

Legal framework

Islam is the state religion of Afghanistan. The constitution states that followers of other religions may exercise their faith within the limits of the law, however conversion from Islam to another religion is considered apostasy and is punishable by law. There are also punishments for verbally or physically assaulting religious adherents and any insults or distortions directed towards Islam, including online.

While Articles 347 and 248 of Afghanistan's Penal Code address 'Crimes Against Religion', Afghan courts rely on Islamic law to address the issue of blasphemy, which is considered a capital offence for males over the age of 18 and females over the age of 16 and of sound mind. Those accused of blasphemy are given three days to recant or face the death penalty.

In addition, Afghanistan's Media Law of 2004 prohibits writings and other published materials which are considered offensive to Islam or other faiths. Vague wording in this law leaves it open to misuse.

Violations of freedom of religion or belief

Afghans have experienced sectarian violence and violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) both before and after the August 2021 withdrawal of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) forces.

Most Afghans are Sunni Muslims, while Shi'as account for approximately 10-15% of the population. Other religious groups, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Baha'is officially account for only 0.3% of the population.

Between 2001, when the Taliban was ousted, and 2021, when they regained power, Afghanistan took some positive steps in terms of women's rights, education, and FoRB. A new law, for example, mandated the reservation of an additional seat in parliament's lower house for a member of the Hindu or Sikh communities. However, persistent challenges for ethnic and religious minorities prompted many to leave the country. For example, the Sikh community in Afghanistan had shrunk to fewer than 400 members by 2021, having formerly numbered 1,300 in 2017.

The Hazara people are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Predominantly Shi'a Muslims, they face systematic discrimination and recurrent periods of targeted violence and enforced displacement.

Aligning with its mission, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV) has been responsible for the enforcement of religious decrees and edicts since the 2021 Taliban takeover, including through corporal and capital punishment. These decrees impact all Afghans and include monitoring men's beard length, observing the hijab decree, prohibiting music, and segregating men and women in the workplace and public spaces. The MPVPV has also

been responsible for imposing restrictions and regulations on religious practices throughout the country.

Under de facto Taliban rule, Afghanistan has experienced a continual and significant decline in FoRB conditions. Taliban authorities have implemented dozens of religious edicts that restrict the right to FoRB of all Afghans, including Sunni Muslims with different interpretations of Islam. Such edicts have disproportionately affected Afghan women and girls as well as religious minorities who remain in the country, including Ahmadiyya Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Shi'a Muslims and Sikhs.

The Taliban has also been engaged in a conflict with the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) since the 2021 takeover. ISIS-K has attacked Taliban positions and officials, while the Taliban has responded to its insurgency with counter-terrorism efforts. While both groups are Islamist, they hold different interpretations of Islam and have distinct goals. ISIS-K aims to establish a global caliphate, while the Taliban places a more regional emphasis on establishing Islamic law in Afghanistan.

Few places of worship remain open for Hindus and Sikhs, while Ahmadiyya Muslims and Christians report that to avoid discrimination and harassment they worship primarily in private or in 'nondescript places of worship.' Hindu and Sikh groups also report difficulties in cremating their dead.

In its 2026 annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found that FoRB conditions in Afghanistan remained 'extremely poor' in 2025, with women and Hazaras facing 'the most severe restrictions'.¹ Hazaras make up the majority of Afghanistan's Shi'a population and have been labelled 'infidels' and 'unbelievers' by top Taliban officials and ISIS-K. Such rhetoric has been used to justify violent attacks against the community.

In January 2024, for example, an explosion occurred near the Abu Muslim Khorasani Mosque in Kabul. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for the minivan explosion that killed at least three people, stating that the attack was part of its campaign against 'infidels' to 'kill them wherever you find them.' The mosque is used by Sunni Muslims, but located in an area where many Shi'a Hazaras reside.

In April 2024 ISIS-K claimed responsibility for an attack on a mosque in a predominantly Shi'a community of Herat Province. Six worshippers, including the mosque's imam, were killed in the attack. In July, de facto Taliban authorities destroyed the statue of former Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari in Kabul.

Hazara women and girls face intersecting vulnerabilities, and some have reported being subjected to violence, assault, threats, and intimidation while in police custody. In March 2024, for example, the Taliban arrested Hazara human rights defenders Azada Rezaei, Nadia Rezaei and Elaha Rezaei,

1 USCIRF, 2026 Annual Report, March 2026 [https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF_2026_AR%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF_2026_AR%20(2).pdf)

along with their brother. While the detainees were reportedly released in April, for a period of time their whereabouts were unknown to their family. Taliban authorities had previously detained their sister, Tamana Rezaei, for 29 days in 2022, inflicting ‘mental and emotional’ torture and reportedly referring to her as an ‘infidel’ for being Hazara.

In addition, the Taliban has reportedly pressured Shi’a Ismaili community members to convert to Sunni Islam. In May 2024, for example, 15 Ismailis were detained in the northeastern province of Badakhshan and were reportedly falsely accused of being affiliated with armed opposition groups.

In July 2025 a Taliban court sentenced teacher Abdul Alim Khamoosh to death for ‘insulting Shari’a and the Prophet of Islam’ for allegedly telling students that science was more important than religious studies.²

Refugees

Land borders with Afghanistan are mostly sealed, apart from that with Iran. According to statistics from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were an estimated 4.4 million Afghan nationals living in Iran as of December 2025, and 1.81 million in Pakistan as of February 2026,³ however the governments of both countries continue to forcibly repatriate Afghan refugees in large numbers.

In March 2025 the government of Pakistan announced the resumption of the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, which requires undocumented refugees, including Afghans, to leave the country within 30 days, starting from 1 April. In the same month, the government of Iran launched a regularisation/return scheme for an estimated two million Afghans, with the majority expected to return to Afghanistan by a deadline of 6 July 2025 or face deportation. The UNHCR reports that over 1.4 million Afghans were deported from the two countries in 2025, and a further 413,000 had been deported in 2026 as of 1 August.⁴

Hundreds of Afghans have also fled to Uzbekistan.⁵ However, despite being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the country does not provide admittance for official refugee status, rendering these individuals vulnerable to deportation.

On his first day in office, on 20 January 2025, United States (US) President Donald Trump signed an executive order

suspending the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), which processes refugees for resettlement in the country, effective 27 January. All applications and arrivals through the programme have likewise been suspended. With a sudden halt to USRAP, Afghan refugees, many already approved to enter the US, find themselves in limbo, facing instability and the threat of violence.⁶

Many Afghan refugees also face challenges in the countries they have fled to. For example, members of the Shi’a Hazara community are likely to face discrimination in Pakistan due to belonging to the Shi’a branch of Islam. Many members of other religious minorities do not have passports and so find themselves stuck in Pakistan and unable to flee to a third country.

Women’s rights under the Taliban

In 2023 the Taliban established, expanded, and implemented a series of edicts and decrees to further restrict the rights of Afghan women and girls in society, including their dress, movement, access to education, and employment. In April 2023 the Taliban prevented Afghan women from reporting to work at the UN, expanding its 2022 decrees forbidding women from working in offices or for NGOs.

During the first half of 2024 de facto Taliban authorities cracked down on Afghan women for failing to observe what authorities deem ‘proper hijab.’⁷ In January 2024 the Taliban began enforcing its May 2022 hijab decree, dictating that women and girls must fully cover themselves in public. The directive noted that women were not to leave the home except in cases of necessity, and it made male relatives responsible for enforcing the decree or face punishment. The decree states that if the hijab law is not enforced, a woman’s male guardian (mahram) will be summoned to the relevant department.

In February 2025 the Taliban suspended the operation of Radio Begum, a Kabul-based radio station run by women that focuses on women’s education. The radio station reported that members of the Taliban’s Ministry of Information and Culture detained the station’s staff during a search of its premises.⁸

Since the August 2021 takeover the authorities have banned girls from receiving an education beyond the sixth grade and barred women from attending universities. They have also removed any topics relating to human rights and women’s

2 USCIRF, Religious Prisoners of Conscience, Abdul Alim Khamoosh <https://www.uscifr.gov/religious-prisoners-conscience/forb-victims-database/abdul-alim-khamoosh>

3 UNHCR, Afghanistan situation, accessed 19 August 2026 <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan>

4 Ibid.

5 DW, ‘Afghan refugees in Uzbekistan live in uncertainty’, 3 November 2021 <https://www.dw.com/en/afghan-refugees-in-uzbekistan-live-in-uncertainty-facing-deportation/a-59710250>

6 Al Jazeera, ‘Advocates and family react as Trump cancels Afghan refugee resettlement’, 22 January 2025 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/22/advocates-and-family-react-as-trump-cancels-afghan-refugee-resettlement>

7 The hijab is a head covering worn by some Muslim women, typically a scarf that covers the hair and neck. It is often seen as a symbol of modesty and religious expression. The term ‘hijab’ also refers to the broader concept of modest attire in Islam, encompassing clothing that covers the body, though the specific head covering is the most recognised usage. The Taliban enforces a particularly strict interpretation of hijab.

8 CNN, ‘Taliban raids and suspends Afghanistan’s only nationwide women’s radio station’, 7 February 2025 <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/05/asia/afghanistan-taliban-raid-radio-begum-intl-hnk/index.html>

rights from school and university curricula, stating that these topics contradict Taliban and Islamic ideology. Recently the Taliban has overseen the removal of curricula that involve inclusive and non-discriminatory approaches to education.

In February 2025 the Taliban's Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai was reportedly forced to flee to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) following a speech he made at a graduation ceremony in the Khost Province, near the Afghan-Pakistani border, on 20 January in which he criticised the government's ban on girls attending secondary schools and higher education, prompting the Taliban's supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, to order his arrest and issue a travel ban.

Recommendations

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Expand the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) to prioritise at-risk religious minorities (e.g. Hazara Shi'as, Christians, Sikhs, Ahmadi Muslims), women human rights defenders, and civil society actors. Ensure the scheme includes individuals without passports or documentation, and actively engage the UNHCR and NGOs to identify and support vulnerable applicants.
- Support international efforts to monitor and document human rights abuses and hold the Taliban accountable, particularly for violations against women, ethnic, and religious minorities.
- Utilise UK influence at the UN Human Rights Council, Security Council, and Commonwealth to advocate for urgent protections for ethnic and religious minorities, including the Hazara population. Coordinate with Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states to halt forced returns and promote non-refoulement principles for Afghan refugees.
- Broaden resettlement programs and create safe pathways for Afghan refugees, especially women and minorities, while halting deportations of those seeking protection.
- Pressure the Taliban to lift restrictions on women's rights, including access to education and public life, and end gender-based violence such as forced marriages.
- Advocate for the protection of minority groups, including Hazara Shi'a, Christians, Sikhs, and others, and support efforts to document and prosecute atrocities.
- Provide financial, legal, and humanitarian support to Afghan civil society organizations, journalists, and human rights defenders working under Taliban restrictions.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Support the work of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, and ensure they have every resource required to fulfil their respective mandates.
- Urge the Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan and other UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies to include the right to FoRB in their monitoring and reporting on Afghanistan, addressing the unique vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Ensure staff at UNHCR are trained to support asylum seekers from religious minority communities so that they are afforded their full rights and protections in accordance with international law.
- Consider easing eligibility criteria for refugees in order to facilitate asylum processes for those who lack passports or identity cards in addition to creating safe pathways for Afghan refugees and migrants, broadening asylum and resettlement programmes and immediately halting the deportation of Afghans who seek protection.
- Where possible, provide financial support for human rights organisations working on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and provide platforms for Afghan human rights defenders to share their experiences, including facilitating their participation during key UN dialogues.

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