

# TURKMENISTAN 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and provides for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution maintains the separation of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs. The Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom requires all religious organizations, including those already registered under the previous law on religion, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to operate legally, a process involving the concurrence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Ministry of National Security (MNB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), and other government agencies. The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the country’s constitution or if it is not recognized as a religion by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), under the grand mufti’s leadership. The law also states the government may dissolve a religious organization for activities violating the lawful interests of the country’s citizens or for harming their “health and morale.” It prohibits all activity by unregistered religious groups. The government does not offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors. According to a nongovernmental organization (NGO), a Muslim prisoner arrested in 2013 died in government custody, with his body described as “incredibly thin” and “blue from beatings.” He was one of a group of Muslims arrested after participating in a religious study group and charged with conspiracy to seize power and incitement of social, ethnic, or religious hatred. According to the international NGO Forum 18, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups continued to face harassment, torture, raids, fines, seizure of literature, and house searches. A court sentenced 18 men up to 25 years in prison in an apparent purge of individuals associated with the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. An international NGO stated the men were reportedly tortured. Authorities arrested and tried army officers in the city of Serdar for propagating “nontraditional Islam,” sentencing them to lengthy prison terms. State institutions reportedly dismissed employees because of their engagement in religious activities, including prayer. The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year, but Forum 18 reported the government reregistered one Pentecostal community in Ashgabat and one in Dashoguz. The government continued to appoint all senior Muslim clerics, prevent the importation of religious literature, and create difficulties for religious groups attempting to purchase or

lease buildings or land for religious purposes. Ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam reported the government scrutinized them more closely than ethnic non-Turkmen converts.

Individuals deviating from traditional religious beliefs and practices continued to report societal criticism and harassment, including denunciation by family members, friends, and neighbors for converting to a different religion. Members of registered Christian religious organizations reported continued hostility from acquaintances due to their religious affiliation.

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting U.S. government officials continued to express concern about arrests, harsh prison conditions (including overcrowding, lack of heat or air conditioning, poor food, lack of bathing facilities, and poor medical care), and detainment of members of religious communities. U.S. officials met with government officials and urged the government to improve its treatment of religious minorities, create civilian service alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors, clarify registration procedures for religious organizations, and lift restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature. In October the embassy held a roundtable discussion with various religious organizations to discuss the status of their reregistration process.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 22, 2017, the Secretary of State redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the “important national interest of the United States.”

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.4 million (July 2017 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, the country is 89 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 9 percent Eastern Orthodox, and 2 percent other. There are small communities of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Shia Muslims, Bahais, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

Most ethnic Russians and Armenians are Christian and generally are members of the Russian or Armenian Orthodox Churches, respectively. Some ethnic Russians and Armenians are also members of smaller religious groups.

There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, made up of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, located along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi.

According to recent estimates, 200-250 Jews live in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and worship and provides for the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution separates the roles of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs or carrying out state functions. The constitution states public education shall be secular in nature. It guarantees the equality of citizens before the law regardless of their religious preference.

The 2016 Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom requires all religious organizations, including those that had registered previously, to register again with the MOJ to operate legally within the country. Unlike the previous statute, which differentiated between “religious groups” (with fewer than 50 members) and “religious organizations” (with 50 or more members), the current law omits mention of “religious groups” and permits only the registration of “religious organizations,” which must have at least 50 resident members above the age of 18. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies, as well as to provide religious education, and registered in accordance with the country’s legislation.

In order to register, organizations must submit to the SCROEERIR their contact information; proof of address; a statement requesting registration signed by the founders and board members of the organization; two copies of the organization’s charter; a registration fee of 200 manat (\$57); and the names, addresses, and dates of birth of the organization’s founders. Once SCROEERIR endorses an application for registration, it is submitted to the MOJ, which coordinates an interministerial approval process involving the MFA, the MNB, MVD, and other government offices. According to government procedures, the MOJ may additionally request biographic information on all the members of an organization

applying for registration. The law states the leaders of registered religious organizations must be citizens who have received an “appropriate religious education.”

The tax code stipulates registered religious organizations are exempt from taxes.

The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the constitution or if SCROEERIR does not recognize it as a religious organization. The law does not specify the standards SCROEERIR uses to make that determination. The law assigns the Office of the Prosecutor General to monitor the compliance of a religious organization with the constitution. The law specifies a court may suspend the activities of a religious organization if it determines the organization to be in violation of the constitution. The law also states that grounds for dissolution of a religious organization include activities “that violate the rights, freedoms, and lawful interests of citizens” or “harm their health and morale.”

The administrative code covering religious organizations delineates a schedule of fines for conducting activities not described in a religious organization’s charter.

Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered branches of registered religious organizations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services, including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 1,000 manat (\$29 to \$290), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for lay members.

The law states MOJ officials have the right to attend any religious event held by a registered religious organization and to question religious leaders about any aspect of their activities.

The administrative code stipulates penalties from 200 to 500 manat (\$57 to \$140) for officials who violate an individual’s right of freedom to worship or right to abstain from worship.

The criminal and administrative codes provide punishment for the harassment of members of registered religious organizations by private individuals. According to the administrative code, obstructing the exercise of religious freedom is punishable by a fine up to 1,000 manat (\$290) or detention for 15 days. The criminal code states such an obstruction is punishable with a fine up to 6,500 manat (\$1,900) or

one year of correctional work. If an obstruction involves a physical attack, the punishment may entail up to two years in prison.

The law allows registered religious organizations to establish religious educational establishments for the training of clergy and other religious personnel after obtaining a license to do so. The Cabinet of Ministers establishes the procedures for obtaining a license. The law also states individuals teaching religious disciplines at religious educational establishments should have a theological education and carry out their activities with the permission of the central governing body of the religious organization and the approval of SCROEERIR. Protestant organizations receive their religious education abroad or via distance learning.

According to the law, SCROEERIR is responsible for helping registered religious organizations work with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they comply with the law, assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations. The law states SCROEERIR must approve individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, although the law does not specify the procedures for obtaining the consent of SCROEERIR. SCROEERIR operates under the leadership of the grand mufti, who by law is appointed by the government, as are all other senior clerics. The deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers for education, health, religion, sports, tourism, science, new technologies, and innovation oversees SCROEERIR's work.

By law, local governments have the right to monitor and “analyze” the “religious situation” within their jurisdiction, send proposals to SCROEERIR to “modernize” legislation on religious freedom, and coordinate religious ceremonies conducted outside of religious buildings.

The law prohibits the publication of religious literature inciting “religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial hatred,” although it does not specify which agency makes this determination. SCROEERIR must approve imported religious literature; only registered religious organizations may import literature. Registered religious organizations may be fined for publishing or disseminating religious material without government approval. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 200 to 2,000 manat (\$57 to \$570), for producing, importing, and disseminating unauthorized religious literature and other religious materials.

The law states religious customs, rituals, and ceremonies may be held on residential property, but the housing code states communal housing should not be used for activities other than habitation.

The law allows local governments, with the consent of SCROEERIR, to make decisions regarding the construction of religious buildings and structures within their jurisdiction.

There is no religious instruction in public schools. The law allows registered religious organizations to provide religious education to children for up to four hours per week with parental and SCROEERIR approval, although the law does not specify the requirements for obtaining SCROEERIR's approval. Persons who graduate from institutions of higher religious education, and who obtain approval from SCROEERIR, may provide religious education. According to the law, citizens have a right to obtain religious education, although obtaining religious education in private settings such as residences is banned. Persons offering private religious education are subject to legal action.

The law prohibits unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious organizations from providing religious education.

The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 100 to 500 manat (\$29 to \$140), for providing unauthorized religious education to children.

The constitution states two years of military service are compulsory for men over the age of 18. Per the provisions of the constitution and the law, the government does not offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors, but offers persons who refuse military service for religious reasons noncombatant positions in the armed forces. Refusal to perform the compulsory two-year service in the armed forces is punishable by a maximum of two years in prison or a two-year maximum sentence of corrective labor, which involves working at a government-assigned position near one's home or transferring to an assigned position at a location away from one's home. In addition, the state withholds part of the salaries of prisoners sentenced to corrective labor in the amount designated by the court. Salary deductions range between 5-20 percent. The law states no one has the right to refuse duties established by the constitution and the law for religious reasons.

The constitution and law prohibit the establishment of political parties on the basis of religion, and the law prohibits the involvement of religious groups in politics.

The law does not address the activities of foreign missionaries and foreign religious organizations. The administrative code, however, bans registered religious organizations from receiving assistance from foreign entities for prohibited activities, including missionary work.

The law requires religious groups to register all foreign assistance with the MOJ and provide interim and final reports on the use of funds. The administrative code provides a detailed schedule of fines for accepting funds from foreign sources by both unregistered and registered religious groups; the code stipulates fines up to 10,000 manat (\$2,900) for religious groups receiving unapproved donations from outside the country.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

*Summary Paragraph:* A Muslim prisoner arrested in 2013 in Turkmenabat for participating in a religious study group died in a government maximum security prison. An NGO described his body as “incredibly thin” and “blue from beatings.” A court sentenced 18 men of terms up to 25 years in prison in what appeared to be a purge of individuals associated with Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen. An international NGO stated the men were reportedly tortured while in custody. Authorities sentenced 12 army officers in Serdar to lengthy prison sentences for propagating “nontraditional Islam.” Jehovah’s Witnesses and Protestant groups continued to experience harassment, physical mistreatment, raids, fines, seizure of literature, and house searches. State institutions dismissed employees due to their religious activities, including prayer. The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year, but Forum 18 reported the government reregistered one Pentecostal community in Ashgabat and one in Dashoguz. The government continued to appoint all senior Muslim clerics, prevent the importation of religious literature, and create difficulties for religious groups attempting to purchase or lease buildings or land for religious purposes.

According to Forum 18, Aziz Gafurov, a Muslim prisoner arrested in Turkmenabat in 2013, died in government custody during the summer in Ovadan-Depe maximum security prison. Gafurov was one of 20 Muslims arrested after participating in a religious study group and sentenced to long prison terms for multiple offenses, including conspiracy to seize power and incitement of social, ethnic, or religious hatred. According to Forum 18, Gafurov was the third member

of the Turkmenabat group known to have died in prison. According to Forum 18, the relatives of the other members of the Turkmenabat group were not allowed to visit the men in prison and did not know whether they were still alive. Witnesses described Gafurov's body as "incredibly thin" and "blue from beatings".

In October Forum 18 reported Jehovah's Witness and Protestant groups continued to face harassment, torture, raids, fines, seizure of literature, and house searches. On May 17, three plain-clothed officers conducted an unauthorized search of a Jehovah's Witness home in Turkmenabat and seized a passport, laptop, and personal books. During the search, the officers reportedly strangled the Witness, threw him to the floor, twisted his hands, and forcefully shut his mouth to keep him from calling for help. On January 20 in another incident in Turkmenabat, law enforcement officers raided the home of a Witness family, beat several members of the family, including a 14-year-old boy, and seized copies of religious publications, laptops, and mobile phones. On May 19, two police officers shoved a Jehovah's Witness into a car, causing bruises on her arms, and detained her for approximately eight hours. The police officers demanded she write an explanatory note and stop talking about her faith to others. Upon her release, the Witness went to the hospital for a medical exam to document the rough treatment by police. The police officers later arrived at the hospital and threatened her with an administrative offense. Jehovah's Witnesses said more than half of all such incidents targeting members of their community in the country took place in Turkmenabat.

Forum 18 reported police raided a meeting of Protestants and detained the group's leader in mid-May. Also in May Forum 18 reported police detained the leader of a Protestant religious community after the leader's neighbor attended a meeting for worship, stole a Bible, and reported the leader to the police.

Human Rights Watch reported that on February 8, a court sentenced 18 men to up to 25 years in prison in what appeared to be "a purge of people associated with Turkish schools believed to have been previously affiliated with the Gulen movement." The 18 men were among an estimated 100 people arrested in Ashgabat in September and October 2016; authorities released the others. Individuals close to the case said the men were tortured while in custody. According to Human Rights Watch, beginning in late April police arrested approximately 20 individuals in Lebap Province for affiliation with the Gulen movement. The opposition website *Chronicles of Turkmenistan (Chronicles)* reported 19 businessmen with alleged connections to the Gulen movement detained during a September 2016 police raid were being held without official



charges and subjected to various forms of physical abuse by unidentified individuals. The detainees were reportedly former students of Turkmen-Turkish high schools and graduates of the former Turkmen-Turkish University.

In September the family of Annamurad Atadyev, who was reportedly sentenced to 15 years in prison in December 2016 on charges that included “organization of or participation in a criminal community” and “excitement of social, national or religious hatred,” told Forum 18 he had not been seen since his trial. According to Forum 18, Atdayev’s conviction followed his arrest in September 2016, a year after returning from studying Islam in Egypt. The MNB had reportedly interrogated Atdayev about his fellow Turkmen students in Egypt and asked him to become an informer for the organization regarding other Muslims in Ashgabat. He refused.

According to Forum 18, the government continued to imprison members of Muslim groups it categorized as extremist for advocating theologically different interpretations of Islamic religious doctrine. In January Forum 18 reported that former prisoners said prisoners branded as “Wahhabis” (which Forum 18 said meant any devout Muslim that officials disliked) were subjected to harsh treatment and often confined in special sections of prisons.

On May 12, the government released from prison Mansur Masharipov, a Jehovah’s Witness, as part of a general amnesty. In June 2016 Forum 18 reported authorities had arrested Masharipov and sentenced him to one year in prison for assaulting a police officer; he was originally arrested in 2014. At the time of his original arrest, law enforcement officers reportedly confiscated religious literature from his home and took him to the nearest police station, where he was beaten and injected with unknown drugs. Masharipov was then reportedly placed in a drug rehabilitation center, from which he escaped until his re-arrest in Ashgabat in June 2016.

In June *Chronicles* reported that authorities arrested and charged army officers in the city of Serdar with propagating “nontraditional Islam.” Twelve officers received prison sentences, according to various *Chronicles* sources, ranging from 10-15 years to 18-23 years.

Jehovah’s Witnesses reported Jehovah’s Witness Bahram Hemdemov continued to be passed over for amnesty, which the government grants to prisoners three times a year. According to Forum 18, Hemdemov remained in the Seydi labor camp serving a four-year sentence handed down in May 2015 for allegedly inciting religious hatred. He had been arrested in March 2015 for worshipping in his home

in Turkmenabat. While in police custody, authorities reportedly tortured him and pressured him to confess to fabricated violations. In August 2016 an appeal on Hemdemov's behalf was submitted to the UN Human Rights Council.

Forum 18 reported the government continued to refuse to provide information on prisoners. Severe restrictions on communication with prisoners prevented Forum 18 from establishing their status, including whether they remained alive. For example, it was uncertain whether Renat Bektemirov, a Muslim from Turkmenabat who had been convicted in 2008 for sharing his faith with others and questioning the preaching of the regional mufti, remained in prison. Forum 18 reported authorities often jailed Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants as short-term prisoners of conscience for up to 15 days. The government cited public disorder as the reason for their detention.

In October Forum 18 reported the MOJ had reregistered one Pentecostal community in Ashgabat and one in Dashoguz. According to Forum 18, the government stated many applications from other communities seeking to reregister contained "errors." No information was reported on the number of communities seeking reregistration. Government representatives said they did not consider previously registered groups, who had not yet completed their reregistration, to be in violation of the law.

According to government figures, there were 130 registered religious organizations operating in the country. Of the 130, 106 were Muslim, of which 101 were Sunni and five Shia; 13 Russian Orthodox; and 11 categorized as other religious groups, including Bahais, Protestants, Roman Catholics, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year or provide information on the number of new groups that had applied for registration. Several religious groups stated they had submitted applications, which the MOJ returned citing administrative errors. By year's end the government had not provided any new information regarding the registration process for religious organizations, and the registration process remained unclear.

According to Forum 18, state institutions dismissed employees during the year due to their religious activities. A Muslim told *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* that he was dismissed from the armed forces after he refused to stop praying. Authorities initially instructed him to stop praying at work and subsequently searched his home and seized a Quran. When he continued to pray,

Ministry of Defense officials summoned him, demanding he write a statement and a letter of resignation, after which authorities forced him and his family to leave their military accommodations. An employee of another state organization told *RFE/RL* he also had been fired for refusing to stop praying. According to *RFE/RL*, cases of Muslims fired for praying in the military and elsewhere in government were likely increasing.

Local underground human rights activists stated MNB and MVD officers responsible for fighting organized crime and terrorism continued to monitor members of religious minorities, including Christian groups through telephonic and undercover surveillance. The activists said the attitudes of senior government officials toward religion reflected Soviet-era practices, despite legal provisions protecting freedom of religion.

Unregistered groups reported their members were subject to arrest for “unlawful assembly” in addition to fines stipulated by law. Members of these groups said they continued to practice discreetly, mostly in private homes, and could do so as long as neighbors did not file complaints with local authorities.

According to Forum 18, the secret police continued to regularly interview members of religious organizations and demanded they provide information on their communities’ activities.

Representatives of registered Christian groups reported some government officials continued to require them to obtain approval to carry out routine religious activities, such as weekly services, as well as social and charitable activities, including summer camps for children. Multiple groups reported they were denied permission to conduct study groups and seminars, even when they were permitted to hold weekly services.

On October 9, Forum 18 reported the government continued its campaign of mosque demolition in Ashgabat. The capital had 14 mosques in the early 2000s, but authorities had forcibly demolished eight through April 2016. An Ashgabat resident reported on October 4 another mosque had been demolished in the capital. At year’s end a new mosque was under construction in Ashgabat’s Parabat 7/3 neighborhood.

In August the government announced it would sponsor Hajj travel for 160 pilgrims, a decrease from previous years and the lowest since 2009. According to Forum 18, those allowed to join the government-sponsored Hajj group needed

approval from several state agencies, including the police and the MNB. Joining the government-sponsored group cost approximately 7,000 manat (\$2,000), according to Forum 18. The government reported 1,340 people were self-funded but did not report how many people applied for the pilgrimage. As in previous years, the government allowed self-funded pilgrims to make their own arrangements to participate in the Hajj.

The government continued its practice of approving the appointment of all senior Muslim clerics. Some Muslims said they remained concerned about the quality of the training clerics received and about changes the government had made in the leadership it appointed. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups continued to be financed independently; the government was not involved with appointing leadership for these groups.

Religious groups reported the government continued to prevent them from importing religious literature and from subscribing to foreign religious publications. Although by law registered religious groups were allowed to import religious literature, they said the government's complex customs procedures made it extremely difficult. The Quran remained unavailable in state bookstores in Ashgabat, although many people kept a Soviet-era copy in Arabic or Russian in their homes. Few translations were available in the Turkmen language. The government did not authorize distribution of a Turkmen-language translation of the Bible printed in Russia.

Members of various religious groups reported the government and state-affiliated enterprises continued to interfere in the purchase or long-term rentals of land and buildings for worship or meeting purposes. Registered religious groups reported continued difficulty in renting space for holiday celebrations from private landlords, which they attributed to landlords' concerns about potential government disapproval.

Forum 18 reported Jehovah's Witness and Protestant children faced harassment in schools outside of Ashgabat. Authorities fired a state school employee and member of the Jehovah's Witness community due to his religious beliefs in Dashoguz. On January 14, the Turkmen National Institute of World Languages, a public university in Ashgabat, dismissed a woman because she was studying the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses. According to Forum 18, teachers, principals, local officials, and Muslim clerics publicly "vilified" non-Muslim children. Jehovah's Witness children faced additional pressures because of their refusal, on religious grounds, to wear the national flag, including on pins as part of their

school uniform; sing the national anthem; or recite the national oath of allegiance. On January 30 in Turkmenabat, a school's director of studies demanded two Witnesses students sign a paper stating they "would not trust in other religions anymore." The director summoned the students' mother to his office, where police questioned why her children did not wear the national flag pin, sing the national anthem, or recite the national oath. When she asked to see a law requiring her children to do so, the police threatened to search her home.

Theology faculty in the Turkmen State University history department in Ashgabat continued to be the only university-level faculty members allowed to provide Islamic higher education. The MNB reportedly continued to vet student candidates for admission to this program. There was no possibility for studying theological subjects other than state-approved Islamic theology. Women remained banned from the program.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported that young men were no longer imprisoned as conscientious objectors, but continued to face tremendous pressure to enlist in the military.

On February 14, Jehovah's Witness Vepa Matyakubov received a two-year suspended sentence of correctional labor for refusal to serve in the armed forces. In 2016, under pressure from Enlistment Office representatives, Matyakubov signed a "call-up notice," committing him to serve in the army. Matyakubov did not appeal the sentence.

On February 8, Jehovah's Witnesses met with MVD representatives to discuss the possibility of alternative service for Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2014 the government stated it was willing to look into alternatives for conscientious objectors.

The government continued its practice of denying visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. Religious groups able to obtain religious visitor visas for foreign religious speakers reported the government continued to grant such visas for very short durations and required the groups to complete burdensome paperwork. As in previous years, the government did not report the number of religious visitors it allowed to visit the country, nor did it report the number of visa applications of foreign religious visitors it had denied.

According to Forum 18, the MVD and secret police placed many religious believers on a "travel blacklist." Officials subjected persons permitted to travel abroad to close scrutiny upon departure and re-entry into the country.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Persons deviating from traditional religious beliefs and practices continued to report harassment, such as public shaming of their family members, friends, and neighbors. Members of registered Christian groups continued to report hostility from acquaintances due to their religious affiliation.

Persons who joined “nontraditional” religious groups reported continuing societal criticism. Ethnic Turkmen who had converted from Islam received more societal scrutiny than ethnic non-Turkmen converts and continued to be ostracized at community events, especially in rural areas, according to representatives of religious minorities.

Forum 18 reported the level of harassment increased for Jehovah’s Witnesses, who stated they continued to be treated with suspicion and scrutiny by fellow citizens. In March Forum 18 reported that a local imam in Tejen warned about the danger of the “sect named Jehovah’s Witnesses” and “slandered the moral character of a local Witness.”

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting U.S. government officials continued to express concerns about the arrests, harsh prison conditions, and detainment of members of religious communities. In April the Special Advisor for Religious Minorities in the Near East and South and Central Asia and other Department of State officials met with MFA and MOJ representatives to discuss abuses of religious freedom, such as the imprisonment of members of religious communities for engaging in peaceful religious practice, and to urge the government to take positive steps to improve religious freedom. The Special Advisor and other U.S. officials urged the government to create civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors to military service, clarify registration procedures for religious organizations, streamline the process of registering new groups, and lift restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature.

In October the embassy held a roundtable discussion with nine religious organizations to discuss the status of their registration process and abuses of their religious rights.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan had been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. On December 22, 2017, the Secretary of State redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the “important national interest of the United States.”