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## **To prevent violent extremism in Tajikistan, promote religious freedom**

***Washington should promote and directly incorporate religious freedom training as a requirement for Tajikistan to receive aid.***

By Tony Perkins and Nury Turkel

The Diplomat (11.06.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3xWkWfN> - Tajikistan is located in a dangerous neighborhood, sharing a long border with Afghanistan that is a growing concern amid the imminent U.S. withdrawal. While the United States engages with Tajikistan on such security issues, the government of Tajikistan continues to operate under the fallacy that security requires strict control of religion, justifying gross violations of religious freedom and facilitating a deeply counterproductive strategy for preventing and countering violent extremism.

Given these circumstances, U.S. assistance to Tajikistan should come with conditions, and should not ignore or condone domestic policies that generate the kinds of grievances that contribute to radicalization. Instead, the U.S. should promote and directly incorporate religious freedom training as a requirement to receive aid. [Research](#) has [found](#) such training to be an effective antidote to violent extremism, and international bodies like the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#) and the [United Nations](#) have recommended it as best practice.

President Emomali Rahmon, who last year won a fraudulent [reelection](#) with a staggering 91 percent of the vote, promotes a monolithic, state-controlled version of Islam that punishes non-conformity. The government has closed more than 2,000 mosques since 2017, converting many into cafes, movie theaters, or factories — even as it ironically prepares to open the [largest mosque](#) in Central Asia, able to accommodate more than 150,000 worshippers. Such large central mosques are staffed by imams appointed and paid by the state. The government dictates or approves the content of sermons, often with the inclusion of explicit praise for the Rahmon regime.

The intended message is clear: The only acceptable form of Islam is official, highly centralized, and nationalistic.

Tajikistan's extremism laws are also vague and expansive, enabling the government to criminalize most speech or behavior it opposes. Security forces round up young men with [beards](#) and forcibly shave them, while women who wear [hijabs](#) are publicly shamed or even denied basic services like medicine and education. The government has

also [targeted](#) political opponents, critical journalists and media outlets, and even naïve social media users who [“like”](#) content deemed to be extremist. These individuals are funneled into a decrepit and overcrowded prison system, cramming violent Islamists together with many who are falsely imprisoned.

The Rahmon regime regularly identifies political opposition with extremism and terrorism. This calculus, which sets a monolithic state-approved religion against an exaggerated host of frightening radicals, has been counterproductive. [Studies](#) show that increased religious freedom actually diminishes the relative influence of radical groups by exposing individuals to a [variety of messages](#) and perspectives. Violent Islamist fighters, for example, consistently demonstrate low levels of knowledge about actual Islamic thought and doctrine.

Indeed, a significant percentage of respondents in recent studies on radicalization in Tajikistan [claim](#) that religious illiteracy makes individuals more vulnerable to extremist recruiting. The country’s overcrowded prisons have become a major [vector](#) for the spread of violent extremism, as many imprisoned on bogus or frivolous extremism charges are subjected to inhumane conditions alongside actual violent extremists. Those conditioned to perceive all religious non-conformity as opposition, or even rebellion, are more likely to become radical.

Consider the case of Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, the commander of an elite police unit in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who in May 2015 released a video [swearing allegiance](#) to the Islamic State. As a highly trained officer with intimate knowledge of Tajikistan’s security infrastructure, Khalimov’s [defection](#) was a devastating blow to the country and a boon to terrorists. By 2016, the Islamic State allegedly appointed him [minister of war](#). Khalimov claimed to have been radicalized through observing and participating in the [government’s campaign against Islam](#). He equated these anti-Islamic policies with “democracy” and called on Tajikistani citizens to combat it by joining the Islamic State. By leading Khalimov to conflate “democracy” with anti-religious authoritarianism, the government’s policies contributed to a dynamic in which opposition was more readily equated with violent extremism.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

In contrast to these failed approaches, effective U.S. government engagement with Tajikistan should emphasize the importance of religious freedom to achieving sustainable security. For example, [USAID](#) opened its first full development mission in Tajikistan in October 2020. This program should include support for religious freedom as part of its educational outreach. The State Department should also include religious freedom training for Tajikistani officials as part of U.S. security assistance, laying out the benefits of religious freedom in countering violent extremism. Such programs would be far more effective in meeting the challenges that actual violent groups like the Islamic State pose, by promoting the social benefits of religious tolerance and pluralism while ending the self-defeating cycle of grievances that current Tajikistani policy generates.

Photo : Depositphotos

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## **BOSNIA police arrest woman for financing Islamic fighters**

AP News (12.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2STNNIG> - Bosnian police have arrested a woman on suspicion of financially supporting her husband and other Bosnians who joined Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq, authorities said Wednesday.

Sena Hamzabegovic was arrested upon her arrival to Bosnia at the airport in the central town of Tuzla on Tuesday, Bosnia's security agency said in a statement.

The prosecutor's office said they will seek detention for Hamzabegovic, who holds dual Bosnian and Swiss citizenship. The 61-year-old woman faces charges of "financing terror activities."

Hamzabegovic allegedly sent money and other means of support from 2013 to her husband, who held a prominent position in the Islamic fighters' group structures. The unidentified man remains at large.

The prosecutor's statement said security agencies in Bosnia have worked in cooperation with foreign colleagues on Hamzabegovic's case over a longer period of time. No other details were immediately available.

Hundreds of Bosnians in the past have joined Islamic fighters in Syria and Iraq. Many have been jailed upon returning and dozens still remain in camps in Syria.

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## **DENMARK: "Translation Law" vs. Religious Liberty**

***Protestants and Roman Catholics are protesting a new law that would compel all religious bodies to translate into Danish and publish in advance their sermons.***

By PierLuigi Zoccatelli

Bitter Winter (30.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pC5wcE> - Here we are again. Concerns about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism lead to introduce legislation that reduces the religious liberty of all religions. The mother of all such laws is the **Russian statute against "religious extremism,"** introduced as a weapon to combat Islamic radical groups, and in fact used to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses and other peaceful communities whose proselyting activities disturb the majority Russian Orthodox Church. The new French law on the defense of the Republican principles was also presented as necessary to combat Islamic "separatism" and extremism, but ended up creating problems for all religions.

Now, the same process is at work in Denmark. **A new law**, which had broad support in the Parliament and the public opinion, would request all religions to have their sermons

published and put at the disposal of the authorities. If they are in languages other than Danish, they should be translated.

It may seem a good idea to allow the police to check the sermons delivered, often in Arabic, by some firebrand Islamic imams, but as usual the law cannot target one religion only, least it meets with intractable Constitutional problems. The result is that the same provisions will apply to all religions.

A first problem is that in Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which are part of the Kingdom of Denmark, most religious services are in the local languages rather than in Danish. Yet, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen **has indicated** that she "cannot guarantee" exceptions for the Faroe Islands and Greenland.

More generally, there are in Denmark German-speaking minorities, which have used German as language for their religious services for eight centuries, and immigrant religious communities, which would be placed under a heavy economic burden if all sermons should be translated. And religious groups also have the unpleasant feeling that they are "**placed under general suspicion by this law,**" in the words of the General Secretary of the Nordic Catholic Bishops Conference, Sister Anna Mirijam Kaschne.

Evangelicals are also complaining that it would be the poorer congregations that would face the more serious problems. The Council of Churches of Denmark called the law "discriminatory and ill-considered." And Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe, **in a statement published by the Vatican**, said that the law "could impede the fundamental right to freedom of religion." Once again, media hype and emotion caused by the presence of radical Islam is leading to ill-advised legislation restricting the freedom of all religions.

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## **UN expert warns counter-terror policies led to 'further stigmatisation' of Muslims**

***UN Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed said Islamophobia has reached 'epidemic proportions' across the world***

**UN expert Ahmed Shaheed said Muslim women face the triple threat of discrimination due to their gender, ethnicity, and religion (AFP)**

By Areeb Ullah

Middle East Eye (05.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3rIFPsg> - A United Nations expert has warned that counter-terrorism policies adopted by countries after terrorist attacks done in the name of opposing radical Islam have led to the further stigmatisation of Muslims.

Ahmed Shaheed, UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, told the Human Rights Council on Thursday that more needed to be done to tackle Islamophobia, which he said had reached "epidemic proportions" across the world.

"Islamophobia builds imaginary constructs around Muslims that are used to justify state-sponsored discrimination, hostility and violence against Muslims, with stark consequences for the enjoyment of human rights including freedom of religion or belief," said Shaheed.

"In such climates of exclusion, fear and distrust, Muslims report that they often feel stigma, shame and a sense that they are 'suspect communities' that are being forced to bear collective responsibility for the actions of a small minority."

His report at the UN Human Rights Council highlighted how Muslims, when a minority in a given country, are frequently targeted based on visible characteristics such as their name, skin colour, clothing and religious attire, notably headscarves.

He also warned that Muslim women face threefold discrimination based on their gender, religion and ethnicity.

The report emphasised that critiques of Islam should never be conflated with Islamophobia, adding that international human rights law protects individuals, not religions.

"I strongly encourage states to take all necessary measures to combat direct and indirect forms of discrimination against Muslims and prohibit any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to violence," the UN expert said

Last month, UN Special Rapporteur Fionnuala Ni Aolain released a report stating that many Muslim communities worldwide are being "hyper-regulated" due to counter-terrorism policies.

She voiced concern over the "construction" of the Muslim family within counter-terrorism policy in certain countries and how the "Muslim home" is viewed as a site of risk, resulting in blame, pathology and state hyperregulation".

She added that in some instances, the "good mother" within a Muslim household "is one who partners with the security state in preventing and countering violent extremism programmes, even as such programmes may stigmatise, marginalise and make her a frontline target within her own political context."

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## **SRI LANKA to ban burqa, shut more than 1,000 Islamic schools**

***Minister for public security says decision has been taken on 'national security' grounds; activists decry announcement.***

ALJAZEERA (13.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vpMzxd> - Sri Lanka's government says it will ban the wearing of the burqa, a full-body veil that covers the face as well, and close more than 1,000 Islamic schools, the latest actions affecting the country's minority Muslim population.

Separately, the government on Saturday announced using a controversial anti-terror law to deal with religious "extremism" and gave itself sweeping powers to detain suspects for up to two years for "deradicalisation".

Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekera told a news conference he had signed a paper on Friday for cabinet approval to ban the burqa – an outer garment that covers the entire body and the face and is worn by some Muslim women – on "national security" grounds.

"In our early days, Muslim women and girls never wore the burqa," he said. "It is a sign of religious extremism that came about recently. We are definitely going to ban it."

The minister said he signed documents outlawing the burqa, but they need to be approved by the cabinet of ministers and Parliament where the government has a two-thirds majority to see its bills through.

Weerasekera also said the government plans to ban more than 1,000 Islamic schools that he said were flouting national education policy.

"Nobody can open a school and teach whatever you want to the children," he said. The government's moves on burqas and schools follow an order last year mandating the cremation of COVID-19 victims – against the wishes of Muslims, who bury their dead.

This ban was lifted earlier this year after criticism from the United States and international rights groups.

Shreen Saroor, a Sri Lankan peace and women's rights activist, said the moves come "at a time when the Muslim community has been constantly targeted".

"It's part of the Islamophobic reaction in Sri Lanka," Saroor told Al Jazeera from the capital, Colombo.

"The compulsory cremation policy was revised, and now we hear so many other measures to some form of punishing the Muslim community," she added, noting that Muslims in the country were not consulted in advance.

Citing the fact that the wearing of the mask has been made compulsory in the country during the coronavirus pandemic, Saroor said the burqa "looks [like] a very political revenge move".

The wearing of the burqa in the majority-Buddhist nation was temporarily banned in 2019 after the Easter Sunday bombing of churches and hotels by armed fighters that killed more than 250 people.

The move drew a mixed response, with activists saying it "violated Muslim women's right to practise their religion freely".

## **Prevention of Terrorism Act**

Meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who was elected president in 2019, after promising a crackdown on “extremism” promulgated regulations allowing the detention of anyone suspected of causing “acts of violence or religious, racial or communal disharmony or feelings of ill will or hostility between different communities”.

The rules, effective on Friday, have been set up under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which local and international rights groups have repeatedly asked Colombo to repeal.

“Anybody can be arrested for saying anything,” said Saroor, calling PTA “very problematic”.

Sri Lanka’s previous government, which was defeated by Rajapaksa at the 2019 elections, had pledged to repeal the PTA after admitting it seriously undermined individual freedoms, but failed to do so.

Muslims make up about 9 percent of the 22 million people in Sri Lanka, where Sinhalese Buddhists account for some 75 percent of the population.

A former defence secretary, Rajapaksa is immensely popular among the Sinhala Buddhist majority, who credit him with ending the island nation’s 26-year civil war in 2009.

Critics, however, say during the war he crushed the dissident Tamil Tigers with little regard for human rights, allowed abductions and gave consent to extrajudicial killings. He has rejected all the allegations.

Photo : Danish Siddiqui/Reuters