

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing
Religious Freedom Conditions in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan
Wednesday, March 19, 2025
10:30AM – 12:00PM EST
Virtual

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Today, I am speaking on behalf of Amnesty International and our more than 10 million members, activists, and supporters around the world. I am humbled to be present here today. My statement is also supported by my personal capacity as a woman from Afghanistan currently in exile.

As I speak here today, we are also observing the holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. However, in Afghanistan, women are barred from entering mosques and even reciting the Quran in the presence of other women. Their voices have been criminalized as sources of sin and temptation. The core values of Ramadan are being stripped away from women under the Taliban's draconian laws and systematic discrimination and oppression.

Since their takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban have been enforcing an extremist interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law), systematically violating all freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief, for all people in Afghanistan. The Taliban claim that their system is based on Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence. However, in practice, their version primarily derives from the Deobandi strand, which also incorporates tribal and militarized elements influenced by the Taliban's extremist ideology. This interpretation is shaped by Taliban leaders, clergy, and muftis, who have issued hundreds of edicts and decrees, either in written or oral form, without a standardized legal process, as they deem necessary since August 2021. The Taliban have replaced hundreds of imams with those approved by their regime, ensuring that religious teachings align with their strict interpretation of Islam.

As part of this, the Taliban have issued more than 190 decrees, including ones specifically aimed at curtailing freedom of religion, primarily targeting minorities and women's rights. They have banned the rights to education, employment, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, access to aid and healthcare, protest, and the practice of religious and cultural activities such as attending mosques or participating in sports. The Ministry for Vice and Virtue, notorious for its arbitrary and inconsistent policies, enforces violently these restrictions and decrees across the country.

And the restrictions and rules continue to become more brutal and draconian. One prevalent aspect of these abuses has been their cumulative nature, with each new decree building upon the previous one. While the initial measures may seem less severe, they progressively intensify, ultimately stripping away every right in each sector. **And it all comes with compounded and disproportionate impacts on religious minorities, particularly the Hazaras who mostly follow the Shia branch of Islam, as well as on women and girls in Afghanistan.**

Afghanistan is a diverse country with various religious groups, including a Shia Muslim population, as well as Hindus, Sikhs, Sufis, Ahmadis, Bahá'ís, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and a very small number of Christian. Non-Muslim communities, such as Hindus and Sikhs, have largely fled the country, with only a small

number remaining. [International Christian Concern \(ICC\)](#) has stated, "The Taliban are working to completely erase Christianity or any religious minority from the country."

The Taliban do not acknowledge many Muslim sects, such as Ahmadis, as part of the Muslim faith, and in the past their members have been subject to persecution. Meanwhile, the small non-Muslim population in Afghanistan continues to live under constant threat of persecution, often practicing their beliefs in secret or going into hiding to avoid detection.

The Shia community, particularly the Hazaras, has been subjected to systematic and targeted attacks. Their schools and residential areas have frequently been bombed and violently attacked, resulting in significant casualties and injuries. Some of the deadliest attacks have been carried out by, and claimed by, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP). In an official statement, ISIS declared that "it would target Shia in their homes and centers in every way, from slaughtering their necks to scattering their limbs... and the news of [ISIS's] attacks...in the temples of the [Shia] and their gatherings is not hidden from anyone, from Baghdad to Khorasan." According to [Human Rights Watch](#), ISKP and ISIS have repeatedly attacked Hazaras and other religious minorities at their mosques, schools, and workplaces.

In addition to violent attacks, the Taliban have severely restricted Shia religious practices. For example, Muharram/Ashura, a sacred period of mourning for Shia Muslims, observed by people across Afghanistan, was previously commemorated publicly, but under Taliban rule, mourners have been forced to limit their activities to private homes. Also, the Taliban forced Hazara residents in Daikundi Province to break their Ramadan fast early according to the Sunni timetable, beating and imprisoning those who disobeyed. Similarly, in Balkh Province, they mandated that the Shia community observe Eid al-Fitr based on Sunni jurisprudence dictated by Taliban leaders. Furthermore, the teaching of Shia jurisprudence has been banned, and marriages between Shia and Sunni individuals have been prohibited.

Multiple reports indicate that the Taliban's campaign of "killing, torture, and forced displacement" of ethnic Hazaras, as well as the seizure of their lands and homes, has continued in multiple provinces. [Amnesty International](#) has documented a series of targeted attacks and extrajudicial executions of Shia Hazaras, including a June 26, 2022, incident in which the Taliban detained and unlawfully executed four men during a night raid. One of the bodies showed signs of torture, and a woman and a 12-year-old girl were also killed during the operation. Similar attacks were recorded in Ghazni province in July 2021 and in Daykundi province in August 2021.

Credible sources, including [Richard Bennett](#) the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Afghanistan, [Amnesty International](#), and [Human Rights Watch](#), have documented the targeted attacks against Shia Hazaras and other religious minorities and stated that the systematic attacks on the Hazara Shia community may amount to crimes against humanity.

Meantime, women's lives are not only defined by the Taliban's narrow, oppressive worldview, but they have also been deprived of the right to practice their faith freely. In October 2024, the Taliban's Vice and Virtue Minister, Khalid Hanafi, declared that it was "prohibited for a grown woman to recite Quranic verses or perform recitations in front of another grown woman." He further stated that even phrases central to Islamic faith, such as "takbir" (Allahu Akbar) and "subhanallah," were forbidden, and that women were not allowed to lead the call to prayer. According to Hanafi, "there is certainly no permission for singing" by women either. These severe restrictions directly challenge women's ability to express their faith and autonomy.

Beyond these restrictions on religious expression, the Taliban has also banned women from attending mosques in certain regions. Last week reports indicated that the Taliban expelled women from mosques in Kandahar and Herat provinces. Since the start of Ramadan, the Taliban has prevented women from attending Tarawih prayers by standing at mosque entrances and blocking their access.

In the face of these atrocities, the Taliban have systematically dismantled all existing laws, policies, and institutions designed to provide access to justice. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, among other programs, was dismantled, leaving the people of Afghanistan without any means to seek justice.

People who wish to practice their faith, convert to a new religion, or even renounce their faith altogether are accused of crime. These individuals are often subjected to extrajudicial executions, torture, and other forms of ill-treatment, including public flogging and stoning.

Recommendations

Amnesty International urges you to use the United States government's influence to advocate for the protection of religious freedom in Afghanistan amid the Taliban's systematic and institutionalized oppression:

- Integrate religious freedom protections into diplomatic engagement: The U.S. and international partners should ensure that protections for freedom of religion or belief are a core part of all diplomatic discussions with the Taliban. Publicly and clearly condemning ongoing violations by both the Taliban and ISIS-K reinforces accountability.
- The U.S. State Department should maintain designation of the Taliban as an "entity of particular concern" due to grave violations of religious freedoms. This designation should guide U.S. policy in holding the Taliban accountable for its actions against religious minorities.
- Mitigate unintended consequences new policies: Ensure that new executive actions restricting travel to the U.S. and cuts to U.S. foreign assistance do not hinder life-saving support and relocation efforts for religious minorities who are the target of Taliban's persecution. Address the compounded impact of these policies, especially on women and other vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen international monitoring and pressure: Support UN and human rights organizations efforts to monitor and report on human rights violations and encourage other governments to collectively pressure the Taliban to uphold human rights, particularly for religious minorities, women, and girls.
- Recognize the link between religious freedom and security: The religious freedom of other sects of Islam in Afghanistan, which are attacked by ISIS-K and further oppressed by the Taliban, is closely tied to overall security and the presence of ISIS-K.