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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Afghanistan

Executive Summary

**The United States has not yet decided whether to recognize the Taliban or any other entity as the Government of Afghanistan or as part of such a government. All references to “the pre-August 2021 government” refer to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. References to the Taliban in this report do not denote or imply that the United States recognizes the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan. The Taliban did not respond to repeated requests for updates and information on subjects addressed in this report.

According to the Taliban, Hanafi jurisprudence is the basis for the legal system, and at present the country does not have in place a clear and cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms. According to the Taliban, laws enacted under the pre-August 2021 government remain in effect unless the laws violate sharia. Taliban leaders largely impose their policies on citizens through guidelines or recommendations specifying acceptable behaviors they justify under their interpretation of sharia and prevalent cultural norms the Taliban consider acceptable.

According to UN Special Rapporteur Richard Bennett, the human rights situation in Afghanistan remained deeply concerning, and threats and attacks against Hazara Shia and other Shia Muslims continued, resulting in great loss of civilian life. It was often unclear whether the perpetrators of the threats and violence were members of ISIS-K, local Taliban, or a combination of both. Hazara activists described Taliban repression of Hazaras and the failure of the Taliban to protect them from ISIS-K attacks as part of a trend toward deepened marginalization and the erasure of the Hazara from society. The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Amnesty International (AI) reported that in June, the Taliban conducted a night raid in search of Mohamad Muradi, a Hazara and security official under the pre-August 2021 government, and killed Muradi, six of his men, and two of his daughters. In June, the Taliban released the last of 28 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kabul whom they had detained in 2021. NGO International Christian Concern said the situation for Christians in the country grew more perilous during the year. Reports and statements quoting Taliban members that they would enforce laws according to sharia engendered fears among Christians and others that the Taliban would treat Christian converts as apostates subject to severe penalties. Reports of Taliban “door-to-door” visits to search for Christians also kept Christian converts in deep hiding. After Taliban

leader Haibatullah Akundzada announced in November that *hudood* punishments (those mandated by God for crimes defined by sharia) were non-discretionary, there were reports of floggings for alleged crimes, including theft, “illegitimate” relationships, and violation of social behavior codes. Members of all religious minority groups reported fear of persecution by the Taliban. Minority religious group representatives said the Taliban continued to marginalize and repress members of these groups, including by restricting access to worship, civil service positions, and university admissions. According to Hazara community and NGO representatives, Hazaras, who are predominantly Shia Muslims, continued to face repression, widespread discrimination, and marginalization by the Taliban in public service delivery and public sector hiring. Because religious and ethnic identities are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Sikhs and Hindus reported they had ceased to congregate at their places of worship; hundreds had resettled abroad due to fear of violent attacks by the Taliban and ISIS-K and because they could not rely on the Taliban to protect their communities. Civil society groups reported an estimated nine Sikh and Hindu individuals remained in the country at year’s end. While enforcement varied by district and province, local Taliban representatives continued to enforce decrees on gender segregation, women’s dress and head covering, men’s facial hair, unaccompanied women, and music.

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), consistent with trends observed in past years, many suicide and improvised explosive device attacks on civilians targeted Shia Muslims, particularly ethnic Hazaras. UNAMA reported a resurgence of these attacks against the Hazara community, for nearly all for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility. UN Special Rapporteur Bennett reported that ISIS-K continued primarily to target civilians of the Shia religious community; in April alone, ISIS-K attacks in Balkh and Kunduz Provinces killed or wounded 100 civilians. In September, a suicide bomber struck an education center in a Hazara area of Kabul. According to UNAMA, the attack killed 53 persons and wounded 110, including mostly girls and women of multiple religious and ethnic backgrounds. Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and Muslim minority groups again reported that an unquantified number of Sunni Muslims had verbally harassed them. According to international sources, Baha’is and Christians lived in constant fear of exposure and were reluctant to publicly reveal their religious identities. Christian groups reported that public sentiment, as expressed in social media and elsewhere, remained hostile toward converts and to Christian proselytization. They said individuals who converted to or were studying Christianity reported receiving threats, including death threats, from family members. Ahmadiyya Muslims reported they continued to worship only privately and in small groups, at home or in nondescript places of worship, in order to avoid discrimination and persecution.

The U.S. Embassy in Kabul suspended operations in August 2021. The U.S. government engaged the Taliban throughout the year to urge them to respect the human rights of all the country’s citizens, regardless of their religious beliefs. In July, the Secretary of State announced the launch of the U.S.-Afghan Consultative Mechanism to facilitate closer engagement between U.S. government policymakers and civil society in support of inclusive governance within the country. The U.S. government maintained its sanctions on the Taliban and the Haqqani network, announced actions to impose targeted visa restrictions on human rights abusers, and continued to assist in the relocation of particularly vulnerable members of minority religious groups.

On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated the Taliban as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 38.3 million (midyear 2022). According to Pew Forum data from 2009, Sunni Muslims constitute approximately 80-85 percent of the population, and Shia Muslims make up approximately 7 percent, according to a 2021 Pew report.

According to religious community leaders, the Shia population, approximately 90 percent of whom are ethnic Hazaras, is predominantly Jaafari, but also includes Ismailis. Smaller numbers of Shia, both Twelver and Ismaili, are found in Nuristani and Pamiri communities and among other ethnic groups.

Other religious groups, mainly Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians, together constitute less than 0.3 percent of the population. The numbers of Hindus and Sikhs continue to decline, with an estimated nine Sikhs and Hindus remaining in the country at year's end, down from approximately 150 at the beginning of the year, and more than 400 prior to August 2021. Most members of the Sikh and Hindu communities are in Kabul, with smaller numbers in Ghazni and other provinces.

According to representatives of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, members in the country number 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.

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 Taliban "Caretaker Government"

Since their August 2021 takeover, the Taliban have said the country is an Islamic emirate whose laws and governance must be consistent with sharia. At year's end, the Taliban had not announced a cohesive legal framework, judicial system, or enforcement mechanisms. It had also not clarified its view of which constitution, if any, was in effect, including the 2004 and 1964 constitutions.

Legal Framework

According to the Taliban, Hanafi jurisprudence is the basis for the country's legal system. The Taliban largely impose their policies on citizens through guidelines or recommendations specifying acceptable behaviors they justify under their interpretation of sharia and prevalent cultural norms they consider acceptable. While the Taliban have not explicitly purported to abrogate specific laws, they have continued to emphasize their view that they govern in accordance with sharia and reject any law that contravenes it. Taliban members have stated they follow only portions of the 2004 and 1964 constitutions that do not contradict sharia. Some observers also state that neither of the two constitutions is fully in effect, so they have limited relevance to any legal framework in operation. According to these observers, any departure from the 2004 constitution would be significant, insofar as the constitution states that 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," a provision the Taliban reject.

Seven offenses make up *hudood* crimes. According to Sunni Hanafi jurisprudence, 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 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 that the age of maturity for citizens is 18, although it is 16 for women to marry. 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. 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, 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, including apostates, have three days to recant or face death, although there is no clear process for recanting under sharia. Some *hadiths* (sayings or traditions from the Prophet Muhammad that serve as a source of Islamic law or guidance) suggest discussion and negotiation with an apostate to encourage the apostate to recant.

A 2007 ruling of the Supreme Court of Afghanistan states that the Baha'i Faith is distinct from Islam and is a form of blasphemy. Baha'is are labeled infidels, and all Muslims who convert to it are considered apostates.

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.

Under sharia, 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 (book of David or Psalms). It is illegal for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

Ministry of Interior-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 Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (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 Taliban "Caretaker Government"

During the year, the Taliban continued to state that they administered the country in accordance with sharia, an assertion some Islamic scholars in the country and abroad challenged. "The Taliban's recent ban on secondary education for girls is unacceptable and is clearly contrary to Islamic teachings. There is no mention in the Quran or prophetic sayings that justifies such action by the Taliban," Haroon

Imtiaz, a spokesman for the Islamic Society of North America, told Voice of America (VOA). During the year, 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 continued to issue decrees specifying acceptable behaviors under their interpretation of sharia and describing them as “guidelines” or “recommendations” that they unevenly enforced. According to the International Development Law Organization, the Taliban had initiated a process to assess criminal and civil laws to filter out those that are in contradiction with the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia. Observers said this departure from the 2004 constitution was significant because the constitution stated that 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,” which was no longer the case under the Taliban. On November 13, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid announced that Taliban leader Akundzada had ordered judges to impose what the Taliban considered *hudood* punishments, including public executions, stoning, floggings, and the amputation of limbs and also ordered the implementation of *qisas* (retributive justice) in certain instances. The Taliban reportedly stated they intended to draft a new constitution but had not publicly announced one by year’s end.

Because religious and ethnic identities are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. According to AI, on June 26, in Ghor Province, the Taliban conducted a night raid in search of Mohamad Muradi, a Hazara and security official under the pre-August 2021 government. During the operation, they killed Muradi, six of his men, and two of his daughters. The Taliban accused Muradi of cooperating with Mawlawi Mahdi Mujahid, the Taliban’s only Hazara commander, who broke with the Taliban earlier in the year. According to an article by AI on September 15, the attack was “part of a wider pattern of unlawful targeted killings of people whom the Taliban perceives as adversaries.” AI Secretary General Agnes Callamard stated, “These violent deaths are further shocking proof that the Taliban continue to persecute, torture, and extrajudicially execute Hazara people.”

In April, the United Nations reported that the Taliban had tortured and killed a midwife in Mazar-e-Sharif, amputating her legs, stabbing her and shooting her 12 times, simply because she was a woman and a Hazara.

In June, Ahmadi international leadership reported that the Taliban had released the last of 28 members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Kabul that it had detained in 2021. According to members of the community, the Taliban had falsely accused them of belonging to ISIS-K and demanded that they repent their “heretical beliefs.”

In June, the Taliban detained Afghan fashion model Ajmal Haqiqi and three of his colleagues, accusing them of disrespecting Islam and the Quran, according to press reports. In one widely circulated video, Haqiqi was seen laughing as his colleague Ghulam Sakhi, who has a speech impediment that he emphasizes for humor, recited verses of the Quran. After the detentions, the Taliban released a video of Haqiqi and his colleagues, who were seen standing in light brown jail uniforms and apologizing to the Taliban and religious scholars.

In June, Taliban fighters stormed the office of Ayatollah Mohaqiqi Kabuli, a prominent Shia cleric who died in 2019, tearing up a photograph and banners and destroying equipment. According to social media sources, the Taliban also detained two staff members. Following the incident, the Taliban inspected the office of Ayatollah Fayyaz, another Shia cleric. Residents of Ghazni Province described the Taliban’s move as an insult to religion.

According to media reports, on October 1, a wave of protests followed a deadly September 30 suicide attack on students, mostly girls and young women, who were preparing for examinations at the Kaaj Higher Education Center in a Hazara neighborhood of Kabul. Young women led many of the marches, chanting slogans that included, "Security is our right! Education is our right! Stop genocide!" amid a Twitter hashtag campaign, "Stop Hazara Genocide." On October 2, Taliban gunmen suppressed similar protests in Herat and Bamyan, beating women and firing guns in the air to disperse crowds. On October 3, similar protests in Kabul and Mazar-a-Sharif were met with a swift, armed response by Taliban gunmen. Hazara activists described Taliban repression of Hazaras and their failure to protect the ethnic and religious minority from ISIS-K attacks as part of a trend toward marginalizing and erasing the ethnic minority from Afghan society.

According to international NGOs, Hindu and Sikh groups continued to express concern regarding their physical safety. In September, the NGO Human Rights Watch asserted that Taliban authorities had an obligation to protect at-risk communities from repeated ISIS-K attacks, but that those authorities did little to protect those communities from suicide bombings and other unlawful attacks or to provide necessary medical care and other assistance to victims. UNAMA emphasized that the Taliban dissolved independent oversight mechanisms and institutions, including the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission, that had sought to protect the religious freedom and security of all.

According to numerous NGO leaders and members of minority religious groups, including Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims, members of these communities continued to seek 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 foreign country, according to those leaders. While in past years, Sikh leaders stated that 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 said they believed the Taliban's violent persecution of them would be inevitable. According to a representative of the Sikh Coalition, there were approximately 150 Sikh and Hindu individuals left in the country at the end of 2021, compared with 400 at the beginning of that year. In February 2022, that number had shifted to 149 individuals in the country. As of August, there were approximately 96 Sikh and Hindu individuals remaining. Reportedly, any individuals who remained chose to do so, and most acted as custodians of the *gurdwaras* (Sikh places of worship) and their holy book in Kabul. They were reportedly attempting to gain Taliban permission to move their holy book outside the country. In late October, diaspora leaders estimated only 15 Sikhs remained in country. They also said the Taliban did not permit the Sikhs to transfer their holy book to India, contending the book is an historical asset and should remain in the country. By year's end, a representative of the Sikh Coalition reported that an estimated nine Sikhs and Hindus remained in the country.

According to a former member of parliament, members of the Sikh and Hindu communities no longer felt safe remaining in the country. He said the Taliban had not consistently provided security for gurdwaras. Hindu and Sikh children no longer attended schools, and women did not participate in gatherings for worship due to security threats. He said Taliban harassment of members of the Sikh and Hindu communities made it difficult for them to do business and maintain livelihoods.

According to International Christian Concern and other external groups, the situation for Christians in the country grew more perilous during the year. In January, Open Doors, a nondenominational NGO supporting abused Christians worldwide, said Afghanistan was the "worst country for Christians." They reported that the Taliban were going door to door, seeking out individuals who practiced religions other than Islam. Christian converts reported receiving threatening telephone calls. Members of the

Afghan Christian diaspora said that, despite the desire of Christians within the country to congregate for group prayer, it remained too dangerous to do so, and the fear of Taliban discovery of texts or digital messages discussing Christianity caused deeply closeted Christians to refrain from communicating with one another. An Afghan House Church Network leader living in exile said Taliban police had killed some Christians who were in hiding. Release International, an international watchdog for monitoring Christians, reported the killing of a Shia man who had converted to Christianity.

According to press reports, Christian converts could 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 a former MOHRA official, prior to the Taliban takeover, there were 81,400 mosques in the country, of which approximately 10,000 were formally registered with MOHRA. Imams at most unregistered mosques did not receive government funding. No estimates of the numbers of registered and unregistered mosques since the Taliban takeover were available. The former MOHRA official said the Taliban had replaced some imams with Taliban madrassah (religious school) graduates but had made no other changes by year's end.

On August 4, the Taliban announced the cancellation of Ashura, which fell on August 8, as an official public holiday. Residents reported the Taliban shut down the internet in parts of Kabul for the day and destroyed community tea stalls in what many Sikh leaders believed was a concerted attempt to suppress Shias from celebrating their most important religious holiday. According to open-source media, the Taliban cut down the black flags and banners that are traditionally raised as part of the Shia commemoration of the death of Imam Hussain ibn Ali, a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, mosques provided primary-level religious studies through affiliated madrassahs. Approximately 80 Ministry of Higher Education-registered public madrassahs offered two-year degree programs at the secondary level – with a focus on rote learning of the Quran in Arabic – open to boys and girls. An estimated 1,000 public madrassahs were registered with the ministry, each receiving financial support from the Taliban. There were no estimates of the number of unregistered madrassahs available. According to a BBC report in November, the “Ministry of Education” estimated there were approximately 1,200 religious schools and Islamic learning centers operating in the country, 85 of which were privately run. During the year, local media reported on Taliban efforts to establish new mosques and madrassahs throughout the country, in place of nonreligious schools, but no firm figures were released on the numbers of new mosques and madrassahs.

The Taliban continued to restrict educational access for girls. Although Taliban representatives had stated in 2021 that all girls would be allowed to attend school starting in March 2022, when most schools in the country would reopen after winter recess, on March 23, the Taliban announced that girls would not be allowed to attend secondary school. In December, the Taliban extended this restriction to universities. Girls, however, were allowed to attend madrassah programs. According to Agence France-Press, whose journalists visited three madrassahs in Kabul and in the city of Kandahar, scholars told them the number of female students studying at madrassahs had doubled during the year. The Taliban continued to maintain that rules of school attendance must accord with the Taliban's interpretation of sharia, including requiring gender segregation, appropriate transportation, and dress

and behavior codes. At year's end, girls and women had not been permitted to return to secondary school or university. After the August 2021 takeover, Taliban representatives said they would retain the existing school curriculum for non-religious subjects but would change any part of it that contradicted their understanding of Islam and sharia. On September 24, the Taliban announced it planned to review and revise the curriculum in view of "Afghan culture." A Taliban spokesperson representing the "Ministry of Higher Education" said a single academic curriculum would be established across the country. As of year's end, no changes to the curriculum had been announced.

According to educators in the country, there was some variance between how religion was taught in public primary and secondary schools. For example, in some provinces with large Hazara populations, teachers used a Taliban-approved textbook that covered only Hanafi *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and they independently supplemented it with instruction on (Shia) Jaafari *fiqh* for the benefit of Hazara students. Private schools in Hazara communities used Jaafari *fiqh* textbooks, which were not approved by the Ministry of Education.

Women of all faiths, including Sunni and Shia Islam, reported that the Taliban continued to impose a slate of restrictions upon their dress and movement in society based upon the Taliban's strict interpretation of sharia. A November 2021 Taliban "Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" decree mandated eight rules for media outlets, including bans on dramas and television shows featuring female actors. A December 2021 decree by the same "ministry" stated that women travelling more than 78 kilometers (47 miles) from their residence should not be offered a ride if they are not accompanied by a close [male] family member. Observers said, however, that enforcement of these restrictions was inconsistent during the year.

According to Hazara representatives, while the Taliban had not formally published discriminatory policies toward ethnic and religious minorities, they in effect had marginalized Hazaras, including by severely limiting their presence in the Taliban's "caretaker government."

Members of minority religious groups said fear of persecution and societal discrimination had prompted members of religious minorities to refrain from publicly expressing their faith. Christians, Ahmadis, Baha'is, Hindus, and Sikhs said they all had further withdrawn from participation in public activities, with most in hiding or opting to leave the country.

Minority religious groups reported discriminatory treatment by the Taliban, and they expressed fear that they risked being tried according to the Taliban's strict interpretation of Hanafi jurisprudence if they took their grievances to court. Hazaras said they faced such treatment at university admissions, admission to mosques for prayers, and within the civil service. Many Hazaras who previously held high-ranking positions of responsibility in the civil service said the Taliban relegated them to performing only clerical work. Because religious and ethnic identities are closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many instances of discrimination or unequal treatment as solely based on religious identity.

According to a former parliamentarian who represented the Sikh and Hindu communities, Sikh and Hindus in the country had lost hope for a future in the country. He said the Taliban were aware of security threats against the Sikh minority for a long time but chose not to pay attention to them. For example, the former parliamentarian said the Taliban's "Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs" met with him but did not respond to concerns that the gurdwara in Kabul had not had electricity for many months. The former parliamentarian said the Sikh and Hindu communities had long faced harassment

and discrimination, including the closure and illegal occupation of many gurdwaras and *mandirs* (Hindu places of worship).

The Indian government, in coordination with the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Indian World Forum, evacuated 11 Sikhs to New Delhi on a special flight on June 2, following a deadly attack on the Karte Parwan Gurdwara in Kabul on June 1. The evacuees brought with them the ashes of Savinder Singh, a priest of the gurdwara, who was killed in the attack. Twenty-one additional Sikhs left Kabul for India in a chartered flight in July, according to Afghanistan International News.

In May, VOA quoted Taliban spokesman Inamullah Samangani as stating, "There are no Christians in Afghanistan. [A] Christian minority has never been known or registered here." He added, "There are only Sikh and Hindu religious minority [sic] in Afghanistan that are completely free and safe to practice their religion."

On June 5, Taliban spokesperson Mujahid tweeted, "All rights of the religious minorities are protected. All Sunni, Shia, Sikhs, and Hindus are freely practicing their religious affairs."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

A July UNAMA report stated that despite an overall, significant reduction in armed violence between mid-August 2021 and mid-June, UNAMA recorded 2,106 civilian casualties (700 killed, 1,406 wounded). Most civilian casualties were attributed to targeted attacks by ISIS-K against ethnic and religious minority communities in their schools and places of worship. In April, at least 16 persons were killed in bomb attacks in two cities, including 12 worshippers at the Shia Seh Dokan Mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif, Balkh Province, for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility, and in Kunduz City, Kunduz Province, where at least four persons were killed and 18 wounded by a bomb hidden in a bicycle that targeted a vehicle carrying mechanics working for the Taliban, according to police spokesman Obaidullah Abedi.

In June, individuals associated with ISIS-K killed at least two persons and wounded seven others during an early morning assault on the last remaining Sikh temple in Kabul. A spokesperson for the Taliban's "Interior Ministry," Abdul Nafi Takor, told reporters that a member of the Sikh community and a Taliban security officer were among the dead. He said a group of gunmen threw hand grenades at security guards and stormed the temple. In August, the Taliban provided funds to help repair the temple.

On September 30, a suicide bomber struck an education center in a Hazara area of Kabul. According to UNAMA, the attack killed 53 persons and wounded 110, mostly teenaged girls and women of multiple religious and ethnic backgrounds who were taking practice university entry examinations. Approximately 300 recent high school graduates, boys and girls, had come to the Kaaj Higher Education Center at 6:30 a.m. to take practice exams, said one survivor, 19-year-old Shafi Akbary. "First, we heard the sounds of a few gunshots at the main gate. Everyone was worried and tried to run to a different direction," said Akbary, adding, "Soon after that, a huge explosion occurred inside the center." According to media reports, the suicide bomber targeted the girls' section of the center and most of the dead were girls. The local police chief criticized the center for failing to inform security officials about the practice exam. "Neither police officials nor intelligence officials were aware of any activity going on or a big exam happening in this center, so the officials from the center were very reckless," he said. "Now our mujaheddin (Taliban) are here, and they are investigating the incident." The investigation continued through year's end.

According to UN Special Rapporteur Bennett, the human rights situation remained deeply concerning, and threats and attacks against Hazara Shia and other Shia Muslims continued, resulting in great loss of civilian life. Bennett stated that attacks against Hazaras, frequently claimed by ISIS-K, and the historical persecution of Hazaras and other minorities, appeared to be “systematic in nature and reflect elements of an organizational policy.” The special rapporteur further stated the attacks “bear the hallmarks of international crimes and need to be fully investigated.” According to the Hazara Organization for Peace and Equality, since May 2021, 25 attacks targeting Hazaras had occurred, particularly in the west Kabul area of Dasht-e-Barchi, resulting in more than 500 persons killed. The NGO Human Rights Watch estimated that 700 persons had been killed or wounded in ISIS-K attacks targeting Hazaras since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

According to eyewitnesses and police, in August, a suicide bomber attacked a Sunni mosque in Kabul during evening prayers, killing at least 10 persons, including prominent cleric Amir Mohammad Kabuli, and wounding at least 27. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack.

In September, unknown assailants bombed a mosque in Herat, killing at least 18 persons during Friday prayers, including Mujib-ul Rahman Ansari, a prominent cleric close to the Taliban.

Religion and ethnicity in the country were often closely linked. Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other non-Muslim minorities reported continued harassment from Muslims.

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. 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.

Christians and Ahmadi Muslims said 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 2021, 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.

Representatives of international Ahmadiyya Muslim organizations with close ties to Ahmadi Muslims in the country said that 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. Hundreds of Ahmadi Muslims departed the country for other countries in the region and the West in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover. At year’s end, reportedly hundreds remained in the country. Ahmadi Muslims said the Taliban directly and indirectly threatened 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.

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. Christians continued to worship alone or in small congregations, sometimes of 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 had emboldened intolerant relatives to threaten them with violence and inform on converts should they continue their practice of Christianity.

According to community members, since the Taliban takeover, the small number of remaining Sikh and Hindu children did not attend school.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In August 2021, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul suspended operations, and U.S. diplomatic operations relocated to the Afghanistan Affairs Unit in Doha, Qatar. U.S. government engagements with the Taliban in March, June, and October focused on restrictions on women and girls by the Taliban and stressed the importance of protecting the rights of all Afghans, including members of minority religious groups, and taking steps to support inclusive and representative governance, to include religious minority participation. Meetings with the Taliban included high-level engagements between the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Taliban “ministers” as well as meetings between the Afghanistan Affairs Unit and the Taliban Political Commission in Doha, Qatar.

Both the Special Representative for Afghanistan and the Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, as well as the members of the Afghanistan Affairs Unit, continued to consult broadly with representatives of diverse religious groups both inside and outside Afghanistan, including with those of the Hazara, Hindu, and Sikh communities. Through expert exchanges convened by the U.S.-Afghan Consultative Mechanism, the Special Envoy for Afghan Women, Girls, and Human Rights, and the U.S. Institute of Peace brought together U.S. policymakers and men and women Afghan religious scholars. These meetings provided an opportunity for frank policy exchanges, as well as for religious scholars to put forth recommendations for advancing Afghan women’s rights within an Islamic framework.

The U.S. government worked closely with international partners to remind the Taliban of their responsibility to respect the rights of all Afghans, regardless of their religious beliefs.

The U.S. government condemned attacks on religious groups on multiple occasions, including on June 21, when ISIS –K attacked a Sikh temple, on August 8, when ISIS-K attacked multiple locations in Hazara and other Shia majority areas of Kabul during Ashura, and on September 30, when a suicide bomber self-detonated at the Kaaj Higher Education Center.

On June 2, the Secretary of State said the Taliban and the Islamic State group’s Afghanistan affiliate posed a significant threat to religious or belief minorities, with the latter (Islamic State) conducting increasingly violent attacks against religious minorities and particularly Hazaras. In July, the Secretary, in coordination with the Special Envoy for Women, Girls, and Human Rights, announced the launch of the U.S.-Afghan Consultative Mechanism to engage U.S. government policymakers more effectively with Afghan women and civil society in support of the goal of a country whose future is determined by all citizens. In his comments, the Secretary spoke of the Taliban stifling free practice of religion for Muslims and non-Muslims alike and urged that robust women’s rights would also empower various

ethnic and religious groups, including Hazaras, Hindus, Sikhs, and Sufis, to take a more prominent role in public life.

U.S. government sanctions remained on the Taliban and the Haqqani network, while providing broad authorizations for humanitarian, commercial, and financial activities with governing institutions in Afghanistan. On October 11, the UN International Day of the Girl Child, the Secretary of State announced further visa restrictions against the Taliban and other individuals that repress women and girls.

During the year, the U.S. government assisted in the relocation of hundreds of vulnerable Afghan members of religious minorities through immigration, refugee resettlement, and parole processes.

The U.S. government remained committed to providing humanitarian assistance and other basic needs support to the Afghan people, and in its engagements with the Taliban, it continued to advocate the need to respect the human rights, including religious freedom, of all Afghans.

On November 30, 2022, the Secretary of State redesignated the Taliban as an “entity of particular concern,” or EPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for engaging in particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

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