



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# ISSUE UPDATE: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CHALLENGES FOR JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

November 2024

Stephen Schneck  
*Chair*

Eric Ueland  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Mohamed Elsanousi

Maureen Ferguson

Susie Gelman

Vicky Hartzler

Asif Mahmood

Meir Soloveichik

Erin D. Singshinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international  
freedom of religion or  
belief, by independently  
assessing and unflinchingly  
confronting threats to this  
fundamental right.*

By Policy Analysts Michael Ardovino, Mollie Blum, Hilary Miller,  
Dylan Schexnaydre, and Jean Wu

## Religious Freedom Challenges for Jehovah's Witnesses

### Overview

Four years after USCIRF's 2020 [publication](#) on the global persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, several countries continue to prosecute and impose harsh penalties on the community for their religious beliefs and peaceful religious activities. Laws punishing so-called "extremism" and conscientious objection have resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses. Other countries employ less harsh mechanisms that prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from fully gaining legal recognition, deprive them of rights afforded to other religious groups, or impose policies prejudicial toward them. Jehovah's Witnesses are entitled to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) under international law, and states have a duty to protect and preserve this right.

This report provides an update about the current situation of Jehovah's Witnesses around the world. It provides analysis of major issues Jehovah's Witnesses face and highlights specific countries of concern based on publicly available information, including information received from the Jehovah's Witness community.

### Country Examples

#### Russia

According to Jehovah's Witness sources, Russian authorities have conducted more than 2,000 searches of Jehovah's Witness homes and opened criminal cases against more than 800 members since the Supreme Court declared Jehovah's Witnesses "extremist" in 2017. Law enforcement routinely prosecute Jehovah's Witnesses for engaging in peaceful religious activities, including discussing the Bible, participating in religious services, and collecting money for their communities. As of October 2024, over 140 Jehovah's Witnesses were either in pretrial detention, enduring forced labor, or imprisoned, while another nine remained under house arrest.

Sentences for Jehovah's Witnesses continue to increase in severity. In June 2024, a court in Khabarovsk sentenced [Nikolai Polevodov](#) to eight years and six months, [Vitaliy Zhuk](#) to eight years and four months, and [Stanislav Kim](#) to eight years and two months in prison, surpassing the record length of eight years' imprisonment for a Jehovah's Witness. Other punishments for Jehovah's Witnesses include fines and compulsory labor. In March 2024, a Teykovo court fined four Jehovah's Witnesses a collective

3,450,000 rubles (\$37,048) for their religious activities. And in January 2024, a court in Tolyatti sentenced Sona Olopova to two years of forced labor for having a religious gathering. Jehovah's Witnesses also sometimes face mistreatment while in state custody. In April 2024, several prisoners at a Tula medical correctional institute demanded that Jehovah's Witness [Rinat Kiramov](#), who is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence, disclose the names of other Jehovah's Witnesses living in Akhtubinsk. When Kiramov refused, the prisoners allegedly beat him for several days, waterboarded him, and electrocuted him with a stun gun.

Russia also persecutes Jehovah's Witnesses in the territories of Ukraine it illegally occupies. Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk have banned Jehovah's Witnesses and declared their religious materials "extremist." In Crimea, Russian de facto authorities imprison Jehovah's Witnesses on the basis of Russia's "extremism" designation. As of October 2024, there were 11 Crimean Jehovah's Witnesses serving prison sentences of six years or more. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian military forces have damaged, destroyed, or looted at least 110 Kingdom Halls, according to the Institute for Religious Freedom, a Ukrainian nongovernmental organization. Russian forces have also raided Jehovah's Witness houses of worship on the frontlines of the war. Russian officials and state propaganda—as part of their disinformation campaigns against Ukrainian religious minorities—falsely accuse Ukrainian Jehovah's Witnesses of being neo-Nazis, supporting Ukraine's national intelligence service, and providing financial support to the Ukrainian military.

### Eritrea

The Eritrean government continues to detain Jehovah's Witnesses indefinitely without charge or trial because of their religious activities, including conscientious objection. In 1994, after the Jehovah's Witness community refused to participate in Eritrea's 1993 independence referendum and mandatory military service, authorities stripped members of the community of their citizenship and have subsequently imprisoned more than 270 members over the last 30 years. While the government did release over 30 Jehovah's Witnesses following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and has sporadically released a few yearly for medical reasons, it continues to arrest members en masse, as demonstrated in September when police raided a private residence during worship and detained more than 20 Jehovah's Witnesses. Three men over 80 years old and a pregnant woman from the group are reportedly now in Mai Serwa Prison. As of October 2024, 63 Jehovah's Witnesses remain imprisoned.

Several Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for nearly two decades. Others are elderly, raising serious concerns about their health and wellbeing. Conditions for prisoners are poor. Many live in dilapidated prison facilities and suffer physical and sexual violence as well as medical neglect. These prisoners include [Teshfazion Gebremichael](#), who is now in his early 80s. Authorities arrested Gebremichael in July 2011. [Yoab Tekle](#) and [Kdisti Tesfamichael](#), a husband and wife in their early 70s, have remained in state custody since November 2022, reportedly over their refusal to contribute money for political purposes. Authorities previously imprisoned Tekle from July 2009 to December 2020 prior to his rearrest.

### Tajikistan

The government of Tajikistan criminalizes the activity of Jehovah's Witnesses by denying the group registration. In 2007, the government arbitrarily removed the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Dushanbe, claiming that the group violated the country's religion law due to its members' conscientious objection to military service and the fact that members believe that their religion is the true one and discuss those beliefs with others. The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Committee issued a decision in 2022 calling on Tajikistan to reverse the 2007 ruling and reconsider Jehovah's Witnesses' registration application in Dushanbe. However, by 2023, the Supreme Court of Tajikistan upheld the registration removal and effective ban on Jehovah's Witnesses' religious activity. That same year, Jehovah's Witnesses became aware of a 2021 decision made during a closed hearing of the Supreme Court to declare the group an "extremist organization." By May 2024, the official website of the Supreme Court had included Jehovah's Witnesses on its public list of "extremist organizations."

As of October 2024, no Jehovah's Witnesses remain imprisoned in Tajikistan. In May 2023, authorities released [Shamil Khakimov](#), the last known Jehovah's Witness in custody. Khakimov spent more than four years in prison for engaging in religious activities and was routinely denied proper medical care for a variety of health issues. Jehovah's Witnesses nevertheless face harassment from authorities and pressure to divulge information about fellow believers. In June 2023, authorities [detained](#) and questioned two Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing and fined them for "inciting religious hatred."

### Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan, Jehovah's Witnesses have never been granted registration and thus do not have the legal recognition necessary to practice their religion. Authorities

have created a climate of fear by harassing and detaining Jehovah's Witnesses to prevent them from sharing their faith and attending religious meetings. In October 2023, authorities detained a Jehovah's Witness from Turkmenabad for 10 days for sharing his beliefs. While detained, authorities allegedly threatened him with a prison sentence, took his phone, filmed him without consent, and prevented him from using the restroom. In January 2024, police in Sakar raided a Jehovah's Witness home, detaining five people and interrogating them for eight hours.

Jehovah's Witnesses have also faced issues over their conscientious objection to serve in the military. Military service is required under the law, but Turkmenistan does not offer an alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. In 2021, then Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov pardoned the final remaining 16 Jehovah's Witnesses *imprisoned* for conscientious objection, and since then there have been no reports of authorities imprisoning Jehovah's Witnesses for their religious belief. At the same time, Jehovah's Witnesses still do not have legal protections to conscientious objection under the law and remain vulnerable to arrest.

### **Uzbekistan**

In Uzbekistan, Jehovah's Witnesses only have registration in Chirchik and struggle to obtain registration in other regions throughout the country, including in the capital, Tashkent. For decades, Jehovah's Witnesses have sought registration in cities across Uzbekistan, with authorities repeatedly rejecting their applications. Police also regularly detain and interrogate Jehovah's Witnesses for their missionary activities. In January 2024, Tashkent police detained and questioned two Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their beliefs. By February, a court fined both women under the Administrative Code article penalizing proselytization and missionary activity. In March 2024, police detained two Jehovah's Witnesses, also in Tashkent, for sharing their beliefs with a store clerk. Police held the women in custody for more than seven hours to interrogate them and force them to write explanatory notes. Since 2006, authorities have prohibited Jehovah's Witnesses from importing religious literature into the country.

### **Kazakhstan**

Jehovah's Witnesses are legally registered in Kazakhstan but still face legal issues over their missionary activities. In 2023, authorities charged over 20 Jehovah's Witnesses under Administrative Code articles, penalizing missionary activity without state registration and harassment in public places. While courts acquitted some Jehovah's Witnesses in those cases, authorities fined or

formally warned others. In March 2024, police in Almaty detained two Jehovah's Witnesses for sharing their beliefs and forced them to write statements after a local man reported their activity. In addition, security services have at times interrupted religious services, claiming such actions were in response to the complaints of neighbors. In April 2024, Karaoi Village police disrupted a religious meeting in a private home and inspected registration documents and license plates of worshippers, allegedly due to a complaint from a local.

While the Kazakh government in the past has granted Jehovah's Witnesses exemptions to mandatory military service, some Jehovah's Witnesses still encounter issues with local conscription offices. In November 2023, a military court ruled that the Rudny conscription office had illegally forced Jehovah's Witness *Daniil Smal* into military service, ordering his release after nearly six months in custody. In 2024, authorities detained 13 Jehovah's Witnesses in enlistment offices, sometimes for several days, despite their conscientious objection.

### **Kyrgyzstan**

While Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan have had registration at the national level since 1998, many local communities have struggled to gain registration. Since 2010, local officials from the southern regions of Jalal-Abad, Naryn, Batken, and Osh have denied Jehovah's Witnesses registration, despite objections from the UN Human Rights Committee. Kyrgyz authorities have also disrupted religious meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses. In August 2024, authorities raided a Jehovah's Witness meeting in Kyzyl-Kyia, seizing religious literature and a laptop and detaining a total of 18 people. That same month, police in Naryn detained 10 Jehovah's Witnesses and took them to the police station for interrogation, where officials demanded information about fellow believers on threat of short-term imprisonment. Officials continue to deny Jehovah's Witnesses permission to import certain religious materials.

### **Azerbaijan**

The situation for Jehovah's Witnesses in Azerbaijan has improved since authorities registered the Jehovah's Witness community of Baku in 2018. Increased engagement with the official State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) has helped resolve issues with the police. However, Jehovah's Witnesses have been unable to register their activities outside of the capital due to the onerous registration requirements of Azerbaijan's 2009 religion law, putting them at risk of prosecution if caught engaging in religious activities. Azerbaijan still has not created an alternative to

mandatory military service, despite a provision in the constitution allowing for alternative civilian service. While the government has for the most part stopped pursuing such criminal prosecutions, some conscription offices continue to call up Jehovah's Witnesses for military service. Some Jehovah's Witnesses have also received travel bans that prevent them from leaving the country, which many believe represents retaliation for their conscientious objection.

### Egypt

Although the government designates Jehovah's Witnesses as "Christian" on identity cards, a 1960 presidential decree bans all Jehovah's Witness religious activities, including holding public religious gatherings, exporting or printing worship texts, and using online religious materials. Community leaders have previously reported that Jehovah's Witnesses choose to worship privately for fear of targeting by state authorities. Others have been monitored by government security at their homes and subjected to hours-long questioning in airports without justification.

### Singapore

Singapore maintains a ban on Jehovah's Witnesses and continues to imprison members for refusing to enter mandatory military conscription. As of October 2024, eight Jehovah's Witnesses remained in prison for conscientious objection, including three who are serving a second sentence for maintaining their stance even after completing their first prison term. Prison authorities [refuse](#) to grant imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses access to chaplains since they lack official registration. The government also bans Jehovah's Witness written materials on the grounds that the group's religious belief in neither performing military service nor pledging allegiance to the state is detrimental to public welfare and order.

### Japan

The Japanese government has increasingly scrutinized religious minorities following the July 2022 assassination of Shinzo Abe, Japan's former prime minister. Authorities have investigated the role some religious groups' activities may have played in motivating his murder, and the government has sought to address these concerns through instituting new policies on religious groups broadly. However, some of these policies and the public scrutiny that erupted as a result have negatively impacted Jehovah's Witnesses and risk criminalizing their peaceful religious activities and jeopardizing their safety.

In December 2022, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) released a set of Questions and

Answers (Q&A) guidelines that sought to prevent child abuse that "may occur with the background of religious beliefs, etc." While the Q&A guidelines seek to help identify child abuse within a religious context, the guidelines frequently use vague language, fail to define key terms, and lower the threshold for child abuse in a religious context as opposed to nonreligious ones. For example, one guideline states that "forcing a child to participate in religious activities, etc., during hours that may interfere with the child's schooling or daily life constitutes neglect." However, the same guideline does not define the term "forcing" nor does it explain how religious activities differ from nonreligious extracurricular activities, like music lessons or sports practice, that may also interfere with schooling.

Although the guidelines do not specifically mention Jehovah's Witnesses, the community has faced increased violence, threats of violence, and other forms of societal discrimination. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported a 638 percent increase in hate incidents in 2023, including multiple threats of mass murder, since the Q&A guidelines' release. Jehovah's Witnesses have also reported discrimination at work, loss of employment, harassment at school, and violent attacks.

In April 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and three other special rapporteurs sent a joint [letter](#) to the government of Japan to raise their concerns about the Q&A guidelines and a subsequent increase in hate crimes and hate speech against Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities. They called on the government to review and reconsider certain key aspects of the guidelines to ensure their compliance with Japan's international human rights law obligations.

### South Korea

Jehovah's Witnesses in South Korea have long faced challenges due to their conscientious objection to the country's compulsory military service. Although the government passed a law and established an alternative civilian service in 2019, human rights groups have criticized the new system as punitive. Under the new law, conscientious objectors must work and live in a prison or other correctional facilities for 36 months—twice as long as the required 18 months of military service. While more than a thousand Jehovah's Witnesses have joined the new alternative service program, some have refused to participate because of its severity and length. As of September 2024, authorities were reportedly prosecuting or investigating nine Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to enlist in the military or the alternative civilian service program, with one Jehovah's Witness serving an 18-month prison sentence.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Jehovah's Witnesses who previously served prison time for conscientious objection have encountered difficulties gaining employment and other services because of their criminal records tied to their conscientious objection, which the government has not expunged.

### Conclusion

Jehovah's Witnesses continue to face widespread persecution and discriminatory treatment on the basis of their religion and affiliated activities across the world. States have an obligation under international law to protect and preserve the freedom of religion or belief for Jehovah's Witnesses, including the right to conscientious objection.

### Professional Staff

---

**Michael Ardovino**

*Policy Analyst*

**Susan Bishai**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Mollie Blum**

*Policy Analyst*

**Guillermo Cantor**

*Director of Research and Policy*

**Elizabeth K. Cassidy**

*Senior Strategic Advisor*

**Mingzhi Chen**

*Supervisory Policy Advisor*

**Sema Hasan**

*Senior Policy Analyst*

**Thomas Kraemer**

*Chief Administrative Officer*

**Veronica McCarthy**

*Public Affairs Specialist*

**Hilary Miller**

*Policy Analyst*

**Nora Morton**

*Operations Specialist*

**Dylan Schexnaydre**

*Policy Analyst*

**Katherine Todd**

*Policy Analyst*

**Scott Weiner**

*Supervisory Policy Analyst*

**Luke Wilson**

*International Legal Specialist*

**Kurt Werthmuller**

*Deputy Director of Research and Policy*

**Nathan Wineinger**

*Chief of Public Affairs*

**Jean Wu**

*Policy Analyst*

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.