



INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

AFGHANISTAN HUMANITARIAN BRIEF

Situational Overview for Christian Minorities

AUGUST 2022

 **PERSECUTION.ORG**
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN

AFGHANISTAN HUMANITARIAN BRIEF

SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW FOR CHRISTIAN MINORITIES



International Christian Concern
P. O. Box 8056
Silver Spring, MD 20907
Copyright © 2022

For interviews, please contact advocacy@persecution.org.

INDEX

| | |
|--|----------|
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| The Internally Displaced | 2 |
| Former Public Service Employees | 2 |
| Christian Leadership | 3 |
| Women | 4 |
| Ethnic Minorities | 5 |
| Recommendations for Further Action Inside Afghanistan | 5 |
| Forced Migration: Afghan Refugees Abroad | 6 |
| Pakistan | 6 |
| Iran | 7 |
| Turkey | 7 |
| Recommendations for Further Action Inside Refugee Host Countries | 8 |
| Conclusion | 8 |

AFGHANISTAN HUMANITARIAN BRIEF

SITUATIONAL OVERVIEW FOR CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

August 15, 2022, marks the one-year anniversary of the collapse of Kabul, an event following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces. Since that time, the Taliban has institutionalized a strict system of Islamic rule, contributing to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty about Afghanistan's future—particularly for religious and ethnic minorities.

ICC's humanitarian response focuses on Christian minorities, most of whom are Muslim Background Believers (MBBs). The Taliban prohibits conversion away from Islam. Even the allegation of a conversion could result in the death penalty for someone then labeled as an apostate. In addition to being converts, many MBBs are women and belong to the ethnic minority known as the Hazara. While their Christian identity is not physically apparent and thus easier to hide, their ethnic or gender identities are more publicly visible, increasing their vulnerability to persecution. It's a no-win situation for many Afghans.

ICC has observed the following trends based on its work with Afghan Christians regarding their humanitarian status, needs, and levels of risk:

- The Taliban's policy of concealment regarding the presence of Afghan Christians forces the Christian community into hiding. The policy ostracizes Christians in all social sectors, worsening their humanitarian situation. By stripping away all open Christian identity, the Taliban ensures Christians have no place in Afghanistan society.*
- The Taliban's dismantled agency of Afghan Christians creates a hostile atmosphere, including invasion of privacy, exploitation of lives and property, and compulsion to commit humiliating and degrading activities.*
- Most Christians see no future inside Afghanistan. Emigration is a highly restricted privilege enjoyed only by a select few. Widows, unmarried women, and the elderly are among those with the least opportunity to leave, creating an untenable environment where they must choose between staying at risk of their lives or fleeing illegally.*
- Pakistan remains the natural exit for many Afghans. But in Pakistan, they are blocked from humanitarian assistance by Pakistani authorities, and reports of severe abuse by the Pakistani community towards Afghans are rampant. Christians are particularly isolated, and some have consequently returned home to Afghanistan.*
- Turkey is the safest destination for exiting Afghans as Turkey allows the UNHCR to register Afghan refugees and provide financial assistance. But Turkey's positive relationship with the Taliban makes Afghan Christians suspicious of sharing their full needs as refugees.*
- Afghan refugees attempt to avoid Iran as a refuge or transit country because they are often subject to sex trafficking and other severe abuses by bad Iranian actors. Additionally, heavy international sanctions limit the available humanitarian assistance for the refugees.*

THE INTERNALLY DISPLACED

The Christian population in Afghanistan is estimated to be between 10,000 and 12,000, making it the country's largest religious minority group. Afghanistan's Christian community is almost exclusively comprised of converts from Islam. In the Taliban's militant interpretation of Islam, Christian converts are considered apostates who deserve death. Under Taliban rule, forsaking Islam is illegal, rendering Christians a 'community of criminals.' The Christian community remains underground and hidden from the glare of public scrutiny, operating as a loosely connected network of house churches because Afghan Christians are direct targets for severe persecution. Known Christians must flee Afghanistan or risk being killed in many cases.

Before Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, Christian pastors experienced a relatively safe environment to proselytize in their respective communities. Threats from Islamic radicals were prevalent but less egregious during the war following 9/11. However, the current reign of Taliban extremism in Afghanistan has presented a much more challenging context for Christians in terms of continuing to proselytize.

The Taliban employs a variety of tactics to uncover Christians. One direct and effective means is confiscating suspected Christians' phones and looking through messages and contacts. The Taliban will also monitor mosques to identify individuals who do not attend prayers. While Afghanistan has never been permissive to Christians, believers experienced relatively more freedom of expression in the previous U.S.-supported Afghan regime. After the Taliban's takeover of the country, Christians who failed to erase their phone and social media presence, or those who were slow in doing so,

were often discovered and persecuted. What followed for the unfortunate Christians was kidnapping, torture for information about other Christians, holding for ransom, or death. In this way, exploiting relationships within the church or poorly hidden active fellowship is the most effective means for the Taliban to hunt Christians.

Women have lost what few liberties they enjoyed prior to the Taliban takeover. Sharia dictates how women should behave and be treated, and the Taliban's extreme brand of Sharia has seen women further marginalized. Women's relative freedom of movement under the previous government has been rescinded, now requiring male escorts. Industries dictate how women employees should conduct themselves in front of men, and secondary schools for girls have been shut down. In addition, women can be married off with no regard for their thoughts or feelings. They are second-class citizens without freedom or independence from Sharia law or its dogmatic followers.

The following demographics are at particular risk of persecution: former public service employees, church leadership, ethnic minorities, and women. Given that the Taliban-led government is not internationally recognized, humanitarian assistance for these demographics is incredibly limited. Bank-to-bank transfers are impossible. The availability of cash at receiving locations is unreliable. These types of administrative details severely delay humanitarian assistance, effectively preventing emergency relief at the moment when it is most needed. Long-term relief projects are common, but requests for livelihood development are increasing, signaling how the environment of Afghanistan is normalizing and trending towards a long-term approach.

Former Public Service Employees

The Taliban's insurgent military operations collapsed and replaced Afghanistan's prior governance system. Maintenance of their authority is contingent upon the

Taliban's ability to locate, harass, intimidate, and eliminate employees of the former government. The Taliban particularly targets individuals with law enforcement

or military background. Many of these individuals had partnerships with American and NATO officials, which facilitated opportunities for exchanging ideas, including religion. About 8% of the Christian community within ICC's caseload were public service employees before

the Taliban takeover. The Taliban is already pursuing these types of professionals; should the Taliban discover their Christian identity, they are likely to face an even harsher outcome.

Case Study: Niaz

Niaz serves as a case study example. He was a police officer in Kabul for many years. He had not heard the story of Christ until, while working as a policeman, one of his colleagues shared Christ's story. After some time and fellowship, Moses converted to Christianity. After the fall of Afghanistan to Taliban rule, Niaz and his fellow Christian officer lost their positions and had to go into hiding to prevent exposure by those who knew him and his past. It is unclear whether the Taliban knew of their beliefs, but their status as policemen was enough to make them targets.

ICC has provided food and shelter to Niaz as he is unable to get another job for fear of being discovered, and he is struggling to survive.

Christian Leadership

Christians who serve in some leadership role within their church community also risk accusations of proselytization, not just by the Taliban but also by the wider society. Any leadership role within a church necessitates, at minimum, welcoming newcomers, providing spiritual guidance, and coordinating logistics. Since conversion to Christianity is not allowed, a Christian leader serving

another Christian can be viewed as proselytizing even if proselytization never occurred. A relative angry with their family member's Christian identity can seek out the names of other believers. The angry family member can subsequently report those names to the Taliban. Thus, anyone who has accepted a leadership role within the church places themselves at significant risk.

Case Study: Azad

Azad lives in Kabul but was raised in a small village outside the city. After positive Christian influences and studying the Bible, he converted from Islam to Christianity. With his newfound passion, Azad was eager to share about his conversion and sought out opportunities to proselytize in Afghanistan and neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan. After years of pastoral work, in February 2021, Azad returned to his home village to continue his career in ministry. However, soon after returning to his village, he was confronted by an elder and a Taliban commander. They accused him of heresy and not adhering to Sharia. The commander and four other extremists attempted to arrest Azad, but he evaded capture. After hearing of his escape, the Taliban commander rallied other extremists to intercept him on the road back to Kabul. Azad evaded them again and managed to return to Kabul, where he lived a cautious lifestyle until August 2021.

After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, Azad was once again in danger. The Taliban militants Azad had evaded earlier in the year began to pursue him again. Five Taliban extremists approached his house late on August 28 and demanded to speak with him. Azad's neighbor and wife tried to repel the aggressors, but he was eventually captured. Naked and terrified, Azad was taken to the same Taliban com-

mander who had harassed him in February. Since their initial encounter, the commander had gained stature within the Taliban and been given the authority to kidnap and torture whomever he deemed an enemy of the state. He taunted Azad, calling him an infidel and threatening him with death.

The elders of Azad's tribe raised 300,000 afghanis to try to buy his release. The Taliban accepted the ransom and released Azad, only to return a short time later to harass him further. Azad fled, but the Taliban returned to his former residence five times, continuing their harassment and questioning the neighbors about Azad's whereabouts.

The Taliban will often hold the victim's friends and family hostage to force compliance and submission from their victims or suspects. Christians live in a reality where their faith makes them a target of the Taliban and hostile family members. The Taliban has increased their tactics to identify and target those they consider 'enemies of the state.'

In Azad's case, when the Taliban could not find him, the Taliban kidnapped his father in hopes of compelling Azad to reveal himself. While his father remains a Taliban hostage, Azad is hidden in Kabul, unable to leave safely. He cannot work or fellowship for fear of being identified.

The reality for Afghan Christians is constant danger from an intransigent government that openly persecutes them. As a result, the Christian community has little hope of regaining a sustainable or safe way of life.

Azad's story is the same as any Christian pastor who openly worked to proselytize in Afghanistan. Taliban commanders persistently hunt Christians they identified before the U.S. and allied withdrawal in 2021.

Women

Another challenge Afghan Christians face is the Taliban's severe restrictions on the role of women and girls within society. Men and women are not allowed to mix. Girls are kept from education beyond sixth grade. This isolation has severe consequences professionally, socially, medically, economically, and religiously. The Christian women served by ICC's projects face

significant difficulties accessing Christian resources. These women would like to teach their children about Christianity, but if they are the only Christian in their household, they cannot risk potential indiscretions by their children. If they are widowed because the Taliban discovered their husband's Christianity, they risk an arranged marriage to a Taliban member.

Case Study: Nasreen

Nasreen is a Christian widow in her 30s. She currently lives in the basement of her father-in-law's home with her two boys and two girls. Her family is Muslim, and no one knows she is a Christian. She wants to share her faith with her children, but they are too young to understand the danger of practicing Christianity in an extreme Islamic environment. Any discussion of Christianity in the house or in public could draw the Taliban's attention to her and her children.

Since Nasreen is a widow, she is at the mercy of her father-in-law. She does not have the freedom to leave and must pay rent to stay in the cramped basement. She and the children sleep on the carpet; they often go to bed hungry.

Her future and the future of her children is uncertain. She could be married to another Muslim man without regard for her desires. Her children would go to school with an increasingly Islam-centric curriculum until her daughters reached sixth grade. They would then be married off themselves, thus continuing a cycle of women's oppression under Taliban rule. She is a second-class citizen as a woman living under Sharia. She cannot leave and must work to stay. She cannot speak freely about her faith, or she puts her family at risk. She cannot adequately care for her children, who will be cast into the extremist Islamic system. Her plight is amplified by being a Christian in addition to a widowed woman. Still, all women under Taliban rule have had their rights stripped.

Ethnic Minorities

Most Christians inside Afghanistan belong to the Hazara community, a predominantly Shia ethnic and religious minority. Hazaras are physically distinguishable from mainstream Afghan society and are subject to multiple types of persecution, including ethnic cleansing, slavery, and other atrocities. Historically, the Taliban has played a significant role in these tragedies. The Taliban

speaks Pashto, a language that has been institutionalized since the Taliban takeover. The Hazara, however, speak a dialect of Dari. Thus, they are further ostracized in mainstream society. Christians who are Hazara, particularly if they are Hazara women or a church leader, are the most vulnerable of those within the Afghanistan Christian community.

Case Study: Javid

In most cases that ICC is aware of, the impacted Christians are Hazara. Javid is a Hazara Christian who has taken steps to fight the cultural stigma of different ethnicities and advocate for women. His goal of influencing his community toward tolerance was going well by his admission. However, progress towards a more harmonious Afghanistan was halted and reversed when the Taliban took over. The Taliban has targeted Javid for being a Christian and a Hazara and for propagating the idea of tolerance for women and minority groups within Afghanistan. He and his family are in hiding now. Like other targeted groups, they have limited means for food and supplies.

Recommendations for Further Action Inside Afghanistan

Humanitarian response plans for vulnerable demographics in Afghanistan are more effective when including a long-term strategy rather than a RAPID or DART response.

The United States and its allies should not offer diplomatic recognition to the Taliban due to their heinous human rights violations and an array of oppressive domestic policies against Christians and other minorities over the years. The international community should offer no credibility whatsoever to the Taliban.

United States Department of State should withhold all foreign aid from Afghanistan except for direct support

to the people until human rights reforms occur and tie all foreign assistance to such reform.

United States Department of State should designate Afghanistan as a Country of Particular Concern and implement all associated sanctions.

The United States and its Allies should convene an international committee tasked with monitoring human rights in Afghanistan and calling attention to ongoing violations.

The United States and its allies should make all foreign aid dependent on the Taliban making significant gains in guaranteeing human rights for all Afghans.

FORCED MIGRATION: AFGHAN REFUGEES ABROAD

Fearing oppression, persecution, and death, many Afghan citizens attempted to leave the country after the U.S. and allied withdrawal. However, obtaining a passport has only grown more difficult under the Taliban regime. The Taliban perceives that a large-scale emigration movement would further cripple the country and challenge the regime's legitimacy. As a result, the Taliban has imposed exceedingly restrictive policies to curb the Afghan people's movement internationally. These measures include shutting down some airports and monitoring points of entry and exit around the country.

The growing refugee crisis has placed a significant burden on recipient countries, and the large influx of people already entering surrounding countries continues

to generate additional challenges for the region. Food shortages, unsanitary living conditions, violence, and sexual abuse are among the problems that many refugees face.

Mass displacement and tenuous documentation make for an excellent human trafficking environment. Women and children disappear on the roads or in the camps—an unfortunate reality of crises like this. Christians are an especially marginalized group in an already difficult situation. In addition to facing the typical challenges of refugees, Christians also experience religious discrimination and persecution and must maintain a high degree of secrecy regarding their faith.

Pakistan

Christians and other refugees seeking to leave Afghanistan have few choices. Neighboring Pakistan had some potential exit routes, but the Pakistani government has clamped down on refugees wishing to enter the country through various measures. Furthermore, Pakistan's internal political problems and a devastating economic crisis have further impeded the refugee movement. Rising inflation and governmental mismanagement led

to a political situation in the last year that climaxed with the removal of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan earlier this year. Though Pakistan was not equipped to manage a refugee crisis, thousands of refugees have flooded over the border since last August. These refugees have met many challenges brought about by the urgency to leave Afghanistan.

Case Study: Sardar

Of the sixty Christian families ICC has identified, at least three have decided to return to Afghanistan after months of turmoil as refugees in Pakistan. One Christian, Sardar, is in Afghanistan after months of being a refugee in Pakistan.

Sardar and his family initially had difficulty getting into Pakistan after the Taliban takeover. En route to the border, he was abducted by the Taliban and held until his family could pay a ransom. Though they managed to scrape the ransom together, the incident further increased their financial plight.

Once in Pakistan, Sardar and his family were not well received. Like nearly all refugees, they faced hunger and poor living conditions. With no means of work, they were at the mercy of Pakistan's refugee system. Pakistan received refugees previously, but the number of families that arrived following the collapse of Afghanistan was unprecedented. Thousands of Afghans flooded into Pakistan, so Sardar's family was insignificant and their struggles commonplace. All the Christian families faced these struggles but would undoubtedly have faced more dire challenges had they been discovered as Christians.

Sardar and his family deemed it better to return to Afghanistan. The fact that he had been subjected to the Taliban's cruelties firsthand and still decided to go back illustrates the dreadful state of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. He has experienced what the Taliban is capable of and knows how much worse it will be if the Taliban captures him again. Despite the ever-present danger to him and his family in Afghanistan, he feels there is a better chance of surviving in hiding than by trying to eke out a life in Pakistan.

Iran

Iran is a marginally better country for Afghan refugees because they share a common language, allowing a more natural integration compared to countries like Pakistan and Turkey. Still, Afghans living inside Iran have experienced a long history of discrimination. This environment has worsened as Iran's economy worsens, given that the presence of an Afghan refugee community places financial pressure on Iran's economy. Iran recognizes that most Afghans are traveling through the

country with no intention of staying, but this creates financial opportunities for traffickers and other bad actors who wish to exploit the situation. Iran is one of the most dangerous countries for Christians in the Middle East. Thus, Afghan Christian refugees cannot feel safe in Iran. However, many Iranian Christian communities have responded to the Afghan crisis. This type of engagement is unique when compared to that of other countries.

Case Study: Beena

Beena, a 16-year-old girl, fled Afghanistan with her family, whose flight plan included leaving Afghanistan through Iran and Turkey on their way to Europe. However, the family's resources were drained while in Iran. Her parents realized they did not have enough money to pay smugglers for the adults, so they made the difficult decision to send their children across the Turkish-Iranian border alone. However, they did not identify a safe smuggler and instead paid sex traffickers. As a result, Beena was raped repeatedly at the border and then sold to a man who lived in Europe before she had even left Asia. When his family discovered that Beena had been sexually assaulted, they sent men to beat her.

She was eventually rescued from the traffickers through the help of a local church, after which ICC was able to provide psychological care. However, the care could not be completed as Beena suddenly disappeared. Given her experiences and the psychological impact, she was considered at high risk for suicide. Rumors circulate that she may have escaped to Europe, been reunited with her parents, or possibly retaken by the traffickers, but her whereabouts today are unknown.

Turkey

Turkey is the largest recipient of refugees worldwide and thus a natural destination for Afghans who have fled the Taliban. Turkey has an established, if imperfect, UNHCR process. Afghans typically enter the country through Van. If the authorities catch them entering illegally, which is the situation for most, they are placed in a deportation center and risk being refouled back to Afghanistan. However, once inside Turkey, they can apply for official refugee status, which qualifies them for

certain benefits that they would not have otherwise.

Those seeking refugee status must declare their reason for seeking such status. Since Turkey is a Muslim-majority country with ties to the Taliban, many Afghan Christians are not comfortable sharing that their faith is why they cannot live inside Afghanistan any longer. Turkey also dictates where refugees live, meaning that Afghan Christians may be grouped into locations that compromise their safety.

Case Study: Sayed

Sayed is an Afghan who fled to Turkey before the Taliban took over in 2021 because his family's connections with Afghan law enforcement had created a threatening environment. While in Turkey, Sayed converted to Christianity and eventually became the pastor of a flourishing Afghan church. However, as that local refugee community grew, so did awareness of Sayed's Christian activities. He was already facing pressure from other Afghans because of his Hazara background, but that pressure became life-threatening when they learned of his Christian faith and pastoral activities.

The Turkish authorities eventually became aware of the threats faced by Sayed and relocated him to another city. Those same authorities, however, also heavily regulate Sayed's ability of church formation. He is now legally restricted from being part of an official church, and the authorities monitor his pastoral activities. This, in addition to the restriction he faces as a refugee, limits his ability to engage with his Afghan congregation.

Recommendations for Further Action Inside Host Countries

Refugees are generally restricted from pursuing a livelihood, thus forcing them to rely on humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian organizations must invent ways for refugees to find self-sustaining opportunities, given that the refugee process can take years or decades.

Countries hosting Afghan refugees should allow the UNHCR to function fully. Those functions should remain distinct from management by local authorities so that neutrality and fairness may be maintained within the system.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be a consensus that the situation in Afghanistan has settled in the year since the Taliban takeover. International focus has shifted to other crises worldwide, particularly the Ukraine conflict, and the international community has begun to recognize the Taliban as the de facto government of Afghanistan. However, no country has provided diplomatic recognition to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban claims to be tolerant, but they are one of the worst oppressors of Christians and have a long track record of brutal crimes against vulnerable minorities. Despite hopes to the contrary, the world has seen a collapse of fundamental human rights such as women's rights, religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to assemble, and others in Afghanistan.

The Taliban hopes to open the borders to international

business while simultaneously oppressing the residents of Afghanistan.

The proposition that the Taliban is, or is becoming, a tolerant, more compassionate, and legitimate government is contradictory to the way they have terrorized the people of Afghanistan. Their most egregious atrocities include the state-mandated hunting, kidnapping, torturing, and killing of former Muslims living out their faith in Christ.

Abysmal conditions created by the Taliban force families to flee the country to comparably dire circumstances in neighboring countries that treat them with similar vitriol. It is inappropriate to contend that the Taliban is anything but an authoritarian extremist regime and irresponsible to ignore the human rights violations committed over the last year.

The international community, led by the United States,

must monitor human rights in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and ensure that the regime receives due international pressure through various sanctioning authorities and international monitoring agencies. The international community must not, under any circumstance, offer diplomatic recognition of the Taliban until the Taliban guarantees human rights for all Afghans regardless of their religious disposition.

The underground church in Afghanistan needs support from the international community as targeted killings and other forms of persecution are rising. The Taliban has not reformed but maintains their extremist interpretation of Sharia law and Islam. The international community must consistently pressure the Taliban to compel behavior change within the regime's domestic policy.



PERSECUTION^{org}
INTERNATIONAL CHRISTIAN CONCERN