

TAJKISTAN 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly, to adhere to any religion or to no religion, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution says religious organizations shall be separate from the state and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” The law restricts Muslim prayer to specific locations, regulates the registration and location of mosques, and prohibits persons under the age of 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government’s Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) approves appointment of imams in accordance with the law, and controls the content of their sermons. There were numerous reports of police forcibly shaving men’s beards, although the government denied it had issued any instruction to police to forcibly shave citizens. One man died in police custody after police detained and beat him allegedly for wearing a beard. The government maintained a list of banned organizations and convicted at least 13 individuals of belonging to the banned Salafiya movement. The government provided no information on the number of cases of individuals detained, arrested, or convicted in 2014 on charges of inciting religious enmity and/or involvement in groups banned as extremist. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported the CRA denied registration to religious groups on technical or administrative grounds. Officials reportedly told the Jehovah’s Witnesses not to apply for reregistration because of the group’s “extremist” activities. The government installed surveillance cameras in mosques, and also banned public financial donations to mosques. Officials announced the suspension and/or conversion to social use of several hundred mosques, which they said had been operating illegally or remained unregistered. The government-influenced Hanafi Sunni Ulema Council, the country’s highest body of Islamic scholars, maintained its ruling that prohibits women from attending mosques.

It was difficult to obtain information concerning societal abuses or discrimination on the basis of religious belief from nongovernment sources. Ethnic Tajiks who converted from Islam reported that at times they faced disapproval from family members or pressure to return to their traditional faith. Leaders of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox communities stated the local population did not hinder their worship services.

The U.S. ambassador, other embassy staff, and visiting senior U.S. government officials met with government officials, including CRA members, to encourage them to adhere to their international commitments to respect freedom of religion

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and belief. Embassy officers also raised concerns about restrictions on minors and women participating in religious services, rejection of attempts of nontraditional religions to register their organizations, convictions on the grounds of “religious extremism,” and restrictions on religious education, the wearing of religious attire, and the publication and importation of religious literature. Embassy officers also met regularly with religious leaders and civil society groups to address the same issues and discuss their concern over government restrictions affecting religious freedom. On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State designated Tajikistan a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary of State also announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies 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 8.2 million (July 2015 estimate). According to local academics, the population is more than 90 percent Muslim and the majority adhere to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Approximately 4 percent of Muslims are Ismaili Shia, the majority of whom reside in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region located in the eastern part of the country.

Other religious minorities include Christians and small numbers of Bahais, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Jews. The largest Christian group is Russian Orthodox; there are also Baptists, Roman Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists, Lutherans, and Korean Protestants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution declares the country shall be a secular state and religious organizations shall be separate from the state and “shall not interfere in state affairs.” According to the constitution, everyone has the right, individually or jointly, to adhere to any religion or to adhere to no religion, and to take part in religious customs and ceremonies.

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The law recognizes the “special status” of Sunni Islam’s Hanafi school of jurisprudence with respect to the country’s culture and spiritual life.

The law defines any group of people who join together for religious purposes as a religious association. These associations are “formed for the aims of joint conducting of religious worship” and are sub-divided into religious organizations and religious communities. In order to operate legally, religious associations and organizations are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA.

In order to register a religious organization, a group of at least 10 persons over the age of 18 must first obtain a certificate from the local authorities confirming that adherents of their religious faith have lived in the local area for at least five years. The founders must each supply proof of citizenship, home address, and date of birth; they must also provide an account of their beliefs and religious practices and describe their attitudes related to education, family and marriage, and the health of their adherents. As part of their documentation, religious organizations must list “national religious centers, central cathedral mosques [facilities built for Friday prayers], central *jamoatkhona* [prayer places], religious educational institutions, churches, synagogues and other forms not contradicting the law.” There are also restrictions on the number and type of mosques. Religious organizations have to specify in their charters the activities they plan to undertake, and have to report annually on their activities or face deregistration.

Religious communities include cathedral mosques and mosques where prayers are recited five times per day. These communities are required to register both locally and nationally, and must be registered “without the formation of a legal personality.” Religious communities must stick to the “essence and limits of activity” set out in their charters.

The law provides penalties for religious associations which engage in activities contrary to the purposes and objectives set out in their charter, and makes the CRA responsible for handing down fines for such offenses. The Code on Administrative Offenses imposes fines for performing activities beyond the purposes and objectives defined by the charter of a religious association. Individuals are subject to fines of 280 to 400 somoni (\$43-\$62), heads of religious associations are fined 800 to 1,200 somoni (\$123-\$184), and legal entities are subject to fines of 4,000 to 5,000 somoni (\$615-\$769). For offenses committed repeatedly within a year after the original offense, fines are increased to 480 to 800 somoni (\$74-\$123) for

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individuals, 1,600 to 2,000 somoni (\$246-\$307) for heads of religious associations, and 12,000 to 16,000 somoni (\$1,842-\$2,456) for legal entities.

If a religious group conducts activities without obtaining lawful registration, local authorities may force a place of worship to close, and fine each member from 280-400 somoni (\$43-\$62) for first time individual offenders, 800-1,200 somoni (\$123-\$184) for religious organization leaders, and 4,000-8,000 somoni (\$614-\$1,228) for illegal entities. In case of repetition of the same offense within one year, the authorities may levy fines of 480-800 somoni (\$74-\$123) for repeat individual offenders, 1,600-2,000 somoni (\$246-\$307) for religious organization leaders, and 12,000-16,000 somoni (\$1,842-\$2,456) for illegal entities.

The CRA is the main body overseeing and implementing all religious law. The Center for Islamic Studies, under the president's executive office, helps formulate the government's policy toward religion.

The law restricts Muslim prayer to four locations: mosques, cemeteries, homes, and shrines. The law regulates registration, size, and location of mosques, limiting the number of mosques which may be registered within a given population area. "Friday" mosques, which conduct larger Friday prayers as well as prayers five times per day, are allowed in districts with populations of 10,000 to 20,000 persons; "five-time" mosques, which conduct only daily prayers five times per day, are allowed in areas with populations of 100 to 10,000. In Dushanbe, Friday mosques are allowed in areas with 30,000 to 50,000 persons, and five-time mosques are allowed in areas with populations of 1,000 to 5,000. The law allows one "central Friday mosque" per district or city, and makes other mosques subordinate to it.

Mosques function on the basis of their self-designed charters in buildings constructed by appropriate religious organizations or by individual citizens, or with the assistance of the general population. The law states the selection of imam-khatibs (religious leaders who preach sermons and conduct weekly Friday prayers) and imams shall take place in coordination with "the appropriate state body in charge of religious affairs" (i.e. the CRA must approve the imam-khatibs and imams elected by the founders of each mosque). The CRA regulates and formulates the content of Friday sermons.

The law regulates private celebrations, including weddings, funeral services, and celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The law limits the number of

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guests and controls ceremonial gift presentations and other rituals. The law states mass worship, religious traditions, and ceremonies shall be carried out according to the procedures for holding meetings, rallies, demonstrations, and peaceful processions prescribed elsewhere in the law.

The law prohibits children under 18 years of age from participating in “public religious activities,” including attending worship services at public places of worship. Children are allowed to attend religious funerals and to practice religion at home, under parental guidance. The law allows children to participate in religious activities as part of specific educational programs at authorized religious institutions.

The law allows registered religious organizations to produce, export, import, and distribute an unspecified amount of religious literature with the advance consent of the appropriate state authorities. Only registered religious organizations are entitled to establish enterprises to produce literature and material with religious content. Such literature and material must indicate the full name of the religious organization producing it. The law allows the government authorities to levy fines for the production, export, import, sale, or distribution of religious literature without permission from the CRA. According to the law, violators are subject to fines of up to 2,800 somoni (\$430) for individuals, 6,000 somoni (\$921) for government officials (who distribute or produce literature without permission), and 12,000 somoni (\$1,842) for legal entities.

The law requires all institutions or groups wishing to provide religious instruction to obtain permission from the CRA. Central district mosques may operate madrassahs, which are open only to high school graduates. Other mosques, if registered with the government, may provide part-time religious instruction for younger students.

With written parental consent, the law allows minors between the ages of seven and 18 to obtain religious instruction provided by a registered religious organization outside of mandatory school hours. According to the law, this kind of extracurricular religious education may not duplicate religious instruction already part of the school curriculum. The CRA is responsible for monitoring mosques throughout the country to ensure implementation of these provisions.

Parents may teach religion to their children at home, provided the child expresses a desire to learn. The law forbids religious instruction at home to individuals outside

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the immediate family. The law maintains restrictions on sending citizens abroad for religious education, and for establishing ties with religious organizations abroad without CRA consent. To be eligible to study religion abroad, students must complete a higher education degree domestically and be enrolled at a university accredited in the country in which it operates. The law provides for fines of 2,000 to 4,000 somoni (\$307 to \$614) for violating these restrictions.

The constitution protects the right to create political parties which are religious in nature, but prohibits the establishment of political parties and public associations which encourage religious enmity and hatred.

The constitution prohibits “propaganda and agitation” encouraging religious enmity.

Government Practices

The government continued to take measures to prevent individuals from joining what it considered to be “extremist” organizations, including in some instances by limiting the length of men’s beards and preventing women from wearing the hijab. There were numerous media reports stating the police had forcibly shaved the beards of up to 13,000 men and convinced 1,770 women to stop wearing the hijab as a means to prevent radicalization. One man died in police custody after police detained and beat him allegedly for wearing a beard. The government denied it had issued any instruction to police to forcibly shave citizens. The government maintained a list of banned organizations and convicted at least 13 individuals of belonging to the banned Salafiya movement. The government provided no information on the number of cases of individuals detained, arrested, or convicted in 2014 on charges of inciting religious enmity and/or involvement in groups banned as extremist. NGOs reported the government denied registration to religious organizations on technical or administrative grounds. Officials reportedly told the Jehovah’s Witnesses not to apply for reregistration because of the group’s “extremist” activities. The government installed surveillance cameras in mosques, banned public servants from attending Friday prayers, banned the conduct of nightly prayers in public during Ramadan, limited participation in the Hajj to individuals more than 35 years old, and limited the religious education of minors. A 2004 fatwa issued by the Ulema Council prohibiting women from praying in mosques remained in force. Officials announced the suspension and/or conversion to social use of several hundred mosques which they said had been operating

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illegally or remained unregistered. The government authorized the construction of a third Orthodox church in Sughd Region.

Local law enforcement officers in some regions targeted and harassed men who wore beards. Umar Bobojonov, a resident of the Vahdat district, died on September 5 in a local hospital following a beating by the police in late August. According to Bobojonov's relatives, he was beaten by police for wearing a beard. Following an order on September 1 from Minister of Internal Affairs Ramazon Rahimzoda for an investigation into the incident by the deputy minister of internal affairs, the media reported the authorities had opened a criminal case. There were no developments in the case as of the end of the year.

On March 31, a police officer reportedly detained Lutfullo Bobobekov at a local market in Khujand and then took him to a police station where other officers forcibly shaved off his beard.

Police detained blogger Rustam Gulov, a member of a public council on police reform of the Department of Internal Affairs in Sughd Region, on April 2 at the same market in Khujand. Gulov stated plain-clothes police officers stopped him in the street and asked why he was wearing a beard. The police reportedly then took Gulov to a police station and forcibly shaved him. Gulov said the police made reference to a "secret" law to ban beards which they refused to show him. Gulov filed a complaint with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) against the policemen who shaved him.

MIA spokesperson Jaloliddin Sadriddinov told media representatives, on April 21, the ministry had not ordered law enforcement authorities to forcibly shave the beards of citizens. Sadriddinov stated police who engaged in such actions would be held individually accountable. Sadriddinov stated that although police personnel were given instructions to "regulate" the wearing of beards, the MIA did not instruct any of its regional offices to forcibly shave beards. He said the MIA was reviewing complaints from citizens concerning the forcible shaving of beards.

According to the head of the police in Khatlon Province, Bahrom Sharifzoda, during the year 12,818 men who "had overly long and unkempt beards" had been "brought to order." Although the media reported the men had been forcibly shaved, Sharifzoda stated this was not the case.

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On April 27, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Ikrom Umarzoda told the media the authorities had taken disciplinary action against two police officers based on complaints by residents over the forcible shaving of beards. One of the police officers was from the Sughd Region and the second from the Districts of Republican Subordination (districts directly under the rule of the central government). According to the Umarzoda, the officers received a warning, but would face more severe punishment if they repeated the offense. Umarzoda stated the leadership of the ministry had not given orders to forcibly shave beards.

Media reported the Ulema Council continued to interpret sharia as limiting beard lengths for men to the size of a fist and requiring women's clothing to cover the entire body except for hands, face, and feet.

The government maintained a list of groups it had banned as "extremist," including Hizb ut-Tahrir, al-Qaida, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, Jamaat Tabligh, Islamic Group (Islamic Community of Pakistan), Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, Islamic Party of Turkestan (former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – IMU), Lashkar-e-Tayba, Tojikistoni Ozod, Sozmoni Tablighot, Salafiya, Jamaat Ansarullah, Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, and Group 24.

In June the Bobojon Ghafurov District Court convicted 13 residents of the Sughd Region of organizing an extremist group and, according to the court, inciting national, racial, regional, or religious enmity. The charges reportedly were linked to their membership in a banned Salafiya "religious-extremist" group. The defendants were residents of Khujand and the Bobojon Ghafurov District and had been detained in February. Five of the 13 received sentences of two years' imprisonment, and eight others were fined 60,000 somoni (\$9,247) each.

At a July 7 press conference CRA chairman Sulaymon Davlatzoda reported the conviction of 29 students for involvement in terrorist organizations following religious training abroad. The CRA did not publically identify the students or make the details of their cases public. As of the end of the year, no further information was available as to whether these convictions occurred inside the country or in other countries where the students were studying; nor was information available on the nature of the sentences handed down to the students.

There was no additional information available on a number of cases of individuals detained, arrested, or convicted in 2014 on charges of inciting religious enmity and/or involvement in groups banned as extremist, including: the case of four

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residents of Farkhor district – Eraj Aliev, Idris Esanov, Bahrom Abdugaforov, and Abdurahmon Ismonov – who were accused of membership in a Salafi group and sentenced to five or six years imprisonment for inciting religious enmity in December 2014; the case of five unnamed individuals detained at the central market in Farkhor in August 2014 on suspicion of spreading the Salafi ideology; and the case of 25 unnamed individuals detained during 2014 because of alleged membership in the Salafiya movement, Hizb ut-Tahrir, or Jamaat Tabligh. Approximately 95 members of Jamaat Tabligh and an unknown number of Salafi adherents reportedly remained imprisoned for religious activities with no further information available on the disposition of their cases. There was also no additional information available on the case of Komiljon Fayzov, imam-khatib at a five-time mosque in Kulob, who was under investigation on suspicion of illegal religious teaching and inciting religious hatred as of the end of 2014.

NGOs stated the authorities sometimes refused to register religious groups on technical or administrative grounds. Without registration, the NGOs said, groups risked criminal or civil penalties for operating. Domestic and international NGOs stated both registered and unregistered religious organizations faced raids, surveillance, and forced closures.

A representative of the unregistered Jehovah's Witnesses community reported a March 20 meeting with the CRA to discuss reregistering the organization. According to the representative, CRA First Deputy Chair Jumakhon Giyosov stated there was no point in the organization attempting to reregister because the courts had upheld the organization's 2007 deregistration. Giyosov reportedly stated the Jehovah's Witnesses engaged in "extremist agitation" similar to the activities of "extremist" groups banned by the government.

The country's sole synagogue remained unregistered, reportedly because the Jewish community had too few members to meet the registration requirements.

The head of the Sughd Regional Department of Religious Affairs, Obid Sharopov, announced on August 27 the government had installed surveillance cameras in all Friday mosques to increase "transparency" and maintain security. He made the announcement at a meeting called by the regional governor's office to discuss the provisions of the law pertaining to freedom of conscience, religious organizations, and ceremonies, which was attended by regional law enforcement officials, security and anticorruption agencies, officials from local cities and districts, the chairman of the regional branch of the Ulema Council, heads of departments on

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religious affairs, imam-khatibs of mosques of the region, and media representatives. He also reported the government had established salaries for mosque clergy. As part of this meeting, government officials reportedly called on the clergy to strengthen efforts to prevent youth from joining “terrorist and extremist organizations” and to speak out against suicide, divorce, marriage between close relatives, and other phenomena regarded negatively by the government.

MIA sources confirmed they conducted video surveillance of mosques within Dushanbe, and said they hoped to expand the program to other cities. They stated they focused on individuals who attended multiple mosques, believing those individuals were the most likely to spread radical ideology.

Hanafi Sunni mosques reportedly enforced the 2004 fatwa issued by the Ulema Council, prohibiting women from praying at mosques. Women of other traditions, such as Ismaili Shia, were not subject to the Ulema Council’s prohibition.

On October 12, the media reported the government had prohibited public servants from attending Friday prayers in mosques. The CRA confirmed this report, saying Friday prayers lasted 20 minutes longer than the hour-long lunch break allotted to public employees. Senior foreign ministry officials confirmed this information, saying it was not a new law, but a reminder to public officials not to use official work time to attend Friday prayers. Ministry officials stated public servants were free to pray during their lunch hour or when they were not on duty and were welcome to use private rooms allotted for prayers at their work places. Previously, the CRA had allowed employees to pray only during nonworking hours and in locations legally designated for prayers.

In April the CRA enacted a regulation limiting the right to perform the Hajj to citizens more than 35 years old. According to the CRA, it made the decision in order to enable older citizens to attend the Hajj. Under the previous policy there had been a 5-10 year waiting list to do so.

On June 20, media outlets reported the authorities had banned the conduct of *tarawih* prayers, usually performed during Ramadan, from public spaces. The Ulema Council confirmed this ban, saying public places did not have the same legal status as mosques. District authorities reportedly sent letters to the cultural venues where the performance of *tarawih* prayers took place instructing them not to allow the performance of such prayers.

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There were several reports of the CRA requiring the delivery of political messages in Friday sermons, including calls from imam-khatibs to close the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) prior to its banning and closure.

According to NGO reporting, the government banned financial donations by individuals to mosques and reclassified all clergy as government officials. The CRA paid Muslim clerics a monthly salary of 800-1,000 somoni (\$151-\$189), depending upon their position. The CRA also required clerics to wear a specific robe while performing official duties and subsidized 25 percent of the robe's cost.

Loudspeakers remained in use for the call to prayer in Dushanbe despite a public disturbance regulation, which prohibited the use of external loudspeakers for *azan* (the Islamic call to prayer) in the city's mosques if residents in the vicinity of a mosque complained to city authorities.

On March 6, President Rahmon gave a speech on acceptable attire for women in Tajikistan based on tradition and culture. Subsequently, media reports detailed efforts by law enforcement to restrict the sale of certain religious attire for women.

At a meeting on March 27 at the Khujand city mayor's office attended by heads of departments and units of the executive authority, the Mayor of Khujand, Rajaboi Ahmadzoda, gave orders to law enforcement employees and other departments to work with communities, youth, women, and local mosques to help prevent citizens from joining "extremist organizations" and to prevent women from wearing the hijab, which was "alien" to national culture. Mayor Ahmadzoda called for meetings with women to instruct them in "proper dress standards" in line with national traditions. Ahmadzoda reportedly told officials to conduct raids on clothing stalls to prevent the sale of Iranian- and Afghan-style clothing. He tasked the heads of departments of religious affairs and of internal affairs to monitor Friday mosques to eliminate prayers reflecting the beliefs of the banned Salafiya movement.

At a meeting at the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) on March 28, officials discussed ways to prevent "practices native to foreign cultures and traditions," such as women wearing clothing "alien to Tajik culture." Heads of departments, divisions, and subdivisions of the MIA were tasked to strengthen outreach and awareness raising efforts in order to thwart those trying to promote such "foreign" cultures, traditions, and clothing.

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On March 31, the media reported representatives of the Khujand mayor's office, department of religious affairs, and law enforcement jointly raided large trading centers and markets in Khujand where hijabs were sold. According to the department of women and family affairs at the Khujand mayor's office, during the raids officials warned the owners and operators of trading centers and individual vendors to stop selling clothing "alien to Tajik culture." Media reports also stated community committees began holding meetings with women recommending they wear "national" clothing.

During a government meeting in Dushanbe on April 20, officials determined the importation of black cloth into the country for use as clothing was alien to Tajik culture and traditions for women and girls and would henceforth be prohibited. Speaking at the meeting, Mayor of Dushanbe Mahmadsaid Ubaidulloev instructed officials at the Agency for Standardization, Metrology, and Certification as well as trade inspectors in the city to prevent the importation of such cloth.

The government continued to closely regulate the publication, importation, and distribution of religious literature. It charged a fee per page to review religious literature before granting permission for its production or import. Government-owned media outlets did not regularly publish religious literature but on occasion published copies of the Quran in Tajik.

On July 1, the Ministry of Internal Affairs posted on its official website a list of banned literature, which included 13 books, most of which promoted the Salafiya religious movement. The ministry stated it had banned the import and distribution of literature, audio and video recordings, and leaflets promoting Salafiya ideas because of a 2009 decision by the Supreme Court banning the movement. At the same press conference, officials stated they had documented 15 cases of illegal religious teaching involving 37 people, 29 of whom were minors. No information was available as of the end of the year on whether the government had taken any action against the individuals involved in the cases.

Officials continued to inspect bookstores, newsstands, kiosks, markets, and mosques to confiscate unregistered religious materials. The government continued to allow vendors to sell basic Islamic texts, including the Quran, the Hadith, the history of the Prophet, and prayer books. The government did not permit vendors to sell Shia literature, Sunni texts considered non-Hanafi, or audio and video disks featuring unregistered imams.

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In July the CRA's department of religion and traditions in Sughd reported the government during the first half of the year had suspended services and operations at 136 mosques which the CRA said had operated illegally and without appropriate registration since 2009. 106 mosques out of the 136 were transformed into cultural and historical facilities, including tea houses, medical centers, museums, cultural centers, and kindergartens. The other 30 mosques were in the process of reregistration.

In January authorities of Khovaling District told the media they were turning five mosques, including two Friday mosques, which had been built illegally and had not been properly registered with the authorities, into housing for families in need.

In January the head of the Kulob Regional Department of Religious Affairs, Sharif Abdulhamidov, told reporters the authorities would convert three "ownerless" mosques in Danghara District into a sewing shop, a club, and a library. He said in 10 districts in the area, government officials had identified 138 mosques operating without official registration. Abdulhamidov stated the number had been much higher two to three years ago, but since then some mosques had received official registration while others had been transformed into "social infrastructure."

In April the Bobojon Ghafurov District local authorities ordered the conversion of 20 five-time mosques, which were not functioning because they lacked proper permits, into "social facilities," including meeting places for community committees, branches of educational institutions, and teahouses. Local authorities told media representatives the buildings had been transferred to the local authorities in their respective communities.

In April authorities in the Jomi District informed the media they were converting 50 "unofficial" mosques into cultural, sports, and recreation facilities. According to local authorities, these mosques had been built without permission from the Committee on Land Management, which must approve such construction, and were conducting religious services without registering with the CRA. Officials held meetings with the residents of local communities to explain only those mosques which were functioning illegally would be converted.

On September 15, the media reported the construction of a new Orthodox church was planned in Khujand. The new church reportedly would be built near one of

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the Christian cemeteries in the city. Representatives of the Khujand city government stated government agencies had provided the necessary paperwork for the church's construction, which would be the third functioning Orthodox church in the Sughd Region.

On February 2, an official of the Sughd Regional Department of Religious Affairs told reporters five existing madrassahs, suspended since 2013, could resume operation following the publication of a decree titled "On the List of Specialties in the Republic of Tajikistan," which allowed madrassahs to provide religious education. According to the head of the religious affairs department, officials had imposed the earlier suspension because they had failed to take account of an earlier governmental decree allowing the teaching of religious subjects in madrassahs.

During a July 7 press conference, CRA chairman Davlatzoda reported six madrassahs registered by the CRA had education programs not meeting "international standards." As a result, he said, the Ministry of Education had not issued licenses to the madrassahs. The activities of the madrassahs, five of which were located in the Sughd Region and one in Tursunzoda city, had been suspended since 2013.

CRA chairman Davlatzoda additionally reported the authorities had found 3,360 citizens to be illegally receiving religious education abroad. According to Davlatzoda, 3,008 of them had voluntarily returned home. Of those who had returned, he said, the authorities suspected 64 of involvement in various crimes while six persons were on a law enforcement wanted list for unspecified offenses.

At the same July 7 press conference, Minister of Education and Science Nuriddin Said announced the introduction of a new course on the history of religions in the 9th grade curriculum of high schools beginning with the current academic year. Minister Said stated the course was not only about Islam but about religion in general and would be taught by history and social science teachers. He said the aim of the course was to educate youth on the history of world religions and fend off "religious radicalization."

Minority religious leaders reported when they discussed with government officials the difficulties they had in complying with the law regarding the religious education of minors, their interlocutors said the law was not meant to apply to their organizations, indicating it was meant for the Hanafi Sunni population instead.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

It was difficult to obtain information from nongovernmental sources concerning societal respect for religious diversity, including information about abuses or discrimination on the basis of religious belief. Ethnic Tajiks who converted from Islam reported at times they faced disapproval from family members or pressure to return to their traditional faith.

Leaders of the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox communities stated the local population did not hinder their worship services or cause concern for their parishioners.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers and U.S. government officials met with government officials and the CRA to encourage them to adhere to their international commitments to respect freedom of religion and belief, and to discuss issues ranging from the reregistration of non-Muslim religious organizations to restrictions on religious education and on the publication and importation of religious literature, including during the February visit to Dushanbe by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs and a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and during the August visit to the Sughd Region by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. In their meetings with government officials, embassy officers also raised the restrictions on minors and women participating in religious services, restrictions on the wearing of religious attire, and convictions on the grounds of religious extremism.

Embassy officers and visiting U.S. officials met with representatives of religious groups and civil society to discuss their concerns about government restrictions on religious freedom, including limits on participation in religious services, wearing religious attire, religious literature, and religious education. In addition, embassy officers discussed with representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses their attempts to reregister their organization officially.

In February, on the occasion of both President's Day and the 225th anniversary of the publication of President George Washington's letter promoting religious tolerance, the embassy hosted a luncheon to celebrate religious tolerance and to

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stimulate discussion on the topic between government officials and religious representatives and civil society leaders.

On February 29, 2016, the Secretary of State designated Tajikistan a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The Secretary of State also announced a waiver of the sanctions that accompanies designation as required in the important national interest of the United States.