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TURKMENISTAN: Raids, literature seizures, imam detained

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

Police in Turkmenbashi and other locations nearby raided homes of devout Muslims in mid-August. They seized religious literature, including books on sharia law and the hadith. They also seized Russian translations of the Koran, leaving only Turkmen-language Koran translations. The Ministry of State Security secret police detained an elderly imam for giving Islamic lessons to children. On 29 August, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on the regime to end its ban on "practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered".

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

The raids came as another United Nations (UN) human rights body called on the regime to end its ban on exercising freedom of religion or belief without state approval (see below).

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its concluding observations of 29 August 2023 after its consideration of Turkmenistan, expressed concern about "excessive administrative barriers to registering religious organizations, as well as the prohibition on practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered". The Committee called on Turkmenistan to "eliminate all barriers to registering religious organizations and practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered" (see below).

No official at the Foreign Ministry (which led the Turkmen delegation to the Committee hearings in Geneva) would give its response to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination observations. Rovshan Annaberdiyev, head of the International Organisations Department who was part of the delegation, did not answer his phone (see below).

Police, the MSS secret police and courts regularly interrogate, raid and punish individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission.

In spring 2023, police and MSS secret police officers questioned girls and women in the western Balkan Region who appeared to be devout Muslims. Officers particularly questioned those who wear hijabs and other clothes deemed religious or carry tasbeeh (Islamic beads) (see below).

In spring 2023, MSS secret police in the south-eastern city of Mary summoned a 60-year-old Muslim several times within a month. Officers interrogated him and warned him to stop offering prayers at the invitation of local people at weddings and commemorations of the dead. "This modest honoured elder even took no money for performing prayers," a local resident told Radio Free Europe (see below).

In 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 27 instances where MSS secret police officers warned people not to meet with others or share their faith. In some cases, officers "seized and examined the cell phones of Jehovah's Witnesses and deleted all publications or apps attributable to Jehovah's Witnesses", Jehovah's Witnesses noted (see below).

In April 2022, police raided the Easter worship meeting of a Protestant church in Turkmenabat. About 20 church members were fined and threatened with criminal prosecution. Officials then told the church that it could apply for state registration to avoid future problems. The regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production in Ashgabat rejected its application in early 2023 (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 who also attended the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination hearings in Geneva, did not answer his phones each time Forum 18 called on 11 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 was not in the office on 11 September. The official who answered the phone at the Ombudsperson's office told Forum 18 he had been working there only for one month and could not answer any questions. He said any questions to the Ombudsperson should be sent by post.

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.

Renewed UN call to allow the exercise of freedom of religion or belief without state permission

Article 16 of the Religion Law bans the exercise of freedom of religion or belief by religious communities without state registration. Denials of communities' right to exercise freedom of religion or belief without state permission is illegal under international law, as the OSCE / Council of Europe Venice Commission Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities (<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/139046.pdf>) note. Yet the regime told the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee on 9 November 2022 that: "Unregistered religious organizations are prohibited from operating in Turkmenistan." (CCPR/C/TKM/RQ/3 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FTKM%2FRQ%2F3&Lang=en)).

Police, the MSS secret police and courts regularly interrogate, raid and punish individuals and communities for exercising freedom of religion or belief without state permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its concluding observations of 29 August 2023 after its consideration of Turkmenistan (CERD/C/TKM/CO/12-13 (https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CERD%2FC%2FTKM%2FCO%2F12-13&Lang=en)), expressed concern about "excessive administrative barriers to registering religious organizations, as well as the prohibition on practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered". The Committee called on Turkmenistan to "eliminate all barriers to registering religious organizations and practicing religion in cases where an organization is unregistered".

The Foreign Ministry led the Turkmen delegation to the Committee hearings in Geneva. Forum 18 was unable to find out what response Turkmen diplomats have to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination observations and whether or not the regime will implement its call to eliminate the ban on unregistered exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

Rovshan Annaberdiyev, head of the International Organisations Department at the Foreign Ministry who was part of the delegation, did not answer his phone when Forum 18 called on 11 September. The official who answered the phone at the Foreign Ministry's press office put the phone down the same day.

Police raid homes, seize Islamic literature

Police in the port city of Turkmenbashi and in other locations in the western Balkan Region raided homes of devout Muslims on 18 and 19 August, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 21 August (<https://www.azathabar.com/a/hakimiyetler-balkanda-dindarlaryn-oylerini-dokyar-gurhandan-dasgary-dini-eserlerin-ahlisi-yygnalya-r/32557418.html>). Police seized religious literature from at least several homes, including books on the hadith (sayings attributed to the Muslim prophet Muhammad) and sharia law.

Officers also seized Russian translations of the Koran, leaving only Turkmen-language Koran translations.

Phones at Turkmenbashi police went unanswered each time Forum 18 called on 11 September.

A number of residents whose homes had been raided told RFE's Turkmen Service that books with religious content, including books of hadith and religious sources promoting sharia, are banned in their homes.

A local resident said that during the campaign, two police officers, a plainclothes official and the district religious affairs official came to his home at 6 am, searched the bookshelves and took away all his religious books.

"The religious affairs official and the police officers asked me to bring out all my religious books," one Muslim resident told RFE's Turkmen Service. "They took all my books except two copies of the Koran. They even took away the Russian translation of the Koran, which was a gift from Russia."

Authorities say they have a court order to search the homes and warn that "if any religious artefacts other than the Koran are found in homes, the owners will be prosecuted."

The regime claimed (wrongly) to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 30 October 2019 (CERD/C/TKM/12-13 (<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=CERD%2FC%2FTKM%2F12-13&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>)) that "Turkmen citizens, foreign nationals and stateless persons have the right to acquire and use religious literature and other information materials with religious content in any language of their choice".

The regime also admitted religious censorship in its submission to the UN Committee: "Religious organizations in Turkmenistan have the right to purchase, produce, use and, after an expert evaluation of the religious material is carried out, import and distribute religious literature and religious items."

Local people said police had increased interrogations of those known to be devout Muslims in August, including those who have started praying recently, particularly among the young. They say police divide Muslims into two groups, "those who know the Arabic alphabet and those who do not". People who have recently started praying, especially young citizens, are the focus of police investigations.

In spring 2023, police and MSS secret police officers in Balkan Region questioned girls and women who appeared to be devout Muslims. Officers particularly questioned those who wear hijabs and other clothes deemed religious or carry tasbeeh (Islamic beads). "They check the information on their mobile phones, internet addresses, and if religious information is found, detailed questioning and investigation of the women is carried out," a correspondent of Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted on 10 March.

Imam detained for teaching Islam

In mid-August, Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police officers detained an elderly imam for giving Islamic lessons to about 50 schoolchildren in the town of Gumdag, 45 kms south-east of the regional capital Balkanabat. Officials accuse him of teaching Islam without state approval.

One local resident told RFE's Turkmen Service that the imam committed "no crime except to follow and propagate the traditional sect of Islam among the Turkmen". The resident added: "It's not a bad thing if our children are religious. There is no religious madrassa in the region." The resident argued that the state should establish religious schools. "However, even in mosques, the promotion of religious literacy is prohibited today."

On Friday 18 August, men who went to Friday prayers at Turkmenbashi city mosque asked the imam to teach people how to pray, as well as other religious practices. But the imam of the mosque strongly opposed this proposal and urged people not to visit mosques for the purpose of studying religion.

Fines, registration denial

In April 2022, police raided the Easter meeting for worship of an independent Protestant church in the eastern city of Turkmenabat. The church meets without the compulsory state registration. A court then fined about 20 church members, Protestants who asked not to be identified for fear of state reprisals told Forum 18. Officials also threatened the Protestants with prosecution under Article 177 ("Incitement of social, ethnic or religious hatred") of the then Criminal Code (equivalent to Article 189 of the current Criminal Code, which came into force on 1 January 2023).

Officials told the church that it could get state registration, which would avoid such problems recurring. The church then prepared a registration application, which it sent to the regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production.

Registration applications require the backing of 50 adult citizens, who need to give their full names, addresses and dates of birth.

The Commission checks all registration applications before deciding whether to send them on to the Justice Ministry for registration. If they reach the Justice Ministry, they must be approved by the Justice Minister, the First Deputies of the Justice Minister, the Foreign Minister, the General Prosecutor, the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police, the Interior Minister, and the Deputy Head of the State Service for Registering Foreign Citizens. Any of these bodies can reject applications (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

In early 2023, the Commission rejected the Turkmenabat church's application, Protestants told Forum 18.

Justice Minister Merettagan Taganov did not answer his phone each time Forum 18 called on 11 September.

Secret police warnings for prayers, meetings without state approval

In spring 2023, MSS secret police in the south-eastern city of Mary summoned a 60-year-old Muslim several times within a month. Officers "interrogated him and demanded that he stop preaching on religious themes", a local resident told Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service in March.

The man – who had no state approval to act as an imam - often attended and offered prayers at weddings and meetings to commemorate the dead at the request of local residents. "This modest honoured elder even took no money for performing prayers," a local resident told RFE. "He called on people not to give money to other imams either."

After the resident's father died he approached the imam for him to conduct burial rites. However, the imam explained that he was unable to do so.

Jehovah's Witnesses – who have been repeatedly denied state registration - frequently face warnings and threats from officials not to meet for worship and not to share their faith with others (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

On 27 occasions during 2022, MSS secret police officers conducted "preventive measures" against Jehovah's Witnesses. "Adherents were either summoned to law enforcement offices or interrogated at their places of work," Jehovah's Witnesses told the United Nations Human Rights Committee in a report submitted on 26 January 2023.

"The Witnesses were asked to set out their beliefs in writing and to confirm that an 'explanatory talk' was conducted with them," the Jehovah's Witness report added. "They were told not to engage in any further 'illegal activities' by meeting with fellow believers or by sharing their beliefs."

In some cases, officers "seized and examined the cell phones of Jehovah's Witnesses and deleted all publications or apps attributable to Jehovah's Witnesses".

Meetings for worship away from registered places of worship illegal

Meetings for worship by state-registered communities away from state-registered places of worship remain illegal, unless communities have gained specific state permission (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244).

The regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production allowed Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Vikenty (Morar) of Tashkent, who lives in the Uzbek capital and is head of the Central Asian Metropolitan Area, and Archbishop Feofilakt (Kuryanov), the Russian-based "temporary" administrator of the Turkmen parishes on behalf of the Moscow Patriarchate, to visit Turkmenistan for a week in late May.

The two bishops were allowed to visit "small communities" in Gyzylyarbat and in Magtymguly in the south-western Balkan Region. In neither town has the Church been able to register a parish.

"The bishops conducted a prayer service in Gyzylyarbat and a memorial service at the cemetery in Magtymguly," the Pyatigorsk Diocese website noted after the visit. It said that while in Gyzylyarbat, "the hierarchs briefly prayed in the former church building, which now houses a museum".

(The regime's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production generally allows non-Muslim registered religious communities only one short-term visit from a foreign representative per year (https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2244). It generally allows the Russian Orthodox Church about three such visits per year.) (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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