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UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

ISSUE UPDATE

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The Global Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses

By Policy Analysts [Jason Morton](#), [Keely Bakken](#), and [Mohy Omer](#), and
Researcher [Patrick Greenwalt](#)

Introduction

State persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses has increased dramatically in recent years. The specific and ongoing persecution of this community across the world is particularly illustrative for global efforts on behalf of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Not only do the individuals whom this persecution has directly impacted deserve wider attention, but the underlying dynamics of their circumstances must be recognized in order to effect lasting reform in the relevant countries. Many of the countries covered here are those where Jehovah's Witnesses are currently imprisoned for their faith, and represent the most severe cases of persecution. However, they do not include the many other countries where the faith is banned or faces official harassment. The situation is ultimately even bleaker than our survey might indicate. This report comes at a critical moment for the Jehovah's Witness community, amid rising incidents of official repression, and concludes with recommendations for the U.S. government's engagement with offending states.

The governments outlined in this report tend to target Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremists" or because of their conscientious objection to military service. Those countries that persecute Jehovah's Witnesses on the basis of vague extremism accusations, however, have failed to provide any evidence to demonstrate that members of the community have ever been involved in any act of violence against the state or its citizens, or called for the overthrow of any such government. On the contrary, the group is doctrinally apolitical and pacifist, and the prosecution of its members as dangerous "extremists" demonstrates the capacity for abuse inherent in vague and sweeping anti-extremism legislation.

In most cases, the core issue behind state persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is conscientious objection—a critical component of FoRB upheld by Articles 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) and the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#). More than many groups, Jehovah's Witnesses tend to bear the brunt of official and societal persecution because of their uncompromising stances on neutrality towards the state—raising critical questions about the nature of citizenship, the autonomy of thought and belief, and, ultimately, the scope of religious freedom.

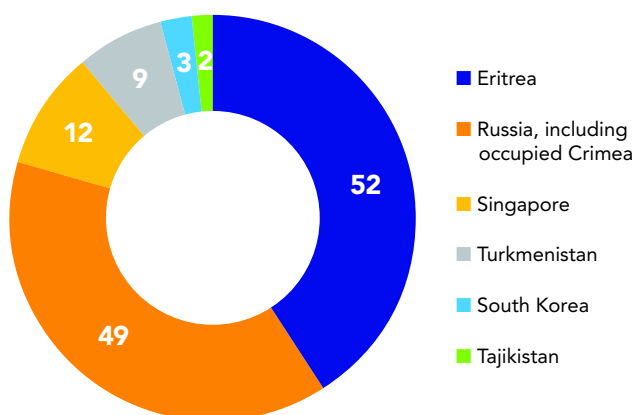
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As discussed in the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) [Legislation Factsheet: Conscientious Objection](#), various United Nations (UN) human rights bodies have [affirmed](#) the right to conscientious objection to military service based on the right to FoRB. States should, therefore, not discriminate between religious beliefs when upholding the right to conscientious objection from military service. The ICCPR provides that the right to religious freedom cannot be suspended, even in times of public emergency or war, and the [UN Human Rights Committee](#) and the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) have affirmed that conscientious objection to military service is protected under article 18(1) of the ICCPR.

There is, in fact, a clear international understanding as to how alternative civilian service can be compatible with human rights. As mentioned in the Legislation Factsheet, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief [recommended](#) that an independent and impartial body separate from the military should decide claims of conscientious objection. The Rapporteur [also](#) noted that the alternative civilian service may be “at least as onerous as military service” to “avoid opportunism,” but it should not be longer, more strenuous, or degrading in order to avert the reality or perception that this service is punitive. Alternative civilian service should not fall under military command and must constitute a genuine service to the community, such as disaster relief, nature conservation, or work in a hospital or care facility. Individuals must also have the right to appeal decisions to an independent and civilian judicial body.

Jehovah's Witnesses Imprisoned by Country as of November 2020



(Graphic by USCIRF using data from www.jw.org)

The countries covered in this report by no means constitute an exhaustive list of those that target and repress

Jehovah's Witnesses; in fact, other countries monitored by USCIRF, such as [Cuba](#) and [Turkey](#), also discriminate against them in similar ways. Rather, an examination of conditions in these countries serves to expose the breadth and severity of the persecution of this particular religious community around the world.

Overview of Global Persecution

Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned in several countries, and individual Witnesses imprisoned for alleged “extremism” or their conscientious objection to military service. The majority of these countries belonged to the former Soviet Union (FSU), with the notable exceptions of Eritrea, Singapore, and South Korea. In April 2017, for example, the Russian government banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an “extremist organization,” placing them in a similar category as terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and Al-Qaeda.

Russia was not the only country in the FSU to explicitly or implicitly target this community, or even the first to do so. In fact, in July 2007, Tajikistan placed Jehovah's Witnesses' publications on its list of prohibited literature, one year before it banned the community entirely as an “extremist organization.” In Turkmenistan, although not technically banned, Jehovah's Witnesses have not been granted registration and are therefore unable to operate legally, and the government has arrested and imprisoned many Witnesses for their conscientious objection to military service. The situation in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan is somewhat better; in these countries, Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to legally register and operate, albeit only in select cities. Yet authorities and societies in these countries still tend to view the community with suspicion—as “non-traditional,” foreign, or even a threat—and Witnesses still experience legal and social persecution.

It is essential to recognize that this association is not accidental. The Soviet Union (USSR) spent decades demonizing Jehovah's Witnesses as a danger to society. In the aftermath of World War II, the group's pacifism and Western origins made it a target of paranoid Soviet authorities. Jehovah's Witnesses were labeled an “anti-Soviet” organization and were one of the few religious groups that the state denied legal registration. Secret operations in 1949 and 1951 deported many Jehovah's Witnesses and their families from the border regions where they lived, and a concerted propaganda campaign spanning decades reinforced the image of Jehovah's Witnesses as a potential “fifth column” in the public psyche.

However, as explained in USCIRF's [recent](#) report, not all religious developments in the region can be attributed to a vague "Soviet mentality." The spread of extremist ideas is a global phenomenon in the 21st century, and state efforts to contain it has resulted in the proliferation of [anti-extremism legislation](#)—which some governments have abused to limit legitimate religious practice or target peaceful religious groups. The Soviet legacy, paired with widespread and vague anti-extremism laws, facilitates the contemporary targeting of Jehovah's Witnesses throughout the FSU, where it was easy to transition from viewing the historically vilified community as "anti-Soviet" to branding them as "extremists".



Infographic courtesy of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

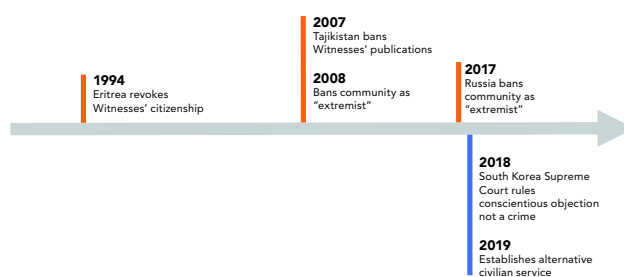
A similar dynamic is evident in the East African country of Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after 31 years of brutal conflict. The war of independence played a predominant role in shaping Eritrea's [identity](#), and the country still celebrates those who participated in the independence war as heroes and liberators. However, shortly after independence, President Isaias Afwerki [issued](#) a presidential decree revoking the citizenship of Jehovah's Witnesses, in retaliation for their refusal to participate in the war and their abstention from voting in the referendum for independence. Today, Eritrean authorities continue to deny Jehovah's Witnesses basic citizenship rights and regularly arrest, persecute, and torture individual Witnesses, often for their conscientious objection to mandatory military service.

Jehovah's Witnesses also face government restrictions in Singapore and South Korea. In Singapore, the government

de-registered the community as an officially-recognized faith in 1972, and it has subsequently imprisoned Witnesses for their conscientious objection to mandatory military service. Similarly, in South Korea, male members of the community have also faced imprisonment for conscientious objection, which is politically charged due to ongoing tensions with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to the north. Recent events in the country, including a Supreme Court case declaring that conscientious objection is not a crime, as well as legal developments toward a civilian alternative, promise positive steps to recognize the community's rights.

Despite those modest glimmers of hope, Jehovah's Witnesses continue to represent an important, comparative case study of religious freedom as they face widespread repression and persecution in many seemingly disparate corners of the world.

TIMELINE OF NOTABLE DECISIONS



Country Examples

Eritrea

All Eritreans between the ages of 18 and 50 are required [by law](#) to serve in the military for 18 months. Only pregnant women and those with a physical disability are exempt. Because of their refusal to serve based on their religious beliefs, Jehovah's Witnesses have been stripped of their citizenship, denied access to job opportunities and government benefits, and arbitrarily imprisoned under poor conditions.

Although Eritrea's [constitution](#) forbids religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of thought and belief, the government has consistently ignored these provisions. For example, Proclamation 73/1995 requires religious and civil society organizations to obtain government permits or risk punishment of one to six months' imprisonment or a fine of ER15,001 to 29,000 (approximately USD440–1,330). As the government has refused to recognize Jehovah's Witnesses

as a religious organization, members of the community have disproportionately suffered the consequences of these laws.

As of November 2020, 52 Jehovah's Witnesses remained imprisoned for their religious activities, including participating in religious meetings or ceremonies, preaching, and conscientiously objecting to military service. Some of those Witnesses have been imprisoned for more than 20 years. According to [reports](#), four Jehovah's Witnesses have died in prison and three elderly men died shortly after their release, due to poor prison conditions and mistreatment by prison authorities.

Russia

In April 2017, Russia's Supreme Court banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an "extremist organization," affirming an earlier push by the [Justice Department](#) to "liquidate" them for "signs of extremist activity that represent a threat to the rights of citizens, social order and the security of society." Officials previously [accused](#) the group of "disregard for the state" that "erodes any sense of civic affiliation and promotes the destruction of national and state security." Authorities frequently refer to the fact that Jehovah's Witnesses refuse [blood transfusions](#) as "evidence" of their extremism. Many [analysts](#) believe the American origins of the religious community also play a role in their repression.

Jehovah's Witnesses, who have roughly 170,000 members in Russia, currently [report](#) that 10 are imprisoned in the country, while 38 are in pre-trial detention, and 26 are under house arrest. Since the ban, Russian authorities have conducted 1,166 searches of Jehovah's Witnesses' private homes and accused 402 of them of criminal activity.

In addition, sentences against Witnesses have become progressively more severe. On June 4, 2020, [Artem Gerasimov](#), a resident of occupied Crimea, was sentenced to six years in prison, and on June 9, [Gennady Shpakovsky](#) was sentenced to six and a half years—the harshest punishment yet given to a Jehovah's Witness in Russia. In July 2020, a court in the city of Furmanov [convicted](#) Yevgeniy Spirin of "organizing the activities of an extremist organization" and fined him RUS500,000 (approximately USD6,920). Official treatment of the community often appears to be vindictive. On June 23, 2020, a court in the city of Lgov approved the early release of [Dennis Christensen](#), who was serving six years in prison. In the days following the decision, Christensen was [reportedly](#) placed in a punishment cell as a prosecutor sought to overturn his parole for alleged infractions like sleeping in and eating at the wrong time.

Tajikistan

In October 2007, Tajikistan's Ministry of Culture [prohibited](#) Jehovah's Witnesses literature as "extremist" and suspended the religious community's activity across the country. One year later, on September 29, 2008, a military tribunal in the capital of Dushanbe upheld the decision and permanently [banned](#) Jehovah's Witnesses in Tajikistan. An official from the Department of Religious Affairs claimed that the government was primarily concerned about their refusal to serve in the military. There is no civilian alternative to military service in Tajikistan, where a brutal civil war claimed up to 100,000 lives between 1992 and 1997.

There are currently two Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in Tajikistan. On October 4, 2019, authorities detained [Jovidon Bobojonov](#) and forced him to undergo training at a military unit outside the capital after the government denied his appeal for civilian service. He was held in the unit against his will, undergoing beatings and torture designed to force his compliance, until January 28, 2020 when he was formally arrested and transferred to prison under Criminal Code Article 376, Part 2—"Refusal to perform military service duties with the purpose of evading it completely." On April 2, Bobojonov was sentenced to two years in a general regime labor camp. Although Bobojonov was released by presidential amnesty on November 1, USCIRF has learned that another Jehovah's Witness was placed in pre-trial detention for conscientious objection on October 17.

Despite their claims to the contrary, Tajikistani authorities are clearly concerned about more than just conscientious objection. On September 10, 2019, Shamil Hakimov was [sentenced](#) to seven and a half years in prison, followed by three years prohibition from working in a religious organization, for sharing his beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. Hakimov was charged under Criminal Code Article 189, Part 2, Point D for "Inciting national, racial, local or religious hatred or dissension, humiliation of national dignity, as well as propaganda of the superiority of citizens based on their religion, national, racial, or local origin, if committed in public or using the mass media." One factor in Hakimov's conviction was his possession of a [Tajik language Bible](#), which government "experts" determined to be a source of "confrontation and schism" if shared with the Muslim community.

Turkmenistan

Although Jehovah's Witnesses are not technically banned in Turkmenistan, the government is conducting an ongoing crackdown on conscientious objection to military service. There is no civilian alternative to military service available to conscientious objectors in the country, and Article 58 of the 2016 Constitution describes defense as a "sacred duty" incumbent on everyone.

Since 2018, when the state renewed its campaign against conscientious objection, Turkmenistan has imprisoned at least 24 Jehovah's Witnesses, charging them under article 219(1) of the Criminal Code for the absence of a legal basis for exemption from military service. Although 13 of those prisoners have since been released after serving out their one-year sentences, 9 others remain [imprisoned](#) at the Seydi Labor Camp. For example, in July 2019, authorities sentenced [Bahtiyar Atahanov](#) to four years in prison—the harshest sentence to date for conscientious objection. Although most sentences range between one and two years, the military forcibly conscripted Atahanov before he was charged, which allowed the courts to treat him as an active duty soldier in dereliction of his duty. He reports experiencing beatings and threats in attempts to coerce his service.

Furthermore, this crackdown appears to be accelerating. In November 2019, a court sentenced [Serdar Dovletov](#) to three years for "fraudulently" attempting to evade service. David Petrosov and Selim Taganov, two Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in September and October 2019, respectively, attempted to obtain alternative service, but the military refused their requests. In January and February 2020, two more Jehovah's Witnesses, Vepa Matyakubov and Kamiljan Ergashov, were [sentenced](#) to two years in prison for their conscientious objection.

Azerbaijan

Over the last two years, the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan has substantially improved, in large part due to an end in police raids and arrests. In November 2018, the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) registered Jehovah's Witnesses in Baku. Although the Baku community had previously and successfully registered in 1999, it lost its legal status following the passage of amendments to Azerbaijan's religion law in 2009. No other Jehovah's Witness community in Azerbaijan has been granted registration, despite numerous applications; for example, Jehovah's Witnesses in Ganja have sought registration since 2010,

but the government has denied their requests. Jehovah's Witnesses in other cities and towns are precluded from registration as their communities fail to meet the 50-person minimum threshold required by the 2009 law, exposing them to possible harassment and legal repercussions.

Despite a provision in the constitution that allows for an alternative to mandatory military service, the government has in practice neither created one nor permitted conscientious objection. This apparent constitutional violation is ostensibly due to the protracted and [ongoing](#) conflict with neighboring Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding territories. As recently as [2018](#), Jehovah's Witnesses were prosecuted for attempting to exercise this right. While the government has lately stopped pursuing such criminal prosecutions, some conscription offices have continued to call up Jehovah's Witnesses for military service, leading to fears that prosecutions may resume. Additionally, at least 10 Jehovah's Witnesses have received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, which many believe represent retaliation for their conscientious objection.

Law enforcement has been known to [interfere](#) in Jehovah's Witnesses' meetings and intervene when individual Witnesses attempt to share their beliefs. While the community has been able to import literature since 2015, the government requires official approval of all religious literature, and it has censored some aspects of Jehovah's Witnesses' literature that officials considered "insulting language" in the past.

Uzbekistan

Until 2019, government officials and law enforcement authorities in Uzbekistan routinely harassed Jehovah's Witnesses. Police conducted raids on members of the community, including in their private homes, and Jehovah's Witnesses frequently faced arrest, detention, interrogation, fines, the search and seizure of religious literature and electronic devices, and at times even assault. However, since a government directive in December 2018 banned raids on religious communities across the board, such instances of flagrant persecution have largely ceased.

Uzbekistan has permitted Jehovah's Witnesses to register legally, albeit to a very limited degree. Although the government initially granted registration to two communities in Chirchiq and Fergana in 1994, it annulled the latter's registration in 2006, leaving [only one](#) registered community in Uzbekistan to date. For more than two decades, the government has rejected applications by

Jehovah's Witnesses to register communities in Bukhara, Fergana, Nukus, Qarshi, Samarqand, Tashkent, and Urgench. Attempts to register are often stymied by the *mahalla*, or local community, which must submit a letter of approval in order for the registration process to proceed. The decision is entirely at the *mahalla*'s discretion, which has resulted in discriminatory ramifications for small religious communities like Jehovah's Witnesses and others throughout Uzbekistan. The *Oliy Majlis*, Uzbekistan's parliament, has pledged to revise the 1998 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations that governs the mandatory registration procedure; in early 2020, the government shared its intent to significantly simplify burdensome registration requirements, including the removal of the *mahalla* from the process. While this constitutes a meaningful positive development, it nevertheless remains unclear whether the government will permit Jehovah's Witnesses to register. Some interlocutors have shared that the local Russian Orthodox Church's opposition, and the authorities' *hostility* to the participation of ethnic Uzbeks, may continue to impede their registration. In addition to registration issues, Jehovah's Witnesses have been unable to import religious literature into the country since 2006, are restricted by blanket prohibitions on proselytism and missionary activity, and have experienced the blocking of their website.

Kazakhstan

Jehovah's Witnesses are legally registered in Kazakhstan. They have 59 houses of worship, called Kingdom Halls, and estimate their membership in the country to be around 20,000. They frequently hold open houses that are attended by officials and the local community, and Witnesses are exempt from compulsory military service.

While conditions in Kazakhstan are generally good for Jehovah's Witnesses, there have been some tensions in the past. The Kazakhstani government strictly monitors religious practice in the country and tends to be suspicious of groups other than "traditional" faiths like Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity. In 2017 and 2018, there were numerous *incidents* of government authorities detaining or fining members of the community for religious activity, and several of the group's publications were censored. In January 2017, Teimur Akhmedov was *arrested* and sentenced to five years in prison for disseminating ideas that "disrupt interreligious and interethnic concord." He was released one year later after receiving a personal pardon from then president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who allowed Akhmedov to seek cancer treatment.

The Kazakhstani government is currently reforming its religious regulations and has shown encouraging signs of actively seeking to incorporate Jehovah's Witnesses into society.

Singapore

On March 14, 1967, the government of Singapore passed the National Service Act, establishing mandatory conscription. The government has periodically amended this system over the years, including in the 1970 Enlistment Act. Under these laws, all male citizens and sons of permanent residents of Singapore must serve two years in the country's defense forces. Failure to do so, including through conscientious objection, risks a penalty of up to three years' imprisonment and a potential fine of SGP10,000 (approximately USD7,300).

In 1972, the government *de-registered* the country's small Jehovah's Witness community for their refusal to perform military service, salute the flag, and swear oaths of allegiance to the state. In the 1990s, authorities *raided* the homes of at least four Witnesses, arresting members of the community for possessing Jehovah's Witnesses faith material and for holding religious meetings. In recent years, the Singaporean government has less rigorously enforced restrictions on the Jehovah's Witness community, but it continues to imprison those who refuse their military service requirement. As of November 2020, 12 Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned for conscientious objection to compulsory military service, all of whom are between the ages of 18 and 22.

The government of Singapore has faced external pressure to amend its stance on conscientious objection to military service, including from the *United Nations*. It has still not officially recognized Jehovah's Witnesses to this day.

South Korea

Jehovah's Witnesses have maintained a presence in Korea for more than 100 years. The primary point of contention between the community and the government of South Korea has been over conscientious objection; by law, all male citizens between 18 and 28 are required to serve for a period in the military, depending on the type of service. Following the Korean War, officials were adamant on imprisoning those who refused military service, and some members of the faith community even died while imprisoned. In fact, since 1953, South Korea has *imprisoned* over 19,300 Jehovah's Witnesses for conscientious objection.

In 2004, certain local courts began to acquit Witnesses for conscientious objection based on religious freedom grounds. This progress culminated in a November 2018 Supreme Court decision, which [determined](#) that conscientious objection to compulsory military service is not a crime. The government subsequently [passed](#) a new law in December 2019 that established an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. On June 30, 2020, authorities [began](#) taking applications for conscientious objectors to serve alternative forms of service in prisons or detention centers. However, this alternative requires an additional year in service, which according to international standards, can be considered a form of “alternative punishment.” In February 2020, the Supreme Court [ordered the release](#) of 300 Jehovah’s Witnesses—although, as of November 2020, three members of the community remained imprisoned as a result of court determinations that their conscientious objections were “insincere.”

Conclusion

Jehovah’s Witnesses, Conscientious Objection, and Religious Freedom

The countries detailed in this report share a tendency to equate male citizenship with active military service for historical and geopolitical reasons. States with a legacy of conflict, or those with relatively small populations, often struggle to incorporate a vision of service that does not embrace violence and the potential loss of life. When national narratives prioritize war as such, they can easily misconstrue pacifism as a rejection of official values. Jehovah’s Witnesses and other conscientious objectors are by no means traitors or “enemies of the state”; many actively seek an alternative to military service that would enable them to serve society in a peaceful way.

Freedom of religion or belief protects this autonomy of individual conscience from intrusion by the state and other corporate interests—not as a rejection of the state, but rather as a critical component of a healthy body politic. Creating space for conscientious objection through alternative civilian service will help, not hinder, the cause of national unity. The societies covered in this report would be better served by tolerant governments that integrate religious minorities like Jehovah’s Witnesses, allowing them access to their religious literature and legal registration, rather than targeting them with extremism laws and forced conscription.

The U.S. State Department [designates](#) many of the countries covered in this report as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) or places them on its Special Watch List because of their treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other violations of religious freedom. In September 2019, the State Department [banned](#) two high-ranking regional officers in Russia’s Investigative Committee from entering the country for allegedly torturing seven Jehovah’s Witnesses in Surgut. The State Department noted Russia’s declining religious freedom environment and called on the government to end its campaign against Jehovah’s Witnesses. In September of 2019, a delegation from the State Department [visited](#) Eritrea to improve bilateral relations. During this visit, U.S. government officials took the opportunity to raise religious freedom concerns, including the Eritrean government’s treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses for their conscientious objection. The U.S. government continues to call for an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. The U.S. Government should:

- Promote education about FoRB and conscientious objection in diplomatic efforts in the above-discussed countries, including information about alternative civilian service, and offer related training and resources as a component of regional humanitarian and military assistance;
- Use advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to increase pressure for the immediate release of Jehovah’s Witnesses and the reform of anti-extremism laws in relevant countries; and
- Publicly censure the governments of Eritrea, Russia, and Tajikistan in international forums for their bans on Jehovah’s Witnesses and ongoing persecution of the community.



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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