



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

COUNTRY UPDATE: AFGHANISTAN

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

By Sema Hasan, Senior Policy Analyst

Religious Freedom under Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan

Introduction

On June 30, 2024, international leaders convened the third round of discussions on Afghanistan, including Taliban officials, in Doha, Qatar. Absent from the conversation were Afghan civil society and human rights representatives, who have emphasized that the repression of minorities, including ethnic and religious minorities in Afghanistan, has significantly expanded and accelerated since 2021. Ahead of the meetings, Taliban chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid [emphasized](#) that certain cultural and religious values “must be acknowledged.”

Under de facto Taliban rule, Afghanistan has experienced a continual and significant decline in religious freedom conditions. Taliban authorities have [implemented](#) dozens of religious edicts that have restricted the religious freedom of all Afghans, including Sunni Muslims with different interpretations of Islam. Such edicts have disproportionately affected Afghan women and girls as well as religious minorities who remain in the country, including Ahmadiyya Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and Shi'a Muslims.

This country update provides an overview of religious freedom concerns in Afghanistan under de facto Taliban rule. It highlights the role of the Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in enforcing de facto authorities' strict interpretation of Islam and Shari'a, including through corporal and capital punishment. It also examines the current status of religious minorities in Afghanistan, including efforts to silence religious scholars who pose different views of Islam.

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice

The Taliban's religious police and edicts are overseen by the [Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice](#) (MPVPV). With an [estimated](#) 5,000 agents, the MPVPV existed during previous Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 and was reestablished following the 2021 Taliban takeover. The ministry's mandate is based on the Taliban's perceived [obligation](#) for all Muslims to hold each other accountable by “commanding right and forbidding wrong.” Its mission is to reform Afghan society so that it conforms with the Taliban's strict Islamic interpretation of Shari'a. In November 2023, the Law and Complaints Hearing was [approved](#) by the Taliban's Supreme Leader,



defining the duties and responsibilities of the MPVPV. It states that all courts are *required* to respond to inquiries from the MPVPV.

Aligning with its mission, the MPVPV has been responsible for the enforcement of religious decrees and edicts since the 2021 Taliban takeover. These decrees impact all Afghans and include monitoring men’s beard length, observing the hijab decree, prohibiting music, and segregating men and women in the workplace and public spaces. The MPVPV has also been responsible for imposing restrictions and regulations on religious practices throughout the country. According to the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), for example, the MPVPV *instructed* all Afghan men to observe congregational prayers, stating that doing so is necessary for uniting Muslims. Failure to adhere to these edicts and regulations has led to harsh penalties, including fines, detention, and corporal punishment.

Use of Corporal and Capital Punishment

Under de facto Taliban rule, the use of corporal and capital punishment has resumed in Afghanistan to penalize perceived violations of Shari’a. Punishments include public executions, lashings and floggings, stoning, beatings, and acts of public humiliation, such as forced head shaving. According to UNAMA, *corporal punishment* in Afghanistan has fallen into three categories: judicial corporal punishment, corporal punishment facilitated by nonjudicial de facto authorities, and ad hoc corporal punishment administered by a nonjudicial de facto authority. Of these, the most frequently reported punishments have

been delivered by nonjudicial de facto authorities, including MPVPV officials.

In February 2024, for example, the Taliban carried out a public *double execution* of two men at a stadium in Ghazni city “according to the Islamic concept of qisas, or retributive justice.” The decision was reportedly made on the basis of Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada’s decrees and the *rulings* of three courts. The executions were attended by de facto officials, including the Provincial governor, the chief of police, and representatives from the courts. In March, Akhundzada defended the Taliban’s strict interpretation of Shari’a, including the use of corporal punishment for crimes it deems illicit or immoral. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid further *stated* that “if the conditions for it [stoning] arise again, we will carry it out.” The following month, Taliban officials publicly *flogged* 63 individuals, allegedly for adultery, *apostacy*, same-sex relations, and other actions considered to be “immoral.”

Enforcement of Hijab Laws

During the first half of 2024, de facto Taliban authorities cracked down on Afghan women for failing to observe what authorities deem “proper hijab.” In January 2024, the Taliban began enforcing its May 2022 hijab decree, *dictating* that women and girls must fully cover themselves in public. The directive noted that women were not to leave the home except in cases of necessity, and it made male relatives responsible for enforcing the decree or face punishment. The decree states that if the hijab law is not enforced, a woman’s male guardian (mahram) will be summoned to the relevant department.

If repeated three times, the mahram will be [imprisoned](#) for three days. Men also are subject to beatings and confiscation of property if they fail to enforce the Taliban's edicts.

Beginning in January, the Taliban reportedly detained [dozens](#) of women in Kabul and Daykundi Provinces for failing to observe the hijab decree. This marked the first crackdown on Islamic dress since the Taliban assumed power in 2021. The spokesman from the MPVPV reportedly [stated](#) that the women were arrested for "violating Islamic values and rituals, and ... in every province, those who go without hijab will be arrested." UNAMA reported that in order for the detained women to be [released](#), a male guardian must sign a letter promising future compliance with the decree.

According to UN Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan Richard Bennett, the Taliban's dress code has not been uniformly enforced throughout the country. In March, an Afghan media outlet [reported](#) that a woman was detained for 20 days and publicly whipped for violating the dress code. In April, two TV news stations were [suspended](#) after the Taliban-run Media Violations Commission complained that the female hosts and guests were not following the hijab decree. In July, the Taliban [announced](#) that women in Daykundi Province would be required to wear an "Arabic-style" hijab or face punishment and imprisonment for noncompliance.

Journalists have additionally been detained for their reporting on the decree. In February, for example, Mansoor Nekmal, editor-in-chief of the Khaama Press, was [summoned](#) by the MPVPV and subsequently arrested in connection to his reporting on the hijab enforcement. He was [released](#) after over 24 hours in detention.

Status of Religious Minorities

Religious and ethnic minorities have been disproportionately targeted by Taliban authorities' harsh enforcement of its religious decrees. While many religious minorities fled following the Taliban takeover in 2021, small numbers of Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Shi'a Muslims, and Buddhists remain in Afghanistan, and some individuals from these communities have returned in 2024.

In April 2024, Taliban's Ministry of Justice [announced](#) its intent to establish a commission to "ensure the return of lands and properties of Sikhs and Hindus" that were previously seized. The same month, Taliban officials announced the [return](#) of Narendra Singh Khalsa, the former representative of Hindus and Sikhs in the former

Afghan parliament. Khalsa, like many other religious minorities, fled following the 2021 Taliban takeover. Currently, an [estimated](#) 40 Sikhs and 50 Hindus reside in Afghanistan, but some reporting [suggests](#) that more may return if seized land is reallocated.

Repatriation of Afghan Refugees from Pakistan

Beyond the voluntary return of some Hindu and Sikh individuals to Afghanistan, recent efforts by the Pakistani government to forcibly return significant numbers of Afghan refugees risks further exacerbating religious freedom concerns. In October 2023, the Pakistani government announced the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan requiring undocumented refugees, including Afghans, to leave the country within 30 days. From October to June, an [estimated](#) 600,000 Afghans were forcibly returned. The second phase of this plan went into effect in June 2024 as authorities [began](#) the next part of the deportation plan, aiming to send 800,000 individuals back to Afghanistan. In July, the Pakistani government [announced](#) that it would extend expired registration cards for Afghan refugees but would continue its repatriation plan.

Among the hundreds of thousands of individuals who have already returned to Afghanistan, religious and ethnic minorities face particular risk and fear of retaliation. As previous USCIRF reporting [emphasizes](#), [Afghan Christians](#) remain particularly vulnerable under de facto Taliban rule, especially those repatriated from Pakistan. Most Christians are converts, which the Taliban considers apostasy and punishable by death under its interpretation of Shari'a.

Additionally, a small community of Uyghur Muslims in Pakistan, [estimated](#) at 100 individuals, face threat of deportation to Afghanistan under the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan. Approximately 20 Uyghur families had fled Afghanistan and are registered as Afghan refugees and hold Afghan Citizen Cards but have no other proof of legal identity, as the Pakistani government has not granted them citizenship, passports, or residency status. These families have expressed concern that they would be detained or deported to China upon their return. Afghan Hazara Shi'a [refugees](#) also risk particularly severe [persecution](#) if returned.

Targeting of Shi'a Communities

Of all religious minorities that remain in Afghanistan, Shi'a Muslims, who constitute [approximately](#) 10–15 percent of Afghanistan's population, continue

to be the most frequently targeted by de facto Taliban authorities. During the first half of 2024, the number of attacks and [targeting](#) of Hazara Shi'a communities increased in particular. Hazaras make up the majority of Afghanistan's Shi'a population and have been [labeled](#) "infidels" and "unbelievers" by top Taliban officials and the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). Such rhetoric has been used to justify violent attacks against the community. In January, for example, an [explosion](#) occurred near the Abu Muslim Khorasani mosque in Kabul. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a minivan explosion that killed at least three people, [stating](#) that the attack was part of its campaign against "infidels" to "kill them wherever you find them."

Hazara women and girls are particularly vulnerable, and some have [reported](#) being subjected to violence, assault, threats, and intimidation while in police custody. In March 2024, for example, the Taliban [arrested](#) Hazara human rights defenders Azada Rezaei, Nadia Rezaei, and Elaha Rezaei along with their brother. While the detainees were [reportedly](#) released in April, for a period of time their whereabouts were unknown to their family. Taliban authorities previously detained their sister, Tamana Rezaei, for 29 days in 2022, [inflicting](#) "mental and emotional" torture and reportedly referring to her as an "infidel" for being Hazara. In June 2024, the Women's Advocacy for Equality Network, a network composed of Hazara women, [expressed concern](#) over the exclusion of Afghan civil society and marginalized communities from the third UN-Doha meeting with Taliban representatives. In April 2024, ISIS-K [claimed responsibility](#) for an attack on a mosque in a predominantly Shi'a community of Herat Province. Six worshipers, including the mosque's imam, were killed in the attack. In July, de facto Taliban authorities [destroyed](#) the statue of former Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari in Kabul. In addition, the Taliban has reportedly pressured Shi'a Ismaili community members to convert to Sunni Islam. In May, for example, 15 Ismailis were [detained](#) in the northeastern province of Badakhshan and reportedly were falsely accused of being affiliated with armed opposition groups against the Taliban.

Prior to the month of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar, de facto Taliban authorities imposed restrictions on the Shi'a minority, including banning religious processions and ceremonies in public spaces and [raising flags](#) for Ashura. The Taliban's information and culture department [described](#) such activities as "political heresy" from abroad. The Afghan Shi'a Ulema

published a [statement](#) on July 6, calling on Taliban officials to ensure security and protection for mourning ceremonies during Muharram. On July 16, however, Taliban officials [reportedly](#) disrupted Ashura ceremonies in Kabul and cut off all telecommunications networks. In Herat Province, Taliban authorities [reportedly](#) killed a Shi'a man for protesting the Muharram restrictions.

Harassment of Religious Scholars

Beyond the protests during the month of Muharram, the Taliban has continued to crack down on dissenting opinions from religious scholars, including from both Shi'a and Sunni sects. Senior officials have [claimed](#) that religion does not allow anyone to criticize Taliban senior officials, ministers, or governors. In February 2024, a well-known religious scholar from Kunduz Province [criticized](#) the Taliban's governance, stating that it was guilty of "cruelty, ethnic bias, intimidation" and using coercion and corporal punishment. The same month, a prominent Hazara Shi'a cleric criticized the Taliban for its actions against the Hazara community.

In an April letter, the Taliban's Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs [requested](#) that mosque clerics help prevent the spread of "propaganda and gatherings against the regime." The same month, representatives from the MPVPV [met with](#) an estimated 1,000 Islamic scholars and imams in Kabul. The MPVPV emphasized the importance of having imams enforce the Taliban's religious edicts within their communities.

In May, several Shi'a scholars [called for](#) an Islamic system "without discrimination, prejudice, and personal inclinations." In June, the Taliban [reportedly](#) detained religious scholar Mawlawi Sufi Aziz and his son for celebrating Eid-al-Adha on Sunday rather than Monday.

Control of Literature and Education

During the first half of 2024, de facto Taliban authorities continued to influence and restructure Afghanistan's education sector to conform with their strict interpretation of Islam, including the restriction of certain texts. Beginning in December 2023, the Taliban's minister of higher education issued a decree calling for the review and removal of books from private university libraries and bookstores that conflict with the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. In January 2024, the Taliban reportedly seized [over 50,000](#) books in Kabul and banned the distribution and publication of [over 100 books](#) focused on religious or political themes, claiming they violate "Islamic values." The Taliban's deputy minister



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of information and culture justified the decision as a means to prevent the spread of “harmful ideologies.” The Taliban warned publishers and booksellers that anyone who continued to distribute these books will face imprisonment.

According to the UN special rapporteur on Afghanistan, seven Taliban-registered *madrasas*, which focus on religious subjects, were *established* within the first half of 2024, resulting in a total of 6,836 for males and 380 for females. As women and girls continue to be *denied* access to education beyond the sixth grade, there are severe consequences to Afghanistan, including a negative impact on the economy, public health, and healthcare industry. For example, the Taliban’s education bans have resulted in significant *shortages* of female doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals, particularly in rural areas. Such shortages have *exacerbated* already high maternal mortality rates and malnutrition. These patterns are compounded by the fact that Afghan women cannot see male doctors under the Taliban’s religious decrees. More broadly, the denial of Afghan women and girls’ access to education has forced them into narrower societal roles, further legitimized by the Taliban’s strict religious ideology and placing them at *greater risk* of forced marriage and psychological distress.

Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino

Policy Analyst

Susan Bishai

Senior Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum

Policy Analyst

Elizabeth K. Cassidy

Senior Strategic Advisor

Mingzhi Chen

Supervisory Policy Advisor

Patrick Greenwalt

Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan

Senior Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer

Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy

Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller

Policy Analyst

Nora Morton

Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre

Policy Analyst

Jamie Staley

Acting Director of Research and Policy

Scott Weiner

Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson

International Legal Specialist

Nathan Wineinger

Chief of Public Affairs

Conclusion

Religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan remain dire. Under de facto Taliban rule, authorities have continued to repress and significantly stifle any action or behavior that does not conform with their strict interpretation of Islam. In doing so, the Taliban has retaliated and silenced religious clerics, prevented religious minorities from observing religious ceremonies, and continued to restrict the movement and educational access of Afghan women and girls. Authorities have implemented severe forms of punishment, including detention, beatings, and execution.

While the United States does not recognize de facto Taliban authorities as the official government of Afghanistan, several delegations have participated in discussions with Taliban officials, most recently during the third round of meetings in Doha. Both U.S. Special Representative Tom West and U.S. Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights Rina Amiri *attended* the Doha meeting.

In its *2024 Annual Report*, USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate Afghanistan as a Country of Particular Concern for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The chapter further outlines a number of policy recommendations that the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom violations in Afghanistan, including continued targeted sanctions on Taliban officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

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.

www.USCIRF.gov

@USCIRF

Media@USCIRF.gov

732 N. Capitol Street, NW, Suite #A714

Washington, DC 20401

202-523-3240