized but peaceful religious activities—such as leading prayers, maintaining prayer rooms, and distributing religious materials—through prison sentences, fines, and the imposition of exit bans. As in years past, Muslims faced restrictions on practices such as studying religion abroad or wearing religious clothing in schools. Government surveillance and intimidation of all religious groups created fear of arbitrary punishment for religious activity and led some unregistered groups not to seek official registration, as mandated by law, for concern of further unwanted government attention. In addition, members of the media reported they felt pressured to self-censor their journalism related to religious freedom issues.

At least seven religious prisoners of conscience, all of whom are Muslim, remained imprisoned in Kazakhstan under unjust sentences for their peaceful, online religious activity. In 2023, three men imprisoned for their participation in a WhatsApp group on Islam, [Nazim Abdрахmanov](#), [Bolatbek Nurgaliyev](#), and [Samat Adilov](#), were released. However, this development came almost two years after the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called for their release in September 2021. Two men from that group remained in prison at the end of 2023.

In May 2023, a district conscription office forcibly recruited Jehovah’s Witness [Daniil Smal](#) despite his conscientious objection

on religious grounds. In August, Smal filed an administrative claim to the Military Court of the Almaty Garrison. After Smal spent months in detention, the court ruled that his conscription was illegal and released him.

The government also penalized religious activities in retaliation for public activism. As reported in May 2023, authorities [interfered](#) in the construction of a mosque after one of the key planners of the construction, Zhandos Saduakasov, advocated for free and fair elections.

Authorities continued to restrict the activities of Kazakh activists who oppose the genocide of Uyghurs and other ethnic Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, China. In December 2023, Kazakh police [prevented](#) those protesting the detainment of their relatives in Xinjiang from approaching the Chinese consulate in Almaty. Ethnic Kazakhs who fled oppression in China faced intimidation campaigns by alleged Chinese Communist Party (CCP) security forces in Kazakhstan, which at times included physical assault. Many of these individuals still [live](#) in legal limbo with refugee status, as the Kazakh government refused requests for citizenship or travel to a third country. Moreover, the government enforced an informal rule that prohibited Uyghur imams and others from leading prayers or giving sermons in Uyghur and languages other than Kazakh.

In response to an October 2023 parliamentary inquiry “on the issue of religion,” then Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov [raised](#) potential reforms to the set of legislation regulating religion. Such reforms included restrictions on religious head coverings in public, further regulation of the distribution of religious materials, and the introduction of additional legal concepts that could have broad, negative repercussions, such as “destructive religious movements” and “religious radicals.” By early 2024, these provisions, among other restrictive measures, were [included](#) in fully formulated draft amendments to the religion law that were to be considered in parliament.

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);
 - Engage with the government of Kazakhstan to further 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; 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:
- Condition granting Normal Trade Relations (NTR) status to Kazakhstan related to any decision to repeal Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (also known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment) on meaningful improvement to freedom of religion or belief, including removing exit bans on individuals penalized for their peaceful religious activities.

KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- Commission Delegation Visit: [Astana and Almaty in May 2023](#)
- Issue Update: [Prosecuting Online Religious Activity in Kazakhstan](#)
- Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List: [Kazakhstan](#)

Background

According to a 2021 census, more than 69 percent of Kazakhs [adhere](#) to Islam, with most identifying as Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Smaller Muslim groups in Kazakhstan [include](#) Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadiyya Muslims. Seventeen percent of the population identify as Christian, most of whom are Russian Orthodox but who also include Catholics, Protestants, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious groups in Kazakhstan include Jews, Baha'is, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Buddhists, and Scientologists. There is also a small percentage of individuals who prefer not to share their religious affiliation or who identify as atheist.

While the constitution characterizes Kazakhstan as a secular state, it also recognizes certain religions—such as Hanafi Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodox Christianity—as traditional to Kazakhstan. The government considers other religious groups and those who subscribe to a different interpretation of “traditional” religions, particularly Islam, to be nontraditional. Authorities are more likely to target members of these groups related to their religious activity.

Administrative Fines

In 2023, authorities increasingly fined people for their peaceful religious activities. During the year, there were over 160 cases of administrative fines for such activities, [compared](#) to about 140 cases in 2022.

According to the 2011 religion law, only registered religious associations may request to hold religious activities outside of their registered place of worship. Individuals and groups that have attempted to engage in unregistered religious activities, like maintaining an unregistered prayer room, have faced fines. For example, in February, the Kordai District Court [fined](#) the owner of a café 50 monthly financial indicators (MFIs)—equivalent to an average monthly wage of \$380 (172,500 tenge)—for operating an unauthorized prayer room. In a case in March, the Shymkent City Court fined the owner of an unregistered prayer hall 50 MFIs. During the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, the Shymkent City Court fined another individual 50 MFIs for leading Tarawih prayers at a deregistered mosque.

Individuals were also penalized for attempting to import and distribute religious literature without state authorization. At the Shymkent airport in February, officials [fined](#) an individual for attempting to travel with 24 religious books. At the Turkestan airport in March, officials [fined](#) a traveler for attempting to import 77 religious books. Also, in the city of Shymkent, officials fined a woman in October for selling religious literature in a gift shop. In July, officials [fined](#) a Jehovah's Witness for distributing religious materials at a café in eastern Kazakhstan.

Restrictions on Religious Clothing

A 2014 Ministry of Education decree bars students from wearing religious clothing to school, an order that the state has continued to

enforce at most schools, both public and private. Prior to the first day of school, many parents expressed concern about whether schools would permit their daughters to wear a hijab to class. There were reports that school directors were initially pressured to enforce the hijab ban under threat of termination. As a result, some students were reportedly [expelled](#) from school, and Ministry of Education officials threatened to punish parents who allowed their children to attend school with a hijab. Government officials from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture and Information have [maintained](#) that schools should prohibit religious clothing on their premises. At the same time, the government has generally downplayed the scope of the issue, despite [reports](#) from human rights activists that over 13,000 girls in Kazakhstan would like to wear a hijab to school. The debate has led some government officials and politicians to call for the government to strengthen the religion law to better address the threat of rising “extremism,” a phenomenon they partly correlate with the increasing number of young people wearing religious clothing.

Key U.S. Policy

U.S. and Kazakh officials continued to prioritize security, trade, and good governance in bilateral relations. In fiscal year 2023, the U.S. government [obligated](#) \$20 million for programs in Kazakhstan. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [visited](#) Astana to meet with senior Kazakh officials and to participate in the C5+1 Ministerial with officials from each Central Asian state to strengthen bilateral relationships and reaffirm U.S. security support to the region. In September, President Joseph R. Biden met with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and other Central Asian leaders under the auspices of the C5+1 Presidential Summit to discuss security and economic matters. Following the summit, all participants [signed](#) the C5+1 Joint Leaders' Statement, which included, among other things, an affirmation of their commitment to human rights. In November, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu [traveled](#) to Astana for the fifth annual U.S.-Kazakhstan Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue (ESPD). During the ESPD, U.S. officials reaffirmed support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty and discussed shared priorities that included human rights and U.S. support for the implementation of President Tokayev's reform plans.

In May, Representative Jimmy Panetta (D-CA) introduced [H.R. 3611](#), which would authorize permanent NTR status with Kazakhstan through the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the 1974 Trade Act. The Jackson-Vanik amendment [restricted](#) free trade between the United States and the Soviet Union (and afterward its successor states) due to the latter's restriction on the free emigration of Jews. The president has repeatedly certified Kazakhstan as compliant with the Trade Act's freedom of emigration requirements and granted conditional NTR status on a biannual basis after submitting the required reports to Congress.