



# TURKMENISTAN

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## Key Findings

Particularly severe religious freedom violations persist in Turkmenistan. Despite a few limited reforms in 2007, the country's laws, policies, and practices violate international human rights norms, including those on freedom of religion or belief. Police raids and harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing major difficulties for all religious groups. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service and nine Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection. In light of these severe violations, USCIRF again recommends in 2014 that the U.S. government designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. The Commission has recommended CPC designation for Turkmenistan since 2000, but the State Department has yet to take such action.

## Background

Turkmenistan is the most closed country in the former Soviet Union. The country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in late 2006, oversaw one of the world's most repressive and isolated states. Virtually no independent public activity was allowed, and the 2003 religion law banned most religious activity. Turkmenistan's public life was dominated by Niyazov's quasi-religious personality cult set out in his book, the *Ruhnama*, which was imposed on the country's religious and educational systems.

After assuming the presidency in early 2007, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov ordered the release of 11 political prisoners, including the former chief mufti; placed certain limits on Niyazov's personality cult; set up two new official human rights commissions; and registered 13 minority religious groups. He eased police controls on internal travel and allowed Turkmenistan to become slightly more open to the outside world. Yet, he has not reformed the country's oppressive laws, maintains a state structure of repressive control, and has

reinstated a pervasive presidential personality cult. Denials of international travel for many citizens continues, especially those travelling to participate in religious events, though the Turkmen government announced in July 2013 that it will continue to allow dual Russian-Turkmenistan citizenship to some 110,000 persons, many of whom are Russian Orthodox, making it easier for them to meet with their coreligionists abroad.

Turkmenistan's constitution purports to guarantee religious freedom, the separation of religion from the state, and equality regardless of religion or belief. The 2003 religion law, however, contradicts these provisions. Despite reforms in 2007, this law sets intrusive registration criteria and bans any activity by unregistered religious organizations; requires that the government be informed of all foreign financial support; forbids worship in private homes, allows only clerics to wear

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religious garb in public; and places severe and discriminatory restrictions on religious education. The government-appointed Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) supervises religious matters. The CRA controls the hiring, promoting, and firing of Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox clergy; censors religious publications; and oversees the activities of all registered groups. CRA members include only government officials and Sunni Muslim and Russian Orthodox Church representatives.

In its 2013 written response during the Universal Periodic Review, the government of Turkmenistan denied to the UN Human Rights Council that any laws restricted the activities of religious groups or criminalized religious activities due to a lack of legal registration.

## **Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014**

### **Punishments for Religious and Human Rights Activities**

In January 2014, new administrative code provisions increased the penalties for most “illegal” religious activities. The government continues to impose harsh penalties, such as imprisonment, forcible drug treatment, and fines, for religious and human rights activities. In recent years, Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses were detained, fined, imprisoned or internally exiled for their religious convictions. In September 2013, police in the city of Mary resumed pressure on the unregistered Protestant congregation led by former religious prisoner of conscience Pastor Ilmurad Nurliev, Forum 18 News Service reported; there is concern that the pastor may be re-arrested. Even registered religious groups may be subject to police raids, as happened in December 2013 in Dashoguz. A Baptist summer camp was also raided and closed by police in 2013. One Protestant and one Jehovah’s Witness are known to be imprisoned for their faith, in addition to nine conscientious objectors. Reports have faded of a dissident imam who had spent years in a psychiatric hospital; this information drought also applies to dozens of other political and religious prisoners, according to a new NGO coalition, known as “Prove they are Alive.” Further, the International Committee for the Red Cross continues to be denied access to Turkmenistan’s prisons.

### **Government Control over Religious Activities**

The secret police, anti-terrorist police units, local government, and local CRA officials continue to raid registered and unregistered religious communities. It is illegal for unregistered groups to rent, purchase, or construct places of worship, and even registered groups must obtain scarce government permits. A decree banned publication of religious texts inside Turkmenistan and only registered groups can legally import such texts. The religion law also bans private religious education. Muslims are not allowed to travel abroad for religious education and there is an extensive list of Turkmen citizens banned from international travel. The country’s largest religious minority, the Russian Orthodox Church, lacks an institution within Turkmenistan to train clergy, but Russian Orthodox men are allowed to exit the country for clerical training.

## **Conscientious Objectors**

Turkmen law has no civilian alternative to military service for conscientious objectors. Those who refuse to serve can face up to two years of jail, but until 2009 the Turkmen government had given suspended sentences. Currently, nine Jehovah’s Witnesses are imprisoned and

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maltreated for refusal of military service; four others were given suspended sentences; their relatives who complained to the UN were threatened, tortured and beaten in 2013.

### **Registration of Religious Groups**

Since 2005, some small religious groups have been registered, such as the Baha’i, several Pentecostal groups, Seventh-Day Adventists, several Evangelical churches, and the Society for Krishna Consciousness. In 2010, Turkmenistan told the UN Human Rights Committee there are 123 registered religious groups, 100 of which are Sunni and Shi’a Muslim and 13 Russian Orthodox. Some groups have decided not to register due to the onerous and opaque process, while certain Shi’a Muslim groups, the Armenian Apostolic Church, some Protestant groups, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses have had numerous registration applications rejected.

### **Government Interference in Internal Religious Affairs**

The Turkmen government interferes in the internal leadership and organizational arrangements of religious communities. In early 2013, the President named a new Grand Mufti. Turkmen Muslims are concerned that the government replaced imams who had formal Islamic theological training with individuals lacking such education. Also, it is official policy not to name imams if they have had foreign theological training. The Turkmen government still limits the number of annual *hajj* travelers to 188, despite a higher quota being permitted. Local secret police officers reportedly require Muslim and Orthodox clerics to report regularly on activities.

## Recommendations for U.S. Policy

For the past decade, U.S. policy in Central Asia was dominated by the Afghan war, and human rights and religious freedom were not major concerns. USCIRF believes that this policy was shortsighted. The evolving regional geopolitical situation may or may not create new security imperatives for the United States, but USCIRF urges the U.S. government to prioritize religious freedom and related human rights in Turkmenistan. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government designate Turkmenistan as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Raise human rights and religious freedom in all bilateral meetings with the Turkmen government, urge it to adopt new laws and practices that comply with international human rights standards, establish a regular reporting mechanism on these issues, and call for the release of religious prisoners, including conscientious objectors;
- Ensure that the U.S. Embassy maintains active contacts with human rights activists and press the Turkmen government to ensure that every prisoner has greater access to his or her family, human rights monitors, adequate medical care, and a lawyer;
- Encourage public scrutiny of Turkmenistan's record on religious freedom and related human rights in appropriate international fora, such as the UN and OSCE, and encourage the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), which is based in Turkmenistan and seeks to encourage more effective government responses to terrorism and extremism, to enhance the human rights aspect of its work;
- Urge the Turkmen government to agree to another visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, as well as visits from the Rapporteurs on Independence of the Judiciary and on Torture, set specific visit dates, and provide the full and necessary conditions for their visits;
- Encourage the Broadcasting Board of Governors to increase radio broadcasts and Internet programs to Turkmenistan, including information on religious freedom, human rights and basic education, to help overcome decades of isolation, and

continue to press for resumption of the U.S. Peace Corps program that existed for 20 years, which the Turkmenistan government ended in 2013; and

- Re-establish funding for the State Department's Title VIII program for research, including on religious freedom and human rights, as well as for language programs related to the study of Eurasia.