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AFGHANISTAN 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

On August 15, the Taliban took control of Kabul, declaring the establishment of an “Islamic Emirate” throughout the country. On September 7, the Taliban announced an interim “caretaker government” made up exclusively of male Taliban members. On September 22, the Taliban expanded its interim “caretaker government,” adding some representatives of religious and ethnic minority groups including Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Nuristani, and Khawaja, but no women. By year’s end, the U.S. government had not yet made a decision as to whether to recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the Government of Afghanistan or as part of such a government.

Executive Summary

Following their takeover in August, the Taliban did not establish a clear and cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms. The Taliban conveyed that those laws enacted under the former government of Afghanistan that were in effect prior to their takeover remained in effect unless the laws violated sharia. Taliban leaders issued decrees specifying acceptable behaviors under their interpretation of sharia, but variously described them as “guidelines” or “recommendations” and unevenly enforced them. Press reports following the Taliban takeover raised fears the group would consider Christian converts as apostates. These reports, combined with statements from some Taliban leaders starting in August reserving the right to enforce harsh punishments for violations of the group’s strict interpretation of sharia, drove some Christian converts into deeper hiding, according to International Christian Concern, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) that focuses on persecution of Christian communities. At year’s end, there were no reports of Taliban representatives having directed sharia-related punishments. According to Amnesty International, Taliban fighters killed 13 Shia Hazaras in Daykundi Province on August 31; the Taliban denied the allegations. In November and December, the Taliban detained 28 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kabul. According to members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the Taliban falsely accused them of belonging to ISIS-Khorasan (an affiliate of ISIS and a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, also known as ISIS-K). The Taliban held 18 of them through year’s end. The NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported the Taliban expelled Shia Hazara members from their homes in several provinces in October, in part to redistribute land to Taliban supporters. In August, Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR)

that the group would respect the rights of members of religious minority groups, including Shia Hazaras. On November 16, Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told the press, “We are providing a safe and secure environment for everyone, especially the Hazaras.” Both prior to and immediately following the Taliban takeover, predominantly Shia Hazara communities expressed fear the Ashraf Ghani administration and the Taliban lacked the ability to protect them from violence and discrimination. According to Hazara community and NGO representatives, Shia Hazaras continued to face longstanding and widespread discrimination by Ghani government officials in public service delivery, public sector hiring, and other areas before August 15. After the Taliban takeover, Taliban leaders publicly pledged to protect the rights of Sikhs and Hindus, although some Sikhs and Hindus reported they had ceased to congregate at their gurdwaras (places of worship), and others sought to resettle abroad due to fear of violent attacks by the Taliban and ISIS-K. In November and December, high level Taliban representatives held meetings with leaders of Shia, Sikh, and Hindu communities, reportedly to offer protection and improve relations. According to community representatives, in these meetings the Taliban laid out rules for the behavior of women, forbade the playing of music, and presented restrictions on businesses owned by minority religious group members. Some Hazara political figures expressed continued concern over the Taliban’s commitment to support freedom of worship but commented that this engagement represented a shift from the Taliban’s approach between 1996 and 2001. According to civil society groups, at year’s end, approximately 150 members of the Sikh and Hindu communities remained in the country, down from approximately 400 at the start of the year. The Taliban closed the Ministry for Women’s Affairs in September, announcing the reconstituted Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, charged with enforcing the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia, would be housed in the same building. While enforcement varied by province and district, local Taliban representatives enforced decrees on gender segregation, women’s dress and head covering, men’s facial hair, unaccompanied women, and music. On December 3, Taliban “Supreme Leader” Hibatullah Akhunzada issued a decree stating that women should not be considered property and must consent to marriage. Media reported the Taliban framed the decree as a call to adhere to broader Islamic law on women’s rights. Some observers praised the decree; others said it did not go far enough because it did not mention a woman’s right to work or to access education and other public services.

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), consistent with trends observed in the past years, many of the suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly

ethnic Hazaras. UNAMA reported a resurgence of these attacks against the Shia Hazara group, nearly all for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility. ISIS-K also conducted such attacks against other groups. In total, for the first six months of the year, 20 incidents targeted the Shia Hazara community resulting in 143 killed and 357 injured, compared with 19 attacks attributed to ISIS-K and other anti-government elements in 2020. According to UNAMA, during the second half of the year, attacks claimed by or attributed to ISIS-K increased and expanded beyond the movement's previous areas of focus in Kabul and the eastern part of the country. Between August 19 and December 31, the United Nations recorded 152 attacks by the group in 16 provinces, compared with 20 attacks in five provinces during the same period in 2020. In addition to targeting the Taliban, ISIS-K also targeted civilians, in particular Shia minorities, in urban areas. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for suicide attacks on two Shia mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar cities on October 8 and 15. On October 8, an ISIS-K suicide bomber killed 70 to 80 members of the Hazara community at a mosque in Kunduz. On October 15, a suicide bomber attack targeting the largest Shia mosque in Kandahar, the Fatima Mosque (also known as the Imam Bargah Mosque), killed more than 50 worshippers and injured at least 100. Two December 10 attacks in western Kabul targeting a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood remained unclaimed at year's end. Prior to the Taliban takeover, antigovernment forces carried out several attacks on religious leaders that resulted in fatalities. According to the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA), over the last two decades, the Taliban and other extremist groups had killed 527 religious scholars, including approximately 50 Sunni and Shia religious leaders killed between February 2020 and July 2021. Prior to their August takeover and as previous years, the Taliban killed and issued death threats against Sunni clerics for preaching messages contrary to the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. Taliban fighters killed progovernment imams and other religious officials throughout the country, and the Taliban warned mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for Ghani administration security officials. On May 8, unidentified individuals detonated a car bomb in front of the Sayed ul-Shuhada school in a predominantly Shia Hazara community, killing at least 85 civilians and injuring another 216. No group claimed responsibility for the attack. According to press interviews in October, Shia Hazaras struggled to take what some characterized as a "life or death" risk to go to mosque on Fridays.

Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Sunni Muslim minority groups continued to report that some Sunni Muslims verbally harassed them, although Hindus and Sikhs stated they still were able to practice their respective religions in public prior to August 15. According to international sources, Baha'is and Christians continued to live 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 to or were studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members. Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims reported they continued to worship only privately and in small groups, at home or in nondescript places of worship, to avoid discrimination and persecution. Prior to the Taliban takeover in August, observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities, such as concerts, which they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine.

The U.S. embassy in Kabul suspended operations on August 31. In October and November, the U.S. government condemned ISIS-K attacks on Shia mosques and engaged Taliban leadership to press for the protection of religious minorities from repression and violence. On November 29-30, a U.S. government delegation met with senior Taliban representatives in Qatar. The U.S. delegation expressed “deep concern regarding allegations of human rights abuses and urged the Taliban to protect the rights of all Afghans, uphold and enforce its policy of general amnesty, and take additional steps to form an inclusive and representative government.” After August 31, the U.S. government also conveyed this message consistently in meetings with the so-called Taliban Political Commission in Doha, Qatar, through the Afghanistan Affairs Unit. Before the Taliban takeover in mid-August, U.S. embassy officials worked with the government to promote understanding of religious freedom and the need for the acceptance and protection of religious minorities. To enhance the Ghani administration’s capacity to counter violent religious extremism and foster religious tolerance, embassy representatives met with the Office of the National Security Council (ONSC) and MOHRA, among other government agencies. The embassy regularly raised concerns about public safety and freedom to worship with security ministers. Until the Taliban takeover, embassy officials continued to meet regularly with leaders of major religious groups, as well as religious minorities, scholars, and NGOs, to discuss ways to enhance religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue. While working with the Ghani administration, the embassy sponsored 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.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 37.5 million (midyear 2021).

According to Pew Forum data from 2009, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 80-85 percent of the population, and Shia make up approximately 10-15 percent.

According to religious community leaders, the Shia population, approximately 90 percent of whom are ethnic Hazaras, is predominantly Jaafari, but also includes Ismailis. Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians, together constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. According to Sikh leaders, there are fewer than 150 members of the Sikh and Hindu communities remaining in the country, compared with an estimated 400 at the start of the year and 1,300 in 2017. Most members of the Sikh and Hindu communities are in Kabul, with smaller numbers in Ghazni and other provinces. Hindu community leaders estimate there are fewer than 50 remaining Hindus, all male and primarily businessmen with families in other countries.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community in the country numbers in the hundreds. Reliable estimates of the Baha'i and Christian communities are not available. There are small numbers of practitioners of other religions. There are no known Jews in the country, following the departure of the country's last known remaining Jew after the Taliban takeover.

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 Respect for Religious Freedom by the Pre-August 15 Government and by the “Caretaker Government” Announced by the Taliban

The legal framework described in the following section refers to the 2004 constitution and the laws as they stood on August 15. Since their August 15 takeover, the Taliban have said the country is an Islamic emirate whose laws and governance must be consistent with sharia. By year's end, the Taliban's interim “caretaker government” had not announced a cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms and it had not clarified which constitution was in effect – the 2004 constitution or the 1964 constitution. The 1964 constitution, adopted under King Mohammad Zahir Shah, specifies rule by a monarch who has the power to appoint and remove prime ministers and other government ministers, issue a state of emergency, approve the national budget, ratify laws, select and dismiss judges, promote and retire high ranking officials, and declare war. In September, so-called Acting Justice Minister Mawlawi Sharayee said the 1964

constitution was temporarily in effect. In October, so-called Acting Foreign Minister Muttaqi said in Doha that Sharayee was merely voicing one option.

Legal Framework

The 2004 constitution declares Islam as 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.” According to so-called Acting Justice Minister Sharayee, all existing laws published in Afghanistan’s Official Gazette remain valid except for provisions that are in contravention of sharia. This includes foundational laws such as the penal, civil, and criminal and civil procedure codes.

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. The penal code states, “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.” It 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 (\$290-\$580). In cases where killings or physical injury result from the disturbance of religious rites or ceremonies, the accused individual is tried according to the 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 (crimes 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 as to the individual’s status as an apostate. 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 regarding 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 the individual does not recant his or her conversion from Islam within three days, then he or she shall be subject to 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 of 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 Muslims.

Licensing and registration of religious groups by the MOHRA are not required. There is no mechanism for registration of religious groups other than Islamic groups. 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 Islamic beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country who are Muslim. 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 no alternatives are available. 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, one imam teaches 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.

In 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 a faith that follows either the Quran, the Torah, the Bible, or the Zabur. It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

Government-issued 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 reserving one seat in parliament's lower house 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.

Practices of the Pre-August 15 Government and of the Interim "Caretaker Government" Announced by the Taliban

On August 15, the Taliban took control of Kabul, declaring the establishment of an "Islamic Emirate" in the entire country. Taliban leadership stated the governance of the country must be consistent with the Taliban's interpretation of sharia. On September 7, the Taliban announced an all-male interim "caretaker government"

made up exclusively of Taliban members. Thirty of the 33 named were from the predominantly Sunni Pashtun ethnic group. On September 22, the Taliban expanded its interim “caretaker government,” adding some representatives of religious and ethnic minority groups including four Tajiks, two Uzbeks, one Turkmen, one Hazara, one Nuristani (an ethnic group native to Nuristan province) and one Khwaja (claiming Arab lineage). At year’s end, two Shia “interim deputy ministers” served in the Taliban interim “caretaker cabinet.” Following their takeover, the Taliban did not announce a clear and cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms. In some provinces and districts, courts were in session, but it was unclear what system of law, procedures, and sentencing guidelines they used. Taliban leaders issued decrees specifying acceptable behaviors under their interpretation of sharia, but variously described them as “guidelines” or “recommendations” and unevenly enforced them.

According to numerous NGO leaders, with the Taliban takeover in August, many Sikh, Hindu, Christian, and Ahmadiyya Muslim community members sought resettlement outside the country, fearing the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia would lead to further persecution and harm. With rare exceptions, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus sought emigration and resettlement in a friendly country, according to those leaders. 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, following the Taliban takeover, many now said they believed the Taliban’s violent persecution of them would be inevitable.

In October, the Taliban stated their intention to develop a new constitution centered on sharia, based on the country’s 1964 constitution instead of the 2004 constitution, and drawing on the Taliban’s earlier draft constitution, which included an emir as head of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

In September, Mullah Booruddin Turabi, a member of the Taliban’s interim “caretaker government” said, “Cutting off of hands is very necessary for security... Everyone criticized us for the punishments in the stadium, but we have never said anything about their laws and their punishments. No one will tell us what our laws should be. We will follow Islam and we will make our laws [based] on the Quran.” Turabi, whom the UN Security Council had sanctioned, also said the so-called interim caretaker government may consider carrying out such punishments in public. International NGOs said they feared such punishments could fall disproportionately on the country’s religious minorities. By year’s end there were no reports that such punishments had occurred.

According to press reports, Taliban fighters killed 13 Shia Hazaras in Daykundi Province on August 31. The Taliban denied the allegation.

In November and December, Taliban intelligence personnel detained 28 Ahmadiyya Muslims, including minors. According to reports from international Ahmadiyya Muslim organizations, Taliban intelligence personnel physically abused the detainees and coerced some into “confessing” membership in ISIS-K. As of year’s end, the Taliban had released 10 of the Ahmadi while 18 remained in detention. Some of the released minors reported that their release was conditioned upon “repenting” their Ahmadi beliefs and attending a Taliban-led madrassah every day.

According to HRW, the Taliban expelled Shia Hazara members from their homes in several provinces in October, in part to redistribute land to Taliban supporters.

According to press reports, before the Taliban takeover, government security forces struggled to provide adequate security for religious leaders and mosques against the Taliban and ISIS-K. Press reports also indicated members of the Afghan security forces were responsible in part for certain attacks against Hazaras, including an attack in May on a Hazara school for girls in Kabul. Provincial mosques – often the furthest from security forces – were particularly vulnerable to attack. Sources stated that imams also were particularly vulnerable because they were often the first to wake to give morning prayers and the last to depart at night when they closed the mosque, a schedule that made their movements predictable. Until the Taliban takeover in August, representatives of the Hazara community continued to say government security and development initiatives in Shia-predominant areas were insufficient 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 protection from the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) up to August 15; however, they said the government distributed arms directly to the community ahead of large Shia gatherings.

In November, following multiple attacks on Shia mosques in October, representatives from the predominantly Shia Hazara community asked for the protection of the Taliban so-called interim caretaker government. The Taliban increased security at Shia mosques during prayer services.

A Shia leader in Herat said in October that the Taliban had assisted the Hazara community by providing guns for local Hazara members to provide security for

their own religious sites and that their foremost concern was violent attacks against the Hazaras by ISIS-K, and not by the Taliban.

In November and December, senior Taliban officials held a series of engagements with Shia Hazara leaders. On December 26, “interim Deputy Prime Minister” Mulawi Abdul Kabir hosted a meeting of Shia leaders from around the country, and “interim Deputy Foreign Minister” Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanekzai spoke at a December 29 meeting of the Shia Ulema Council in Kabul. In these meetings, the Taliban officials expressed their commitment to provide security for all Afghans and a desire to avoid sectarian division.

Hindu and Sikh groups again reported that under the Ghani administration 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. Under the Ghani administration, 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.

According to international NGOs, since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, Hindu and Sikh groups expressed concern over their physical safety. Some Sikhs and Hindus reported they had ceased to congregate in their gurdwaras. In October, Sikhs reported that armed Taliban had harassed them at their central temple in Kabul. According to members of the Sikh community, in late November, more than 80 Sikhs and Hindus departed for India. Senior Taliban representatives met publicly with senior Sikh and Hindu representatives in December, welcoming their communities to return and offering assurances that Taliban security forces would protect Sikh and Hindu worship sites throughout the country. In a December 23 meeting with leaders of the Sikh and Hindu communities, so-called interim Deputy Prime Minister Kabir expressed the Taliban’s commitment to provide security for their religious sites. One Sikh meeting participant stated, “This is quite different from 1996 to 2001 – the outreach never would have happened then, and the commitment seemed genuine.” Some community members later said the Taliban had used the meetings merely to lay out the rules minority religious groups were expected to follow, including the requirement that women wear a hijab and a male relative accompany them in public. According to these community leaders, the Taliban also said playing music was forbidden and that businesses owned by religious minorities would be subject to restrictions on hours of operation and merchandise for sale.

Prior to the Taliban takeover in August, individuals converting from Islam continued to report they risked annulment of their marriages, rejection by their families and communities, loss of employment, and 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. According to press reports, Christian converts would be considered apostates and subject to execution under strict interpretations of sharia, as had occurred during the time of the Islamic Republic and under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, when apostates were sentenced to death. According to the NGO International Christian Concern, fear of such punishment had driven Christian converts into deeper hiding. At year's end, there were no reports of Taliban representatives having directed sharia-related punishments at converts. According to some Afghan political analysts, it was not yet evident that Taliban representatives acted more repressively toward Christian converts than officials had acted prior to the Taliban takeover.

International Christian Concern detailed several specific threats against Christians. In one instance following the Taliban takeover in mid-August, an individual the NGO stated was an Islamic extremist threatened to kidnap a Christian man's daughters and marry them off to members of the Taliban. In another, a Christian man reported receiving a letter from the Taliban saying his house belonged to the Taliban. According to International Christian Concern, there were also reports that the Taliban had warned Christians to refrain from gathering, that the Taliban were going door-to-door to identify Christians, and that Taliban were telephoning Christians and stating, "We are coming for you."

Prior to the Taliban takeover, MOHRA did not provide official statistics on the number of mullahs and mosques in country. Only a minority were registered with the government authority and MOHRA paid the salaries of a small number of mullahs.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, MOHRA said the majority of the country's estimated 150,000 mosques were not registered with the government. Imams at most unregistered mosques did not receive government funding.

Before the August 15 Taliban takeover, 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. Pre-August 15 government officials said

they were concerned about their inability to supervise unregistered madrassahs that could teach violent extremist curricula intolerant of religious minorities and become recruitment centers for antigovernment groups.

According to media reports, after their takeover, the Taliban allowed Shia to perform their religious ceremonies, including the annual Ashura procession in August, for which the Taliban provided security.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, 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 madrassahs available.

Following their takeover, the Taliban restricted educational access for girls, a restriction that remained in place through year's end. In November, Taliban representatives stated that all girls would be allowed to attend school starting in March 2022 when most schools around the country reopened after the winter recess. The Taliban said school attendance must be according to the Taliban's interpretation of sharia, including requiring gender segregation, appropriate transportation, and dress and behavior codes. After the Taliban takeover, Taliban representatives said they would keep the existing school curriculum for nonreligious subjects but make changes to anything that contradicted their understanding of Islam and sharia. As of year's end, no changes to the curriculum had been announced.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, 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. Then president Ghani held meetings with Ulema Council members on promoting intrafaith tolerance and "moderate practices" of Islam. On December 13, senior Taliban representatives met with the Ulema Council. Taliban spokesperson Mujahid told the press, "We need to adjust some government issues with the Islamic values, and therefore the Islamic Ulema will share their views on controversial issues, including women's rights, with the government, so we can run the government affairs based on their decision."

The Taliban closed the Ministry for Women's Affairs in September, announcing the building would be used to house the reconstituted Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, charged with enforcing the Taliban's interpretation of sharia. While enforcement varied by province and district, local Taliban representatives enforced decrees on gender segregation, women's dress and head covering, men's facial hair (requiring men to grow beards), unaccompanied women (requiring a male relative to accompany a woman in public), and music.

On December 3, Taliban Supreme Leader Akhunzada issued a decree stating that women should not be considered property and must consent to marriage. Media reported the Taliban framed the decree as a call to adhere to broader Islamic law on women's rights. Some observers praised the decree; others said it did not go far enough because there was no mention of a woman's right to work or to access education and other public services. Women of several different faiths reported local Muslim religious leaders continued to harass them 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 concerts, which they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, 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 means of legal redress. Prior to the Taliban takeover, representatives from non-Muslim religious minorities, including Sikhs and Hindus, reported a consistent pattern of discrimination at all levels of the justice system. Non-Muslims said they continued to risk being tried according to Hanafi jurisprudence if they took their grievances to court. Instead, their members continued to settle disputes through traditional informal mediation within their communities.

According to Hazara community representatives, persecution of religious minorities by the government prior to the August takeover was common, with discrimination reported against the Hazara Shia minority particularly prevalent. They also said the government routinely engaged in efforts to sideline Hazara Shia interests in favor of pro-Pashtun policies, although observers said this mistreatment was ethnically driven rather than based on religious discrimination.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, leaders of both Hindu and Sikh communities

continued to state they faced long delays in resolving cases, particularly regarding the continued appropriation of Sikh properties. In a December 23 meeting between the Taliban's so-called interim Deputy Prime Minister Kabir and representatives of the Sikh community, the Sikhs reiterated their hope to retrieve land forcibly taken from their communities since the 1979 Soviet invasion.

Some Shia held senior positions in the Ghani administration, 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. Prior to the Taliban takeover, a small number of Sikhs served in government positions under the Ghani administration, 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 former State Minister for Peace Sadat Mansoor Naderi is also an Ismaili Muslim.

In September, the Taliban announced its formation of an all-male interim "caretaker government," composed exclusively of Taliban members, mostly of the dominant Sunni Pashtun ethnic group, but also a small number of appointments of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Hazaras in senior roles. In the same month, the Taliban announced its reinstatement of the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which had existed during the period of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001 and was charged with enforcing adherence to the Taliban's interpretation of sharia. Critics pointed to such actions as reinforcing a singular and intolerant approach to sharia. Shia Hazara leaders said that after the Taliban took over Kabul, they forced Hazaras to depart from key government positions; Hazaras expressed concern that the Taliban would never treat them as equals and that discrimination against them had spread to the working level as well. By year's end, the Taliban appointed two Shia Hazaras as the interim "Deputy Ministers" of Health and Economy. In public remarks on December 14, "interim Deputy Foreign Minister" Stanekzai stated the country was "the common home of all Afghans free of any ethnic and religious discrimination."

In December, senior Taliban representatives held a series of engagements with Shia Hazara leaders. On December 26, "interim Deputy Prime Minister" Kabir hosted a meeting of Shia leaders from around the country, and "interim Deputy Foreign Minister" Stanekzai spoke at a December 29 meeting of the Shia Ulema Council in Kabul. In these meetings, Taliban representatives expressed their commitment to providing security for all citizens and a desire to avoid sectarian

division.

Taliban spokesperson Mujahid stated in a February 22 tweet, “The Islamic Emirate instructs all officials, commissions/department chiefs, provincial and district governors, military unit and group commanders, the Mujahedeen and all compatriots to robustly protect, monitor, and preserve artifacts.” The statement described the protection of Islamic sites but did not mention protection of other cultural sites.

Before the Taliban takeover, the government continued to support the efforts of judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of Sunni and Shia groups to promote Muslim intrafaith reconciliation; these did not include members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs and MOHRA worked 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 worked on intrafaith reconciliation.

On August 18, Taliban spokesperson Shaheen told NPR, “Now we have a policy that we do not have any kind of discrimination against the Shia people. They are Afghans. They can live in this country peacefully and they can contribute to the reconstruction, prosperity and development of the country.”

In September, Taliban spokesman Mujahid called Israel a “tumor in the body of the Islamic Ummah [community of believers],” adding that “Quds [Jerusalem] is a common issue.”

Actions of the Taliban Before August 15, 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 Shia Hazaras. Until the Taliban took over, UNAMA reported a resurgence of sectarian-motivated attacks against Shia Muslims, nearly all for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility. In total, for the first six months of the year, 20 incidents targeted the Shia Hazara community resulting in 143 killed and 357 injured, compared with 19 attacks attributed to ISIS-K and other antigovernment elements in 2020. During the first six months of the year, nearly half of civilian casualties from non-suicide IEDs directed against civilians came from the May 8 attack on the Sayed ul-Shuhada high school in a Kabul neighborhood mainly inhabited by Hazaras. Nearly all the 85 killed and 216 injured were Shia Hazaras.

According to UNAMA, during the second half of the year, attacks claimed by or attributed to ISIS-K increased and expanded beyond the movement's previous areas of focus in Kabul and the eastern part of the country. Between August 19 and December 31, the United Nations recorded 152 attacks by the group in 16 provinces, compared with 20 attacks in five provinces during the same period in 2020. In addition to targeting the Taliban, ISIL-K also targeted civilians, in particular Shia minorities, in urban areas.

According to media, major attacks against the Shia Hazara community and claimed by ISIS-K occurred throughout the year. In May, ISIS-K militants stopped a bus in Ghor, ordered three Hazara men out, then shot and killed them. On October 8, an ISIS-K suicide bomber killed 70 to 80 members of the Hazara community at a mosque in Kunduz. On October 15, a suicide bomber attack targeting the largest Shia mosque in Kandahar, the Fatima Mosque (also known as the Imam Bargah Mosque), killed more than 50 worshippers and injured at least 100 worshippers. Two December 10 attacks in western Kabul targeting a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood remained unclaimed at year's end. Two persons were killed and four other injured in each attack.

According to the Ghani administration, fighting in February and March between government forces and a Hazara Shia militia in the Behsud District of Maidan Wardak Province killed dozens of government security forces and militia members. Militia leader Abdul Ghani Alipoor – also known as Commander Shamshir – said he established this resistance group in 2014 to defend Hazaras against Taliban attacks. The Ghani administration, however, defined the group as an illegal militia that should be disarmed and disbanded. The Ghani administration accused Alipoor's militia of shooting down a government security forces helicopter on March 18, killing several ANDSF members.

During the year, media reported attacks on Sikhs and their places of worship for which no group claimed responsibility, but which Sikh community members believed were mostly linked to the Taliban. On February 2, an explosion at a store in central Kabul killed one Sikh and injured two. Having lost their businesses in the attack, the injured Sikhs received 50,000 afghanis (\$480) each from the government as compensation. On June 30, a bomb exploded outside a Sikh gurdwara in Jalalabad, injuring two Sikhs. On October 5, more than a dozen armed men entered a Sikh temple in Kabul, tying up the guards and destroying security cameras. Taliban authorities reportedly were investigating the incident.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, progovernment Islamic scholars were killed in

attacks for which no group claimed responsibility, but the Ghani administration attributed the attacks to the Taliban. On January 3 in Kapisa Province, north of Kabul, an explosion targeting a vehicle carrying Mirwais Karimi, the head of the Ulema Council in Kapisa, injured Karimi and killed five others. On February 2, an unclaimed bomb attack killed a prominent scholar and cofounder of a group of religious schools in Kabul. The scholar was the head of the Jamiat-e-Eslah, a local civil society group engaged in Islamic teaching and mobilization. On March 3, unknown gunmen shot Faiz Mohammad Fayez, former head of the Ulema Council in Kunduz in Kabul. On March 31, a bomb blast killed the head of Takhar's Ulema Council Mawlawi Abdul Samad Mohammadi and wounded three others. On June 30, unidentified gunman killed religious scholar Qari Ghorzand in the Anar Bagh District of the city of Mehtarlam in Laghman Province, according to local media. Ghorzand was employed by MOHRA and was the imam of a local mosque.

On April 26, a rocket attack on the Kunar provincial governor's compound during a Quran recitation competition wounded 15 students, Quranic teachers, and provincial officials. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but local government authorities accused the Taliban. On May 14, a bombing during Friday prayers at a Sunni mosque in the Shakadara District in Kabul killed 12 and injured 15. Among the dead was the imam, Mufti Noman. ISIS-K claimed responsibility the following day, saying the imam was a Taliban sympathizer. In Parwan Province on May 23, unidentified assailants killed the chair of the Islamic Scholars' Council in Khil District, Mawlawi Safiurrahman Safi. Residents blamed the Taliban. On May 28, an unidentified gunman shot and killed progovernment imam Qari Ghorzang in front of his home in the Laghman Province capital of Mehtarlam. No group claimed responsibility.

According to the MOHRA, over the last two decades, the Taliban and other extremist groups had killed 527 religious scholars, including approximately 50 Sunni and Shia religious leaders killed between February 2020 and July 2021. Several ISIS-K attacks on mosques targeted the Shia community throughout the country, beginning in October. According to press interviews in October, Shia Hazaras struggled to take what some characterized as a "life or death" risk to go to mosque on Fridays.

According to media reports, on November 13, a bomb on a passenger bus carrying residents of the Shia dominant Dasht-e Barchi neighborhood in western Kabul exploded and killed at least six persons and injured many others. According to a Taliban source, ISIS-K was behind the attack.

In several cases, the responsibility for attacks on pro-Ghani administration religious leaders was unclear. In these instances, although no individual or group claimed responsibility, local authorities said they suspected ISIS-K or, less frequently, the Taliban. According to press reports, in October, at least five persons attending memorial services for the mother of Taliban spokesperson Mujahid at the Edigah Mosque in Kabul died in a bomb attack on the mosque. According to media reports, ISIS-K was suspected of being behind the attack. The Taliban detained three individuals and the investigation of the bombing continued at year's end.

Before mid-August, 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.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, there were reports of the Taliban warning mullahs not to perform funeral prayers for Ghani administration security officials. As a result, according to MOHRA officials, imams said they feared performing funeral rites for members of the ANDSF and other Ghani administration employees.

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

According to members of the international Ahmadiyya community, prior to the Taliban takeover, an Ahmadiyya Muslim worship facility in Kabul remained unmarked because members of the congregation said they had not received permission from authorities to operate as a mosque due to the prevailing government and societal belief that Ahmadis were a heretical sect.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, there were reports of the Taliban taking over schools in areas under their control and imposing their own curricula during its insurgency against the Ghani-led central government; however, it was difficult to obtain information in Taliban-controlled territory.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Religion and ethnicity in the country were often closely linked. Sikhs, Hindus,

Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities reported continued harassment from Muslims, although Hindus and Sikhs stated that prior to the Taliban takeover, they continued to be able to publicly practice their religions.

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. They said fears of violent societal repression had further increased since the Taliban takeover.

According to Christians and Ahmadi Muslims, members of their groups continued to worship only in private to avoid societal discrimination and persecution, including harassment from neighbors and coworkers. They also said that following the Taliban takeover in August, relatives and neighbors who were aware of their identities were more likely to treat them harshly or report them to the Taliban, whether out of self-preservation or to curry favor with the Taliban.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, women of several different faiths, including Sunni and Shia Islam, continued to report harassment from local Muslim religious leaders over their attire. Clerics in numerous provinces preached that women must wear modest dress and that the faithful should publicly enforce a strict implementation of sharia law. 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, before the Taliban takeover, in contrast to other more secure, Ghani administration-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 to increase their security in public. Prior to the Taliban takeover, observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities, such as concerts, considered by the religious leaders to be inconsistent with Islamic doctrine. Following the Taliban takeover, media reported instances of local Muslim religious leaders becoming more prohibitive of such activities.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, Ahmadiyya Muslims said they did not proselytize due to fear of persecution. Ahmadiyya Muslims reported an 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. Before the Taliban takeover of Kabul, members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim

community said they were able to intermittently perform weekly congregational prayer at a nondescript location in Kabul. According to international Ahmadiyya Muslim organizations with close ties to Ahmadi Muslims in the country, following the Taliban takeover, fear of persecution by the Taliban and its sympathizers had driven community members to refrain from worship at their center in Kabul. Approximately 100 Ahmadi Muslims departed the country in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. As of year's end, hundreds remained in country. Ahmadi Muslims 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. Ahmadi Muslim representatives said they did not initially report or publicize these threats because they feared additional verbal harassment and physical abuse from Taliban representatives.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, Christian representatives reported public opinion, as expressed in social media and elsewhere, remained hostile toward converts to Christianity and to the idea of Christian proselytization. They reported pressure and threats, largely from family, to renounce Christianity and return to Islam. 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. The dates, times, and locations of these services were frequently changed to avoid detection. There continued to be no public Christian churches. Following the Taliban takeover, Christians described raids by Taliban on the homes of Christian converts even after they had fled the country or moved out. Christian sources stated the Taliban takeover emboldened intolerant relatives to threaten them with violence and inform on converts should they continue their practice of Christianity.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, some Sikhs and Hindus had refused to send their children to public schools because other students harassed their children, although only a few private school options were available to them due to the decreasing sizes of the two communities and their members' declining economic circumstances. According to community members, since the Taliban takeover, the small number of remaining Sikh and Hindu children did not attend school due to school closures related to COVID-19 and inclement winter weather.

Until the Taliban takeover, 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 known Jew departed Afghanistan in late August, saying he feared the Taliban would be unable to

protect him from an ISIS-K attack.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, 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

On August 31, the U.S. embassy in Kabul suspended operations.

In October and November, the U.S. government condemned ISIS-K attacks on Shia mosques and engaged Taliban leadership to press for the protection of religious minorities from repression and violence. On November 29-30, a U.S. government delegation met with senior Taliban representatives in Qatar. U.S. government officials expressed “deep concern regarding allegations of human rights abuses and urged the Taliban to protect the rights of all Afghans, uphold and enforce its policy of general amnesty, and take additional steps to form an inclusive and representative government.” U.S. representatives also expressed concern over the status of religious minorities in a meeting with senior Taliban representatives in Islamabad, Pakistan, in December. The U.S. government also conveyed this message consistently in meetings with the “Taliban Political Commission” in Doha after August 31 through the Afghanistan Affairs Unit.

Before the Taliban takeover in mid-August, U.S. embassy officials worked with the government to promote understanding of religious freedom and its importance as well the need for the acceptance and protection of religious minorities. In meetings with members of the President’s staff, the ONSC, MOHRA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs, and the Ulema Council, embassy officials promoted understanding of religious freedom as well as the need to enhance the government’s capacity to counter violent religious extremism.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, senior embassy officials engaged leaders of the Sikh and Hindu communities in June to understand their concerns and their ability to practice their faith freely.

Until the Taliban takeover, embassy officials met with both government and religious officials to promote cooperation with ulema councils and emphasize the potential strong impact international Islamic scholars could have on moderating the Taliban. The embassy coordinated with the ONSC, as well as other governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders, to promote respect for religious diversity.

While working with the Ghani administration, the embassy sponsored 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.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, the embassy also used social media to support religious freedom. On May 20, the Ambassador, responding to a Taliban-attributed attack in Ghor in which three Hazara shopkeepers were killed, condemned via Twitter the Taliban's and ISIS-K's targeting of Hazaras. This followed the Ambassador's condemnation of the May 8 attack on a Kabul girls' school in a Hazara community that resulted in the deaths of more than 80 persons.

Following the Taliban takeover, the United States continued to support the Afghan people. The United States remained committed to providing humanitarian assistance and basic needs support to the Afghan people and continued to advocate for the need to respect the human rights, including religious freedom, of all Afghans through its engagements with the Taliban.