

# AFGHANISTAN 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution establishes Islam as the state religion but stipulates followers of religions other than Islam may exercise their faith within the limits of the law. Conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy, punishable by death, imprisonment, or confiscation of property, according to the Sunni Islam Hanafi school of jurisprudence. The constitution states the Hanafi school of jurisprudence shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case.” The penal code includes punishments for verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion and punishment for insults or distortions directed towards Islam, including in cyberspace. Representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community continued to say the government’s provision of security in Shia-predominant areas was insufficient. Shia representatives said they saw no increase in Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) protection; however, they said the government distributed arms directly to the Shia community ahead of large Shia gatherings. Following a series of deadly attacks by ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) in March that targeted Sikhs and killed 25 persons, approximately 200 members of the Sikh community departed the country for India, indicating they left because of the lack of security and insufficient government protection. According to the Hindu and Sikh communities, their members continued to avoid settling commercial and civil disputes in the courts due to fear of retaliation by the local community and instead chose to settle disputes through community councils.

There were reports that ISIS-K, an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, continued to target and kill members of minority religious communities and that the Taliban targeted and killed individuals because of their religious beliefs or their links to the government. During the year, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) recorded 19 attacks attributed to ISIS-K and other antigovernment elements targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, compared with 20 attacks in 2019 – causing 115 civilian casualties (60 deaths and 55 injured), compared with 236 civilian casualties (80 deaths and 156 injured) in 2019. According UNAMA, consistent with trends observed in the past four years, many of the suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly ethnic Hazaras. Two major attacks on the Shia Hazara community occurred during the year. On March 6, two gunmen opened fire on participants, primarily Shia Hazara,

attending a commemorative ceremony in Kabul, killing 32; ISIS-K claimed responsibility. On May 12, three gunmen stormed a maternity clinic in a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood of Kabul, killing 24 persons, including mothers, infants, and health-care workers; no group claimed responsibility, although the government believed ISIS-K was responsible. On March 25, gunmen attacked a Sikh *gurdwara* (house of worship and community gathering place) in Kabul, killing 25 and injuring 11. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for this attack. On March 26, an IED detonated during funeral services for the Sikh victims, injuring one person. Police also found and defused two other IEDs targeting Sikhs on March 26 and 27. The Taliban continued to kill or issue death threats against Sunni clerics for preaching messages contrary to its interpretation of Islam. Taliban gunmen killed progovernment imams and other religious officials throughout the country. The Taliban continued to warn mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. According to observers, the Taliban applied its interpretation of Islam in conducting a parallel system of justice. In February, in Baghlan Province, the Taliban shot and killed a pregnant woman named Fatima, who was accused of adultery. Media reported an Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission statement that on June 19, Taliban physically abused and killed the imam of a mosque in Baghlan Province for performing funeral rites for a local police commander. Insurgents claiming affiliation with ISIS-K reportedly engaged in similar activities. According to media, antigovernment forces also targeted Sunni mosques, including attacking two mosques in June, leading to the deaths of two imams and other worshippers. During the year, antigovernment forces carried out several attacks on religious leaders that resulted in fatalities.

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minority groups reported verbal harassment by some Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they still were able to practice their respective religions in public. Hindus and Sikhs said their children were harassed by fellow students in public schools, sometimes to the point that parents withdrew them from classes. According to international sources, Baha'is and Christians lived in constant fear of exposure and were reluctant to reveal their religious identities to anyone. Christian groups reported public sentiment, as expressed in social media and elsewhere, remained hostile towards converts and to Christian proselytization. They said individuals who converted or were studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members. Christians and Ahmadi Muslims reported they continued to worship only privately, at home or in nondescript places of worship, to avoid discrimination and persecution. One mullah in Herat reportedly detained and punished with beatings more than 100 persons for what he said were violations of

sharia; authorities did not restrain his activities, citing the need to focus on the Taliban. Women of several different faiths reported continued harassment by local Muslim religious leaders over their attire, which they said made it necessary for almost all women, both local and foreign, to wear some form of head covering. Observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities, such as music concerts, they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine. According to minority religious leaders, due to the small size of their communities, only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of violent attacks on the community, societal discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported continued interference with efforts to cremate the remains of their dead, in accordance with their customs, by individuals who lived near cremation sites. Despite requesting and receiving local authority support for security during their cremation ceremonies, the Hindu and Sikh communities continued to face protests and threats of violence that prevented them from carrying out the sacred practice. Before every cremation ceremony, the community requested the support of police, who sent security forces to the area to help avoid any disturbance. According to members of the community, at year's end, approximately 400 members of the Sikh and Hindu communities remained in the country, down from approximately 600 at the start of the year.

U.S. Embassy officials continued to work with the government to promote understanding of religious freedom and why it is important as well the need for the acceptance and protection of religious minorities in meetings with senior government officials. To enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism, facilitate creation of a national strategy against such extremism, and create policies to foster religious tolerance, embassy representatives met with the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA), among other government agencies. The embassy regularly raised concerns about public safety and freedom to worship with security ministers. Embassy officials continued to meet regularly with leaders of major religious groups, as well as religious minorities, scholars, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. On February 17, embassy officials conducted a discussion via the Lincoln Learning Center in Khost Province with students, civil activists, and youth to explore how religious freedom is promoted in the United States. The embassy used virtual platforms to engage communities so these discussions could continue despite COVID-19 restrictions. The embassy continued to sponsor programs for religious leaders to increase interreligious dialogue, identify ways to

counter violent religious extremism, empower female religious leaders, and promote tolerance for religious diversity. The embassy also used social media to condemn attacks on places of worship.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 36.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). There are no reliable statistics available concerning the percentages of Sunni and Shia Muslims in the country; the government's Central Statistics Office does not track disaggregated population data. According to Pew Forum data from 2009, Shia make up approximately 10-15 percent of the population.

According to religious community leaders, the Shia population, approximately 90 percent of whom are ethnic Hazaras, is predominantly Jaafari, but it also includes Ismailis. Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians, constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. According to Sikh leaders, there are fewer than 400 members of the Sikh community remaining in the country, compared with an estimated 600 at the start of the year and 1,300 in 2017. Most of the community is located in Kabul, with smaller groups in Nangarhar and Ghazni Provinces. Hindu community leaders estimate there are fewer than 50 remaining Afghan Hindus, all male and primarily businessmen with families in other countries.

The Ahmadi Muslim community estimates it has 450 adherents nationwide, down from 600 in 2017. Reliable estimates of the Baha'i and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions, including at least one Jew.

Hazaras live predominantly in the central and western provinces as well as in Kabul; Ismaili Muslims live mainly in Kabul and in the central and northern provinces. Followers of the Baha'i faith live predominantly in Kabul, with a small community in Kandahar. Ahmadi Muslims largely live in Kabul.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution declares Islam the official state religion and says no law may contravene the tenets and provisions of the "sacred religion of Islam." It further states there shall be no amendment to the constitution's provisions with respect to

adherence to the fundamentals of Islam. According to the constitution, followers of religions other than Islam are “free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law.”

The penal code contains provisions that criminalize verbal and physical assaults on religion and protects individuals’ right to exercise their beliefs for any religion. The penal code includes punishments for verbal and physical assaults on a follower of any religion and punishment for insults or distortions directed towards Islam, including in cyberspace. An article in the penal code specifies what constitutes an insult to religion, stating, “A person who intentionally insults a religion or disrupts its rites or destroys its permitted places of worship shall be deemed as a perpetrator of the crime of insulting religions and shall be punished according to provisions of this chapter.” The penal code specifies that deliberate insults or distortions directed towards Islamic beliefs or laws carry a prison sentence of one to five years and specifies imprisonment for persons using a computer system, program, or data to insult Islam.

Another article of the penal code states persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, destroy or damage “permitted places of worship” (a term not defined by the code) where religious rituals are conducted, or destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion are subject to imprisonment of three months to one year or a fine ranging from 30,000 to 60,000 afghanis (\$390-\$780). In cases where killings or physical injury result from the disturbance of religious rites or ceremonies, the accused individual is tried according to crimes of murder and physical injury as defined by law.

While apostasy is not specifically provided for under the penal code, it falls under the seven offenses making up *hudood* crimes as defined by sharia. According to the penal code, perpetrators of hudood crimes are punished according to sharia as interpreted by the Sunni school of Hanafi jurisprudence. According to Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence, which the constitution states shall apply “if there is no provision in the constitution or other laws about a case,” beheading is appropriate for male apostates, while life imprisonment is appropriate for female apostates, unless the individual repents. A judge may also impose a lesser penalty, such as short-term imprisonment or lashes, if doubt about the apostasy exists. Under Hanafi jurisprudence, the government may also confiscate the property of apostates or prevent apostates from inheriting property. This guidance applies to individuals who are of sound mind and have reached the age of maturity. Civil law states the age of maturity for citizens is 18, although it is 16 for females with regard to marriage. Islamic law defines age of maturity as the point at which one shows

signs of puberty, and puberty is usually applied as the marriageable age, particularly for girls.

Conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence applicable in the courts. If someone converts to another religion from Islam, he or she shall have three days to recant the conversion. If the person does not recant, then he or she shall be subject to the punishment for apostasy. Proselytizing to try to convert individuals from Islam to another religion is also illegal according to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, which is applied in the courts. Those accused of proselytizing are subject to the same punishment as those who convert from Islam.

Blasphemy, which may include anti-Islamic writings or speech, is a capital crime according to the Hanafi school. Accused blasphemers, like apostates, have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia. Some *hadiths* (sayings or traditions that serve as a source of Islamic law or guidance) suggest discussion and negotiation with an apostate to encourage the apostate to recant.

According to a 2007 ruling from the General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court, the Baha'i Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. All Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates; Baha'is are labeled infidels by other Muslims.

Licensing and registration of religious groups by the MOHRA are not required. Registration as a group (which gives the group the status of a council, known as a *shura*) or an association conveys official recognition and the benefit of government provision of facilities for seminars and conferences. By law, anyone who is 18 years of age or older may establish a social or political organization. Such an entity must have a central office as well as a charter consistent with domestic laws. Both groups and associations may register with the Ministry of Justice. The ministry may dissolve such organizations through a judicial order. Groups recognized as shuras may cooperate with one another on religious issues. Associations may conduct business with the government or the society as a whole.

A mass media law prohibits the production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam or offensive to other religions and denominations. It also prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam and bans articles on any topic the government deems might harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and

adolescents. The law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan, a government agency, to provide broadcasting content reflecting the religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country, all based on Islam. Some radio stations provide religious programming for Sunni Muslims, and a smaller number of radio stations provide religious programming for Shia Muslims. The law also obligates the agency to adjust its programs to reflect Islamic principles as well as national and spiritual values.

According to the constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, as well as academic principles” and develop courses on religion based on the “Islamic sects” in the country. The national curriculum includes materials designed separately for Sunni-majority schools and Shia-majority schools as well as textbooks that emphasize nonviolent Islamic terms and principles. The curriculum includes courses on Islam but not on other religions. Non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools, but there are no alternatives offered. The registration process for madrassahs requires a school to demonstrate it has suitable buildings, classrooms, accredited teachers, and dormitories if students live on campus. MOHRA registers madrassahs collocated with mosques, while the Ministry of Education registers madrassahs not associated with mosques. In MOHRA-registered madrassahs, students receive instruction, with one imam teaching approximately 50 to 70 children studying at various levels. Only certificates issued by registered madrassahs allow students to pursue higher education at government universities.

According to the law, all funds contributed to madrassahs by private or international sources must be channeled through the Ministry of Education.

The civil and penal codes derive their authority from the constitution. The constitution stipulates the courts shall apply constitutional provisions as well as the law in ruling on cases. For instances in which neither the constitution nor the penal or civil codes addresses a specific case, the constitution declares the courts may apply Hanafi jurisprudence within the limits set by the constitution to attain justice. The constitution also allows courts to apply Shia law in cases involving Shia followers. Non-Muslims may not provide testimony in matters requiring Hanafi jurisprudence. The constitution makes no mention of separate laws applying to non-Muslims.

A Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not an adherent of one of the other two Abrahamic faiths –

Christianity or Judaism. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

The government's national identity cards indicate an individual's religion as well as nationality, tribe, and ethnicity. Individuals are not required to declare belief in Islam to receive citizenship.

The constitution requires the President and two Vice Presidents to be Muslim. Other senior officials (ministers, members of parliament, judges) must swear allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam as part of their oath of office.

The constitution allows the formation of political parties, provided the program and charter of a party are "not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam." The constitution states political parties may not be based on sectarianism.

The law mandates an additional seat in parliament's lower house be reserved for a member of the Hindu or Sikh communities. The person occupying the seat is not obliged to swear allegiance to Islam, only to obey the law and serve all citizens and the state.

MOHRA is responsible for managing Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, revenue collection for religious activities, acquisition of property for religious purposes, issuance of fatwas, educational testing of imams, sermon preparation and distribution for government-supported mosques, and raising public awareness of religious issues.

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

### **Government Practices**

Media reported and representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community continued to say government security and development initiatives in Shia-predominant areas were insufficient, merely symbolic measures – and that the government failed to implement effective measures to protect the community, including from nonstate actors. Members of the Shia community reported they saw no increase in ANDSF protection during the year; however, they said the government distributed arms directly to the community ahead of large Shia gatherings. The Ministry of Interior again promised to increase security around Shia mosques and authorized the arming of Shia civilians under police authority to provide extra security for the Ashura commemoration. According to media

reports, security forces took special precautions to reduce street traffic in the affected neighborhoods of Kabul during the Ashura commemoration period. There were no reports of violence during Ashura processions.

Following a series of deadly attacks by ISIS-K in March that killed 25 persons, approximately 200 members of the Sikh community departed the country for India, indicating they left because of lack of security and insufficient government protection.

There were no reports of government prosecutions for blasphemy or apostasy; however, individuals converting from Islam reported they continued to risk annulment of their marriages, rejection by their families and communities, loss of employment, and possibly the death penalty. Baha'is continued to be labeled as "infidels" by many Muslims, although they were not always considered converts from Islam (apostates); as such, they were not charged with either crime.

MOHRA officials said the ministry had no official statistics on the number of mullahs and mosques in the country because it lacked the financial resources to generate a comprehensive registry, but they estimated there were approximately 160,000 mosques. MOHRA reported that at year's end, of the approximately 120,000 mullahs in the country, 7,000 mullahs were registered with and paid by MOHRA. They said registered mullahs working directly for MOHRA continued to receive monthly salaries of between 7,710 and 15,420 afghanis (\$100-\$200) from the government, depending on their location, the size of their congregation, and the knowledge of the mullah. MOHRA reported that just 7,000 mosques in the country were registered with the ministry.

MOHRA reported it continued to allocate approximately 65 percent of its budget (188 million afghanis – \$2.44 million) for the construction of new mosques, although local groups remained the source of most of the funds for the new mosques. Unless the local groups requested financial or other assistance from the ministry, they were not required to inform the ministry about new construction.

Hindu and Sikh groups again reported they remained free to build places of worship and to train other Hindus and Sikhs to become clergy but not to spread information about their religion or encourage others to practice it. Hindu and Sikh community members said they continued to avoid pursuing commercial and civil disputes in the courts for fear of retaliation and that they avoided pursuing land disputes through the courts for the same reason, especially if powerful local leaders occupied their property.

Although the government provided land to use as cremation sites, Sikh leaders stated the distance from any major urban area and the lack of security continued to make the land unusable. Hindus and Sikhs also reported that individuals who lived near the cremation site continued to interfere with their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead. In response, the government continued to provide police support to protect the Sikh and Hindu communities while they performed their cremation rituals. The government allocated 80 million afghanis (\$1.04 million) for the repair of places of worship, including for Sikh and Hindu sites, of which 40 million afghanis (\$520,000) were expended as of October 2020. Community leaders reported that MOHRA provided free water and electricity and was making efforts to provide repair services for a few remaining Sikh and Hindu temples.

According to MOHRA, due to insecurity, the ministry did not have access to most of the country, especially in districts, villages, and rural areas. MOHRA officials said there were hundreds or thousands of unregistered mosques and madrassahs located in Taliban-controlled areas. They said that in rural areas and most villages, mosques were used as madrassahs and that because most mosques were not registered, most madrassahs were not either. In November, the First Vice President, Amrullah Saleh, ordered the Central Statistics Office to register all teachers and students of the 362 madrassahs in Kabul City and of the 130 madrassahs in the other districts of Kabul Province. Once registration was complete in Kabul Province, the office was expected to conduct the same process throughout the country. According to MOHRA, there was no system or mechanism for opening a new madrassah, particularly at the district level and in villages. MOHRA officials said it did not have a database or information on the number of madrassahs or mosques, except for information on the number of mosques located at provincial or district centers with imams on the MOHRA's payroll. According to media reporting, there were approximately 5,000 madrassahs and "Quran learning centers" throughout the country registered with MOHRA. More than 300,000 students were enrolled in these registered madrassahs during the year, mostly in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat Provinces, according to MOHRA's estimates. The government stated that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it did not have sufficient resources to consolidate data on the enrollment of students in religious institutions.

MOHRA officials said the government continued its efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of registering madrassahs, including recognition of graduation certificates and financial and material assistance, such as furniture or stationery. Government officials said they were concerned about their inability to supervise

unregistered madrassas that could teach violent extremist curricula intolerant of religious minorities and become recruitment centers for antigovernment groups.

Mosques continued to handle primary-level religious studies. Approximately 80 Ministry of Education-registered public madrassahs offered two-year degree programs at the secondary level. An estimated 1,000 public madrassahs were registered with the ministry, each receiving financial support from the government. There were no estimates of the number of unregistered madrassas available.

Members of the Ulema Council, the highest religious body in the country, continued to receive financial support from the state, although it officially remained independent from the government. The council also provided advice to some provincial governments; however, according to scholars and NGOs, most legal decision making in villages and rural areas continued to be based on local interpretations of Islamic law and tradition. President Ashraf Ghani held meetings with Ulema Council members on promoting intrafaith tolerance and “moderate practices” of Islam.

Minority religious groups reported the courts continued not to apply the protections provided to those groups by law, and the courts denied non-Muslims equal access to the courts and other legal redress, even when the non-Muslims were legally entitled to those same rights.

Representatives from non-Muslim religious minorities, including Sikhs and Hindus, reported a consistent pattern of discrimination at all levels of the justice system. As Taliban representatives engaged in peace process discussions, some Sikhs and Hindus expressed concern that in a postconflict environment they might be required to wear yellow (forehead) dots, badges, or armbands, as the Taliban had mandated during its 1996-2001 rule. Non-Muslims said they continued to risk being tried according to Hanafi jurisprudence. Instead, their members continued to settle disputes within their communities.

Leaders of both Hindu and Sikh communities continued to state they faced discrimination in the judicial system, including long delays in resolving cases, particularly regarding the continued appropriation of Sikh properties.

MOHRA’s office dedicated to assisting religious minorities, specifically Sikhs and Hindus, focused on helping Sikhs and Hindus secure passports and visas so they could permanently leave the country, most often to India.

Some Shia continued to hold senior positions in the government, including Second Vice President Sarwar Danish and a number of deputy ministers, governors, and one member of the Supreme Court, but no cabinet-level positions, unlike in previous years. Shia leaders continued to state the proportion of official positions held by Shia did not reflect their estimate of the country's demographics, which they attributed to the government's marginalization of minority groups and the lack of a supportive social environment. Sunni members of the Ulema Council continued to state, however, that Shia were overrepresented in government based on Sunni estimates of the percentage of Shia in the population. According to some observers, Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims, often faced discrimination based on their ethnicity and religion. Some observers also said the country's Shia were underrepresented in government not because of their religion, but because of their Hazara ethnicity. According to NGOs, the government frequently assigned Hazara police officers to symbolic positions with little authority within the Ministry of Interior. NGOs also reported that Hazara ANDSF officers were more likely than non-Hazara officers to be posted to insecure areas of the country.

A small and decreasing number of Sikhs continued to serve in government positions, including one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament, one as an elected member in the lower house, and one as a presidential advisor on Sikh and Hindu affairs.

Three Ismaili Muslims were members of parliament, down one from 2019, and State Minister for Peace Sadat Mansoor Naderi is also an Ismaili Muslim. Ismaili community leaders continued to report concerns about what they called the exclusion of Ismailis from other positions of political authority.

The government continued to support the efforts of judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different Islamic religious groups (Sunni and Shia) to promote Muslim intrafaith reconciliation. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and MOHRA continued working toward their stated goal of gaining nationwide acceptance of the practice of allowing women to attend mosques. The Ulema Council, the Islamic Brotherhood Council (a Shia-led initiative with some Sunni members), and MOHRA continued their work on intrafaith reconciliation. On October 25 and November 12, they held meetings in Kabul to address concerns and find areas of mutual cooperation. On October 1, women's rights activist Jamila Afghani organized the country's first women's Ulema conference, held in Kabul. Ministry officials and NGOs promoting religious tolerance, however, said it was difficult to continue their programs due to funding and capacity constraints.

## **Actions of Foreign Forces and Nonstate Actors**

According to journalists, local observers, and UNAMA, attacks by ISIS-K and other insurgent groups continued to target specific religious and ethnoreligious groups, including the Shia Hazara. During the year, UNAMA documented a reduction from 2019 in civilian casualties from attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers. UNAMA recorded 19 attacks targeting places of worship, religious leaders, and worshippers, compared with 20 attacks in 2019. The attacks caused 115 civilian casualties (60 deaths and 55 injured), compared with 236 civilian casualties (80 deaths and 156 injured) in 2019. The report attributed all the attacks to antigovernment elements.

UNAMA continued to report high levels of ISIS-K-directed, sectarian-motivated violence, primarily targeting the Shia Muslim, mostly ethnic Hazara, population. It documented 10 incidents of sectarian-motivated violence against Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims, and Sikhs, resulting in 308 civilian casualties (112 killed and 196 injured), compared with 2019 when there were 10 incidents resulting in 485 civilian casualties (117 killed and 368 injured).

Several major attacks against the Shia Hazara community occurred during the year. On March 6, gunmen attacked a ceremony in Kabul attended primarily by Shia Hazara, killing 32 persons; ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack. On May 12, three unidentified gunmen stormed a maternity clinic in a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood of Kabul, killing 24 persons, including mothers, infants, and healthcare workers; no group claimed responsibility. On October 24, a suicide bomber staged an attack on an educational center in the same Shia Hazara-dominant neighborhood of Kabul, killing 24 persons and wounding 57. Most of the casualties were between the ages of 15 and 25. ISIS-K claimed responsibility.

On March 25, gunmen attacked a Sikh *gurdwara* in Kabul, killing 25 and injuring 11 during a six-hour siege. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for this attack. On March 26, an IED detonated during funeral services for the Sikh victims, injuring one. On March 27, police found and defused another IED near the Kabul *gurdwara*. In the months that followed, many Sikh families departed the country, primarily to India, due to threats against Sikhs and what they perceived to be inadequate government protection.

Progovernment Islamic scholars were killed in attacks for which no group claimed responsibility. Media reported that on January 28, the district director of the Hajj

and Religious Department for Pashtun-Zarghon District in Herat Province, Mullah Abdulhamid Ahmadi, was shot and killed by unidentified individuals. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. Media reported that on February 2, unidentified gunmen killed one person praying in a Shia mosque in Herat. On February 11, five children were killed and three others wounded when a bomb exploded at their Sunni madrassah in Kunduz Province. All the children were under the age of 14. On May 13, unknown gunmen attacked worshippers praying at a Sunni mosque in Khost Province. One person was killed and another wounded. On May 19, unidentified gunmen killed three persons and wounded another in a Sunni mosque in Khost. Also on May 19, in Parwan Province, gunmen opened fire on worshippers gathered at a Sunni mosque, killing 12, including four children, and wounding six. None of the perpetrators was identified.

On June 18, a bomb killed at least seven students at a seminary in Takhar Province. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, and there was no investigation of the incident by year's end.

According to media, antigovernment forces also targeted progovernment Sunni mosques. On June 2, a bomb exploded inside the Sunni Wazir Akber Khan Mosque in Kabul, killing the imam and one other worshipper attending evening prayers. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the attack. On June 12, a bomb in the Sunni Sher Shah Suri Mosque in Kabul killed four men gathered for Friday prayers, including the imam. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. Following these attacks on two mosques in June, clerics gathered in Kabul to demand government protection of religious figures. Media reported that the Ministry of Interior said it had assigned a team to investigate the incidents.

The Taliban continued to kill religious leaders and threaten them with death for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam or its political agenda. Media reported that on December 22, the Taliban killed Imam Mawlawi Ghullam Sakhi Khatib in Farah because of his progovernment messaging.

In several cases, the responsibility for attacks on progovernment religious leaders was unclear. In these instances, although no individual or group claimed responsibility, local authorities said they suspected that ISIS-K or, less frequently, the Taliban were responsible. On June 13, an imam in Takhar Province was killed and two of his companions wounded by unidentified gunmen as the imam returned from prayers. No group claimed responsibility. On October 17, a religious scholar

was killed by a bomb that exploded inside the seminary where he studied in Nangarhar Province; no group claimed responsibility.

There continued to be reports of the Taliban monitoring the social practices of local populations in areas under their control and imposing punishments on residents according to their interpretation of Islamic law. According to observers, the Taliban applied its interpretation of Islam in conducting a parallel system of justice. In February, in Baghlan Province, the Taliban shot and killed a pregnant woman named Fatima, who was accused of adultery. The man with whom she was reportedly involved escaped. Media reported that on August 4, the Taliban killed a local singer in Takhar Province as he returned home from a wedding because the Taliban considered singing to be prohibited in Islam.

There were again reports of Taliban warnings to mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for government security officials. As a result, according to MOHRA officials, imams continued to state they feared performing funeral rites for members of the ANDSF and other government employees. According to media, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission reported that on June 19, the Taliban tortured and killed the imam of a mosque in Baghlan Province for performing the funeral rites of a local police commander.

According to religious community leaders, some mullahs in unregistered mosques continued to preach in support of the Taliban or ISIS-K in their sermons.

There again were reports of the Taliban taking over schools in areas under their control and imposing their own curricula; however, it was difficult to obtain information in Taliban-controlled territory.

Shia Hazara leaders said the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha offered a chance for a peaceful future but were concerned a postsettlement Taliban would “turn back the clock” to a time when human rights, including religious freedom, were not respected in Afghanistan. Hazara leaders expressed concern that, if the Taliban established an Islamic emirate in the country, the Taliban would not accept Shia Islam as a formal religion and would ignore laws currently in place that protect Shia. In March, the UN Security Council issued UN Security Council Resolution 2513 noting that the Security Council did not support the restoration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic’s negotiating team for the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations included Shia Hazara representatives.

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

Since religion and ethnicity in the country are often closely linked, it was often difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities reported continued harassment from Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they continued to be able to publicly practice their religions. Members of the Hindu community reported they faced fewer cases of harassment, including verbal abuse, than Sikhs, which they ascribed to their lack of a distinctive male headdress.

According to international sources, Baha'is and Christians lived in constant fear of exposure and were reluctant to reveal their religious identities to anyone. According to some sources, converts to Christianity and individuals studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members opposed to their interest in Christianity. Christian sources estimated there were "dozens" of Christian missionaries in the country, mostly foreign but some local.

According to Christians and Ahmadi Muslims, members of their groups continued to worship only in private to avoid societal discrimination and persecution.

Women of several different faiths, including Islam, continued to report harassment from local Muslim religious leaders over their attire. As a result, some women said they continued to wear burqas or other modest dress in public in rural areas and in some districts in urban areas, including in Kabul, in contrast to other more secure, government-controlled areas, where women said they felt comfortable not wearing what they considered conservative clothing. Almost all women reported wearing some form of head covering. Some women said they did so by personal choice, but many said they did so due to societal pressure and a desire to avoid harassment and increase their security in public.

Ahmadi Muslims continued to report verbal abuse on the street and harassment when neighbors or coworkers learned of their faith. They said they also faced accusations of being "spies" for communicating with other Ahmadi Muslim community congregations abroad. They said they did not proselytize due to fear of persecution. Ahmadis continued to report the increasing need to conceal their identity to avoid unwanted attention in public and their intent to depart the country permanently if there was a peace agreement with the Taliban. Ahmadis said they received direct as well as indirect threats against their safety in the form of notes, telephone messages, and other menacing communications because of their faith. Ahmadis representatives said they did not report these threats to police because

they feared additional verbal harassment and physical abuse from police and other officials.

Christian representatives continued to report public opinion remained hostile toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytization. They said Christians continued to worship alone or in small congregations, sometimes 10 or fewer persons, in private homes due to fear of societal discrimination and persecution. They reported pressure and threats, largely from family, to renounce Christianity and return to Islam. The dates, times, and locations of these services were frequently changed to avoid detection. There continued to be no public Christian churches.

According to minority religious leaders, the decreasing numbers of Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious minorities had only a few remaining places of worship. According to the Sikh and Hindu Council, which advocates with the government on behalf of the Sikh and Hindu communities, there were a total of 70 gurdwaras and *mandirs* (Hindu temples) remaining in the country, although they did not specify how many of each. Buddhist foreigners remained free to worship in Hindu temples. Members of the Hindu and Sikh communities said their complaints over seizures of their places of worship in Ghazni, Herat, Kandahar, Khost, Nangarhar, Paktiya, and Parwan Provinces – some pending since 2016 – remained unresolved at year's end. The ONSC established a commission to assist in the restoration of these properties, but no further action was taken by year's end.

Community leaders continued to say they considered the large number of butchers selling beef near a Sikh temple in Kabul a deliberate insult because neighbors were aware that Sikhs and Hindus do not eat beef for religious reasons. Sikh and Hindu leaders again reported neighboring residents tended to place household trash in their temples of worship. Although they filed official complaints to police, neither local authorities nor local imams took action to remedy the situation.

According to members of the Sikh and Hindu communities, they continued to refuse to send their children to public schools due to harassment from other students, although there were only a few private school options available to them due to the decreasing sizes of the two communities and their members' declining economic circumstances. The Sikh and Hindu Council reported one school in Nangarhar and one school in Kabul remained operational. Sikh and Hindu representatives, however, again said these schools lacked capable teachers, books, and other items necessary to teach students.

While in past years Sikh leaders stated the main cause of Sikh emigration was lack of employment opportunities, due in part to illiteracy resulting from lack of access to education, during the year they said threats from antigovernment groups, inadequate government protection, and multiple attacks on the community in March caused many families to emigrate or consider doing so. Many left for India, where international Sikh organizations facilitated their relocation. Sikh leaders said many families in Kabul lived at community temples because they could not afford permanent housing. Both Sikh and Hindu communities stated emigration would increase as economic conditions declined and security concerns increased. Community leaders estimated fewer than 400 members of the Sikh and Hindu community remained in the country at year's end, down from approximately 600 at the start of the year. They said the departure mirrored events in 2018, when 500 to 600 Sikhs fled the country following a major attack on the community. Some Sikhs and Hindus also reported that they faced frequent calls to convert to Islam.

Media published reports of both Shia and Sunni leaders condemning particular secular events as contrary to Islam; however, there were no prominent reports of joint condemnations. Media reported a cleric in the city of Herat banned public music and concerts, stating that certain television programs and social media platforms were un-Islamic. The cleric enjoyed the support of hundreds of supporters; according to press and other observers, local law enforcement rarely interfered with the cleric's strict interpretation and enforcement of sharia. The same mullah reportedly detained and punished with beatings more than 100 persons for what he said were violations of sharia, such as women not covering their hair or public contact between unrelated men and women.

Kabul's lone synagogue remained occupied by the self-proclaimed last remaining Jew in the country, and a nearby abandoned Jewish cemetery was still utilized as an unofficial dump; reportedly many abandoned Islamic cemeteries were also used as dumping sites. The lone Jew said it was becoming more difficult for him to perform his religious rituals. He said that in the past, Jews from international military forces and foreign embassies had attended the synagogue, but they could no longer do so due to security concerns.

Worship facilities for noncitizens of various faiths continued to be located at coalition military facilities and at embassies in Kabul, but security restrictions limited access.

Media continued to report efforts by local Muslim religious leaders to limit social activities they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine, such as education for

females or female participation in sports. Women who swam at a private swimming club in Kabul and exercised at a gym in Kandahar told media they experienced harassment from men when going to and from these facilities and sometimes faced the disapproval of their families due to traditional attitudes against women's participation in sports.

NGOs reported some Muslims remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization.

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

U.S. embassy officials continued to work with the government to promote understanding of religious freedom and why it is important as well the need for the acceptance and protection of religious minorities in meetings with senior government officials. In meetings with members of the President's staff, the ONSC, MOHRA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, and the Ulema Council, embassy officials continued to promote understanding of religious freedom as well as the need to enhance the government's capacity to counter violent religious extremism. Senior embassy officials met with government officials to emphasize the need to accept and protect religious minorities, although COVID-19 restrictions changed the platforms for engagement used by embassy officials, and many discussions were held virtually.

Senior embassy officials met with leaders of the Sikh and Hindu communities following the March attacks on the Sikh community to understand their concerns and their ability to practice their faith. On March 28, senior embassy officials met with Shia Hazara leaders to discuss the peace process and the protection of Afghan ethnic and religious minorities. On October 14, senior embassy officials met virtually with members of the Shia Hazara community to discuss their perspectives on the peace negotiations and how they might affect their community, including religious freedom.

Embassy officials met with both government and religious officials to discuss the issue of ensuring madrassahs did not offer a curriculum encouraging religiously motivated violent extremism, which could foment intolerance towards the country's religious minorities. The embassy continued to coordinate with the ONSC, as well as other governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, to promote respect for religious diversity.

Embassy officials held regular meetings with government officials from MOHRA; leaders of religious minorities, including Shias, Sikhs, Hindus, and Ahmadis; imams; scholars; and NGOs to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue, especially in the context of peace negotiations. The embassy reaffirmed the U.S. government's commitment to promoting religious freedom and tolerance. It coordinated events with researchers and religious scholars throughout the provinces to discuss religion as an avenue to promote tolerance. On February 17, embassy officials conducted a discussion via the Lincoln Learning Center in Khost with students, civil activists, and youth to explore how religious freedom is promoted in the United States. On February 20, representatives of the Lincoln Learning Center in Gardiz visited the Sikh minority community of Gardiz to highlight interfaith tolerance. On May 21, the Lincoln Learning Center network hosted a speaker who shared his personal experience about how Muslim Americans observe Ramadan in the United States. In addition, in the context of the connections between ethnicity and religious identities in the country, embassy officials hosted panel discussions to analyze antiracism efforts through an Islamic lens.

The embassy hosted in-person and virtual roundtables with researchers, Sunni and Shia religious scholars, Ulema Council members, including members of the Women's Ulema, and MOHRA representatives to discuss means to counter violent extremism related to religion and to promote tolerance.

The embassy also used social media to support religious freedom. On January 16, U.S. Religious Freedom Day, the embassy highlighted on Twitter and Facebook a roundtable with faith communities that centered on how tolerance promotes peace and underscored the U.S. government's support for religious freedom. Senior Department of State officials condemned the late March attacks on the Sikh community in Kabul through tweets and media statements. In drawing attention to diversity in June, the *Charge d'Affaires* shared a quote on social media expressing U.S. commitment to stand with an Afghanistan that promotes freedoms for all its citizens, including in following their faith. The *Charge d'Affaires* condemned through Twitter the June 2 attack on a Kabul mosque that resulted in the death of its imam and other worshippers.