

Said Nursi Followers (Muslims)

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Said Nursi was a Turkish religious scholar, opinion leader and activist concerned with the acute problems of society. Throughout his life, he attempted to reconcile religion, modernity and politics. His books inspired a faith movement that played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey throughout much of the 20th century and now has several millions of followers worldwide, including in Russia and other post-Soviet countries with a Muslim majority.

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in Nurs, a small village in Eastern Anatolia, Turkey, in the 1870s. His parents were pious peasants who had been in close contact with local Sufi leaders. He received an unconventional educational training.

In the 1890s, the governor of the Turkish province of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, gave him the opportunity to continue his studies and meet regional governors, bureaucrats and politicians who were eager to modernise the Ottoman Empire. Through these contacts, Nursi developed an interest in social, economic and political issues and became familiar with modern ideologies that were more critical of a religious worldview. He studied modern sciences and philosophy, through which he became more cognisant of positivism and materialism. He realised that modern scepticism arising from Western scientific discoveries and technical developments was rapidly prevailing within the Ottoman elite and was alienating people from religion. He disapproved of dichotomies such as ‘reason versus revelation’ and ‘science versus spirituality’.

Teachings

Said Nursi's educational and political commitments

A fierce critic of both the religious ideology of *medrese*, which ignores scientific achievements, and the modernist educational system's exclusion of religion, he conceptualised a new and holistic educational model. His approach attempted to harmonise various opposing views by jointly teaching religious studies and modern sciences under the same roof.

Despite the suspicions of Sultan Abdülhamid II about his teachings, Nursi managed to get the attention of the intellectual elite in a short time. Because of his writings urging reform and his critique of the imperial regime, he was arrested, briefly imprisoned and then sent to a mental institution. He was later released by a medical report clearing him of any mental health concerns, although he remained under strict surveillance by authorities.

When the Second Constitutional Rule¹ was declared in July 1908, Nursi delivered fervent public speeches and published articles supporting the new constitutional regime. In his opinion, real freedom could only flourish if the regime followed the ordinances and moral conduct outlined by divine revelation. If freedom is abused, he maintained, it would be lost and end up in despotism.

Frustrated by his political experience in Istanbul, Nursi decided to go back to his native Anatolia in 1910. There he published a book on the principles of contemporary Quranic exegesis. In his public discussions he addressed regional issues such as ignorance, fanaticism and the need for good relations with Armenians.

First World War

With approval from the central government, Nursi became the leader of a militia force during World War I. The group was mainly comprised of his students from his former *medrese* in Van. From 1914 to 1916, he fought in the Special Organisation of the Ottoman Empire² against the Russian army. He was captured

¹ The Second Constitutional Era of the Ottoman Empire was established shortly after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution which forced Sultan Abdul Hamid II to restore the constitutional monarchy by the revival of the Ottoman Parliament and the restoration of the Constitution of 1876.

² Enver Pasha assumed the primary role in the direction of the Special Organisation. Kemal Ataturk was one of its notable members. Most of its 30,000 members were drawn from trained specialists such as doctors, engineers, and journalists but the organisation also employed criminals released from prison in 1913 through an amnesty. Many members of this organisation who had played a role in the Armenian Genocide also participated in the Turkish national movement. The Special Organisation, assisted by government and army officials, deported all Greek men of military age to labour brigades beginning in summer 1914 and lasting through 1916. See more information at https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/teskilat-i_mahsus_ottoman_empire.

by the Russians on 3 March 1916 and sent to a camp in Kostroma, a Russian city located at the convergence of the Volga and Kostroma rivers. He remained in captivity in Tsarist Russia for two years before he was able to take advantage of the political chaos of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 to escape.

Said Nursi and Kemalism

Nursi was welcomed back as a hero in Istanbul. He was soon nominated to be a member of the Academy for Islamic Wisdom. However, he was disappointed by the lack of success in his political and social involvement thus far and was also troubled by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, decline of Muslim communities and occupation of Istanbul by British forces in March 1920. He issued defying statements against this occupation and supported the Ankara-based independence movement. When the Turks recovered their sovereignty in 1922, they abolished the Sultanate.

Nursi's vision was of a new political entity based on the Quran and promoting religious understanding. However, the new governing body led by Mustafa Kemal had a very different agenda: nationalism and anti-religious secularism. The Caliphate was abolished in 1924, and over the next decade traces of religious influence in the public sphere were dismantled. All *medrese* establishments and Sufi brotherhoods were outlawed, *shariah* courts were replaced by civil courts, tombs of saints were closed, Arabic was banned and replaced by Latin, and the Arabic call to prayer was forbidden. This was the beginning of Nursi's split from Kemalist ideology.

Alarmed by the growing popularity of his teachings, which had spread even among the intellectuals and the military officers, the government repeatedly arrested Nursi for allegedly: exploiting religion for political ends, forming a clandestine political organisation, giving instruction in Sufism and opposing secular republican reforms. He was constantly harassed, placed under strict surveillance and sentenced to prison terms and internal exile. In 1956, he was cleared of all charges, although the authorities continued their campaign against him for many years afterwards.

From the Democrat Party rule to the junta regime

In May 1950, the Democrat Party won Turkey's first free multi-party elections with an absolute majority in the Parliament. The new party supported more liberal and democratic governance, abolished the ban on Arabic and declared a general amnesty from which Nursi benefitted.

The government supported a religion-friendly secularism and aimed to firmly fight against Communism; policies which aligned with Nursi's ideas of an alliance between Muslims and Christians to combat Communism. Nursi was in full support of the domestic and foreign policies of the new regime.

Nursi died in his 80s in Urfa, the legendary city of Abraham, on 23 March 1960. He was buried the next day with a grand funeral ceremony. However, his body was not left in peace for long. Two months later, a coup d'état took place in Turkey and the junta regime overthrew the ruling Democratic Party. On 12 July 1960, Nursi's corpse was exhumed and buried in an unknown location to prevent popular veneration.

His works

Nursi was a prolific preacher and writer. His major work is a collection of texts titled *Risale-i Nur* (translated to *Letters of Divine Light*), with is a body of Quranic commentary exceeding 6,000 pages.

Despite surveillance and persecution by multiple regimes, he continued to influence people whilst in exile. A small group of loyal followers emerged who became the forerunners of the *Nur* movement, which would eventually become the most dynamic and influential community in modern Turkey. The first portions of *Risale-i Nur* were produced in the 1950s and were copied by hand. More than 600,000 copies were made in this way and disseminated throughout Anatolia. Nursi's works have been published in Latin script by publishing houses from 1956 onwards.

There are now followers of Said Nursi worldwide. They continue to be persecuted in several Muslim majority countries, even though they do not commit or advocate for violence or terrorism.

Nursi's works are banned in Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Having possession of them or meeting to study them is a criminal activity in these countries.

RUSSIA: Reasons for the Persecution of Said Nursi Followers

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Russia to be 142.2 million. A 2015-2016 poll by the Pew Research Centre reported 71% of the

population is Orthodox Christian, while 10% identify as Muslim. There are no statistics about the number of Said Nursi Followers.³

Russia is officially a secular country with legislation about the separation of church and state but, in reality, ‘the government gives preference to Orthodox Christianity, Hanafi Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism’⁴ and especially favours the Orthodox Church.

Muslims who study Said Nursi’s teachings are particularly repressed in Russia. The first significant ruling against Said Nursi followers came in May 2007 when a Moscow court declared Russian translations of portions of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* (translated to *Letters of Divine Light*) to be extremist. This decision was based solely on linguistic textual analysis and ignored the counsel of Russia's Ombudsperson for Human Rights, Vladimir Lukin, and even Russia's most pro-Kremlin Muslim leader, Talgat Tadzhuiddin. In 2001, Tadzhuiddin declared that *Risale-i Nur* was ‘far from religious extremism and fanaticism’.⁵

Nurdzhular, which is a russification of the Turkish word for ‘Nursi followers’, was officially banned as an ‘extremist’ organisation by Russia's Supreme Court in April 2008. However, those who study the teachings of Said Nursi have consistently denied that any such organisation exists.⁶ Instead, Said Nursi followers meet in private homes to pray, eat, drink tea and study Nursi’s teachings together.

Said Nursi Followers in Prison in Russia

As Said Nursi’s works are banned, any activity related to this theologian is illegal.

Said Nursi followers behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF had documented **four cases** of Said Nursi followers in its Prisoners’ Database.⁷ Of these cases, three of them were arrested and sentenced in 2017. The third individual was arrested in 2020 and was awaiting trial. There were six people detained for membership in this movement in 2019,

³ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Russia 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/>.

⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Countries of Special Concern: Russia 2019*, 2019. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_RUSSIA_2019.pdf.

⁵ Fagan, Geraldine, “RUSSIA: ‘Extremism’ Religious Freedom Survey, July 2012,” Forum 18, July 23, 2012, accessed May 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1724.

⁶ Arnold, Victoria, “RUSSIA: ‘Extremism’ Religious Freedom Survey, September 2016,” Forum 18: September 13, 2016, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2215.

⁷ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Said Nursi followers, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

seven in 2018 and five in 2017. It is important to note that, in addition to prison terms, the Russian government has targeted followers using administrative penalties such as fines.⁸

One example of the extreme persecution that Said Nursi followers are subjected to is the case of Yevgeny Kim. After serving his prison sentence, he was stripped of his Russian citizenship in May 2019 and then placed in a detention centre for foreigners awaiting deportation. He is now stateless.⁹

Article of the Penal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under this article of the Russian Penal Code:

Article 282.2, Part 1 sanctions anyone convicted of organising for an extremist organisation or recruiting for it, while **Part 2** sanctions those participating in it. This article ‘refers to organisations already banned by the court as extremist and included on a special list published by the Ministry of Justice. Therefore, this is a formally defined crime – the very fact of participation in a banned organisation makes a person liable regardless of whether or what kind of socially dangerous consequences it entailed or did not entail’.¹⁰

Since the alleged organisation Nurdzhular has been banned as extremist, any organisation of and/or participation in any activity linked to Said Nursi’s teachings is illegal under this article. Part 1 is punishable by six to ten years in prison or a fine between 400,000 and 800,000 Roubles (approximately 5,125-10,255 EUR), and Part 2 is punishable by two to six years in prison, a fine of 300,000 to 600,000 Roubles (approximately 3,846-7,692 EUR), or one to four years of assigned labour.¹¹

International advocacy

On 28 August 2018, the **European Court of Human Rights** (ECtHR) published its ruling on a case about Russia’s ban of the works of Said Nursi: *Ibragim Ibragimov and others v. Russia*. In this landmark decision, the ECtHR found that this ban violated Article 10, which enshrines the right to freedom of expression, of the European Convention on Human Rights. Furthermore, the Court concluded that:

⁸ United States Commission on international Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020*, April 2020. https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_42720_new_0.pdf.

⁹ Ibid, page 35.

¹⁰ Arnold, Victoria, “RUSSIA: Currently Jailed, Serving Suspended Sentences, Fined – List,” Forum 18: RUSSIA, June 23, 2020, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2581.

¹¹ SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, *Anti-Extremist Policies in Russia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. Comparative Review*, April 2020. <https://www.sova-center.ru/files/books/wg-4-2020-eng.pdf>.

123. [...] the Court finds that the domestic courts did not apply standards which were in conformity with the principles embodied in Article 10 and did not provide ‘relevant and sufficient’ reasons for the interference. In particular, it is unable to discern any element in the domestic courts’ analysis which would allow it to conclude that the book in question incited violence, religious hatred or intolerance, that the context in which it had been published was marked by heightened tensions or special social or historical background in Russia or that its circulation had led or could lead to harmful consequences. The Court concludes that it was not necessary, in a democratic society, to ban the book in question.¹²

On 7 February 2019, the **UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**, Michelle Bachelet, issued this statement in a press release:

We urge the Government of Russia to revise the Federal Law on Combating Extremist Activity with a view to clarifying the vague and open-ended definition of ‘extremist activity,’ and ensuring that the definition requires an element of violence or hatred.

We also call on the authorities to drop charges against and to release all those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of religion or belief, the freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.¹³

On 18 December 2019, the **US Department of State** again placed Russia on its Special Watch List (SWL) for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom, as it had in 2018. Countries on this list are not sanctioned or otherwise penalised by the US as they would be when classified as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).¹⁴

¹² “The Prosecution of Five Residents of Bashkortostan, Convicted of Involvement in Nurjular, an Islamic Association, Has a Political Motive, Memorial Says,” Human Rights Center MEMORIAL, June 3, 2019, accessed May 2020.

https://memohrc.org/en/news_old/prosecution-five-residents-bashkortostan-convicted-involvement-nurjular-islamic-association, and,

Case of Ibragim Ibragimov and Others v. Russia, European Court of Human Rights, Third Section (Application numbers 1413 / 08 and 28621 / 11), August 28, 2018. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22fulltext%22%3A%5B%22CASE%20OF%20IBRAGIM%20IBRAGIMOV%20AND%20OTHERS%20v.%20RUSSIA%22%22%5D%2C%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22001-185293%22%5D%7D>.

¹³ “UN Rights Chief ‘Deeply Concerned’ over Jehovah’s Witness Sentencing in Russia,” United Nations, February 7, 2019, accessed May 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032151>.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Russia, 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/>.

The **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** recommended that Russia be designated as a CPC in its 2020 annual report due to its extreme repression of religious freedom.¹⁵

CASE STUDIES

Azamat Salatovich Abutalipov sentenced to four years in prison

In March 2017, the Ufa's October district court gave **Azamat Abutalipov** and four other Muslims suspended sentences for being members of the alleged extremist organisation Nurdzhular. All five defendants pled innocent and insisted that, although they did study the works of Said Nursi, no such organisation exists.

In June 2017, the Supreme Court of Bashkortostan supported the initial ruling and thus initiated their sentences.

Azamat Abutalipov was found guilty under Article 282.2 Part 1 and was sentenced to four years in prison, the longest sentencing of this group. As part of their sentencing, these five men have also been banned from working in education.¹⁶

Ilgar Vagif-ogly Aliyev sentenced to the longest known prison term for a Said Nursi follower

During an armed night-time raid in the city of Izberbash on 19 April 2017, **Ilgar Aliyev** was arrested. He was charged under Article 282.2 Part 1 for allegedly holding gatherings for adherents of Nurdzhular and for recruiting new members. He denied the charges and asserted that no such organisation exists.

On 28 May 2018, Ilgar Aliyev was sentenced to eight years imprisonment followed by two years of restrictions by the Izberbash City Court.

Ilgar Aliyev was placed on Russia's Finance Ministry Financial Monitoring Committee's List of Terrorists and Extremists. This blacklist is for individuals who are allegedly 'connected with the financing of terrorism or extremism' and enables the authorities to freeze all of their bank accounts. The authorities may grant their dependent family members access to their accounts, but only in small

¹⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Russia 2020*, 2020. <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Russia.pdf>.

¹⁶ "The Prosecution of Five Residents of Bashkortostan, Convicted of Involvement in Nurjular, an Islamic Association, Has a Political Motive, Memorial Says," Human Rights Center MEMORIAL, June 3, 2019, accessed May 2020.

https://memohrc.org/en/news_old/prosecution-five-residents-bashkortostan-convicted-involvement-nurjular-islamic-association.

and controlled amounts. After their release from prison, they remain on this list for six to eight years.¹⁷

Ibragim Abdulzhalilovich Murtazaliyev held in pre-trial detention

On 17 March 2020, **Ibragim Murtazaliyev** was questioned and detained by state security officers during a series of house searches in Izberbash. He has not been formally charged for a criminal offence, and the authorities have not released any information regarding a trial. Forum 18 reports that he had been a witness in both Ilgar Aliyev's trial and another Muslim who had previously served a prison sentence for activity in the alleged Nurdzhular group.

On 1 April 2020, Ibragim Murtazaliyev's name was added to Russia's Finance Ministry Financial Monitoring Committee's List of Terrorists and Extremists. This blacklist is for individuals who are allegedly 'connected with the financing of terrorism or extremism' and enables the authorities to freeze all of their bank accounts. The authorities may grant their dependent family members access to their accounts, but only in small and controlled amounts. After their release from prison, they remain on this list for six to eight years.

At the time of writing, Ibragim Murtazaliyev was still being held in pre-trial detention in Makhachkala.¹⁸

TURKMENISTAN: Reasons for the Persecution of Said Nursi Followers

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of Turkmenistan to be 5.4 million. According to these estimates, the country is 89% Muslim (mostly Sunni), 9% Eastern Orthodox Christian, and 2% identifying with another religion.¹⁹ There are no statistics about the number of Said Nursi followers.

Even though the Turkish theologian Said Nursi never advocated for or incited violence, called for the overthrow of the regime or favoured the establishment of a caliphate, Nursi's teachings have been labelled extremist by Turkmenistan. Said Nursi followers are often accused of being part of a group called 'Nurjylar' or 'Nurcular', but they deny the existence of such a group entirely.²⁰

¹⁷ Arnold, Victoria, "RUSSIA: Further arrest for Muslim study groups," Forum 18: RUSSIA, May 12, 2017, accessed June 2020. http://forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2279, and,

Arnold, Victoria, "RUSSIA: Longest jail term yet for religious meeting," Forum 18: RUSSIA, June 8, 2018, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2386.

¹⁸ Arnold, Victoria, "RUSSIA: Mass raids, new arrests on 'extremism' charges," Forum 18: RUSSIA, April 9, 2020, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2563.

¹⁹ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkmenistan/>.

²⁰ Corley, Arnold, "TURKMENISTAN: Last-ditch appeal against 12-year jail terms," Forum 18:

Said Nursi Followers in Prison in Turkmenistan

As Said Nursi's works are banned, any activity related to this theologian is illegal.

Said Nursi followers behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF had documented **six cases** of imprisoned Said Nursi followers in its Prisoners' Database.²¹ Of these cases, five men were arrested in 2017 and all of them were subsequently sentenced to prison terms of 12 years. The sixth case is of a man who was arrested in 2016, sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, and then 'disappeared' while serving his prison term.

As of the end of 2019, there were nine cases recorded in HRWF's database, while in 2018 there were 26 cases due to mass arrests that year.

It is important to note that, in addition to prison terms, the government has increasingly used administrative penalties, such as fines, against members of this movement.

Articles of the Criminal Code

Prisoners are typically charged under these articles of Turkmenistan's Criminal Code:

Article 174, Part 1 which is the 'conspiracy to seize power' or **Part 3** which is the 'incitement of social, ethnic or religious hatred with the use or threat of physical violence, or conducted by an organised group'.

Article 175, Part 2 which includes 'calls to violent change of the constitutional order'.

Article 177, Part 1 which is 'inciting social, ethnic or religious hatred'.

Article 275, Part 1 which is 'creating an organised criminal group' or **Part 2** which is the 'participation in the activity of criminal structures'.

Article 275.1, Part 2 which includes the 'storage or distribution of property of criminal structures and planning the financing of them'.

TURKMENISTAN, July 10, 2018, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2393.

²¹ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Said Nursi followers, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

All of these are punishable with prison terms, most of them lengthy, and some include the confiscation of property.²²

International advocacy

On 20 April 2017, the **UN Human Rights Committee** published *Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Turkmenistan* which recommended that

39. The State party should guarantee the effective exercise of freedom of religion and belief in practice and refrain from any action that may restrict it beyond the narrowly construed restrictions permitted under article 18 of the Covenant. It should bring legislation and practice into conformity with article 18 of the Covenant and investigate all acts of undue interference with the freedom of religion of religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants and Muslims.²³

For years, the **European Parliament** has failed to approve an EU-Turkmenistan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) because of human rights concerns. On 12 March 2019, the Parliament adopted a resolution that outlined a few 'short-term benchmarks' for the Turkmenistan government 'as a matter of urgency', including '(v) Overall respect for the peaceful and legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of religion or belief'.²⁴

The **US Commission on International Religious Freedom's** (USCIRF) 2020 Annual Report recommends that the US State Department designate 14 countries as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs) due to 'systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom' that their governments engage in or

²² Corley, Felix "TURKMENISTAN: Another disappeared prisoner dies of torture," Forum 18, TURKMENISTAN, September 27, 2017, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318,%20http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/List-of-the-disappeared-in-TM-prisons_Prove_Sept-2017_eng.pdf, and, Corley, Arnold, "TURKMENISTAN: Last-ditch appeal against 12-year jail terms," Forum 18: TURKMENISTAN, July 10, 2018, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2393.

²³ 'UN Treaty Body Database,' United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, accessed June 24, 2020, accessed May 2020. https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/TKM/CO/2&ang=En.

²⁴ European Parliament, Resolution on the cases of the draft Council and Commission decision on the conclusion by the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement establishing a Partnership between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and Turkmenistan, of the other part (12183/1/2011 – C8-0059/2015 – 1998/0031R(NLE)), March 12, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0146_EN.html.

tolerate. This list included nine countries that were also CPCs in December 2019. Turkmenistan is among them.²⁵

CASE STUDIES

Annamurad Atdaev sentenced to 15 years in prison and then ‘disappeared’

Annamurad Atdaev left Turkmenistan in 2008 to pursue studies in Belarus, and then moved to Egypt to study Islam at the Al-Azhar University in Cairo. There, he married a Russian citizen who had converted to Islam and they had two children.

He was required to go back to Turkmenistan to renew his passport and, when he landed in March 2016, he was immediately detained and questioned by the Ministry of State Security (MSS) secret police. Later, he was questioned by the MSS again and asked to become an informant for them on Muslims in Turkmenistan. He refused.

On 27 September 2016, Annamurad Atdaev was arrested for ‘hooliganism’ and sentenced to 15 days in prison, which was then renewed twice. After 45 days in detention, a criminal case was launched against him.

On 13 December 2016, he was sentenced to 15 years in a strict regime prison by the Ashgabad City Court. In January 2017, Annamurad Atdaev’s relatives were informed that he was being held at the top-security prison in Ovadan-Depe. However, in the summer of 2017, prison authorities at Ovadan-Depe informed his relatives that he was not there. He had ‘disappeared’.²⁶

During its May 2017 session in Geneva, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances reported that:

On 27 April 2017, the Working Group transmitted, under its urgent action procedure, a case to the Government of Turkmenistan concerning Annamurad Atdaev, allegedly disappeared in late January 2017 from the penal colony in Tedzhen, Ahal Province, Turkmenistan (A/HRC/WGEID/112/1).

²⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2020*. <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2020-annual-report>.

²⁶ The 2019 USCIRF report on Turkmenistan demonstrates that this case is not an isolated incident, as some political or religious prisoners have been ‘disappeared’ using the state prison system. See: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: Turkmenistan 2019*, 2019. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_TURKMENISTAN_2019.pdf.

Despite this advocacy at the UN level, there has been no news on Annamurad Atdaev's whereabouts to this day.²⁷

Five Said Nursi followers sentenced to 12 years imprisonment each

There were five arrests of Said Nursi followers made in 2017: first **Jumanazar Hojambetow** on 18 May, then **Begejik Begejikow** and **Ahmet Mammetdurdiyew** on 17 June, and finally **Meret Owezow** and **Myratdurdy Shamyradow** on 27 June. They were arrested for meeting in private homes to study Islam and discuss Nursi's works together. However, they were accused of organising and being members of a criminal group that has 'the aim of inciting ethnic, religious or other social hatred'.

On 15 August 2017, the Balkan Regional Court sentenced all five men to 12 years imprisonment in strict regime labour camps.

Instead of serving their time in labour camps, four of these five men were transferred to the Ovadan-Depe prison, which has much harsher conditions. The fifth man, who used to be an official, was sent to a labour camp in Akdash that is exclusively for former law-enforcement officers.

On 11 July 2018, the Supreme Court in Ashgabad rejected their appeal and upheld the initial court decision.²⁸

Conclusions

Said Nursi followers are prosecuted for religious activities that do not pose any public danger. Nursi himself never advocated for or incited violence, called for the overthrow of the regime or favoured the establishment of a caliphate. Nursi's teachings were moderate in character and appeal to Muslims wishing to reconcile Islamic teaching and modernity. Followers meet to discuss his works in private homes and do not pose any threat.

The reasons behind the campaign against Nursi's followers in Russia and Turkmenistan are unclear. Official statements in Russia point to government fears that they will form a pan-Turkic 'fifth column' seeking to realign Turkish Muslims among Russia's Turkic-speaking minorities, such as Tatars, Bashkirs, and Kumyks. As for Turkmenistan, there is general suspicion towards any

²⁷ Corley, Felix "TURKMENISTAN: Another disappeared prisoner dies of torture," Forum 18, TURKMENISTAN, September 27, 2017, accessed June 2020.

http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2318,%20http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/List-of-the-disappeared-in-TM-prisons_Prove_Sept-2017_eng.pdf.

²⁸ Corley, Arnold, "TURKMENISTAN: Last-ditch appeal against 12-year jail terms," Forum 18: TURKMENISTAN, July 10, 2018, accessed June 2020. http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2393.

Muslim teachings from abroad. There have been incidents where Turkmen citizens return home with religious literature from other Muslim countries, including Turkey, only to be detained for a few days for further investigation. However, the authorities have never clearly stated the reasoning for the ban against the teachings of Said Nursi.

It is noteworthy that Nursi's works are not prohibited in Turkey.

HRWF and Sova-Center, a Moscow-based NGO, view the ban of Said Nursi's works in Russia and several post-Soviet countries as well as the criminalisation of its members' activities inappropriate. HRWF and Sova-Center consider the repression of Said Nursi's followers to be unjustified and counter-productive.