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## **24 hours in airport, travel ban for Korans**

***Security personnel at Ashgabad Airport detained a woman working in Turkey bringing in Arabic Korans as gifts for relatives, questioning her for 24 hours. She was later banned from leaving Turkmenistan. Police are again forcibly shaving men under 40 with beards. Officers forced one victim to drink alcohol.***

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (05.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GN7HYe> - In late December 2018, security personnel at the airport in the capital Ashgabat [Ashgabat] detained a local woman returning from work in Turkey because she had brought back copies of the Koran. Officers seized the Korans. She was held for 24 hours in the airport before being allowed to travel on to her home town. When she tried to return to Turkey in January, security personnel at the airport stopped her from leaving.

Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service, which reported on the detention, literature seizure and exit denial on 23 January, did not identify the Lebap Region resident for fear of state reprisals.

An official of the Migration Service in Ashgabat refused to discuss such exit bans with Forum 18. Forum 18 was unable to reach other officials (see below).

Meanwhile, police have stepped up their campaign to stop men under the age of 40 from wearing beards. They have forcibly shaved some and pressured others to shave. Police appear to believe that young men who wear beards encourage Muslims to become extreme (see below).

In one case in Lebap Region, officers forced a young man they had detained not only to shave but to drink alcohol (see below).

In recent years, police have intermittently detained young men with beards and forcibly shaved them. Sometimes this is accompanied by forced drinking of alcohol and eating of pork, both unacceptable for devout Muslims (see below).

The authorities impose tight restrictions over all exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Worship and religious meetings without state permission are illegal, officials refuse state registration to many religious communities (including Muslim communities outside the state-backed Muslim Board), all religious literature is subject to state censorship, and individuals are jailed to punish them for exercising freedom of religion or belief outside state controls.

### ***No answers***

Forum 18 again tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament, to find out why individuals are stopped at Ashgabat Airport because they have religious literature,

why they are banned from leaving Turkmenistan, why young men under 40 are not allowed to choose to have a beard and why police forcibly shave them and force some to drink alcohol.

An official told Forum 18 on 5 February that Gurbannazarova was not in the office. The official said Maysa Muradova, head of the department, was in a meeting and asked Forum 18 to call back in 15 minutes. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

Forum 18 also again tried to call Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee. His phone went unanswered on 5 February.

Similarly unanswered on 5 February was the phone of Gurbanberdy Nursakhatov, a Deputy Chair of the government's Commission for Work with Religious Organisations and Expert Analysis of Resources Containing Religious Information, Published and Printed Production.

### ***Airport detention for Arabic Korans***

Security personnel at Ashgabad's international airport found several copies of the Koran in Arabic in the luggage of a Turkmen woman returning from Turkey in late December 2018. The woman, who works legally in Turkey, had returned to visit relatives in the eastern Lebap Region. She had brought the Korans as gifts, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service noted. Officers seized the Korans and souvenirs she had with Arabic inscriptions.

A uniformed police officer and two men in civilian clothes called her over after she had passed through passport control and took her away for questioning. Their questions mainly focused on why she was bringing the Korans into the country.

"The police officer asked no questions, but the men in civilian clothes asked questions one after the other," the woman told Radio Free Europe, "and when necessary they were ready to put moral pressure on me." She said the two men shouted at her: "Aren't you ashamed bringing such books with you, you're a woman! So you're trying to bring in religious/political propaganda!"

Other victims who have been held because they had religious literature and witnesses have told Radio Free Europe that officers behave crudely and in a prejudiced way.

The officers also questioned the way the woman was dressed and why she had not dyed her hair.

The officers then demanded that the woman read out a passage from the Koran for them, apparently to find out if she knew how to read the text. She refused to read from it without ritually washing herself. The officers forced her to read from the Koran. The following morning, they brought an imam from an Ashgabad mosque who listened to her reading and confirmed her correct pronunciation and understanding of the Arabic.

Only after she had been held in the airport for 24 hours did the officers allow the woman to leave. Once she had reached her relatives in Lebap Region, local security officers also questioned her.

In January, after her holiday with relatives, the woman travelled back to Ashgabad airport for the return flight to Turkey. However, airport officials refused to allow her to board her flight as they said she had been banned from leaving Turkmenistan.

The official who answered the phone at the Migration Service in Ashgabad on 5 February refused to explain why individuals are banned from leaving the country to punish them

for exercising freedom of religion or belief. "Ask the embassy," he kept repeating, even though Forum 18 was asking about Turkmen citizens denied permission to leave Turkmenistan. He then put the phone down.

The authorities have long obstructed active religious believers from leaving the country.

### ***Enforced beard shaving, enforced alcohol drinking***

Police in Ashgabad and Lebap Region have again begun to enforce an unwritten ban on men under 40 wearing beards, two emigre Turkmen news websites noted separately. It appears Police regard young men with a beard as being radical Muslims and fear their influence on society could spread.

On 24 January, police detained a young man on the street in Ashgabad's 6th microdistrict because he had not shaved, Alternative Turkmenistan News noted on 25 January. Officers took him to the local police station, handed him a razor and forced him to shave.

Several other young men were detained for the same reason on the central Ashgabad street where the headquarters of the ordinary police and Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police are located. "My colleague spent two days there," an Ashgabad resident told Alternative Turkmenistan News. "When he came to work his boss asked him: So, you managed to get out? He replied that friends had helped him." The young man added that the police headquarters was "packed with bearded men".

Police in Lebap Region held for several days a young man with a beard regarded locally as in "Muslim" style (with the moustache shaved off), a relative told Alternative Turkmenistan News. Officers also forced the young man to drink alcohol.

Police often accompany the detention of young men with beards with bribe-seeking, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights noted. Officers demand 100 Manats (several days' average wages) from such young men, otherwise they hand out a fine. Some men may have been beaten and humiliated in detention, it added.

Traffic police are also stopping drivers with beards, one young man who had been stopped told the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights. After checking his driving licence to confirm that he was under 40, the officer asked why he had a beard as it is "not allowed". The young man responded that he had never heard nor read that it was banned. The officer responded that ignorance of the law is no defence and took him to the police station.

Once there, the officer again told him that men can only grow beards when they reach the age of 40. He forced him to go to the barbers' shop next door to be shaved. "Until your beard is shaved off, you won't get your driving licence back," the duty officer told him. After being shaved, officers gave the young man his driving licence back and released him.

Employers, both state and private, do not allow men of any age to have beards, the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights added.

In 2014, Police in Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] detained one former member of a Muslim group led by Bahram Saparov even though he had – apparently out of fear - stopped praying publicly following the mass arrests of group members, including Saparov, the previous year. Officers shaved off his beard and forced him to eat pork and drink alcohol, both unacceptable for Muslims.

Police in the northern Dashoguz Region detained young men with beards in summer 2016 and forced them to shave, Radio Free Europe's Turkmen Service reported at the time. Police forced one of those detained to drink alcohol and eat pork.

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## **New year, new jailed conscientious objector**

***With the 7 January one-year jailing of 18-year-old Azamatjan Narkulyev, 12 conscientious objectors – all Jehovah's Witnesses – are now jailed for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. No officials would comment on why, in defiance of United Nations calls, Turkmenistan jails these young men.***

By Felix Corley

Forum 18 (22.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2MA6Km8> - On 7 January, a court in the eastern Lebap Region handed 18-year-old Azamatjan Narkulyev a one-year jail term for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. He is one of 12 conscientious objectors – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – known to be jailed. All had told Conscription Offices they were ready to conduct an alternative, civilian service, but the authorities do not offer this.

The new jailing came weeks after two other conscientious objectors were jailed in late 2018. A court handed Gurbangylych Muhammetgulyyev a one-year prison term in the south-eastern city of Mary in November. A court handed Eziz Atabayev a two-year prison term in the northern city of Dashoguz in December (see below).

The jailing of Muhammetgulyyev and Atabayev brought to twelve the number of conscientious objectors known to have been jailed in Turkmenistan in 2018 for refusing compulsory military service on grounds of conscience. Of these, only one - Arslan Begenchov – has completed his prison term and been freed. Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014 (see below).

Two of the current conscientious objector prisoners of conscience are serving two-year jail terms and the other ten a one-year sentence (see list at foot of article).

Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concern that conscription offices are now calling back some young men earlier exempted from military service on grounds of health. Protestants have expressed concern that in autumn 2018 the conscription office in Dashoguz summoned two young men who had already completed military service. There officials insulted them because of their faith (see below).

On 20 September 2018, a Turkmen diplomat again rejected to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva a call in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the country to introduce a civilian alternative to compulsory military service. Turkmenistan also rejected a UPR call for independent visits to prisons, including those where Muslim and Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are being held (see below).

No officials would comment on why Turkmenistan jails those who cannot perform military service on grounds of conscience (see below).

***Many prisoners of conscience***

The twelve jailed conscientious objectors are among the many people Turkmenistan has jailed for exercising freedom of religion or belief.

Five Muslims who met to study the works of theologian Said Nursi failed to overturn their 12-year jail terms at Turkmenistan's Supreme Court in July 2018. Four of the five are in the top-security prison at Ovadan-Depe, where prisoners have suffered torture and death from abuse or neglect.

Dozens of Muslims from in and around the eastern city of Turkmenabad [Turkmenabat] were imprisoned in 2013 and after to punish them for their involvement in a Muslim study group. Most or all the prisoners are believed to be held in Ovadan-Depe. Relatives often have no information as to whether they are still alive. Three of the group are known to have died in prison.

Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov is serving a four-year jail term to punish him for hosting a religious meeting (see below).

### ***Government rejects alternative service call at UN***

During the review of Turkmenistan by the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva in May 2018, other governments presented 191 recommendations of how the country could improve its human rights record (A /HRC/39/3).

Argentina recommended: "Adopt the necessary measures in order to recognize the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service." However, this was among the 19 recommendations the Turkmen government rejected.

The Turkmen government rejected the call to introduce an alternative to compulsory military service in its written response to the UPR (A/HRC/39/3/Add.1), made public by the UN on 13 September 2018. It repeated its rejection at a meeting of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 20 September 2018.

"We refer to Article 58 of the Constitution of Turkmenistan which provides that the protection of Turkmenistan is a sacred duty of every citizen," Ahmetyar Kulov, First Secretary at Turkmenistan's Permanent Mission to the UN in Geneva, told the meeting. "Under the Constitution, military service is compulsory for all male citizens."

Another UPR recommendation given in May 2018 was: "Provide those who are imprisoned, including in the Ovadan-Depe and Seydi prisons, access to independent inspectors and other visitors and permit those visitors to conduct private and fully confidential interviews with prisoners, consistent with the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners."

The Turkmenistan government's written response also rejected this recommendation, with no explanation.

Many Muslim prisoners of conscience are held at Ovadan-Depe prison (see above), while eleven jailed Jehovah's Witness prisoners of conscience are being held at Seydi Labour Camp (see below).

### ***No answers***

Forum 18 again tried to call the Human Rights Ombudsperson Yazdursun Gurbannazarova, who was named by the government-appointed parliament, to find out why young men are being jailed for refusing military service on grounds of conscience

and why Turkmenistan rejected the call in the UPR to introduce an alternative to military service.

An official told Forum 18 on 22 January that Gurbannazarova was on a work trip until 28 January. The official referred Forum 18 to Maysa Muradova, head of the department, asking it to call back in one hour. All subsequent calls went unanswered.

Forum 18 also again tried to call Yusupguly Eshshayev, Chair of the Mejlis (Parliament) Human Rights Committee, to find out if the authorities will ever introduce a law to allow those with conscientious objections to compulsory military service to perform an alternative civilian service. The man who answered his phone on 22 January hung up as soon as Forum 18 asked if it was Eshshayev. Subsequent calls went unanswered.

### ***No conscientious objection, no alternative service***

In defiance of repeated calls by the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Turkmenistan offers no alternative to its compulsory military service. Military service for men between the ages of 18 and 27 is generally two years. Call-up is decreed each spring and autumn.

Young men who refuse military service on grounds of conscience face prosecution under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1. This punishes refusal to serve in the armed forces in peacetime with a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or two years' corrective labour.

From 2014, courts punished conscientious objectors with corrective labour or suspended prison terms, rather than imprisonment. However, jailings resumed with the two prison terms in January 2018.

### ***One-year jail term***

On his call-up in autumn 2018, Azamatjan Narkulyev (born 9 November 2000), a Jehovah's Witness from the city of Seydi in Lebap Region, told officials that he was unable to perform military service on grounds of conscience. He offered to perform an alternative, civilian service.

Prosecutors brought a case against Narkulyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"). They handed his case to Danew District Court. At his trial on 7 January 2019, the Judge sentenced him to one year's ordinary regime labour camp, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The telephone went unanswered at Lebap Regional Court on 22 January, so Forum 18 was unable to find out if Narkulyev had appealed against his conviction.

Narkulyev is currently being held in the Temporary Detention Prison (LB-D/9) in the city of Turkmenabad. He is likely to be sent to serve his sentence at the labour camp in Seydi, where other jailed conscientious objectors are being held.

### ***Two further 2018 sentences***

Two more young men were jailed in late 2018 for refusing compulsory military service, despite offering to perform an alternative, civilian service.

Gurbangylych Dovletovich Muhammetgulyyev (born 15 March 2000) is a Jehovah's Witness from the city of Mary who was called up in the autumn 2018 conscription round. On 17 and 23 October 2018 he failed to arrive at the Mary Regional Conscription Office to

begin his military service, despite having been approved for service by a medical commission, according to the subsequent court verdict.

Prosecutors brought a case against Muhammetgulyyev under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service") and he had to sign a pledge not to leave his home town without prosecutors' permission. Prosecutor B. Myradov then handed the case to Mary City Court.

On 28 November 2018, Judge Gulher Aminova found Muhammetgulyyev guilty. She sentenced him to one year's imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp, according to the verdict seen by Forum 18. He was arrested in the court room after the verdict was handed down, with his sentence to run from that date.

The court rejected Muhammetgulyyev's insistence that his faith bans taking up arms and that he "could not go against the word of Jehovah", the verdict records. His parents and sister also spoke up for him in court.

Curiously, the verdict notes that Muhammetgulyyev is not a member of a political party.

Both Judge Aminova and her assistant refused to discuss the case with Forum 18 on 22 January 2019. Mary Regional Court told Forum 18 the same day that Muhammetgulyyev had not appealed against the sentence.

Following his sentence, the authorities transferred Muhammetgulyyev to the labour camp in Seydi.

Eziz Atabayev (born 15 March 1998) is a Jehovah's Witness from the city of Dashoguz. On 19 December 2018, Judge Sh. Gummanov of Dashoguz City Court found him guilty under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"). He sentenced him to two years' imprisonment in ordinary regime labour camp.

On 15 January 2019, Atabayev's father learned that Dashoguz Regional Court had rejected his son's appeal, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18. Dashoguz Regional Court refused to give Forum 18 any information by phone on 22 January.

Atabayev is currently being held in the Temporary Detention Prison (DZ-D/7) in Dashoguz Region. However, the authorities are expected to transfer him soon to the labour camp in Seydi.

### ***Freed on completing sentence***

On 17 December 2018 conscientious objector Arslan Begenchovich Begenchov (born 15 May 1999) was released from Seydi Labour Camp after completing his full term of imprisonment, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The authorities arrested Begenchov on 2 January 2018 in his home region of Lebap in eastern Turkmenistan after he refused to perform compulsory military service on grounds of religious conscience. Charjew District Court sentenced him to one year's imprisonment on 17 January 2018. Lebap Regional Court rejected his appeal on 13 February 2018.

Begenchov served eleven and a half months in prison, as each day of pre-trial detention counts as the equivalent of two days' imprisonment.

Begenchov was the first conscientious objector to be sentenced to prison since 2014.

### ***Ten jailed conscientious objectors in one labour camp***

Narkulyev and Atabayev, the two conscientious objectors jailed in December 2018 and January 2019, are likely to be sent to serve their sentences at the ordinary regime labour camp in the desert near Seydi, in Lebap Region. (The prison now seems to use the designation LB-E/12, not LB-K/12.) Many other prisoners of conscience jailed to punish them for exercising the right to freedom of religion or belief have been held in the camp.

The ten jailed conscientious objectors sentenced between January and November 2018 - Kerven Kakabayev, Mekan Annayev, Ikhlosbek Rozmetov, Veniamin Genjiyev, Maksat Jumadurdiyev, Isa Sayayev, Ruslan Artykmuradov, Sokhbet Agamyradov, Serdar Atayev, and Gurbangylych Muhammetgulyyev – are all serving their sentences at the Seydi camp.

Also held at Seydi Labour Camp is fellow Jehovah's Witness Bahram Hemdemov. He was arrested during a March 2015 raid on his home, after which he was tortured. He is serving a four year prison term from 19 May 2015 on charges of allegedly inciting religious hatred, which he strongly denies, but his real "crime" seems to have been hosting a meeting for worship.

### ***No amnesty***

None of these prisoners of conscience have been included in prisoner amnesties periodically approved by the president.

On 24 September 2018, ahead of the presidential amnesty, officials at Seydi Labour Camp told Kakabayev, Annayev, and Genjiyev that they would be granted amnesty and released. Even though their names were on the publicly announced list of prisoners to be amnestied, the three men were not among the 1,722 prisoners released the following day, Jehovah's Witnesses told Forum 18.

The address of the Seydi Labour Camp is:

746222 Lebap velayat  
Seydi  
uchr. LB-E/12  
Turkmenistan

### ***Conscription offices reopening cases?***

Jehovah's Witnesses expressed concern that Conscription Offices are now calling back some young men earlier exempted from military service on grounds of health, insisting that they are medically fit to serve. Jehovah's Witnesses fear those now re-classified as fit could be called up and face possible imprisonment.

Protestants have expressed concern that in autumn 2018 the Conscription Office in Dashoguz summoned two young men who had already completed military service. There officials complained that the young men "read the Book" (a reference to the Bible) and insulted them because of their faith, fellow Protestants told Forum 18.

### ***List of known jailed conscientious objectors***

Twelve conscientious objectors to compulsory military service (listed below) – all of them Jehovah's Witnesses – are known to be serving prison sentences under Criminal Code Article 219, Part 1 ("Rejecting call-up to military service"):

- 1) Kerven Arslanovich Kakabayev; born 9 September 1996; sentenced 29 January 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal denied due to missed appeal deadline 27 June 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 2) Mekan Orazdurdiyevich Annayev; born 22 June 1999; sentenced 26 June 2018 Turkmenbashi City Court; no appeal to Balkan Region Court; two year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 3) Ikhlosbek Valijon oglu Rozmetov; born 26 November 1997; sentenced 11 July 2018 Gurbansoltan eje District Court; appeal rejected 23 July 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 4) Veniamin Muslimovich Genjiyev; born 12 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 5) Maksat Jumadurdiyevich Jumadurdiyev; born 15 May 2000; sentenced 17 July 2018 Danew District Court; no appeal to Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 6) Isa Muslimovich Sayayev; born 14 May 1994; sentenced 9 August 2018 Koneurgench City Court; appeal rejected 11 September 2018 Dashoguz Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 7) Ruslan Khadynyaz oglu Artykmuradov; born 24 May 2000; sentenced 13 August 2018 Sayat District Court; appeal rejected 11 September 2018 Lebap Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 8) Sokhbet Rejepmyradovich Agamyradov; born 4 January 2000; sentenced 27 August 2018 Mary City Court; appeal lodged to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 9) Serdar Annamyradovich Atayev; born 9 June 2000; sentenced 28 August 2018 Mary City Court; appeal lodged to Mary Regional Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 10) Gurbangylych Dovletovich Muhammetgulyyev; born 15 March 2000; sentenced 28 November 2018 Mary City Court; no appeal; one year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 11) Eziz Atabayev; born 15 March 1998; sentenced 19 December 2018 Dashoguz City Court; appeal rejected January 2019 Dashoguz Regional Court; two year ordinary regime labour camp.
- 12) Azamatjan Narkulyev; born 9 November 2000; sentenced 7 January 2019 Danew District Court; one year ordinary regime labour camp.