

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution establishes the republic as a secular country and provides for freedom of religion and the right of individuals to choose their religion, express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution separates the roles of government and religion and stipulates that religious organizations are prohibited from “interference” in state affairs. The constitution provides for the equality of citizens before the law, regardless of their religious preference.

Opposition media outlets reported on August 30 that Russia deported Turkmen citizen Ashyrbay Bekiyev to Turkmenistan for violation of Russian migration laws. Media outlets further reported that the Dashoguz regional court sentenced Bekiyev to 23 years in prison on “trumped-up charges” of Islamic extremism. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 14 cases of security officers detaining their members, summoning them to appear at law enforcement agencies, questioning them for a few hours, then releasing them. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s* (RFE/RL) Turkmenistan Service reported that police in the Balkan Province raided the homes of Muslims in mid-August and seized religious literature.

Some religious leaders reported fewer barriers to re-registration during the year and the ability to hold normal religious activities, including services and events. Others stated that they struggled to find adequate spaces to hold services, at times due to reported government pressure on the owners of establishments to not make their locations available for religious activities. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported that they could only meet in private homes, putting them at risk of detention due to the group’s lack of registration. The Norwegian-based international religious freedom nongovernmental organization (NGO) Forum 18 reported that in the spring, security officials in Balkan Province stopped girls and women who appeared to be Muslims for questioning, especially those who wore religious attire. Most religious leaders said they largely avoided importing printed religious literature due to restrictions and cumbersome importation processes, with some accessing religious literature online instead.

Some minority religious leaders said that persons who were not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox continued to report harassment in society, such as public shaming by family members, friends, and neighbors and pressure to return to their original faith, although these incidents were isolated and occurred more often outside the large cities. Some religious groups reported an increase in what one Catholic leader said was “religious curiosity” – a wider interest in the country in religious issues over the last 30 years.

The Ambassador, other embassy representatives, and other U.S. government officials expressed concern to authorities about religious freedom issues, including conscientious objection to military service, the registration process, the need for more legal places of worship, and other factors that contributed to the country’s designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Embassy officials continued to urge authorities not to arrest, detain, or harass religious practitioners and requested information on those arrested and still in prison for possible religious reasons. At an Ambassador-hosted roundtable in October and in various meetings with embassy officials, leaders of 10 minority religious groups discussed religious freedom problems they faced. The leaders did not report significant changes from 2022 in terms of the religious freedom climate in the country.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as a CPC for having engaged in or tolerated “particularly severe violations of religious freedom.” On December 29, 2023, the Secretary of State

again designated Turkmenistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the “important national interest of the United States.”

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.7 million (mid-year 2023). The State Statistics Committee conducted a census in December, determining the population is 7,057,841. According to U.S. government estimates, the country is 93 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 6.4 percent Eastern Orthodox, and 1 percent other. There are small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shia Muslims, Baha'is, Roman Catholics, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Evangelical Christians, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

Most ethnic Russians and Armenians identify as Orthodox Christian and generally are members of the Russian Orthodox Church or Armenian Apostolic Church. Some ethnic Russians and Armenians are also members of smaller Protestant groups.

There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, consisting largely of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, some located in Ashgabat, with others along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashi.

Based on estimates from the Israeli embassy and members of the Jewish community, approximately 200 Jews live in the country.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

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

Under the criminal code, intentional actions aimed at the incitement of social, national, tribal, ethnical, racial, or religious enmity, abasement of human dignity, and propaganda of the exceptionality, superiority, or inferiority of individuals by reason of their attitude to religion, social, national, ethnic, or racial affiliation is punishable by a fine of from 2,000 to 4,000 manat (\$570 to \$1,140 at the official, but unavailable, exchange rate or approximately \$103 to \$206 at the government controlled secondary exchange rate in effect during all of 2023, which reflects actual daily commercial transactions at all levels and sectors of society) or imprisonment up to three years. If the same acts are committed with the use of mass media, the fine is from 2,500 to 5,000 manat (\$720-\$1,440) or imprisonment up to four years. If the above-mentioned actions are committed with the use of violence or with the threat of its use, they are punishable by imprisonment for up to eight years.

The law requires all religious organizations, including those already registered, to reregister with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) whenever the organization changes its address or amends its legal charter. The law permits the registration only of those religious organizations that have at least 50 resident members age 18 or older; a similar requirement applies to nonreligious civil associations. The law defines a religious organization as a voluntary association of citizens affiliated with a religion, organized to conduct religious services and other rites and ceremonies and/or to provide religious education, that is registered in accordance with the country's legislation. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are 134 religious organizations in the country, composed of Muslim (105 Sunni and five Shia), 13 Russian Orthodox, 10 other Christian confessions and one Bahai.

By law, the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR) is responsible for helping religious organizations register with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they comply with the law, assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations.

The law states SCROEERIR must approve all individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations, although the law does not specify the procedures for obtaining the required approval. The law also states leaders of registered religious organizations must be Turkmen citizens who have received an "appropriate religious education," but it does not define that term. SCROEERIR operates under the leadership of the Grand Mufti, who is appointed by the government, as are all other senior Muslim clerics, Sunni or Shia. The Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers for Education, Health, Religion, Sports, Tourism, Science, New Technologies, and Innovation oversees SCROEERIR's work. The chair of SCROEERIR is also the chair of the Department for Work with Religious Organizations in the Cabinet of Ministers. Except for the name of the chairman, the government did not make public the membership list of SCROEERIR or information on its deliberations.

To register or reregister, organizations must submit to SCROEERIR their contact information; proof of address, a statement requesting registration signed by the founders and board members of the organization, two copies of the organization's charter, and the names, addresses, and dates of birth of the organization's founders. They must pay a registration fee that starts at 300 manat (\$86) and is based on the size of the organization and where it is registered. Once SCROEERIR endorses an application for registration, it is submitted to the MOJ, which coordinates an interministerial approval process involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other government offices. According to government procedures, the MOJ may additionally request the biographic information of all members of an organization applying for registration. Each congregation of a registered religious organization must also register, and the registration process is the same as that of the parent organization.

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

The law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the constitution or if SCROEERIR does not endorse its application. The law assigns the Office of the Prosecutor General to monitor the compliance of a religious organization with the constitution. A court may suspend the activities of a religious organization if it determines the organization is in violation of the constitution. Such a suspension may only be overcome if the organization submits documentation satisfying the court that the activities that led to suspension have ceased. The law also states that grounds for dissolution of a religious organization include activities "that violate the rights, freedoms, and lawful interests of citizens" or "harm their health and morale."

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

Unregistered religious organizations and their unregistered subsidiary congregations may not legally conduct religious activities; establish places of worship; gather for religious services,

including in private residences; produce or disseminate religious materials; or proselytize. Any such activity is punishable as an administrative offense by fines ranging from 100 to 2,000 manat (\$29 to \$570), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for members.

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

The administrative code stipulates penalties ranging from 200 to 500 manat (\$57 to \$142) for those who violate an individual's right of freedom to worship or right to abstain from worship.

The criminal and administrative codes dictate punishment for private individuals who harass members of registered religious organizations. According to the administrative code, obstructing the exercise of religious freedom is punishable by a fine ranging from 500 to 1,000 manat (\$142 to \$284) or a 15-day administrative detention. According to the criminal code, obstructing the legal activities of religious organizations or the performance of religious rites that do not violate public order and are not associated with infringement of the rights, freedoms, and or lawful interests of citizens is punishable by a fine ranging from 500 to 1,000 manat, (\$142 to \$284) compulsory labor of up to 480 hours, or corrective labor up to one year, which entails the state deducting five to 20 percent of the individual's salary. If an obstruction involves a physical attack, the punishment may entail up to two years in prison.

The law allows registered religious organizations to create educational establishments to train clergy and other religious personnel after obtaining a license. The Cabinet of Ministers establishes the procedures for doing so. The law also states individuals teaching religious disciplines at religious educational establishments must have a theological education and must carry out their activities with the permission of the central governing body of the religious organization and the approval of SCROEERIR.

Local government offices have the right to monitor the "religious situation" within their jurisdictions, send proposals to SCROEERIR to change or update legislation on religious freedom, and coordinate religious ceremonies conducted outside of religious buildings.

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

Under the criminal code, polygamy carries penalties of up to two years of labor or fines ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 manat (\$570 to \$855).

The law prohibits the publication of religious literature inciting "religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial hatred." SCROEERIR must approve imported religious literature, and only registered religious organizations may import literature. Registered religious organizations may be fined for publishing or disseminating religious material without government approval. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 200 to 2,000 manat (\$57 to \$570), for producing, importing, and disseminating unauthorized literature and other materials.

Religious instruction is not part of the public-school curriculum. The law allows registered religious organizations to provide religious education after school hours to children for up to four hours per week with parental and SCROEERIR approval, although the law does not specify the requirements for obtaining SCROEERIR's approval. Persons who graduate from institutions of higher religious education and obtain approval from SCROEERIR may provide religious education. According to the law, citizens have a right to obtain religious education, although doing so in a private home is illegal.

The administrative code prohibits unregistered religious groups or unregistered subsidiary congregations of registered religious organizations from providing religious education. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines of up to 500 manat (\$142) for providing unauthorized religious education to children.

The constitution states two years of military service are compulsory for men older than 18. The law does not provide for an exemption to compulsory service for religious reasons. However, the government has offered a civilian service alternative in the State Migration Service for conscientious objectors since 2022. Refusal to perform the compulsory two-year military or alternative service is punishable by a maximum of two years in prison or two years of “corrective labor, in which” the state deducts part of the salaries of prisoners in an amount designated by the court. Salary deductions range between five and 20 percent. Until the age of 27, individuals may be convicted each time they refuse compulsory military service or alternative service, potentially resulting in multiple convictions in their lifetimes.

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

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

The law requires religious groups to register all foreign assistance with the MOJ and to provide interim and final reports on the use of funds. The administrative code provides a detailed schedule of fines of up to 1,000 manat (\$284) for both unregistered and registered religious groups for accepting unauthorized funds from foreign sources.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving Violence, Detention, or Mass Resettlement

On August 30, the NGO Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Helsinki Foundation), which is based outside of the country, reported that Russia deported Turkmen citizen Ashyrbay Bekiyev to Turkmenistan in August for violating Russian immigration laws. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's* Turkmenistan Service, *Radio Azatlyk*, reported government security services alleged Ashyrbay Bekiyev and his brother Tachmyrat Bekiyev, after moving to Russia, began propagating fundamentalist religious beliefs to Turkmen students. According to human rights defenders, the brothers' beliefs had nothing to do with religious extremes and they were being persecuted by authorities for deviating from the government's religious line. The Helsinki Foundation described Bekiyev's deportation as 'illegal,' stating that his first detention in 2016, on an extradition request from Turkmenistan, attracted the attention of media and human rights activists. In May 2017, Bekiyev was released after the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in his favor, prohibiting his deportation. In August 2023, opposition news outlet *Turkmen.news* cited a source saying, “Turkmenistan authorities are angry with Bekiyev for filing a complaint to the ECHR and... [disgracing] the country and the president. There is a high risk that he will be beaten in places of detention.” Ashyrbay's brother Tachmyrat was reported to remain in custody in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation was considering the issue of his extradition to Turkmenistan, according to the Helsinki Foundation's report.

On September 15, the Helsinki Foundation reported that authorities detained a Muslim man from the village of Sharlavuk, Balkan province, for 15 days for teaching children the Koran. During those 15 days, the man was reportedly forbidden to pray or to receive parcels from his relatives. According to the Helsinki Foundation article, sources inside the country mentioned that Turkmen authorities labeled the man a “Wahhabi” and warned him that if he repeated the ‘offence’, he could face up to six years in prison as a member of a Wahhabi group.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)’s Turkmenistan Service reported that police in the Balkan province raided the homes of Muslims in mid-August. According to the article, the police

seized religious literature, including books on sharia and Russian translations of the Koran, and left only two Turkmen-language Koran copies. According to RFE/RL reporting, this was part of a larger continued campaign that included interrogating people who are considered “too pious.” RFE/RL further reported that officials from the Ministry of National Security reportedly detained a mullah for giving religious lessons to about 50 school-age children. The RFE/RL article noted that, according to a local resident, the lessons followed Turkmen traditions for Islam. The article further reported that Ministry of National Security officials questioned an elderly imam for giving Islamic lessons to approximately 50 children without government approval.

The Helsinki Foundation reported authorities continued to persecute Muslims believers for spreading the teachings of Islam, citing an example of a person detained for 15 days after authorities found CDs with religious recordings in the individual’s car. The report said authorities prohibited any group study of the Koran outside of mosques or places not controlled by the authorities. It also reported the head of the BL-K/4 “Akdash” colony prohibited prisoners from receiving outside copies of the Koran.

The NGO Forum 18 reported that police in the southeastern city of Mary summoned a Muslim man several times during the spring. According to the article, officers interrogated him and warned him to stop offering prayers at the invitation of local inhabitants at weddings and commemorations of the dead.

In their *2023 Religious Freedom Report*, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported 14 cases of police and officers from the Ministry of National Security detaining Witnesses over the year, summoning them to law enforcement agencies, at times while they were sharing their religious beliefs or in their place of work, questioning them for a few hours, and then releasing them. The report stated that the Ministry of National Security “continued to carry out preventative work among Jehovah’s Witnesses throughout the country.” According to the report, “In almost all cases, the authorities ask the Witnesses to state their beliefs in writing, indicate that they have had an explanatory conversation, and undertake that they will no longer engage in ‘illegal activities.’ In some cases, the authorities have checked mobile phones and gained access to contact lists.” The report noted that interrogations were “held in a respectful manner, although in some cases the officers have been aggressive.” A local representative mentioned that in October, Ministry of National Security officers detained a Jehovah’s Witness, questioned him for hours, and later released him, but did not return his passport.

According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses 2023 report, “Since September 2022, no criminal cases have been initiated against draft-age Jehovah’s Witnesses for conscientious objection to military service. No Witnesses are currently detained. However, on several occasions, law enforcement officers interviewed draft-age Witnesses and pressured them to renounce their personal religious convictions.”

There were no reliable figures on the total number of citizens convicted of crimes related to religion and the government declined to provide figures, stating the information was confidential.

Other than the Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives, most leaders from minority religious groups reported no cases of harassment by government security services during the year. One leader of a Christian minority group reported that security service officials questioned, but did not arrest, some followers.

Abuses Limiting Religious Belief and Expression

According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, no one in their community was imprisoned for conscientious objection during the year. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives stated, however, that the government’s offer for conscientious objectors to serve at the State Migration Service instead of the military to meet the compulsory two-year service requirement was not a “genuine alternative civilian service” that met international standards.

The Israeli Embassy said that there were no known incidents of antisemitism during the year.

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or in Community with Others

Some religious leaders reported satisfactory relations with government officials and fewer barriers to re-registration. One religious leader said a branch of a religious group in the region had not received registration approval despite several attempts over years. Some religious leaders reported that they were able to hold normal religious activities, including services and events, and that they routinely invited government officials to their activities. Other religious leaders stated that they struggled to find adequate spaces to hold their services, at times due to reported government pressure on the owners of establishments to not make their establishments available for religious activities. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses said that their adherents could only practice their religion by meeting in their private homes, which remained illegal, due to their lack of registration.

The MFA reported the Ministry of Justice did not register any new religious organizations in 2023, as no requests for registration were submitted. Religious organizations noted that the registration process legally remained the same, and some mentioned they were able to successfully re-register. During 2022-2023, 18 organizations re-registered, 16 of them due to a change in their legal addresses and the other two for amendments to the organization's charter. One religious leader stated, however, that their organization was still waiting for approval of a registration application that was submitted to authorities three years earlier.

The NGO Forum 18 reported that in August, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed concern about "excessive administrative barriers to registering religious organizations (in the country) as well as the prohibition on practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered." CERD called on the country to "eliminate all barriers to registering religious organizations and practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered."

Forum 18 also reported that in the spring, local police and representatives of the Ministry of National Security in Balkan Province questioned girls and women who appeared to be Muslims, especially those who wore hijabs and other religious attire or carried *tasbeih* (Islamic beads).

Most religious organizations' leaders said they largely avoided importing printed religious literature due to restrictions and cumbersome importation processes. Some organizations' leaders said their followers accessed religious literature online and that some used smart cell phone applications to access religious literature. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported there were no imports of printed religious literature during the year.

Members of various religious groups reported difficulty in purchasing or renting land and buildings for worship or meeting purposes, although they said they were unsure if this was government-driven or landlord-driven. Some reported that landlords said they feared government reprisal if they leased properties to be used as places of worship, and some landlords were allegedly pressured to refrain from offering their properties for religious activities. Some groups reported they had secured properties, only to have landlords renege on the contracts.

A representative of a Sunni mosque said plans approved in 2022 by President Serdar Berdimuhamedov for the construction of new Sunni mosques in every province were still in place and advancing.

The theology faculty of Turkmen State University, located in Ashgabat, continued to be the only university-level institution allowed to provide Islamic higher education. Some religious groups previously said they suspected the Ministry of National Security continued to vet student candidates for admission to this program, although the ministry officially denied the practice. Women remained banned from participating in the program.

The government continued to require its approval of all senior Muslim clerics. The government was not involved in appointing the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church or other financially independent religious groups but required the senior Russian Orthodox priest to be a citizen.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

On June 7, the government reported it would provide charter flights for 2,312 Turkmen citizens to perform the hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia. On June 14, the opposition media outlet *Turkmen.news* reported that 19,000 persons had registered to perform the pilgrimage.

The Helsinki Foundation reported that citizens wishing to make a pilgrimage abroad were required to apply for permission from imams. A source told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation that, “For several years now, the stated price for performing the Hajj to Mecca has been about 20 thousand manats (\$5,680). But at this price, only relatives and acquaintances of the imams perform the hajj. For everyone else, the price is from 80 to 200 thousand manat (\$22,720 to 57,300). But even with this amount, not every provincial will be able to leave, since most of the quotas are allocated to believers from my Akhal province.”

According to the Helsinki Foundation, after government authorities twice denied her permission, without explanation, to perform the umrah pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, Yakutjan Babajanova was permitted to travel in August. The foundation said the government granted permission after Babajanova’s relatives appealed to the State Migration Service and international organizations.

On January 15, the news outlet *Turkmen Portal* reported that Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Chairman of the People’s Council, national leader, and former president of the country, inspected the construction of the newly established Arkadag City in the Ahal province. During the inspection, Berdimuhamedov noted the appropriateness of building a madrassah near the central mosque. According to the article, the mosque is expected to be able to accommodate 5,500 believers.

The news outlet *Orient* reported that Russian Orthodox Church Archbishop Theophylact, administrator of the parishes of the Patriarchal Deanery in the country, visited the country on January 13-17. According to *Orient* and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the visit, the Archbishop met with Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, and visited churches in Ahal, Lebap, and Mary Provinces.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some minority religious leaders said that persons who were not Sunni Muslim or Russian Orthodox continued to report harassment, such as public shaming by family members, friends, and neighbors, and pressure to return to their original faith, although they said these incidents were isolated and occurred more often outside the large cities. Some religious leaders reported that in larger cities, unlike in the past, workers rarely if ever faced questioning or harassment because of their religious beliefs, but said they sometimes still did in less urban areas.

In its 2023 annual report, the Christian NGO Open Doors noted “Christians from a Muslim background come under pressure both from the state and from their family and community, who may subject them to house arrest, forced marriage and beatings to try to force them to return to Islam.” Open Doors further reported that “Christian converts from a Muslim background are most vulnerable to persecution, especially in rural areas. They are likely to experience pressure and occasionally physical violence from their families, friends and local community to force them to return to Islam. Some converts are locked up by their families for long periods, beaten and may eventually be expelled from their communities. Local imams preach against them, adding pressure. As a result, converts will do their best to hide their faith – they become secret believers.”

Some religious groups reported an increase in what one Catholic leader said was “religious curiosity” – a wider interest in the country in religious issues over the previous 30 years. The leader said the change in attitude towards religion came from people who were curious about Christianity

and others who were looking to re-establish ties with their familial ancestors who were religious. The religious leaders stated they did not proselytize, but rather opened their doors to all people.

The Israeli Embassy said that there were no known incidents of antisemitism during the year.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador, other embassy representatives, and other U.S. government officials expressed concern about religious freedom issues, including the legal status of conscientious objectors, the registration process, the need for places of worship, and other factors that contributed to the country's designation as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. Embassy representatives advocated for an internationally recognized alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. Embassy representatives also urged the government to cease any arrest, detention or harassment of religious practitioners, ease the registration process, and help provide places for worship. They also requested information on those arrested and still in prison for possible religious reasons.

In the November session of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva, the U.S. Mission to International Organizations welcomed the "government's efforts to work with Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors on a mutually agreeable alternative civilian service policy".

During an Ambassador-hosted roundtable in October and various meetings with embassy officials, leaders of minority religious groups discussed religious freedom challenges the groups faced in the country. Throughout the year, the Ambassador and other embassy officials visited places of worship of religious groups, including a Russian Orthodox church, a Catholic church, and Sunni and Shia mosques, to show support for those communities and provide a forum to discuss their concerns.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as a CPC under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having "engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom." On December 29, the Secretary of State again designated Turkmenistan as a CPC and announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompany designation as required in the "important national interest of the United States."