



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE: THE ABUSE OF EXTREMISM LAWS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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USCIRF's Mission

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

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The Abuse of Extremism Laws in Central Asia

Overview

Central Asian governments' legislation, including extremism laws, has been influenced by decades of Soviet rule of the region. When the Central Asian governments of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan enforce extremism laws, they regularly go beyond using the legislation to address legitimate security threats and penalize individuals engaged in peaceful religious activities. Practices that are restricted include online religious expression, the sharing of religious materials, the manifestation of religious beliefs through clothing, and religious teaching. Enforcement measures include harassment, fines, forced renunciations of faith, detention, imprisonment, and, at times, torture and extrajudicial killings.

While all states have an obligation to protect individuals from extremism-motivated *violence and incitement to violence*, they also are required to uphold other human rights enshrined under international law. Despite this, each Central Asian state enforces extremism laws in ways that fail to uphold the human right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Notably, Central Asian governments' use of extremism laws bypasses the specific permissible grounds for limiting manifestations of FoRB outlined in Article 18.3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which all five states are signatories. That provision states that governments can only limit manifestations of FoRB when such limitations are "prescribed by law and necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

In line with the ICCPR, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which includes each Central Asian state, [released](#) policy guidance on FoRB and security. The guidance advises that any law limiting FoRB should, among other things, "specifically address criminal conduct and not thoughts or beliefs," "address the specific unlawful activity [instead of] targeting a religion or belief," and "avoid vaguely defined terms." By contrast, Central Asian governments often use their extremism legislation to penalize the holding of beliefs themselves or to limit peaceful religious activities that the state considers undesirable but that do not implicate the [permissible limitations](#) to FoRB under the ICCPR.

This publication outlines in detail the extremism laws in each Central Asian state and discusses the similarities and differences in how officials throughout the region abuse such legislation to restrict and penalize peaceful religious activities.

Shared Practices in the Combat against “Extremism”

Broad and Vague Extremism Laws

Under international standards, states must adhere to the principle of legal certainty, outlined in the OSCE’s [Guidelines on Democratic Lawmaking for Better Laws](#), which require that legislation clearly describes what constitutes a violation of the law. Each of the extremism laws in Central Asia, however, define “extremism” using vague and broad terms, such as disturbing constitutional order or inciting hatred. By employing these terms, the state makes it nearly impossible for the general population to understand what conduct would represent a violation of the law. By ignoring the principle of legal certainty, authorities have the flexibility to label virtually any activity as “extremist,” including activity that does not include the use or incitement of violence.

The Ban of Formal and Informal Religious Groups as “Extremist” and Application of Other “Extremism”-Related Terms

Each government maintains a list of banned “extremist” organizations, each of which includes some religious groups with no known history of violence and sometimes includes religious ideologies that may not constitute formal groups. Central Asian governments routinely use these lists to indiscriminately prosecute alleged members’ peaceful religious activities that deviate from the state’s preferred religious practices, especially targeting Muslims. Additionally, Central Asian governments sometimes employ terms they consider synonymous with “extremist,” such as “Wahhabi” or “religious radical,” to similarly target and penalize individuals for peaceful religious activity without the need to allege affiliation with any particular banned group.

Securitization of Peaceful Religious Practices in Response to Global Terrorist Incidents

Central Asian governments face real security threats from both domestic and regional bad actors, including the risk of terrorist attacks by violent Islamist groups. Although such violent attacks have become less common in recent years, Central Asian governments still point to international security incidents as a justification to further restrict freedoms, including religious freedom, at home. For example, in response to the March 22, 2024, attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow, during which Tajik terrorists affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K) opened fire on concertgoers, killing over 130 people and injuring hundreds more, Central Asian governments strengthened their internal security measures. Such measures, in some cases, included

further restrictions on peaceful religious activity, especially for Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan.

Tajikistan

Use of Broad and Vague Definitions of “Extremism”

The [2020 Law on Resistance to Extremism](#), or the extremism law, provides the legal framework for the government to label and penalize a wide range of activities under the guise of combating “extremism.” Under the extremism law, “extremist” activities do not clearly require violence or the incitement of violence and are broadly defined as those actions aimed at, among other things, “inciting religious hatred” and “promoting the superiority of citizens based on their religion.”

Banned Religious Ideologies and Groups: The “Salafi Movement” and Jehovah’s Witnesses

The Ministry of Justice [maintains](#) a list of 29 banned “extremist” organizations, which includes religious groups and ideologies that the Tajik government deems to be undesirable. Such labels enable authorities to target individuals for their peaceful religious activities through the arbitrary application of the broad legal definition of extremism.

The “Salafi Movement”

The Tajik government banned the “Salafi movement” as an illegal “extremist” organization in 2009. While there are groups globally that label themselves as “Salafi” and engage in violence, there is no evidence that the individuals USCIRF tracks who are imprisoned on “Salafism”-related “extremism” charges have used or advocated for violence. Since the ban, the Tajik government has broadly accused independent Tajik Muslims both in and outside of the country of affiliation with the “Salafi movement.” Officials use the allegation as a catch-all to penalize a broad range of nonviolent Islamic activity, including cases where those accused of affiliation with Salafism have no demonstrable connection with the ideology.

For example, in April 2024, during Ramadan, authorities in Sughd region arrested [Ikhtiyorhoja Kamolov](#), an imam at Khoja Muhammad Balodurkun mosque in the village of Rumon, on “extremism” charges based on allegations that he spread Salafism by allowing minors to attend mosque, a practice forbidden in Tajikistan. Along with Kamolov, authorities also detained [Bakhtiyor Akbarov](#), another religious leader, and [Mirzoburhan Salmanzoda](#), a congregant, on the same charges. Akbarov and Salmanzoda remained in police custody without trial as of August 2024, although Kamolov’s status was unclear by the end of the year.

In addition, in April 2023, a Khatlon region court sentenced [Abdulahannon Usmonov](#) to six years in prison on charges of participating in a “banned extremist group” and obstructing education. While Usmonov did prevent his daughter from going to school, authorities also charged him for watching and distributing “extremist” materials from the “Salafi movement” and leading prayers in the “Salafi style.” Also, in March 2023, the Ismoili Somoni District Criminal Court sentenced [Mukhammadi Mukharramov](#), a well-known Salafi leader prior to the 2009 ban, to eight years in prison on charges of organizing an “extremist” organization for teaching Islam to a group of 12 Muslim men. The students also received prison sentences ranging from seven to 10 years on similar charges.

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Authorities have long harassed, fined, detained, imprisoned, and prosecuted Jehovah Witnesses for their peaceful activities. In 2007, the Tajikistan government removed the Jehovah Witnesses’ registration to operate legally within the country. In 2021, the Supreme Court, in a closed hearing, [declared](#) Jehovah’s Witnesses to be an “extremist” organization and banned the group’s activity and religious publications. The government only publicized the decision in 2023 and added Jehovah’s Witnesses to the public list of “extremist” organizations on the Supreme Court website in 2024. As a banned “extremist” group, all Jehovah’s Witnesses’ religious activity is illegal. The new public “extremism” designation places local Jehovah Witnesses at further legal risk to freely practice their religion.

Supporting “National Values” through the Suppression of “Extremism”

In March 2024, President Emomali Rahmon [gave](#) a speech about Tajik national and religious values and the risk of the infiltration of “extremism” in Tajikistan. During his speech, Rahmon referenced the danger of the “Salafi movement” and those who wear “alien” clothes, such as hijabs, connecting these groups to activities defined as “extremist” under Tajik law. Following through on his anti-“extremism” rhetoric, in June 2024 Rahmon [approved](#) amendments to the law “on the regulation of celebrations and ceremonies” to prohibit the “import, sale, promotion and wearing of clothes alien to national culture.” While the language of the amendments does not mention religious head coverings specifically, in practice authorities have [targeted](#) women who tie their headscarves in a “foreign” way. For example, in the leadup to the amendments’ passage, the Committee for Work with Women and Family, a government body, and security services threatened, harassed, and

detained women wearing their headscarves tied in front of their necks, which the government deems to be a non-“Tajik style.” Authorities also similarly targeted men with long beards, another religious practice officially viewed as foreign. Furthermore, authorities reportedly denied women not wearing their head covering in the “Tajik” style entry into a local hospital and threatened them with fines. Similarly, officials in Sino district, Dushanbe, forcibly took women wearing “foreign” head coverings and men with beards to a police station to be fingerprinted and photographed. Also in Dushanbe, officials detained another group of men with beards and forced them to shave and pay for the shaving tools used during the incident.

Turkmenistan

Use of Broad and Vague Definitions of Extremism

The 2015 [Law about Countering Extremism](#) defines “extremism” as an activity with a number of aims, many of which are vague in nature and may encompass a wide range of actions, including religious practices. For example, the extremism law references the incitement of enmity and the public dissemination of “extremist” materials. Such vague provisions ensure that Turkmen cannot ascertain which specific actions would constitute a violation of the law. Many of the definitions are also listed in the 2016 [Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations](#), indicating that the government draws connections between broad, undefined “extremist” goals and religious activity.

Prison Sentences and Detainments Due to “Extremism” Charges

USCIRF’s FoRB Victims List includes the cases of 10 individuals the Turkmen government has imprisoned on “extremism” charges for practicing their faith outside of the state’s strict regime of control. In October 2023, a court in Dashoguz sentenced [Ashyrbay Bekiev](#) to 23 years in prison on unspecified “extremism” charges for conducting religious classes with fellow Turkmen students while living abroad in Russia. Bekiev is [serving](#) his sentence in Ovadan-Depe Prison, notorious for medical neglect, torture, and enforced disappearances. Other Turkmen that the government has forcibly returned from abroad and imprisoned on “extremism” charges for their religious studies include [Annamurad Atdaev](#), [Kemal Saparov](#), and [Kakadjan Halbaev](#). In addition, authorities imprisoned [Bahram Saparov](#) for “extremism” for organizing unregistered religious meetings and [Myratdurdy Shamyradow](#), [Meret Owezow](#), [Ahmet Mammetsurdyyew](#), [Begejik Begejikow](#), and [Jumanazar Hojambetow](#) for studying the work of Muslim

theologian Said Nursi. In September 2023, authorities [detained](#) a Muslim man from the Balkan region for 15 days for teaching the Qur'an to some children, labeling him as "Wahhabi."

Reaction to the Crocus Terrorist Attack in Russia

In Turkmenistan, authorities increased crackdowns on mosques throughout the country during Ramadan in 2024 to identify alleged "extremists" in the wake of the [Crocus terrorist attack](#) in Russia. According to a report from March 25, 2024, officials throughout the Balkan region [interrogated](#) and harassed young worshippers attending mosque in the Cheleken Peninsula and the cities of Turkmenbashi and Balkanbat. According to a local religious leader, security officials ordered all people under the age of 50 to perform prayers at home, questioned the religious practice of fasting, and forcibly shaved men's beards under the threat of at least five years in Ovadan-Depe on "extremism" charges and forcing them to drink alcohol. In Turkmenbashi city, security officials [closed](#) and confiscated the goods of shops selling religious clothes. In the leadup to Eid, authorities in the Balkan region [imposed](#) increased security measures for worshippers, including a requirement to submit personal information, such as proof of residence. Officials also reportedly installed video cameras in mosques in Turkmenbashi city and increased security at all mosque entryways.

Officials [took](#) similar measures in Lebap region. In the city of Turkmenabat, for example, locals reported a stark increase in plain-clothes law enforcement surrounding and inside mosques following the Crocus attack. Security services reportedly forced worshippers to leave mosques immediately upon the conclusion of prayers, even though worshippers typically linger. Officials also interrogated older men with beards. In the following weeks, the number of attendees of Friday prayer at the main mosque in Turkmenabat city [decreased](#) significantly. Only old men and young children attended prayers, as the increased security deterred young men from attending.

Kyrgyzstan

Use of Broad and Vague Definitions of Extremism

The [2005 Law on Countering Extremist Activity](#), or the extremism law, defines "extremism" broadly as activities that, among other things, are "aimed at the incitement of hatred and the propaganda of exclusivity, superiority or inferiority based on religious affiliation." These goals, along with others included in the extremism law, do not clearly involve the use or advocacy of violence and are vague. This allows authorities to arbitrarily prosecute individuals for peaceful, independent religious activities.

In September 2024, the Kyrgyz government [released](#) draft amendments to the extremism law that, if passed, would increase the punishments for certain "extremist" activities. Namely, the amendments would punish, for the first time, the possession of "extremist" materials with up to three years' imprisonment following a written warning and public calls for "extremist" activities with up to five years' imprisonment. The amendments would also increase the punishment for the production and distribution of "extremist" materials from up to seven years' imprisonment to up to 10 years in prison.

Banned Religious Groups:

Yakyn Inkar and Hizb ut-Tahrir

The Kyrgyz government [maintains](#) a list of 20 organizations it bans as "extremist." The list includes some religious groups that have no known history of violence but whose beliefs deviate from those that the state prefers. Such banned groups include [Hizb ut-Tahrir](#) and Yakyn Inkar. Authorities regularly detain alleged members of both religious groups. For example, in the first six months of 2024, authorities detained at least 24 alleged Hizb ut-Tahrir members and 25 alleged Yakyn Inkar members. Beyond reports of the initial arrest of such individuals, it is difficult to find further information due to the secretive nature of "extremism"-related cases.

Hizb ut-Tahrir

Kyrgyzstan included Hizb ut-Tahrir—a group with no known history of violence but sometimes propagates antisemitism, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—on its list of "extremist" organizations in 2003. Security officials often detain alleged members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, particularly for their online religious activity, sometimes charging them under Article 332 of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the production and distribution of extremist materials. For example, on January 30, 2024, State Committee for National Security (SCNS) officials in Issyk-Kul region detained and [searched](#) the residences of 13 members of Hizb ut-Tahrir. Authorities found that one of the members' homes served as a printing house and [seized](#) religious materials, including Hizb ut-Tahrir brochures and religious notebooks. In February 2024, authorities from Sokuluk district [detained](#) a man for distributing materials from Hizb ut-Tahrir on Facebook and opened a criminal case against him. The following month, also in Sokuluk district, authorities [detained](#) a former leader of Hizb ut-Tahrir for distributing religious materials on Facebook. Upon his detainment, the man refused to renounce his beliefs and authorities placed him in a temporary detention facility as they conducted an investigation into him. In June 2024, authorities [placed](#)

six men in pretrial detention for promoting and adhering to Hizb ut-Tahrir beliefs.

Yakyn Inkar

Kyrgyzstan [included](#) Yakyn Inkar on its list of banned “extremist” organizations in 2017. The government often criticizes the religious group for its beliefs regarding education and healthcare. Security officials often detain Yakyn Inkar members for possessing “extremist” religious materials or using social media to spread their beliefs. In some cases, authorities force members to renounce their faith. For example, in January 2024, authorities throughout Batken region conducted multiple searches, ultimately [arresting](#) 14 Yakyn Inkar members. The Batken District Department of Internal Affairs placed a leader of the group in temporary detention. On May 4, 2024, the SCNS and Osh Regional police searched the homes of and [detained](#) four Yakyn Inkar members. Through coercion by security officials upon his arrest, one man denounced his faith on video. As of May, the Ministry of Justice was examining seized materials from the raid and stated that the men would be subject to criminal penalties.

Repression of Online Religious Expression

Article 330 of the Criminal Code broadly punishes the incitement of hostility or discord, an activity defined as “extremist” under Kyrgyz law, with five to seven years in prison. This provision allows Kyrgyz authorities to censor and penalize anyone who expresses opinions the government considers undesirable, especially those who question or oppose President Sadyr Japarov and his policies, including religious ones. For example, in October 2023, authorities in Kara-Suu district arrested three men for posting a video online complaining about the inspection and potential closure of their local mosque as part of a nationwide, interdepartmental government campaign to close or suspend independent Islamic institutions. Officials fined one of those men, and in February 2024 the Kara-Suu District Court sentenced the others, [Mamirzhan Tashmatov](#) and Asadullo Madraimov, to two- and three-year terms in prison, respectively. Upon appeal, the court reduced the terms of Tashmatov and Madraimov. While Tashmatov was released from prison immediately following his appeal, in October 2024 the Supreme Court [reinstated](#) Madraimov’s original three-year sentence. In another instance, in May 2023, a Chui region court sentenced Aytbek Tynaliev, a Protestant Christian, to six months in prison for social media posts he made sharing his beliefs and criticizing government religious policies. In December 2023, authorities detained Artsan Abdyl daev, allegedly for inciting enmity through his online religious expression. However, he was likely arrested in connection to his

presidential bids, including one against Japarov in 2021. While detained, Abdyl daev was found hanged in prison under murky circumstances.

Reaction to the Crocus Terrorist Attack in Russia

The Kyrgyz government responded to the Crocus terrorist attack by strengthening security measures, including through further restrictions on religious freedom for Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan. Namely, the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan (SAMK), a quasi-governmental Muslim board, [announced](#) on April 8, 2024, that Eid prayers would only be held inside mosques. This restriction limited worshipers’ celebration of Eid, as typically, during major holidays so many worshipers attend mosque that they spill out into the surrounding courtyards.

Kazakhstan

Use of Broad and Vague Definitions of Extremism

Kazakhstan’s [2005 Law on Countering Extremism](#) defines religious “extremism” as the “incitement of religious discord or strife, as well as related with violence or incitement to violence, as well as the use of any religious practice, causing a threat to security, life, health, morality or rights and freedoms of citizens.” The language of the legislation provides an opening for authorities to penalize religious activities deemed as “extremist” that neither incite nor use violence or that do not fall within permissible ground for the limitation of FoRB under the ICCPR.

Criminal Procedure for “Extremism” Cases

USCIRF’s FoRB Victims List [includes](#) seven individuals imprisoned for their peaceful religious practices in Kazakhstan. Authorities charged four of those individuals under Article 174 of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the incitement of discord, an activity considered “extremist” under Kazakh law. Grouped with crimes such as genocide and producing weapons of mass destruction, Article 174 is the only “extremism”-related provision in Chapter 4 of the Criminal Code, which includes crimes “against the peace and security of mankind.”

The National Security Committee (NSC) has the authority to investigate and prosecute alleged national security crimes and can play a role in any cases under Chapter 4, including those cases involving the incitement of religious discord. In addition, Article 29 of the [Criminal Procedure Code](#) permits closed court hearings in order to protect state secrets. Thus, the prosecutor and the court have the right to decide to what degree an investigation and trial in Chapter 4 cases may be closed

under the [2002 Supreme Court Ruling on Maintaining the Openness of Criminal Trials](#), meaning that “extremism” cases are often opaque. The remaining individuals included on USCIRF’s Victims List are imprisoned for their peaceful religious activity under Article 256, Part 2 of the Criminal Code, which penalizes the promotion of terrorism. The [Law on Counter-Terrorism](#) similarly broadly defines terrorism, a term authorities use interchangeably with “extremism.” As a result, such cases can likewise be nontransparent and do not necessarily include the use or incitement of violence.

The Use of Terms Synonymous with “Extremism”

In early 2024, the Kazakh government was considering amendments to the 2011 law “on religious activities and religious associations,” or the religion law, which would have introduced the terms “destructive religious movement” and “religious radicalism” as legal terms. Although the amendments never passed, the government nevertheless arbitrarily applies those broad and vague concepts to penalize a wide range of peaceful religious activities under the extremism law. The NSC regularly reports publicly the arrests of members of “destructive religious movements” or “religious radicals” for possessing religious literature, with little to no further information. While the NSC mentions violent activity or the possession of weapons in cases where such conduct is alleged, many NSC press releases accusing individuals of belonging to a “destructive religious movement” or engaging in “religious radicalism” only reference the possession of religious literature. This demonstrates the opaque circumstances of many “extremism” arrests and the difficulty in determining whether specific individuals were wrongfully detained. For example, based on searches of key terms relating to peaceful religious practices in NSC press releases, on January 18, 2024, following an investigation by the Kyzylorda Regional Police Anti-Extremism Department, the specialized court of Kyzylorda city [sentenced](#) a 62-year-old man to two years in prison and probation. Authorities accused him of “adhering to a destructive religious trend” and publishing “non-traditional religious materials on social networks.” On February 15, 2024, NSC officials [detained](#) a 17-year-old young man described as a “religious radical” in Atyrau for allegedly promoting terrorism through social networks and began a pretrial investigation. In early May 2024, NSC officials in the cities of Astana and Pavlodar raided the homes of the three men and, finding religious literature, [arrested](#) them on allegations of belonging to an undisclosed “extremist” organization. The individuals’ current statuses are unknown.

Uzbekistan

Use of Broad and Vague Definitions of Extremism

Uzbekistan’s [2018 Law on Combating Extremism](#) includes violence or the incitement of violent activities as elements of some of the activities deemed “extremist” but also some broad provisions that encompass nonviolent activities. For example, “extremist” activities include the preparation, storage, distribution, or display of “attributes or symbols of extremist organizations.” The law additionally references the “incitement of enmity” in a way that opens the definition to applications targeting nonviolent activities, according to [comments](#) by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Prison Sentences Due to “Extremism” Charges

USCIRF’s FoRB Victims List details the cases of over 50 religious prisoners of conscience in Uzbekistan, most of whom are imprisoned based on unfounded “extremism” charges. Authorities arbitrarily employ accusations of “extremism” largely to penalize Muslims for their peaceful religious advocacy or activities, such as religious discussions or online religious expression. In some cases, the government targets Muslims for their actual or alleged affiliation with banned groups, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir. For example, in December 2023, the Zangiota District Court added 10 years to the sentence of [Fariduddin Abduvokhidov](#), who was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2020 on charges of terrorism, preparing or distributing materials containing a threat to public security, and creating, managing, and participating in a religious extremism organization for gathering to discuss religion. In May 2022, an Andijan court sentenced [Oybek Khamidov](#) to five years in prison on “extremism” charges for allegedly sharing illegal religious materials on social media and for possessing “extremist” sermons on his phone. In May 2024, the Bog’dod District Court [sentenced](#) Abdumutal Abdurahimov to 12 years in prison on unspecified extremism charges for allegedly watching and distributing Hizb ut-Tahrir materials online, taking religious lessons, and sharing his beliefs with others.

Reaction to the Crocus Terrorist Attack in Russia

On April 3, 2024, following the Crocus terrorist attack in Moscow, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan [requested](#) that all imams hand over their passports. In addition, the Department of Internal Affairs in Tashkent stated on April 7, 2024, that authorities [searched](#) 45 homes of citizens who allegedly joined “extremist” radical groups and made some arrests. The current status of these individuals is unknown.



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Conclusion

The governments of Central Asia target and penalize individuals for their peaceful religious activities through the arbitrary application of broad and vague legislation, including extremism laws. While all states have both a responsibility and a right to respond to real security threats, states must at the same time maintain respect for

human rights enshrined in international law. However, all five Central Asian states restrict the fundamental human right to freedom of religion or belief beyond what is deemed permissible under the ICCPR under the guise of combating “extremism.”

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