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TURKMENISTAN: Pensioner's pilgrimage departure blocked for five months

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

On 23 August, Yakutjan Babajanova finally left Turkmenistan for her umra pilgrimage to Mecca, five months after Ashgabat Airport officials refused to allow the 73-year-old to board her flight, despite having all documentation. Officials gave no reason. "We managed to break through the blank wall that the authorities erected by forbidding my mother this spring to fulfil her lifelong dream," her daughter said. Migration Service officials refused to discuss her case. More pilgrims were allowed to join the 2023 haj, but far more were denied.

On 23 August, after a nearly five-month delay, Turkmenistan's regime finally allowed a 73-year-old Muslim to leave the country on her long-desired pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia. Yakutjan Babajanova, who is from Koneurgench in the northern Dashoguz Region, was denied boarding at Ashgabat Airport in April after joining a group travelling on the umra pilgrimage to Mecca. Officials gave her no reason.

"Everyone boarded the plane, but they stopped my mother, looked at some list and prohibited her from taking off. My Mum had spent 2,000 Dollars on this trip to Mecca and Medina," her daughter Hamida Babajanova told the exile Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in April (see below).

Yakutjan Babajanova lost almost all the money she spent on the pilgrimage tickets, which she had saved for over many years (see below).

The phone at the Migration Service office at Ashgabat Airport went unanswered each time Forum 18 called. The official who answered the phone at the Dashoguz Regional Department of the Migration Service put the phone down when Forum 18 asked why Yakutjan Babajanova had been prevented from leaving Turkmenistan on pilgrimage. Similarly, the official who answered the phone at the Migration Service headquarters in Ashgabat put the phone down as soon as Forum 18 asked about denials of exit permission (see below).

The regime finally allowed Yakutjan Babajanova to fly out of Ashgabat Airport on 23 August on a flight to Dubai for onward travel to Saudi Arabia. "We managed to break through the blank wall that the authorities erected by forbidding my mother this spring to fulfil her lifelong dream – a pilgrimage to the holy places," Hamida Babajanova told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation (see below).

The regime maintains secret exit-ban lists and individuals generally do not know they have been added to the list until they try to leave the country (see below).

The official who answered the phone at the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production refused to answer any questions. "I'm only an assistant. The leadership is not here," he told Forum 18 from Ashgabat on 6 September. He then put the phone down.

Yusupguly Eshshayew, Chair of the Human Rights Committee of parliament, did not answer his phones each time Forum 18 called on 6 September. No parliamentary deputy has ever faced a free and fair election (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/8/382915_0.pdf).

The regime-appointed Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarowa did not answer her phone on 6 September. The phone at the Ombudsperson's office went unanswered the same day. Gurbannazarowa was appointed in 2017, and her office does not comply with the United Nations' Paris Principles (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/principles-relating-status-national-institutions-paris>) for national human rights institutions.

Although higher than in previous years, the regime apparently allowed only 2,312 Muslims to join the haj pilgrimage to Mecca,

which this year began in late June. This was far below the number seeking to go and far below numbers for other Central Asian states. When applications to go on the haj opened up in 2023, more than 19,000 Muslims had joined the waiting list at the Mekan Palace in Ashgabat by mid-June, the exile Turkmen.news noted (see below).

As well as providing their passport, application and confirmation they had been vaccinated against coronavirus, would-be pilgrims were also required to give information on their family going back three generations (as is usual for individuals seeking employment in the police or MSS secret police or other key state jobs) and say where their deceased close relatives are buried (see below).

"If any of them have been sentenced to prison, [the would-be pilgrims] are not included in the list at all," a specialist in Balkan Region involved in preparing for the haj told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service (see below).

As in previous years, corruption appears to have been a factor in deciding who was eventually allowed to join the haj (see below).

One would-be pilgrim who felt too afraid to join the haj pilgrimage was the wife of Chief Mufti Yalkap Hojagulyyev. She had been included on the list of pilgrims together with her husband. However, former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov (who also joined the haj) found out that she was on the list, without his approval, and grew angry. Out of fear, the Chief Mufti's wife did not travel on the pilgrimage (see below).

On their return in July, officials at Ashgabat Airport subjected the returning pilgrims to thorough checks of their luggage, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted. It did not say what happened if officials discovered religious items in their luggage (see below).

Police in the western Balkan Region, including the port city of Turkmenbashi, raided homes of devout Muslims in mid-August (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2858). They seized religious literature, including books on sharia law and Russian translations of the Koran, leaving only Turkmen-language Koran translations, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted. The Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police also detained an elderly imam for giving Islamic lessons to children.

Initially blocked from leaving for pilgrimage

In spring 2023, a 73-year-old resident of Koneurgench in the northern Dashoguz Region, Yakutjan Babajanova, managed to get all the required permissions to leave Turkmenistan with a group of Muslims to take part in the umra pilgrimage to Mecca. The group were due to leave on 3 April on a flight to Saudi Arabia via Istanbul.

However, border guards at Ashgabat Airport refused to allow Yakutjan Babajanova to board her flight without giving any reason, her daughter Hamida Babajanova told the exile Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights on 10 April (<https://tmhelsinki.org/tk/article/203a0374-9c4f-40ab-ab49-36c66c2c7da9>).

"Everyone boarded the plane, but they stopped my mother, looked at some list and prohibited her from taking off. My Mum had spent 2,000 Dollars on this trip to Mecca and Medina," Hamida Babajanova said. "She was only reimbursed for the cost of the ticket, but due to the arbitrariness of the authorities, she lost an amount equal to 10 average monthly salaries of Turkmen citizens." She adds that her mother had saved up for the pilgrimage for many years.

The phone at the Migration Service office at Ashgabat Airport went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 6 September. The official who answered the phone at the Dashoguz Regional Department of the Migration Service on 6 September put the phone down when Forum 18 asked why Yakutjan Babajanova had been prevented from leaving Turkmenistan on pilgrimage.

Similarly, the official who answered the phone at the Migration Service headquarters in Ashgabat put the phone down on 6 September as soon as Forum 18 asked about denials of exit permission

The regime maintains secret exit-ban lists and individuals generally do not know they have been added to the list until they try to leave the country. When banned from leaving, individuals can appeal to the Migration Service, though this often fails to overturn the exit ban. Individuals who try to challenge exit bans in court generally fail.

Since 2020, officials had summoned and warned Yakutjan Babajanova and her other children over the activity of her daughter Hamida Babajanova – who has lived in Turkey since 2016 - to publicise poor living conditions in Turkmenistan. The family are from Turkmenistan's ethnic Uzbek minority.

After she was refused boarding at Ashgabat Airport, Yakutjan Babajanova's relatives went to the regional office of the Migration Service. Officials then said that she would be able to leave Turkmenistan on 23 April. However, they did not allow her to leave then either.

On 24 June, in a letter seen by Forum 18, Amanmuhammet Sazakow, the then Deputy Head (now Head) of the Migration Service, wrote to Yakutjan Babajanova saying she was permitted to leave the country. "Your written request sent to us on 31 May 2023 was fully studied," Sazakow wrote. "We inform you that according to Article 24 of the Migration Law, you have the right to leave

Turkmenistan and return."

The regime finally allowed Yakutjan Babajanova to fly out of Ashgabat Airport on 23 August on a flight to Dubai for onward travel to Saudi Arabia. "We managed to break through the blank wall that the authorities erected by forbidding my mother this spring to fulfil her lifelong dream – a pilgrimage to the holy places," Hamida Babajanova told the Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation on 24 August (<https://tmhelsinki.org/tk/article/51aad392-c492-46c9-9c5c-6b5a202b4083>).

"Thanks to our persistent demands, the Turkmen authorities did not put up obstacles for her at the airport this time, and she managed to fly out of the country," Hamida Babajanova added.

Limited numbers of haj pilgrimages places

It appears that the number of Muslims the Turkmen government allowed to go on this year's haj pilgrimage to Mecca was the highest ever, but far below the number seeking to go and far below numbers for other Central Asian states.

The haj is an obligation for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford it at least once in their lifetime. The government has severely restricted its citizens' participation (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244) in the past two decades. It has never explained why it does so. It also sends officials among the pilgrims to monitor their activity while on the pilgrimage.

State media announced on 7 June that the Muslim Board planned to send 2,312 pilgrims to Mecca for the haj, which this year began on 25 June. All would be transported by Turkmenistan Airlines, but only 289 of them would enjoy free flights. State media do not appear to have announced how many pilgrims eventually took part in the haj.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, up till 2019, the regime allowed only about 160 pilgrims to join each year's pilgrimage. Saudi Arabia banned foreigners from entering the country for the haj in 2020 and 2021. In 2022, the Turkmen regime allowed only 275 pilgrims to travel from the country to the haj (compared to the reduced post-coronavirus Saudi quota for Turkmenistan that year of 2,083).

Of the 44 pilgrims allowed to travel on the 2022 haj from Lebap Region (30 of them from the regional capital Turkmenabat), most of them were "influential people, or people who previously worked in high official positions, and the rest are businesspeople", RFE's Turkmen Service noted on 7 July 2022.

When applications to go on the haj opened up in 2023, more than 19,000 Muslims had joined the waiting list at the Mekan Palace in Ashgabat by mid-June, the exile Turkmen.news noted on 14 June (<https://turkmen.news/v-turkmenistane-nachalas-zapis-zhelayushchih-sovershit-hadzh-v-mekku/>).

Applicants were required to present their passport, application form and certificates that they have been vaccinated against coronavirus. They were also required to give information on their family going back three generations (as is usual for individuals seeking employment in the police or MSS secret police or other key state jobs).

"If any of them have been sentenced to prison, [the would-be pilgrims] are not included in the list at all," a specialist in Balkan Region involved in preparing for the haj told RFE's Turkmen Service on 30 May (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/haj-zy%C3%BDaratyna-ugradyljak-adamlar-seljeril%C3%BD%C3%A4r-korrupsi%C3%BDa-aladalar-bildiril%C3%BD%C3%A4r-/32435086.html>). "In addition, [the would-be pilgrim] must specify in writing in which cemeteries their deceased close relatives are buried. We don't even understand the reason for this request."

Corruption over getting onto the list of pilgrims appears to be widespread. Several individuals told RFE that if a would-be pilgrim has three close relatives who have been jailed, this information can be suppressed in exchange for a bribe of 30,000 Manats.

In 2017, the former specialist of the Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production, Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, was arrested and sentenced for reportedly taking bribes from those seeking to go on the haj pilgrimage (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2519) to Mecca. He appeared in handcuffs on state television making a tearful confession. Two officials from the Muslim Board – Rovshen Allaberdiev (a 42-year-old former Chief Mufti) and Mukhammetmurad Gurbangeldiyev - were tried and convicted with Nursakhatov.

The state-appointed Chief Mufti Yalkap Hojagulyyev as well as his wife were included on the list of pilgrims allowed to travel on the 2023 haj. However, former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov (who also joined the haj) found out that the Chief Mufti's wife was on the list, without his approval, and grew angry. Out of fear, the Chief Mufti's wife did not travel on the pilgrimage, an official told Turkmen.news for a 17 July article (<https://turkmen.news/muftiy-turkmenistana-vpal-v-nemilost-arkadagu/>). Chief Mufti Hojagulyyev took a low profile on the haj, trying to avoid the former president.

Thorough checks on pilgrims' return

While in Saudi Arabia, pilgrims acquired copies of the Koran, tasbih (Islamic beads) and water from the Zamzam well close to the Kaaba in Mecca. On their return in July, officials at Ashgabat Airport subjected the returning pilgrims to thorough checks of their luggage, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 15 August (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/haj-zyyaratynda-aradan-cykan-turkmenistanlynyn-jesedi-saud-arabystanynda-galdy/32548876.html>). It did not say what happened if officials discovered religious items in their luggage.

In the past, officials have confiscated religious items – including literature and Islamic prayer rugs – from individuals returning to Turkmenistan, whether by air, land or sea.

In December 2018, security personnel at Ashgabat Airport detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2449). She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan. (END)

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Turkmenistan (<https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?country=32>)

For background information, see Forum 18's Turkmenistan religious freedom survey (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244)

Forum 18's compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion and belief commitments (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1351)

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