

### KEY FINDINGS

In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained dire as the government continued to restrict and penalize the religious activity of its citizens, including those living abroad. Under the law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), the government prohibits unregistered religious activity, limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, and maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, among other actions. As in years prior, the Tajik government retaliated against persons who violated the religion law, punishing them with imprisonment, torture, fines, and harassment. While this repression impacted all religious groups, authorities particularly targeted Muslims. Notably, the government increasingly directed such actions against Ismaili Shi'a Muslims during the year.

In line with the “extremism law,” the government maintained a list of arbitrarily defined “extremist” organizations, which included peaceful religious and political organizations. The government banned Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2007, and in August the Supreme Court rejected an appeal to reverse that ban. Officials also harassed Jehovah’s Witnesses for their religious activities. For example, authorities interrogated Jehovah’s Witnesses in Sughd region and Dushanbe about fellow Jehovah’s Witnesses. In June, two women were detained overnight and fined \$311 (3,400 somonis) on charges of “inciting religious hatred” for sharing their religious beliefs. In May, Jehovah’s Witness [Shamil Khakimov](#) completed his sentence and was released. Khakimov was wrongfully imprisoned in 2019 for his peaceful

religious activities and suffered medical neglect throughout his time in prison.

The government routinely accused individuals of “extremism” for dissenting against or criticizing Tajik President Emomali Rahmon’s administration, and it similarly banned the activities of groups such as the religiously based Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) as “extremist.” As part of its efforts to suppress these groups, the government engaged in transnational repression to forcibly return their members living abroad to Tajikistan, in part by submitting fraudulent “Red Notices” to the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). In January 2023, the German government [deported](#) Abdullo Shamsiddin, the son of an IRPT founder, to Tajikistan where he received a seven-year prison sentence on sedition charges for reportedly liking a social media post. Also in January, the Tajik government requested that Belarusian authorities [deport](#) former Group-24 member Nizomiddin Nasriddinov partly due to his alleged online engagement with IRPT content. A court later [sentenced](#) him to eight and a half years in prison on charges of attempting to forcibly change Tajikistan’s constitutional order. In August, 63-year-old Jaloliddin Makhmudov [died](#) while serving a prison sentence in Tajikistan for his affiliation with the IRPT.

Authorities reportedly closed down or destroyed the mosques of communities that did not provide enough enlisted men for the military. In Isfara city, authorities [closed](#) a mosque during Ramadan to coerce military conscriptions. In October, authorities [destroyed](#) a mosque in Vahdat city, reportedly because not enough men volunteered for the military.

### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Redesignate Tajikistan 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), and lift the waiver releasing the administration from taking otherwise legislatively mandated action as a result of the designation;
  - Condition U.S. security assistance to the Tajik government on 1) reform of the 2009 religion law improving conditions for freedom of religion or belief, and 2) mandated religious freedom training for Tajik officials, including education about the benefits of religious freedom for countering and preventing violent extremism;
  - Impose targeted sanctions on Tajik government agencies and 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
  - Press the Tajik government at the highest levels to account for the whereabouts of all prisoners of conscience; immediately release individuals imprisoned in Tajikistan for their peaceful religious activities or religious affiliations; and allow international observers to monitor conditions in Tajik prisons.
- The U.S. Congress should:
- Raise Tajikistan’s transnational repression with counterparts in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and press member states to take measures to ensure that individuals seeking asylum due to religious persecution and facing unfounded accusations of extremism are not subject to deportation.

### KEY USCIRF RESOURCES & ACTIVITIES

- **Country Update:** [The Repression of Religious Freedom in Authoritarian Tajikistan](#)
- **Hearing:** [Religious Freedom in Tajikistan: Policy Options for a Country of Particular Concern](#)
- **Press Release:** [USCIRF Welcomes Tajikistan’s Release of Shamil Khakimov and Calls for U.S. Policy Action](#)
- **Op-Ed:** [Will Tajikistan Meaningfully Engage on Religious Freedom?](#)
- **Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List:** [Tajikistan](#)

## Background

Around 90 percent of Tajikistan's population is Muslim, with the majority [adhering](#) to Hanafi Sunni Islam. Around four percent are ethnically Pamiri, adhere to Ismaili Shi'a Islam, and reside in Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region (commonly known as GBAO). The remainder of the population includes Christian denominations, such as Russian Orthodox, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious communities include Jews, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians.

In 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, [Nazila Ghanea](#), and on minority issues, [Fernand de Varennes](#), separately visited Tajikistan and noted several religious freedom violations impacting all religious groups, including specific targeting of Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, a stringent registration process for all religious organizations, and bans on women from attending mosque and all those under 18 from engaging in religious activity.

## State Targeting of Sunni Muslims

The Tajik government continued to target individuals who deviated from the state's preferred interpretation of Islam. Authorities often justified the penalization of peaceful religious activities as a means to prevent "extremism," a broadly defined term arbitrarily used to repress those that the government views as threatening to its authority.

In 2023, authorities accused independent Muslims of adhering to Salafism, which the government has banned as an "extremist" movement and [characterized](#) as a "direct threat to society." In March, authorities [sentenced](#) imam [Mukhammad Mukhammarov](#) to eight years in prison on extremism charges for allegedly teaching Islam to a group of 12 Muslims, but also likely due to his affiliation with the "Salafi movement." His students were similarly sentenced to up to 10 years in prison. In April, a Khatlon region court [sentenced](#) imam Abdullahannon Usmonov to six years in prison on charges of participating in a banned extremist organization and obstructing his daughter's education. Authorities initially arrested Usmonov for disrupting a wedding, but the prosecutor's office later [found](#) that Usmonov watched and distributed "extremist" "Salafi movement" materials online. USCIRF's [Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#) includes other Muslims who remained in prison in Tajikistan on falsified extremism charges for their peaceful religious activities.

The government continued to retain the right to approve the appointment of imams and targeted unsanctioned imams. In October, the Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) warned that an unauthorized imam in Hisar city provided funeral services instead of the state-appointed imam and announced an investigation into whether this individual "degraded the dignity of the dead body." In November, the CRA announced it was investigating an individual who reportedly addressed a mosque congregation in the absence of the state-appointed imam.

In early 2023, Islamic bookstores in Dushanbe reopened after authorities had forcibly closed them in late 2022 for printing and/or

importing religious materials without state approval. However, the reopened bookstores allegedly are no longer [permitted](#) to sell the same Islamic books.

Tajik officials also continued to monitor and penalize religious activity through use of the "traditions law," which prohibits "excessive" religious ceremonies and rituals. For example, in January 2023, the Vahdat city court fined an individual an unknown amount for providing food at a religious ceremony.

## Crackdown on Shi'a Muslims

In 2023, authorities further restricted Ismaili Shi'a religious activity in GBAO. In an effort to curtail the influence of their spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, the government nationalized Aga Khan Foundation social service facilities, such as the [Aga Khan Lyceum](#), and upheld a decision to nationalize the [University of Central Asia](#). Security officials also [harassed and threatened](#) instructors for teaching "Ethics and Knowledge" courses, which included information about Islam and Ismailism.

In a January 2023 meeting with local elders, authorities [announced](#) that it was prohibited to study at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, hang portraits of the Aga Khan, and hold group prayers in private homes, even though there is only one operating Ismaili prayer house in GBAO. At least two individuals were fined without a court hearing for hosting prayers in their homes in January and February.

In April 2023, President Rahmon [signed](#) into law a decree banning funeral rites for those killed in "anti-terrorist operations," which it has violently enforced. Activists said the decree is intended to punish the families of protesters in GBAO who were killed by military forces. Families of the deceased were forbidden from knowing the burial locations of their loved ones or erecting gravestones. In May, authorities [tortured](#) the relative of an individual killed during the protests for placing their loved one's name on a gravestone.

## Key U.S. Policy

The United States continued to partner with the Tajik government to address regional security concerns, like terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and provided over \$60 million for [programs](#) in Tajikistan in 2023. In February, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken [met](#) with Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin. In September, President Rahmon met with President Joseph R. Biden under the auspices of the C5+1 Presidential Summit. Along with the other Central Asian leaders, President Rahmon signed onto a [joint statement](#) that passingly mentioned human rights. In December, Chair of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [wrote](#) a letter to President Rahmon urging him to respect human rights in Tajikistan and stop practicing transnational repression.

On December 29, 2023, the U.S. Department of State [redesignated](#) Tajikistan as a CPC under IRFA, although it also maintained a waiver on imposing any related sanctions on the country "as required in the important national interest of the United States."