

# TURKMENISTAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

In September the country's Council of Elders adopted a new constitution which, like the previous one, guarantees the freedom of religion. It provides for the right of individuals to choose their religion, to express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and to participate in religious observances and ceremonies. The constitution maintains the separation of government and religion, stipulating religious organizations are prohibited from "interference" in state affairs. In March the government approved a new Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom in which it requires all religious organizations, including those already registered under the previous law on religion, to re-register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to operate legally, a process involving the concurrence of the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of National Security (MNB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other government agencies. The new law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if its goals or activities contradict the country's constitution or if it is not recognized as a religion by the State Commission on Religious Organizations and Expert Evaluation of Religious Information Resources (SCROEERIR), which is headed by the grand mufti. The new law also states a religious organization may be dissolved by the government for activities violating the lawful interests of the country's citizens or for harming their "health and morale." The new law prohibits all activity by unregistered religious groups, including establishing places of worship, gathering for services, producing and disseminating religious materials, and proselytizing. The government imprisoned religious leaders of Muslim groups deviating from what it considered to be acceptable religious doctrine, as well as members of unregistered minority religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, for practicing their religion. Government restrictions on communications with prisoners made it difficult to ascertain which prisoners convicted in previous years for crimes related to their religious beliefs or activities remained in prison. The government sentenced several Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to corrective labor terms and rejected creation of an alternative civilian service option to compulsory military service. The police raided meetings of unregistered religious groups to stop their activities, and in some cases allowed private individuals to harass members of registered religious organizations. The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year and did not re-register previously registered organizations, although it stated it did not consider previously registered groups which had not completed reregistration to be in violation of the law. In December,

at the first roundtable discussion in 10 years with members of religious organizations, the government reportedly did not discuss the substance of the registration procedures beyond saying it would try to make registration procedures clearer. The government continued to appoint all senior Muslim clerics, prevent the importation of religious literature, and create difficulties for religious organizations attempting to purchase or lease buildings or land for religious purposes.

Individuals who deviated from traditional ethno-religious beliefs and practices continued to report societal criticism and harassment, including denunciation by family members, friends, and neighbors for converting to a different religion. Members of registered Christian religious organizations reported continued hostility from acquaintances due to their religious affiliation. Ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam reportedly received more societal scrutiny than ethnic non-Turkmen converts and continued to be ostracized at social events.

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the U.S. Ambassador, embassy officers, and visiting U.S. government officials continued to express concern about the arrest and imprisonment of members of religious communities, including Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. They urged the government to improve its treatment of religious minorities, to create civilian service alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors, to clarify the new registration procedures for religious organizations, and to lift restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature. Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as 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. On October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated 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 5.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to U.S. government estimates, the country is 89 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 9 percent Orthodox Christian, and 2 percent other. There are small communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, Shia Muslims, Bahais, Roman Catholics, and evangelical Christians, including Baptists and Pentecostals.

Most ethnic Russians and Armenians are Christian and generally are members of the Russian or Armenian Orthodox Churches, respectively. Some ethnic Russians and Armenians are also members of smaller religious groups.

There are small pockets of Shia Muslims, made up of ethnic Iranians, Azeris, and Kurds, located along the border with Iran and in the western city of Turkmenbashy.

According to recent estimates, 200-250 Jews live in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

In September the country's Council of Elders adopted a new constitution which, like the previous one, guarantees the freedom of religion and worship. It provides for the right of individuals to choose their religion, to express and disseminate their religious beliefs, and to 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 guarantees the equality of citizens before the law regardless of their religious preference.

The country's new Law on Religious Organizations and Religious Freedom, which was adopted in March and came into force in April, requires all religious organizations, including those which had registered previously, to register again with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to operate legally in the country. Unlike the old law, which differentiated between "religious groups" (with less than 50 members) and "religious organizations" (with 50 or more members), the new law omits mention of "religious groups" and permits only the registration of "religious organizations," which are required to have at least 50 resident members above the age of 18. The new 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, as well as to provide religious education, and registered in accordance with the country's legislation.

In order to register, 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; a registration fee currently set at 230 manat (\$66); and the names,

addresses, and dates of birth of the founders of the organization. Once SCROEERIR endorses an application for registration, it is submitted to the MOJ, which coordinates an approval process involving the Foreign Ministry, the MNB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and other government offices, as well as the MOJ itself. According to the government's procedures, the MOJ may additionally request biographic information of all the members of an organization applying for registration. The law states the leaders of registered religious organizations must be citizens who have received an "appropriate religious education."

The previously existing tax code, which is still binding, stipulates registered religious organizations are exempt from paying taxes.

The new law states the MOJ will not register a religious organization if the goals or activities of the organization contradict the country's constitution or if the organization in question is not recognized as religious by the SCROEERIR. The new law does not specify the standards by which SCROEERIR makes that determination. The new law assigns the Prosecutor General's office to monitor the compliance of a religious organization with the constitution. The new law specifies the country's courts may suspend a religious organization from activity if they find the organization in violation of the constitution. The new law also states the 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, adopted in 2013 and still binding, sets out a detailed schedule of fines for conducting activities not described in a religious organization's charter.

Unregistered religious organizations and unregistered branches of registered religious organizations 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 1,000 manat (\$28 to \$286), with higher fines for religious leaders and lower fines for lay 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 of 200-500 manat (\$57-\$143) for officials who violate an individual's right of freedom to worship or to abstain from worship.

The still-binding criminal and administrative codes provide punishment for the harassment of members of registered religious organizations by private individuals. According to the administrative code, obstructing the exercise of religious freedom is punishable by a fine up to 1,000 manat (\$286) or arrest for 15 days. The criminal code states such an obstruction is punishable with a fine up to 6,500 manat (\$1,858) or one year of correctional work. If an obstruction involves a physical attack, then the punishment may involve up to two years in prison.

The new law does not address wearing religious attire in public, unlike the previous law, which prohibited wearing religious attire in public places.

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

According to the new law, SCROEERIR is responsible for helping registered religious organizations work with government agencies, explaining the law to representatives of religious organizations, monitoring the activities of religious organizations to ensure they are in compliance with the law, assisting with the translation and publication of religious literature, and promoting understanding and tolerance among different religious organizations. The new law states individuals appointed as leaders of religious organizations must be approved by SCROEERIR, although the law does not specify the procedures for obtaining SCROEERIR's consent. The grand mufti heads SCROEERIR. The deputy chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers responsible for religious affairs oversees the work of the SCROEERIR.

According to the new law, local governments have the right to monitor and "analyze" the religious situation within their jurisdiction, send proposals to SCROEERIR to modernize legislation on "religious freedom," and to coordinate religious ceremonies conducted outside of religious buildings.

The new law prohibits the domestic publication of religious literature inciting “religious, national, ethnic, and/or racial hatred,” although it does not specify which agency makes this determination. SCROEERIR must approve imported religious literature, and only registered religious organizations may import literature. Registered religious organizations may also 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 2000 manat (\$57-\$572), for producing, importing, and disseminating unauthorized religious literature and other religious materials.

The new law states religious customs, rituals, and ceremonies may be held on residential property, but the housing code states communal housing “should not” be used for activities other than habitation.

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

There is no religious instruction in public schools. The new law allows registered religious organizations to provide religious education 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 who obtain approval from SCROEERIR, may provide religious education. According to the new law, citizens have a right to obtain religious education, although obtaining religious education in private settings such as residences is banned, and persons offering private religious education are subject to legal action.

The new law prohibits unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious organizations from providing religious education.

The still binding administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines, ranging from 100 to 500 manat (\$29 to \$143), for providing unauthorized religious education to children.

The new constitution states two years of military service are compulsory for men over the age of 18. Per the provisions of the new constitution and the new law, the government does not offer civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors, but offers persons who refuse military service for religious reasons non-combatant

positions in the armed forces. Refusal to perform the compulsory two-year service in the armed forces is punishable by a maximum of two years' imprisonment or a two-year sentence to corrective labor, which involves working at a government-assigned position near one's home or transfer to an assigned position at a location away from one's home. Although the previous law on religion made reference to undefined alternative service options, the new law states no one has the right to refuse duties established by the constitution and the law for religious reasons.

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

The new law does not address the activities of foreign missionaries and foreign religious organizations, although the previous law had banned such activity. The administrative code, however, bans registered religious organizations from receiving assistance from foreign entities for prohibited activities, including missionary work.

The new law requires religious groups to register all foreign assistance with the MOJ and provide interim and final reports on the use of the funds. The administrative code sets out a detailed schedule of fines for accepting funds from foreign sources by unregistered and registered religious groups alike; the code stipulates fines of up to 10,000 manat (\$2,864) for religious groups receiving unapproved donations from outside the country.

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

### **Government Practices**

The government imprisoned religious leaders of Muslim groups deviating from what it considered to be acceptable religious doctrine and members of unregistered minority religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses for practicing their religion. Government restrictions on communications with prisoners made it difficult to ascertain the status of prisoners convicted in previous years for their religious beliefs or activities. The government sentenced several Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors for refusing compulsory military service to corrective labor terms. The government offered conscientious objectors the option to serve in non-combat roles in the military but refused to create an alternative civilian service option. Police raided the meetings of unregistered religious groups to stop their activities, and also allowed private individuals to harass registered religious

groups, which sometimes had to ask for permission to conduct activities. The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year and did not re-register previously registered organizations, although it stated it did not consider previously registered groups which had not completed reregistration to be in violation of the law. The government continued to appoint all senior Muslim clerics, prevented the importation of religious literature, and created difficulties for religious groups attempting to purchase or lease buildings or land for religious purposes. The government supported pilgrims making the Hajj. It allowed some groups to invite foreign religious speakers.

According to the international NGO Forum 18, the government continued to imprison members of Muslim groups it categorized as extremist for advocating theologically different interpretations of Islamic religious doctrine. Authorities frequently referred to these persons as “Wahhabis.” According to Forum 18, prisoners categorized as Wahhabis were confined to special sections of prisons and were banned from receiving visits or exchanging correspondence with the outside world. Forum 18 reported the authorities refused requests for further information about the status of these prisoners.

Forum 18 reported Muslim leader Bahram Saparov was convicted in June at a closed trial for alleged theft and robbery, combining his two previous sentences into a new 15-year prison sentence. His trial and incarceration took place at the country’s top-security Ovadan-Depe prison. Saparov was already in prison following convictions at two trials for allegedly conspiring to seize power; calling for violent change of the constitutional order; inciting social, ethnic, or religious hatred; creating an organized criminal association; and theft of weapons, military materiel, explosive substances, and explosive devices. Saparov led a Hanafi Sunni Muslim community in Turkmenabat when he and approximately 20 members of his group were given long prison sentences in May 2013. Alternative Turkmenistan News (ATN) reported two members of Saparov’s group, Lukman Yaylanov and Narkuly Baltaev, died in Ovadan-Depe prison during the year. According to ATN, the men’s bodies were returned to relatives, who signed a non-disclosure form prohibiting them from talking about what they had seen. There was no information available on the sentences, location, or welfare of the other members of Saparov’s group.

According to Forum 18, Muslim Yoldash Khodjamuradov, committed suicide in Turkmenabat after weeks of daily interrogation by the police, who pressured him to identify other “Wahhabis.”

Forum 18 reported Jehovah's Witness Mansur Masharipov was arrested in June and sentenced to one year of imprisonment for allegedly assaulting a police officer in 2014 when he originally was arrested. According to Forum 18, at the time of his original arrest law enforcement officers reportedly confiscated religious literature from his home and took him to the nearest police station, where he was beaten and given injections containing unknown drugs. Masharipov was then reportedly placed in a drug rehabilitation center from which he escaped until his re-arrest in Ashgabat in June. He was reportedly appealing his sentence while in detention. There was no further information available on his case as of the end of the year.

According to Forum 18, Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov remained in the Seydi labor camp serving a four-year sentence handed down in May 2015 for allegedly inciting religious hatred. He had been arrested in March 2015 for worshipping in his home in Turkmenabat. While in police custody, he was reportedly tortured and pressured to confess to fabricated violations.

Forum 18 reported the government's refusal to provide information on prisoners of conscience; severe restrictions on communication with prisoners meant it was unable to establish the status of other Muslims who were previously imprisoned, including whether they remained alive. For example, it was uncertain whether Renat Bektemirov, a Muslim from Turkmenabat who had been convicted in 2008 for sharing his faith with others and questioning the preaching of the regional mufti, remained in prison.

In December various media reported authorities had detained, interrogated, and tortured dozens of alleged followers of the Turkish cleric Fethullah Gulen after the Turkish government accused Gulen of masterminding a failed coup attempt in July.

In September Forum 18 reported the 2013 death of the imam of a Sunni mosque in Khitrovka, Ali Atayev, who had been sentenced in 2008 to a strict labor regime for 20 years for allegedly organizing an attempted coup. Atayev had been arrested following an armed clash between a local gang and security forces. According to an individual quoted by Forum 18, Atayev had been teaching Islam to children at a mosque not sanctioned by the government. Atayev's body was not returned to his relatives.

Jehovah's Witnesses continued to refuse compulsory military service, but according to Forum 18, no conscientious objectors to military service were known to be imprisoned; instead the government sentenced them to corrective labor.

Forum 18 reported Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector Dayanch Jumayev was sentenced in February in Ashgabat to one year of corrective labor. Between February and August five more Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors were reportedly given two-year suspended sentences, and one was given an eighteen-month suspended sentence. In July the UN Human Rights Committee issued a finding stating under the ICCPR the government had violated the rights of the six Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors it had sentenced through the first six months of the year, bringing the overall total of such violations to 10.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported police officers attempted to enter a private apartment in Turkmenabat on March 23 where a group of 20 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for the annual observance of Christ's death, but did not succeed in the attempt. The next day, police officers broke into the apartment and took the entire group to a police station where they reportedly assaulted two men in the group. On March 25, all the detainees except one were released; the remaining Jehovah's Witness remained in custody for 15 days. The police reportedly issued 500 manat (\$143) fines to seven members of the group, but they were not formally charged. In response to the Witnesses' complaint about the incident, in August the Prosecutor's Office in Turkmenabat stated the police officers had committed no violations during their "investigation."

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported law enforcement authorities in Dashoguz had stopped men under the age of 50 with beards and forced them to shave the beards off. The authorities did not comment on this report.

According to representatives of religious minorities, the government continued to scrutinize and question ethnic Turkmen who converted from Islam more than they did non-Turkmen, even though the law did not prohibit persons from changing their religious beliefs and affiliations.

The government did not register any new religious organizations during the year and did not re-register previously registered organizations, although previously registered organizations continued to operate during the reregistration process. Government representatives stated they did not consider previously registered groups which had not yet completed reregistration to be in violation of the law. The government did not provide information on the number of new groups which had applied for registration, although several religious groups stated they had submitted applications during the year. Some other groups stated they were in the process of resubmitting applications for registration. The MOJ stated it continued to deny registration only if an application was incomplete or if the group

constituted a threat to the security of the country, but did not state how it made that determination. Several religious group members stated the registration process remained unclear, and they were unable to obtain assistance from the SCROEERIR despite previous statements the government was willing to publish the procedures and meet with the religious groups to clarify the procedures. In December, at the government's first roundtable with religious groups in 10 years, attended by previously registered and unregistered groups, the government reportedly did not address the substance of the registration requirement, but said it would try to make registration procedures clearer.

According to government figures, there were 130 registered religious organizations operating in the country, including two new Muslim groups registered in 2015. Of the 130, 106 were Muslim, of which 101 were Sunni and five Shia; 13 were Russian Orthodox; and 11 represented other religious groups, including Roman Catholics, Bahais, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and Protestants.

Local human rights activists, who operated underground, stated officers in the MNB and Ministry of Internal Affairs responsible for fighting organized crime and terrorism reportedly continued to monitor members of religious minorities, including Christian groups, through telephonic and undercover surveillance. The activists said the attitudes of senior-level officials of the government toward religion continued to reflect the practices of the Soviet era, despite provisions of the law protecting freedom of religion.

According to Forum 18, the secret police regularly interviewed members of religious organizations and demanded they provide information about their communities' activities.

Government enforcement of the prohibition of harassment of registered religious groups by private citizens reportedly remained uneven. For example, government officials reportedly continued to allow private citizens to interfere with religious meetings held in public. Representatives of registered religious groups said they did not report such harassment for fear of increasing government harassment and monitoring of their activities.

Representatives of registered Christian groups reported some government officials continued to require them to obtain approval to carry out routine religious activities, such as weekly services, as well as social and charitable activities, including summer camps for children. The groups reported they continued to be

denied permission to conduct study groups and seminars, even when they were permitted to hold weekly services.

According to Forum 18, police authorities met with the pastor of the Baptist church in the city of Mary on February 26 and warned him not to conduct his annual summer camp. After questioning the pastor for 90 minutes, police authorities stated they knew about alleged financial support he had supposedly received in previous years from foreign countries to hold the camps and demanded he sign a statement admitting he had violated the law; the pastor refused. As of year's end, there was no further information available with regard to the summer camp.

The government continued to ban gatherings in public or private by unregistered religious groups or unregistered branches of registered religious groups. Unregistered groups reported their members were subject to arrest for "unlawful assembly" in addition to the fines stipulated by the law. They said they continued to practice discreetly, mostly in private homes, and remained able to do so as long as neighbors did not file complaints with local authorities.

In September the government announced it would sponsor Hajj travel for 188 pilgrims, the same number as in 2015. As in previous years, the government allowed self-funded pilgrims to make their own arrangements to participate in the Hajj. In November the government reported "many citizens" had performed the Hajj independent of government sponsorship, but provided no numbers.

The government continued its practice of approving the appointment of all senior Muslim clerics. Some Muslims remained concerned about the quality of the training clerics received and about changes the government made in the leadership it appointed. The Russian Orthodox Church and other religious groups continued to be financed independently, and the government was not involved with the appointment of their leadership.

Members of the theology faculty in the history department at Turkmen State University in Ashgabat continued to be the only university-level faculty members allowed to provide Islamic higher education. The MNB reportedly continued to vet student candidates for admission to this program. There was no possibility of studying theology subjects other than the state-approved Islamic theology. Women remained banned from the program.

The Bahai community, as well as some other registered religious groups, continued to report it was free to share its faith in public without harassment, despite the legal ban on proselytizing.

Authorities continued to fine individuals and religious groups for unauthorized religious practices. Forum 18 reported the police in February detained, and a court later fined, members of the registered Greater Grace Church 500 manat (\$143) each for allegedly distributing illegal religious literature in Tejen.

Religious groups reported the government continued to prevent them from importing religious literature and from subscribing to foreign religious publications. Although registered religious groups by law were allowed to import religious literature, they said the complex customs procedures imposed by the government made this extremely difficult. The Quran remained unavailable in state bookstores in Ashgabat, although many people had a copy in Arabic or in Russian in their homes left over from the Soviet era. Few translations were available in the Turkmen language. The Bible also remained unavailable in state bookstores.

In early March the authorities in Ashgabat bulldozed the Sunni Muslim Aksa Mosque. According to Forum 18, the authorities stated they had destroyed the mosque because it had been “built without permission.”

According to Forum 18, the Armenian Apostolic Church continued to be unable to regain possession of its church in Turkmenbashi, which had been confiscated during the Soviet period, despite President Berdimuhamedov’s promise in 2012 to return it.

According to members of religious groups, government and state-affiliated enterprises continued to interfere in the purchase or long-term rentals of land and buildings to use for worship or meetings. Registered religious groups reported continued difficulty in renting special event space for holiday celebrations from private landlords, which they attributed to concern about government disapproval on the part of the owners. According to Forum 18, the Light of the East Church in Dashoguz remained unable to meet during the year, as it had been since early in 2015.

Authorities continued to enforce the ban on unregistered groups providing religious education.

The government continued to avoid discussions with religious groups about potential alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors, despite a 2014 statement it was willing to look into such alternatives. The government reported three Jehovah's Witnesses served in the military during the year.

The government continued its practice of denying visas to foreigners suspected of conducting or intending to conduct missionary activity. Religious groups able to obtain religious-visitor visas for foreign religious speakers reported the government continued to grant such visas for very short durations and required the groups to complete burdensome paperwork. The government did not report the number of religious visitors it allowed to visit the country, nor did it report the number of visa applications by foreign religious visitors it had denied.

According to Forum 18, many religious believers were placed on a travel blacklist compiled by the Interior Ministry and secret police, and persons who were permitted to travel abroad were subjected to close scrutiny by officials upon departure and re-entry into the country.

In June the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) organized a three-day seminar for 20 legislators, law enforcement officials, and researchers to address issues related to "religious inclusiveness," including teaching about other religions and the benefits of learning about other religions. The OSCE Center in Ashgabat stated the training helped enhance implementation in the country of international standards relating to freedom of religion and belief.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Persons who deviated from traditional ethno-religious beliefs and practices continued to report societal criticism and harassment, ranging from public shaming of their families at local markets to denunciation by family members, friends, and neighbors. Members of registered Christian groups reported continued hostility from acquaintances due to their religious affiliation.

Persons who joined "non-traditional" religious groups reported ongoing societal criticism. Ethnic Turkmen who had converted from Islam received more societal scrutiny than ethnic non-Turkmen converts and continued to be ostracized at community events, especially in rural areas, according to representatives of religious minorities.

Members of foreign-based religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses stated they continued to be treated with suspicion and scrutiny by fellow citizens.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

In meetings and official correspondence with government officials, the Ambassador, embassy officers, and visiting U.S. government officials, including the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, raised concerns about the arrests and imprisonment of religious community members, including Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors. They continued to urge the government to improve its treatment of religious minorities, to create civilian service alternatives for conscientious objectors to military service, to clarify the registration procedures for religious groups, to speed up the process of registering new groups, and to lift restrictions on the importation and distribution of religious literature.

In March the embassy urged the government to convene a roundtable discussion between the MOJ and religious organizations, which was ultimately convened by the government in December. Although the embassy's emphasis was on the need to address the substance of the registration procedures at the roundtable, the government did not provide a specific pledge to make the process more transparent.

The Ambassador continued to hold regular discussions throughout the year with representatives of registered and unregistered religious groups to monitor their status.

Since 2014, Turkmenistan has been designated as 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. On October 31, 2016, the Secretary of State redesignated 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.