



## Assessment of Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan: Progress and Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

30 April 2024

### Disclaimer

This report does not reflect the views of the governments of Uzbekistan or the United States, nor the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or any NGO. These are our own opinions, based on this visit to Uzbekistan, as well as our previous visits, and our own research and additional interviews. We should also note that this report is not a research paper. This report is a trip report, a summary of our own conversations and impressions of Uzbekistan. Our intent is to present a general impression that is not only accurate, but also a catalyst to strengthening the reforms so far, while encouraging more.

### Introduction

On 5 October 2023, Ambassador Furqat Sidiqov asked Dr. Chris Seiple to form and lead a delegation to Uzbekistan to assess the religious freedom situation there, in the context of Uzbekistan's historical, geo-political, economic, and security situation. The delegation included Dr. Mohamed Elsanousi, [Executive Director of the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers](#); Mr. Wade Kusack, Founder/President of Love Your Neighbor Community; and, Ms. Nadine Maenza, [President of the IRF Secretariat](#) and former Chair of USCIRF.

The delegation visited Uzbekistan from 17-24 January 2024. During this time, it traveled from Tashkent to Fergana City, Bukhara, Termez, and Nukus, holding over 20 meetings with government officials, civil society actors, including but not limited to religious leaders, human rights activists, and youth.

There was broad agreement that Uzbekistan had made tremendous progress in the realm of religious freedom and other sectors of society. In particular, there was great appreciation for more freedom to worship, a better registration process for religious organizations, and the reforms in higher education.

By way of brief background, Uzbekistan's president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been driving change since he took office in 2016, actively implementing reforms, to include religious freedom reforms, while opening up to the world. The country's President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has been instrumental

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<sup>1</sup> [Assessment of Religious Freedom in Uzbekistan: Progress and Perspectives - LYNC \(lyncommunity.org\)](#)



in driving these changes. As a result of these efforts, the United States State Department removed Uzbekistan from the "Country of Particular Concern" list in 2019, and from the Special Watch List in 2020, acknowledging significant progress in religious freedom.

Uzbekistan was also elected to the UN Human Rights Council in 2020, and President Mirziyoyev reaffirmed the country's commitment to international human rights obligations. Uzbekistan initiated a 2018 UN resolution on "Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance," which was cosigned by more than 50 countries.

According to our interviews, there has been a significant positive transformation in religious freedom in Uzbekistan. There have been 23 churches, 91 mosques, and 2 educational institutes registered since 2017. Unregistered churches are no longer subjected to crackdowns and harassment, and there has been a liberalization in religious law implementation. The government has also helped renovate existing mosques and churches and construct new ones. The process for inviting foreign religious teachers has improved, and religious education has been integrated the Imam Termezi International Research Center in Termez, which specializes in Islamic studies, including the science of hadiths and the legacy of Isa Termezi and other scholars from Termez, provides advanced training for imams. In 2023, a new building was inaugurated for the "Khadijah al-Kubra," a special Islamic educational institution for women and girls.

The government has streamlined regulations for religious organizations, making registration and reporting easier and more affordable. There has been a shift towards greater openness and reduced fear in practicing religion, with the government seeking to control religion less. Multifaith dialogue has been encouraged, with events such as multi-faith retreats—between pastors and imams—demonstrating new models of mutually respectful engagement without fear; an engagement that also builds social cohesion through inclusion.

With regard to Islam, President Mirziyoyev has catalyzed several initiatives, particularly in education, that embody and educate an "enlightened Islam." This includes the establishment of The Imam Bukhari International Center in Samarkand, with its twofold focus on scholarly research and advanced training courses for imams; the Center of Islamic Civilization in Tashkent, a living museum and research center regarding Islam's rich history in Uzbekistan.

As President Mirziyoyev [said](#) on 29 January 2021: "Our country has raised many scholars, collectors of hadiths, theologians; their legacy is colossal. However, we must acknowledge that we have not deeply studied this rich source. That is why this center must scientifically substantiate and promote the idea of what a great people we are. Everything here should convey the national



idea. People who come to the center, our youth, should receive a charge of spiritual strength and confidence."

In the same spirit, in 2017, the president established the Educational Center for Training Afghan Citizens was inaugurated in Termez, just across the Amu Darya River from Afghanistan. This center helps Afghan refugees with humanitarian aid and professional development. In 2023 The United Nations Development Programme and the European Union have opened the EU Knowledge Center at the Educational Center for Afghan Citizens in Termez. From 2019 to 2022, Uzbekistan successfully completed five "Mehr" operations aimed at repatriating women and children from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Several government agencies and NGOs, including "Barkaror Hayot" led by Oliya Ilmuradova (one of our interviewees), have worked together in conducting what they call "organic social reintegration of repatriates."

However, there was also a consensus that, it was in Uzbekistan's self-interest to continue pursuing more improvements. In particular, while there is more religious freedom and more guidance from the state about what "pure Islam" is, there is also the potential for more danger. It is not improbable for some citizens to reject the state's approach to Islam, seeking spiritual meaning and purpose elsewhere (e.g., on the internet, which often doesn't portray the balanced message of Islam, and creates a higher possibility for manipulation by those who are not adequately trained in Islam). Meanwhile, government agencies and educational institutions are not as equipped as they could be to engage citizens on these issues (e.g., law enforcement, K-12 education).

We returned on 25 January, and provided our initial assessment on [29 January 2024 at the Army Navy Club](#). We believe that implementing these (below) recommendations are necessary to maintain the status quo. If these issues are not addressed, the security threat will likely increase.

Since this presentation, we have reflected more about what appropriate mid-term recommendations might be for a state and a society that is now, more than ever, discussing with itself what it means to be a Muslim-majority country in a globalized world, as well as a difficult neighborhood. We feel that our (below) mid-term recommendations will contribute to this discussion through practical policy suggestions.

We believe that these near- and mid-term recommendations will help sustain the overall progress of the country, by strengthening the cornerstone of stability and social cohesion: a freedom of conscience/belief that is practical and respectful in the interrelated spheres of faith, critical thinking, and free speech, while seeking the inclusion of all voices as equal citizens.



Before considering our near- and mid-term recommendations, it is important to briefly understand the conceptual, historical and security contexts in which they take place.

### Conceptual Context

There are generally two approaches to advancing religious freedom: advocating and building. The former tends to ignore context, the latter begins with it. Ours was a builders delegation. We were asked to do the assessment because we have a common understanding about how best to engage a country, about how to work and walk with it, step by step, coming alongside what the country is already doing. All of us had been to Uzbekistan many times before (particularly Dr. Seiple, who first visited in 2000, and wrote his PhD on Uzbekistan-U.S. relations).

Essential to the builders' approach is the invitation. In our case, *the government of Uzbekistan invited us; offered us the opportunity to go anywhere, talk to anyone, and ask any question; and committed to paying all travel costs for the delegation; in return, the delegation volunteered their time and their holistic expertise, while LYNC funded the 29 January public briefing, with assistance from Templeton Religion Trust.*

Some advocates have suggested that working with Uzbekistan, or giving it a religious freedom platform in Washington, D.C., is “faith-washing,” that any association with Uzbekistan lends it credibility. Our response is simple: *why wouldn't we—at the invitation of the government of Uzbekistan, after conducting many programs there—visit and speak into their reform process?*

The Uzbeks are the first to tell you that the comprehensive reforms undertaken by the new president since 2017, religious freedom among them, have not always advanced as smoothly as they would like. The honesty is genuine as is the genuine desire to build their society. *Again: Why wouldn't we, in an evenhanded manner; participate in reform process just six-years old, in a country that, like most of Asia, has no living memory of an unregulated religious space?*

*No country in the world has made as much progress in religious freedom as Uzbekistan.*

We believe that religious freedom advocacy is crucial. We also believe that this approach is not equipped to offer comprehensive policy solutions tailored to a given context; especially those contexts whose national security is so fluid as Uzbekistan's.

***We recognize that this trip is not only a first for Uzbekistan, but a new model of engagement for the religious freedom movement.***



In March, Uzbekistan invited us to return in 2025. It wants to make our assessment an annual event. It is difficult to think of any country taking this unique approach. This decision is that much more remarkable given Uzbekistan's historical and security contexts.

### Historical Context

The historical context of religious freedom in Uzbekistan is complex and deeply rooted in the region's turbulent past. During the Soviet era, Uzbekistan, like other Soviet republics, was subject to state-imposed atheism. Religion was heavily suppressed, religious institutions were controlled or eliminated, and public expressions of faith were discouraged. This period left a legacy of religious suppression and a general absence of institutionalized faith practices.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Uzbekistan, along with other Central Asian states, gained independence. This period was marked by a resurgence of religious identity as a form of national reawakening. However, the sudden vacuum of power and absence of established religious institutions led to a chaotic era in the 1990s, where different groups vied for influence. This chaos was not just political but also religious, as various religious movements began to establish themselves in a society that had been officially atheist for decades.

Amidst this backdrop, extremist groups found fertile ground to grow. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which aimed to establish an Islamist state in Uzbekistan and the wider region, rose to prominence. The IMU was involved in violent conflicts, including attempts to overthrow the government, and was designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department and other entities. The rise of such groups posed a significant challenge to the newly independent Uzbekistan, prompting the government to adopt an ironfist approach with its religious policies in an attempt to maintain control and security. Without making excuses, it was the only strategy that a post-soviet government understood (although there were those who suggested otherwise).

The government's response to religious resurgence and extremism was to regulate religious practice tightly. This included control over religious institutions, strict registration requirements for religious groups, and a general suspicion of religious activism, particularly of Islam, the majority religion. These measures were seen as necessary to prevent the spread of radical ideologies and to maintain the secular nature of the new state.

Over time, especially since President Mirziyoyev took office, there has been a gradual shift towards greater religious freedom in Uzbekistan. As discussed above, the government has taken



steps to ease some of the strict controls and has sought to promote a version of Islam that is consistent with Uzbek traditions and resistant to extremism.<sup>2</sup>

### Security Context<sup>3</sup>

Uzbekistan is one of two double-landlocked countries in the world; i.e., it is surrounded by landlocked countries, countries with no direct access to the sea, and therefore trade—a difficult situation when 80% of world trade is seaborne.

Uzbekistan has 38 million citizens, 96% of whom are Sunni Islam (Hanafi). 65% of those 38 million people are under the age of 35 (i.e., almost 25M).

The economy is growing at 5.5% a year; but it is not creating enough jobs. For example, 2.9 million Uzbeks are migrant workers in Russia. If one conservatively figures that one migrant worker is helping three family members back home, then at least one third of the country depends on Russia for its means.

Neighboring countries significantly influence the information sphere. Indeed, our interviews suggest that Uzbek citizens are more likely to be radicalized abroad (which some regard as intentional), than in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan also has to consider its neighbor Islamist states that commit terrorism.

It is not difficult for those adhering to Sunni and Shia extremist ideologies to infiltrate Uzbekistan; even as it is very difficult to prevent young people from seeking it out. Such incidents as the 28 March 2021 protest in Tashkent, where participants shouting Allah u Akbar, bring back memories of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and fears of the violent Muslims return.

Finally, there is China, which is Uzbekistan's largest trading partner (21.3%), which helps create jobs. While we were in Uzbekistan, the presidents of Uzbekistan and China signed an "allweather" partnership; that is, they will maintain relations in all contexts.

***In sum, Uzbekistan's security issues are complicated, often opaque, and multi-tiered, that include various factors beyond its control...all of which informs how the government thinks about, describes, discusses, engages and advances religious freedom.***

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Uzbekistan's context, and the Uzbek and U.S. perspectives on security and religious freedom, please see Dr. Seiple's 2007 dissertation on [Uzbekistan-U.S. relations](#).

<sup>3</sup> Please note that our intent is not to provide an analysis of the below, interrelated, factors. Our intent is simply to name these factors as issues that came up time and again in our interviews.



## Recommendations

We make the below near- and mid-term recommendations in the context of an ongoing and regular conversation between American civil society and the government and people of Uzbekistan; a conversation that has been on-and-off-again throughout the history of the bilateral relationship between Uzbekistan and the United States.

This conversation began again in November 2017 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited Dr. Seiple to help think about a process that would remove Uzbekistan from the U.S. State Department’s “Country of Particular Concern” list. Part of this process took formal form when the Institute for Global Engagement signed an MOU with the President of Uzbekistan’s Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies on 18 September 2018, which led to the May 2022 Dialogue of Declarations and the Bukhara Declaration.

As we conclude below, we think this conversation should be formalized anew, with a new MOU—which will address the below recommendations, in part by co-conducting several relevant certificate programs—that deepens and expands the conversation, in part through a second Dialogue of Declarations in May of 2025.

**We make these recommendations with respect for public order, and, to the best of our understanding, as consistent with the history and culture of Uzbekistan, and, especially, what the government and civil society are already doing.**

### *Maintaining the Status Quo: Near-Term Recommendations (2024-2025)*

- a. Registration:** Take a comprehensive approach to the interrelated issues of registration.
  - i. Provide simple explanation of current registration process.
  - ii. Consider establishing an international advisory board of international religious freedom experts, who both understand Uzbekistan’s unique context as well as have access to comparative examples from around the world
- b. Explore establishing dialogue platforms for government and registered & unregistered groups, in order to discuss such issues as:**
  - i. The progress of registration, noting success & areas for improvement
  - ii. Whether the publication and distribution of religious materials could be granted with registration
  - iii. The meaning and implications of:



1. missionary activity
2. extremism

**c. Extremism:**

- i. Consider establishing a working group to precisely define “religious extremism,” including, perhaps, international legal experts
- ii. Consider creating professional development certificate programs in:
  1. Cross-cultural religious and digital literacy, equipping citizens, especially youth, to critically assess (online) religious content and recognize extremist propaganda.
  2. Story-telling and speech-writing equipping government and religious leaders to engage in compelling conversations that build social cohesion.
- iii. Continue to share story of Uzbekistan’s pioneering work in developing the networks for families and communities affected by radicalization, to include those wives and children repatriated from Syria and Iraq (whose husbands fought for ISIS)
- iv. Consider creating an international dialogue that will develop recommendations regarding how best to address the issue of Uzbek migrant workers being radicalized abroad, ensuring that efforts to counter extremism are collaborative and cross-border.

**d. Prisoners:**

- i. Consider establishing a review board for all prisoners accused of terrorism, inviting international observers
- ii. Keep inviting USCIRF to commit to participating in a systematic and ongoing conversation about prisons and prisoners, particularly the invitation to discuss regular visits.
- iii. Consider the strategic approach to judicial and criminal justice reform that African countries have developed in partnership with Pepperdine University

*Moving Forward: Mid-Term Recommendations (2026-2030)*

**a. Mandate professional development regarding engagement**

- i. Teach Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy (CCRL) to government agencies, particularly law enforcement, equipping them to model and message good governance and social cohesion





1. Establish themes for these engagement certificates:
    - a. Gender & Youth inclusion.
    - b. Use football, given the success of Uzbek soccer, as a means to teach social cohesion, through popular young players.
  2. Develop a CCRL certificate on engaging America.
- ii. Host regional and national multifaith annual dinners as mechanisms and platform for showing solidarity.
- b. Mandate professional development regarding women and youth empowerment:** Implement best practices into each element of the described engagements.
  - c. Expand religious tourism: In addition to the growing Islamic tourism to Bukhara and Samarkand,** develop places and stories of pre-Islamic faiths (e.g., Buddhist, Nestorian, Zoroastrianism), that demonstrate Uzbekistan as a land mutual respect.
  - d. Criminal Justice Reform and Further constitutional reform:** Dr. Akmal Saidov has always said that the constitution is a work in progress. As lessons are learned from implementing the above recommendations, consider how best to make improvements to the law and the constitution.
  - e. Host a donor conference on these issues:** Invite individual, institutional, and governmental donors to discuss these ideas, modeling Uzbek progress.

*Conclusion:* In order to facilitate discussion about and the implementation of the above recommendations, our final recommendation is to build on the success of the many interactions that have taken place between global NGOs and Uzbekistan, most notably the May 2022 Dialogue of Declarations, which resulted in the Bukhara Declaration. In particular, LYNC should sign an MOU with the President of Uzbekistan's Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies. This document would govern the citizen-equipping certificate programs that would be facilitated by LYNC and its global partners. The MOU would also establish a path forward for the second Dialogue of Declarations in May of 2025, which Uzbekistan would again host in Tashkent and Bukhara.