

CHRISTIANS ON THE RUN

The Global Persecution of Christians

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PART 1

AFGHANISTAN

The first part of a global series



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AFGHANISTAN

3.C.1 Country Profile: Afghanistan

Country Overview

The **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan** is a landlocked state located at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. It shares borders with Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and China. Its strategic location has historically made Afghanistan a focal point of regional competition, migration, and ideological movements, factors that continue to shape its political development and religious landscape.

Since **15 August 2021**, Afghanistan has been governed by the **Taliban**, which exercises de facto authority following the collapse of the internationally recognised Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Although the Taliban maintains effective control over state institutions and territory, its government has not received formal international recognition by the United Nations or the overwhelming majority of sovereign states. Consequently, Afghanistan occupies a unique position in international law whereby a de facto authority exercises governmental functions without broad diplomatic recognition.

The Taliban has fundamentally transformed Afghanistan's legal, political and institutional framework. The 2004 Constitution has effectively been suspended, and governance is now based on the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence** combined with decrees issued by the Supreme Leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada. Religious authority and political authority have consequently become closely intertwined, making Afghanistan one of the few contemporary states where the governing system explicitly derives its legitimacy from a singular interpretation of Islamic law rather than from a constitutional order or electoral mandate. This institutional transformation has profound implications for the protection of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), particularly for religious minorities, converts from Islam, women, and individuals who do not conform to the Taliban's prescribed religious norms.

Afghanistan has an estimated population of approximately **42–43 million** people (United Nations, 2024). The overwhelming majority identify as Muslims, with **Sunni Muslims** comprising approximately **85–90%** of the population and **Shi'a Muslims**, predominantly members of the Hazara community, accounting for approximately **10–15%**. Small Sikh and Hindu communities that once numbered in the tens of thousands have declined dramatically over four decades of conflict and persecution, while the country's Jewish community has effectively disappeared. Christianity is not legally recognised, and Afghan Christians consist almost entirely of converts from Islam who practice their faith clandestinely due to the risk of severe punishment, including execution under prevailing interpretations of apostasy. Publicly identifying as Christian is effectively impossible under current conditions.

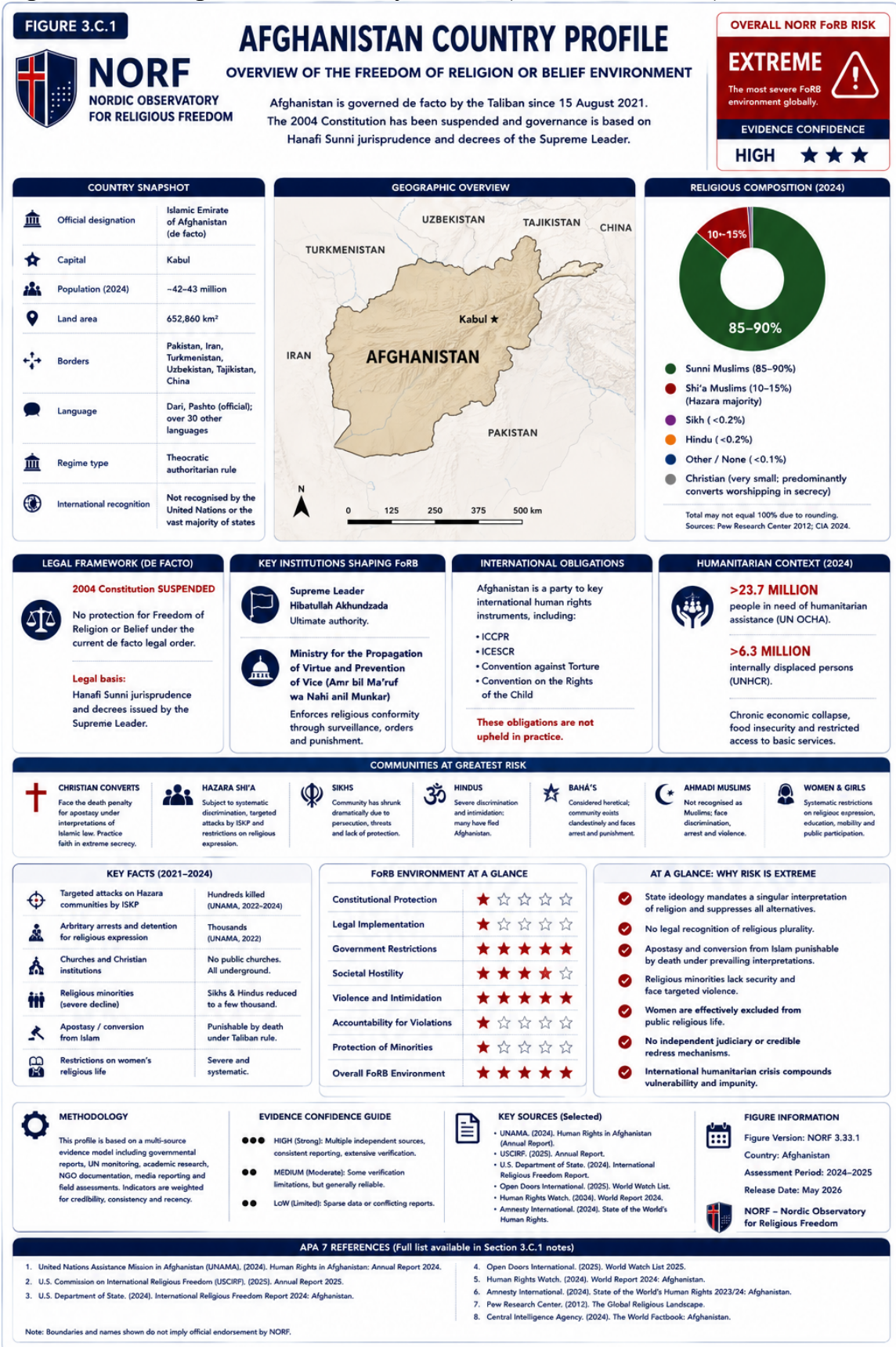
Afghanistan is characterised by persistent humanitarian crisis, chronic insecurity and widespread institutional fragility. According to the United Nations, more than half of the population requires humanitarian assistance, while millions remain internally displaced or vulnerable to displacement resulting from conflict, economic collapse and natural disasters. Although large-scale conventional warfare declined following the Taliban takeover, targeted violence continues through attacks

conducted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), local insurgent activity, and systematic repression by the de facto authorities. Religious minorities—including Hazara Shi'a, Sikhs, Hindus and covert Christians—remain among the communities facing the highest levels of vulnerability.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, Afghanistan represents one of the world's most restrictive environments. State institutions responsible for protecting constitutional rights have effectively ceased to function, while the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has become the principal institution responsible for enforcing religious conformity through administrative orders, surveillance and coercive enforcement. Religious freedom restrictions therefore originate both from formal governance structures and from broader societal pressures reinforced by the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law. Multiple international monitoring bodies—including the United Nations, USCIRF, the U.S. Department of State, Open Doors, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—have consistently concluded that religious freedom conditions deteriorated sharply following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 and remain among the most severe globally.

For the purposes of this report, Afghanistan should therefore be understood not merely as a conflict-affected state, but as a country in which the de facto governing system itself constitutes the principal determinant of the Freedom of Religion or Belief environment. Unlike contexts where violations arise primarily from non-state actors operating alongside functioning state institutions, religious restrictions in Afghanistan are embedded within the current governing structure, making institutional practice, legal interpretation and ideological governance central analytical variables throughout this assessment.

Figure 3.C.1. Afghanistan Country Profile (NORF Overview)



Sources: United Nations; UNAMA; USCIRF; U.S. Department of State; Open Doors World Watch List; Human Rights Watch; Amnesty International.

3.C.2 Historical Development

Historical Development of Religion and Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan

Afghanistan occupies one of the most historically significant crossroads of Eurasia. For more than two millennia, successive empires, migration routes and religious traditions have converged across the territory, producing a complex religious landscape long before the emergence of the modern Afghan state. Contemporary patterns of religious governance, sectarian identity and restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) are therefore best understood as the cumulative product of successive political and religious transformations rather than as developments associated solely with the modern state.

Unlike many contemporary nation-states, Afghanistan has never experienced a prolonged period in which religion and political authority were institutionally separated. Instead, successive governing systems have derived legitimacy from religious traditions, although the interpretation, institutional role and political application of religion have varied considerably over time. The present FoRB environment reflects this long historical trajectory, while also representing a significant departure from earlier periods through the unprecedented concentration of religious and political authority under the Taliban's de facto government.

Pre-Islamic Afghanistan (c. 550 BCE–7th Century CE)

The territory of present-day Afghanistan formed part of several major imperial systems, including the **Achaemenid Empire**, the conquests of **Alexander the Great**, the **Seleucid Empire**, the **Greco-Bactrian Kingdom**, the **Kushan Empire**, and later the **Sasanian Empire**. Owing to its location along the Silk Roads, the region became one of Asia's principal centres of commercial exchange and religious interaction.

Religious pluralism characterised much of this period. **Zoroastrianism** predominated under Persian rule, while **Buddhism** flourished under Kushan patronage between the first and fourth centuries CE. The monumental Buddhas of Bamiyan, completed between the sixth and seventh centuries, symbolised Afghanistan's position as one of the most important Buddhist cultural centres in Central Asia. Hindu religious traditions also became established, particularly in eastern Afghanistan, while indigenous Iranian religious practices persisted alongside imported belief systems.

Religious communities generally coexisted under imperial administrations that prioritised political stability over religious uniformity. Although rulers often favoured particular traditions,

archaeological and historical evidence suggests a comparatively pluralistic religious environment relative to later periods.

FoRB significance. The pre-Islamic period established Afghanistan as a region of substantial religious diversity. The disappearance of many of these communities in subsequent centuries illustrates the profound historical transformation of the country's religious landscape.

Islamisation and the Formation of an Islamic Society (7th–10th Centuries)

Arab Muslim expansion reached eastern Iran and present-day Afghanistan during the seventh century, although the Islamisation of the region occurred gradually over several centuries rather than through immediate political conquest. Conversion proceeded unevenly across different regions and populations, with Buddhist, Hindu and local religious communities continuing to exist alongside emerging Muslim communities for generations.

By the tenth century, Islam had become the dominant religion throughout most of the region. The **Hanafi school of Sunni jurisprudence** gradually emerged as the prevailing legal tradition, while Persian-Islamic scholarship became increasingly influential in administration, education and jurisprudence. At the same time, Shi'a communities developed in parts of central Afghanistan, particularly among populations that would later become associated with the Hazara community.

The process of Islamisation transformed religious institutions as mosques, madrasas and Islamic courts progressively replaced earlier religious centres. Nevertheless, conversion remained a gradual social process shaped by trade, political integration and local patronage rather than solely by military conquest.

FoRB significance. This period established Sunni Hanafi Islam as the dominant religious tradition that continues to underpin Afghanistan's contemporary legal and political order.

Medieval Islamic Dynasties and the Consolidation of Religious Authority (10th Century–1747)

Between the tenth and eighteenth centuries, Afghanistan was governed by a succession of Islamic dynasties, including the **Ghaznavids**, **Ghurids**, **Timurids**, and later competing **Safavid**, **Mughal** and regional Pashtun rulers. These centuries witnessed the consolidation of Islamic political institutions, the expansion of religious education and the increasing influence of the ulema within public administration.

Although Sunni Islam remained dominant, competition between the Sunni Mughal Empire and the Shi'a Safavid Empire contributed to the emergence of sectarian boundaries that continue to influence Afghan society. The spread of Sufi orders also played an important role in local religious life, often providing social cohesion across tribal communities.

Religious minorities—including Hindus, Sikhs and Jews—continued to participate in commercial life, particularly in urban centres, although their legal status remained subordinate under Islamic governance. Conversion away from Islam was generally regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations of Islamic law and therefore remained socially and legally constrained.

FoRB significance. The medieval period institutionalised the close relationship between political authority, Islamic jurisprudence and religious legitimacy that has characterised Afghan governance ever since.

Formation of the Modern Afghan State (1747–1919)

The establishment of the **Durrani Empire** under Ahmad Shah Durrani in **1747** marked the beginning of the modern Afghan state. Sunni Islam became an essential source of political legitimacy, while tribal governance and religious authority operated in close partnership. Although local autonomy remained considerable, rulers relied heavily on religious scholars to legitimise state authority and judicial practice.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became a strategic buffer state between the British and Russian Empires during the "Great Game." State institutions expanded gradually, but religious leaders continued to exercise significant influence over education, law and dispute resolution.

FoRB significance. Islam became firmly embedded within the institutional foundations of the Afghan state, while religious legitimacy increasingly complemented tribal authority.

Constitutional Reform and State Modernisation (1919–1978)

Following independence in **1919**, King Amanullah Khan introduced extensive programmes of political modernisation inspired partly by developments in Turkey and Europe. Constitutional reforms sought to strengthen central government, expand secular education and reduce the political influence of conservative religious elites. Strong opposition from tribal leaders and religious authorities ultimately contributed to the collapse of these reforms.

Subsequent monarchs adopted more gradual modernisation strategies, culminating in the **1964 Constitution**, which introduced limited parliamentary institutions and expanded civil liberties while retaining Islam as the state religion. Religious minorities experienced relatively greater stability than in later decades, although equality before the law remained constrained by the constitutional primacy of Islam.

FoRB significance. This period demonstrated both the possibilities and political limits of institutional reform in a society where religious legitimacy remained central to state authority.

Communist Rule, Soviet Intervention and Religious Mobilisation (1978–1992)

The **Saur Revolution** of **1978** fundamentally altered Afghanistan's political trajectory. The communist government attempted to secularise public administration, reduce clerical influence and implement radical social reforms. These policies provoked widespread resistance from religious leaders and rural communities.

Following the Soviet intervention in **1979**, numerous Mujahideen groups framed armed resistance as both national liberation and religious obligation. Religion consequently became increasingly

militarised, while decades of conflict devastated state institutions and strengthened Islamist political movements.

FoRB significance. The conflict reinforced the political role of Islamic identity while weakening secular institutions capable of protecting religious pluralism.

Civil War and the First Taliban Emirate (1992–2001)

The collapse of the communist government led to prolonged civil war among competing Mujahideen factions before the Taliban captured Kabul in **1996**.

The Taliban established the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**, implementing a highly restrictive interpretation of Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence enforced through the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Women were excluded from most aspects of public life, religious minorities faced systematic discrimination, and public religious expression outside Taliban doctrine was prohibited.

The Hazara Shi'a community experienced documented massacres and widespread persecution. Hindus and Sikhs emigrated in large numbers, while Christians and Bahá'ís were forced entirely underground.

FoRB significance. The first Taliban regime established an ideological model of religious governance that would largely re-emerge after 2021.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001–2021)

Following the international intervention in late **2001**, Afghanistan adopted the **2004 Constitution**, establishing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Constitution recognised certain civil liberties while maintaining Islam as the religion of the state and prohibiting legislation contrary to Islamic principles.

Although civil society, education, independent media and women's participation expanded considerably, FoRB protections remained incomplete. Apostasy and blasphemy continued to be prosecutable through Hanafi jurisprudence, Christian converts remained unable to worship openly, Bahá'ís lacked legal recognition, and Ahmadi Muslims continued to experience discrimination.

Simultaneously, insurgent violence by the Taliban and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) increasingly targeted Shi'a mosques, educational institutions and minority religious communities.

FoRB significance. Constitutional protections improved significantly relative to Taliban rule, but implementation remained constrained by insecurity, constitutional limitations and persistent conflict.

Taliban Return to Power (2021–Present)

The collapse of the Islamic Republic in **August 2021** marked the most profound transformation of Afghanistan's FoRB environment in two decades. The Taliban suspended the constitutional framework and re-established the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan**, replacing statutory governance with decrees based upon its interpretation of Hanafi Sunni jurisprudence.

International monitoring bodies have documented a sharp deterioration in religious freedom. Christian converts, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims and many remaining religious minorities have either fled Afghanistan or continue to practise their faith clandestinely. Hazara Shi'a communities remain vulnerable to both discriminatory state policies and repeated attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), while the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has become the principal institution responsible for enforcing religious conformity.

FoRB significance. Contemporary Afghanistan represents one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, characterised by the fusion of executive, judicial and religious authority within a single de facto governing structure.

Overall Historical Assessment

From a FoRB perspective, Afghanistan's history reveals a long-term progression from religious pluralism in the pre-Islamic period towards increasing institutional integration between religion and political authority following Islamisation. While successive governments have differed markedly in their interpretation and implementation of Islamic governance, religion has consistently remained a central source of political legitimacy. The post-2021 Taliban government represents the most comprehensive concentration of religious and executive authority in Afghanistan's modern history, making ideological governance itself the principal determinant of contemporary religious freedom conditions.

Fig. 3.C.2



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3.C.3 Religious Landscape

Religious Landscape and Demographic Composition

Afghanistan is one of the world's most religiously homogeneous countries in terms of formal religious affiliation. Islam constitutes the religion of the overwhelming majority of the population and forms the constitutional, legal and ideological foundation of the current de facto governing system. Nevertheless, this apparent homogeneity conceals important internal diversity, including differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, variations in religious practice across ethnic communities, and the continued existence—albeit on a greatly diminished scale—of historic religious minorities. Moreover, official demographic statistics do not adequately capture religious communities that are compelled to conceal their identity due to legal sanctions or fear of persecution, particularly Christian converts, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims.

Reliable demographic data remain limited. Afghanistan has not conducted a comprehensive national census capable of accurately measuring religious affiliation, and estimates therefore rely on international organisations, academic research and governmental reporting. Consequently, all percentages presented below should be regarded as approximate.

Sunni Islam

Sunni Islam is the dominant religious tradition in Afghanistan, representing an estimated **85–90%** of the population. The overwhelming majority of Afghan Sunnis adhere to the **Hanafi school of jurisprudence**, which has historically shaped judicial practice, religious education and political legitimacy. Hanafi jurisprudence remains the principal legal framework applied by the Taliban and constitutes the basis for many contemporary regulations governing public behaviour, religious practice and family law.

Sunni Islam is practised throughout the country and is closely associated with several ethnic communities, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmen and many smaller groups. Although Sunni communities are not internally homogeneous, religious institutions—including mosques, madrasas and clerical networks—continue to play a central role in community governance and local dispute resolution.

FoRB significance. Sunni Islam functions not only as the majority religion but also as the principal normative framework informing state institutions, legislation and public policy under the current de facto authorities.

Shi'a Muslims

Shi'a Muslims comprise approximately **10–15%** of Afghanistan's population, with the majority belonging to the **Twelver (Ja'fari) tradition**. Most Shi'a are members of the Hazara ethnic community, although Shi'a populations also include Qizilbash, Sadat and smaller ethnic groups.

Historically, Shi'a communities have experienced varying degrees of discrimination and political marginalisation. Since the Taliban's return to power, concerns regarding the protection of Shi'a religious rights have increased substantially. While the Taliban has publicly stated that Shi'a Muslims may continue their religious practices, international monitoring bodies have documented restrictions affecting Shi'a institutions, unequal access to public administration and continuing security vulnerabilities.

In addition to institutional concerns, Shi'a religious gatherings have repeatedly been targeted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), which considers Shi'a Muslims to be apostates. Numerous attacks against mosques, educational institutions and commemorative ceremonies have resulted in significant civilian casualties since 2021.

FoRB significance. Although recognised as Muslims, Shi'a communities remain among Afghanistan's most vulnerable religious groups due to the combined effects of discrimination, limited institutional protection and repeated attacks by violent extremist organisations.

Christian Communities

Christianity has no official legal status in Afghanistan. The country contains **no publicly recognised churches**, and virtually all Afghan Christians are believed to be converts from Islam or members of expatriate communities with highly restricted religious activities. Reliable estimates of the Christian population are unavailable because public identification as Christian carries an exceptionally high risk of persecution.

Under prevailing interpretations of Islamic law applied by the Taliban, conversion from Islam may constitute apostasy, exposing individuals to severe punishment. Consequently, Afghan Christians generally worship in complete secrecy through informal house-based networks or individual devotional practice. Public evangelism, church construction and organised Christian institutions are effectively impossible under present conditions.

International organisations consistently identify Afghan Christians as one of the world's most vulnerable religious communities.

FoRB significance. The Christian community illustrates the distinction between legal recognition and actual religious existence. Christianity persists within Afghanistan despite the complete absence of public institutional space for religious expression.

Hindus and Sikhs

Afghanistan historically hosted substantial Hindu and Sikh communities, particularly in Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Ghazni. During the twentieth century these communities played important roles in commerce, education and public administration.

Decades of conflict, discrimination, targeted violence and forced migration have reduced both communities dramatically. Current estimates suggest that only **a few hundred** Sikhs and Hindus remain in Afghanistan. Many religious sites have been abandoned or damaged, while repeated attacks by extremist organisations—including ISKP—have accelerated emigration.

Although Taliban representatives have occasionally pledged protection for remaining Sikh and Hindu citizens, international observers continue to report insecurity, discrimination and limited institutional safeguards.

FoRB significance. The decline of Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities represents one of the most significant long-term transformations of the country's religious diversity over the past half-century.

Bahá'ís

The Bahá'í Faith is not recognised under Afghanistan's current legal framework. Previous religious rulings have characterised Bahá'ís as apostates from Islam, and adherents consequently face significant legal and societal risks.

Little reliable demographic information exists because Bahá'ís generally conceal their religious identity. Public worship, institutional organisation and community activities are effectively absent.

FoRB significance. The Bahá'í community exemplifies how legal non-recognition contributes to the effective disappearance of religious communities from public life.

Ahmadi Muslims

Ahmadi Muslims constitute a very small religious minority whose precise numbers remain unknown. Their interpretation of Islam is rejected by many mainstream Islamic authorities, and they receive no formal recognition from the current de facto authorities.

Public religious activity is extremely limited, and available information suggests that many Ahmadi Muslims practise their faith privately or have left the country.

FoRB significance. Although numerically small, the Ahmadi community demonstrates the limited space available for theological diversity within contemporary Afghanistan.

Other Religious Communities

The historic Jewish community of Afghanistan has effectively disappeared following decades of emigration. Small numbers of foreign nationals may practise other religions privately under highly restricted circumstances, but no significant public religious institutions exist outside Islam.

Atheists, agnostics and individuals identifying with no religion remain effectively invisible in public life because openly rejecting Islam may expose individuals to serious legal and societal consequences.

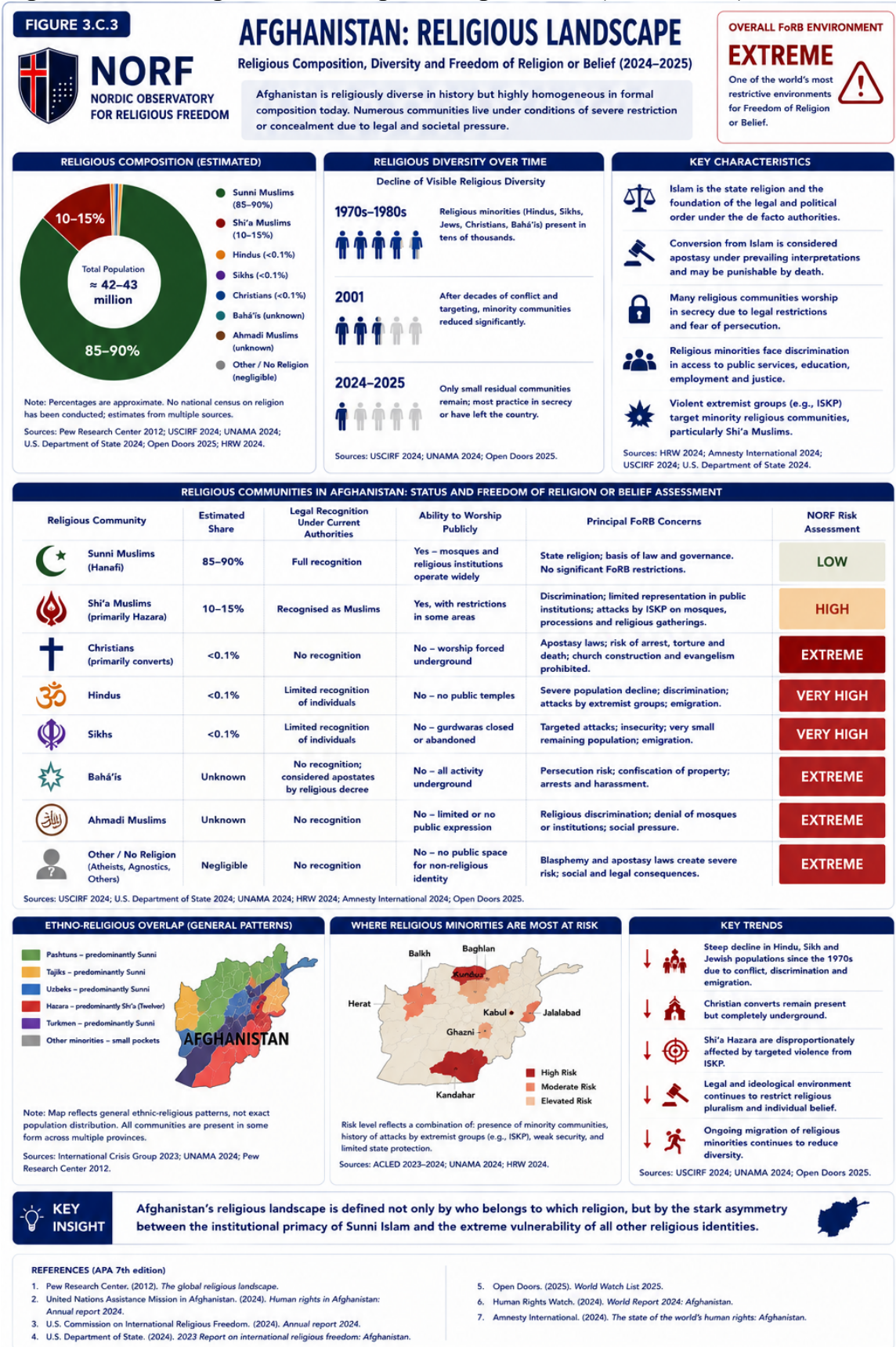
FoRB significance. Contemporary Afghanistan has transitioned from a historically diverse religious crossroads to one of the world's least publicly diverse religious environments.

Overall Assessment of the Religious Landscape

At first glance, Afghanistan appears religiously homogeneous. From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, however, the country's religious landscape is characterised less by homogeneity than by **asymmetrical religious freedom**. Sunni Islam enjoys institutional primacy and constitutes the ideological basis of governance, while minority religious communities experience widely differing levels of recognition, protection and security. Some communities—notably Christians, Bahá'ís and many converts from Islam—are largely absent from public life not because they do not exist, but because prevailing legal, political and societal conditions compel them to remain invisible.

This distinction between **demographic composition** and **effective religious freedom** is fundamental to understanding Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment and provides the analytical foundation for the subsequent assessment of legal restrictions, government practice and patterns of religious persecution.

Figure 3.C.3. Religious Landscape of Afghanistan (2024–2025)



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3.C.4 Legal and Institutional Framework

Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Afghanistan's contemporary legal and institutional framework governing Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) has undergone a fundamental transformation since the Taliban assumed control of the country in August 2021. The suspension of the **2004 Constitution** and the restoration of the **Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan** have replaced a constitutional legal order with a governance system based upon the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence**. As a result, religious authority, executive power and judicial authority have become closely integrated, substantially reducing institutional safeguards for religious diversity and individual religious freedom.

Unlike the constitutional framework that existed prior to 2021, Afghanistan currently lacks a comprehensive written constitutional document defining individual rights, separation of powers or judicial review. Instead, governance is exercised through decrees issued by the Supreme Leader, religious directives, ministerial regulations and interpretations of Islamic law implemented by de facto institutions.

From a FoRB perspective, this represents a transition from a constitutional system with limited legal protections to an ideological governance model in which religious conformity constitutes a central organising principle of the state.

Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The **2004 Constitution**, adopted following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, formally guaranteed certain fundamental rights while simultaneously recognising Islam as the religion of the state. Article 2 permitted followers of other religions to exercise their

faith within the limits of the law, whereas Article 3 prohibited legislation contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam. The Constitution therefore provided only qualified protection for religious freedom, and apostasy and blasphemy remained prosecutable through Hanafi jurisprudence where statutory law was silent.

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the constitutional order was suspended. The Taliban has repeatedly stated that governance is based upon Islamic law as interpreted according to Hanafi jurisprudence, although no comprehensive constitutional document has replaced the previous framework. Consequently, legal certainty has been substantially reduced, with many regulations implemented through executive decrees rather than codified legislation.

This institutional transition has significantly affected the predictability of legal protections available to religious minorities and has expanded the discretionary authority of religious institutions within public administration.

FoRB significance. Afghanistan currently lacks a constitutional framework providing enforceable guarantees for Freedom of Religion or Belief comparable to those recognised under international human rights law.

Sources of Law

The present legal system is derived from multiple overlapping sources:

- Islamic law (Sharia) as interpreted according to Hanafi jurisprudence;
- decrees issued by the Supreme Leader;
- regulations issued by Taliban ministries;
- existing statutory legislation where considered compatible with Islamic principles; and
- decisions issued by religious courts and local authorities.

Because many legal provisions remain uncoded, considerable discretion exists in their interpretation and implementation. This contributes to significant regional variation in administrative practice and judicial outcomes.

International observers have repeatedly noted that the absence of transparent legislative procedures complicates legal predictability and limits opportunities for judicial appeal.

FoRB significance. The absence of a unified codified legal framework increases uncertainty for religious minorities and permits extensive discretionary enforcement.

Judicial Institutions

The Taliban has fundamentally reorganised Afghanistan's judicial institutions.

Civil courts established under the Islamic Republic have largely been replaced by judicial structures operating according to the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. Judges are generally appointed by the de facto authorities and are expected to apply Hanafi legal principles in conjunction with directives issued by the Supreme Leader.

Independent constitutional review no longer exists, and no institutional mechanism provides judicial oversight comparable to constitutional courts found in many democratic legal systems. Opportunities for legal challenge against executive decisions are therefore extremely limited.

For individuals accused of apostasy, blasphemy or activities perceived as contrary to Islamic principles, legal protections recognised under international human rights standards—including due process guarantees and judicial independence—remain significantly constrained.

ForRB significance. Judicial institutions function primarily as mechanisms for implementing religious governance rather than as independent guarantors of individual rights.

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)** has emerged as one of the most influential institutions within Afghanistan's contemporary governance system.

Originally established during the Taliban's first period in power (1996–2001), the Ministry was re-established following the Taliban's return in 2021 and has assumed responsibility for monitoring compliance with religious and moral regulations. Its mandate extends to public behaviour, dress codes, gender segregation, religious observance and other matters interpreted as falling within Islamic norms.

The Ministry exercises extensive enforcement powers through inspections, administrative directives and cooperation with local authorities. Successive decrees have expanded its role in regulating everyday social life, including restrictions affecting women, education, media and public religious expression.

Although the Ministry's primary focus is moral regulation rather than minority religions specifically, its activities substantially influence the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief throughout the country.

ForRB significance. The Ministry institutionalises state enforcement of religious conformity and constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which ideological governance affects everyday religious freedom.

International Human Rights Obligations

Afghanistan remains a State Party to several core international human rights treaties, including the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, which recognises Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion under Article 18.

However, the Taliban has not demonstrated a commitment to implementing these obligations consistently within domestic governance. United Nations bodies, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and numerous international organisations have repeatedly concluded that current policies are incompatible with internationally recognised standards relating to religious freedom, equality before the law and non-discrimination.

The absence of effective domestic judicial remedies further limits the practical enforceability of Afghanistan's international legal obligations.

FoRB significance. A substantial gap exists between Afghanistan's international treaty obligations and the implementation of religious freedom protections under the current de facto authorities.

Institutional Protection of Religious Minorities

Afghanistan currently possesses few institutional mechanisms specifically designed to protect religious minorities.

No independent national human rights institution presently exercises effective oversight of FoRB violations. Civil society organisations working on religious freedom have largely ceased operating within Afghanistan, while independent media capable of documenting religious discrimination have been significantly reduced.

Minority religious communities therefore possess limited institutional avenues through which discrimination, violence or restrictions on religious practice can be challenged.

This institutional deficit disproportionately affects communities already facing elevated levels of legal or societal vulnerability, including Christians, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Hazara Shi'a communities.

FoRB significance. The absence of independent oversight institutions significantly increases the vulnerability of religious minorities and limits accountability for FoRB violations.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's current legal and institutional framework is characterised by the integration of religious doctrine and state authority within a single ideological governance system. Rather than protecting religious pluralism through constitutional guarantees and independent judicial oversight, contemporary institutions prioritise the implementation of the Taliban's interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic law as the organising principle of public governance.

From a Freedom of Religion or Belief perspective, the principal challenge is therefore not merely the existence of restrictive laws, but the absence of institutional safeguards capable of balancing religious authority with internationally recognised human rights protections. This institutional configuration underpins many of the patterns of discrimination, exclusion and persecution examined in the subsequent FoRB assessment.

Figure 3.C.4. Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

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3.C.5 Key Institutions and Actors Influencing Freedom of Religion or Belief

Institutional and Non-State Actors

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan is shaped by a complex interaction between state institutions, religious authorities, security actors and violent extremist organisations. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, authority over religious affairs has become highly centralised within the de facto government. Nevertheless, implementation varies across provinces, reflecting the influence of local officials, tribal structures and security conditions. At the same time, non-state armed groups—most notably the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)—continue to exert a significant influence on the security and religious freedom of minority communities.

Understanding these actors is essential for assessing both the legal restrictions and the patterns of persecution examined in subsequent chapters.

Supreme Leader (Amir al-Mu'minin)

Ultimate political and religious authority rests with the **Supreme Leader (Amir al-Mu'minin)**, whose decrees constitute the highest source of executive direction within the Islamic Emirate. The Supreme Leader exercises authority over legislation, judicial policy, appointments and religious governance.

Unlike constitutional systems in which executive authority is constrained by judicial review or parliamentary oversight, the Supreme Leader combines political leadership with religious legitimacy. Major policy decisions affecting religious practice—including decrees concerning public morality, education and social conduct—originate from this office.

FoRB significance. The concentration of executive and religious authority within a single office significantly limits institutional checks on restrictions affecting religious freedom.

Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MPVPV)** is responsible for enforcing compliance with religious and moral regulations in public life. Since its re-establishment in 2021, the Ministry has assumed a central role in implementing Taliban decrees concerning public behaviour, dress, gender segregation, media, education and religious observance.

Officials conduct inspections and issue administrative instructions intended to ensure conformity with the authorities' interpretation of Islamic law. Although not exclusively focused on religious minorities, the Ministry's activities significantly affect the practical exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief throughout Afghanistan.

FoRB significance. The Ministry constitutes the principal institutional mechanism through which religious conformity is enforced in everyday life.

Religious Scholars (Ulema)

Islamic scholars (ulema) continue to occupy influential positions within Afghan society. Many serve as judges, educators, advisers and community leaders, while others participate in official religious councils that provide theological legitimacy for government policy.

The influence of the ulema varies regionally, but religious opinions (fatwas) and clerical guidance remain important sources of authority within many communities. In some areas, local religious leaders also mediate disputes and shape community attitudes toward religious minorities and converts.

FoRB significance. Religious authorities influence both formal governance and societal attitudes, affecting the implementation of FoRB beyond the state's formal institutions.

Security Institutions

Taliban security institutions—including the Ministry of Interior, intelligence services and provincial security authorities—are responsible for maintaining public order and implementing government decrees.

These institutions investigate activities considered contrary to Islamic principles and cooperate with judicial authorities in cases involving alleged apostasy, blasphemy or other religiously related offences. Security agencies also respond to attacks conducted by ISKP and other armed groups,

although international organisations continue to report significant protection gaps for vulnerable religious communities.

FoRB significance. Security institutions simultaneously function as enforcers of religious regulations and providers of protection against extremist violence, creating a complex relationship between security and religious freedom.

Provincial and Local Authorities

Although governance is highly centralised, provincial governors, district officials and local religious leaders retain considerable influence over implementation. Variations in administrative capacity, security conditions and local religious traditions contribute to differences in the enforcement of Taliban decrees across provinces.

This local variation affects the lived experience of religious minorities, particularly in remote rural districts where informal authority structures often complement official institutions.

FoRB significance. The implementation of FoRB restrictions is not entirely uniform, and local administrative practices contribute to regional variation in religious freedom conditions.

Tribal and Community Structures

Traditional tribal and community institutions continue to play an important role, particularly in rural Afghanistan. Tribal elders (maliks), community councils (shuras) and local jirgas often mediate disputes concerning family matters, inheritance and community relations.

Although these structures are not formal organs of the state, they shape societal attitudes toward religious identity, conversion and minority communities. In some cases, social sanctions imposed by local communities may reinforce or exceed formal legal restrictions.

FoRB significance. Community-level governance reinforces the societal dimension of FoRB restrictions, particularly regarding religious conversion and social acceptance of minority faiths.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

The **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)** remains the most significant non-state armed actor affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan. Unlike the Taliban, which seeks to govern the country, ISKP pursues a transnational jihadist agenda and has repeatedly targeted religious minorities, particularly Hazara Shi'a communities.

Since 2021, ISKP has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on Shi'a mosques, educational institutions, religious commemorations and civilian gatherings. These attacks have resulted in substantial casualties and have intensified insecurity among minority religious communities.

ISKP also considers many other religious groups—including Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Bahá'ís—to be legitimate targets under its extremist ideology.

FoRB significance. ISKP constitutes the principal non-state source of religiously motivated violence in Afghanistan and significantly exacerbates the vulnerability of minority communities.

International Organisations

Despite the withdrawal of most international military forces, organisations including the **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**, the **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)**, the **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** and numerous humanitarian organisations continue to monitor and document FoRB developments.

These organisations no longer possess enforcement authority within Afghanistan but remain essential sources of independent monitoring, reporting and international accountability.

FoRB significance. International organisations provide independent documentation of FoRB conditions but possess limited capacity to influence domestic implementation.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is shaped by a highly centralised governance system in which political authority, religious legitimacy and security institutions operate in close coordination. At the same time, local religious leaders, tribal structures and violent extremist organisations continue to influence religious freedom conditions at the provincial and community levels. Consequently, restrictions on FoRB arise not only from formal legislation but also from institutional practice, social enforcement and persistent security threats. Understanding these interacting actors provides an essential foundation for analysing government restrictions, societal discrimination and patterns of religious persecution in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.5. Principal Actors Shaping Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. <https://www.amnesty.org>

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Afghanistan*. <https://www.hrw.org>

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U.S. Department of State. (2024). *2023 Report on international religious freedom: Afghanistan*.

3.C.6 Political, Social and Security Context

Political, Social and Security Context

Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan is shaped not only by the country's legal framework and religious institutions but also by broader political, social and security dynamics. Since the Taliban regained power in August 2021, Afghanistan has experienced profound changes in governance, civil society, humanitarian conditions and internal security. These developments have altered both the institutional environment in which religious communities operate and the everyday realities affecting the exercise of religion or belief.

Although Afghanistan no longer experiences the nationwide armed conflict that characterised much of the previous two decades, security improvements in some regions have not translated into broader protection of fundamental rights. Instead, political centralisation, ideological governance, humanitarian crisis and targeted violence against religious minorities collectively define the contemporary FoRB environment.

Political Environment

The Taliban exercises effective control over virtually the entire territory of Afghanistan through the Islamic Emirate. No nationally recognised elections have been held since the Taliban's return to power, and political authority is concentrated within the office of the Supreme Leader and senior Taliban institutions.

Independent political opposition, organised civil society and many representative institutions established under the former Islamic Republic have either ceased operating or function only under

significant restrictions. International recognition of the Taliban government remains limited, although diplomatic engagement continues through humanitarian and regional security channels.

This highly centralised political structure allows religious policy to be implemented with relatively limited institutional opposition or judicial oversight.

FoRB significance. The concentration of political authority reduces institutional checks on religious policy and limits opportunities for legal or political advocacy on behalf of religious minorities.

Humanitarian Context

Afghanistan continues to experience one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. According to United Nations humanitarian assessments, millions of Afghans require humanitarian assistance owing to economic collapse, food insecurity, displacement, climate-related shocks and declining public services.

These conditions affect all communities but disproportionately increase the vulnerability of already marginalised religious minorities. Communities with limited access to employment, education, documentation or humanitarian assistance may face additional obstacles resulting from discrimination or social exclusion.

Humanitarian organisations continue to operate across much of the country, although their activities remain subject to regulatory restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities.

FoRB significance. Humanitarian vulnerability amplifies existing inequalities affecting minority religious communities and reduces their resilience against discrimination and persecution.

Social Environment

Afghan society remains deeply influenced by religious tradition, family networks, tribal affiliations and local community structures. Religious identity is closely intertwined with social belonging, particularly in rural areas where community expectations strongly influence individual behaviour.

Conversion from Islam is widely regarded as socially unacceptable across many communities irrespective of formal legal provisions. Individuals perceived as departing from prevailing religious norms may therefore face family rejection, community ostracism, forced marriage, loss of livelihood or displacement in addition to possible legal consequences.

Women and girls belonging to minority religious communities may experience intersecting forms of vulnerability associated with both gender and religious identity.

FoRB significance. Social norms reinforce formal legal restrictions, meaning that societal pressure frequently limits religious freedom even in the absence of direct state intervention.

Security Environment

Overall levels of armed conflict have declined since the Taliban assumed nationwide control in 2021. However, the security environment remains unstable owing primarily to attacks conducted by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).

ISKP continues to target Shi'a mosques, educational institutions, religious commemorations and civilian gatherings, particularly those associated with the Hazara community. These attacks constitute one of the principal contemporary sources of religiously motivated violence in Afghanistan.

In addition, localised violence, unexploded ordnance, criminal activity and limited state capacity continue to affect security conditions in parts of the country.

Although Taliban security forces have undertaken operations against ISKP, international monitoring bodies continue to report recurring attacks against religious minorities.

FoRB significance. The principal contemporary security threat to religious minorities originates from violent extremist organisations rather than conventional armed conflict.

Civil Society and Media

Independent civil society organisations working on human rights and religious freedom have been substantially reduced since 2021. Many domestic organisations have ceased operations or relocated abroad, while remaining organisations operate under significant administrative and political constraints.

Independent media have likewise experienced extensive restrictions affecting licensing, editorial independence and freedom of expression. These developments have reduced the capacity of domestic institutions to document FoRB violations, support vulnerable communities or promote public debate concerning religious freedom.

International organisations therefore remain the principal independent sources of information regarding religious freedom conditions within Afghanistan.

FoRB significance. Reduced civic space limits independent monitoring, public accountability and domestic advocacy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

International Relations

Afghanistan's international engagement remains shaped by humanitarian cooperation rather than formal diplomatic recognition. The Taliban government has not obtained broad international recognition as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, while United Nations sanctions continue to affect several senior Taliban leaders.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan maintains practical engagement with neighbouring states, United Nations agencies and international humanitarian organisations. International human rights mechanisms—

including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Afghanistan, UNAMA and USCIRF—continue to monitor developments relating to religious freedom and broader human rights conditions.

Although international scrutiny contributes to documentation and advocacy, its capacity to influence domestic policy remains limited.

FoRB significance. International oversight enhances external accountability but has had limited impact on the domestic protection of religious freedom.

Overall Assessment

Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment is shaped by the interaction of four mutually reinforcing dynamics: highly centralised ideological governance, persistent humanitarian vulnerability, conservative societal norms and continuing extremist violence targeting religious minorities. While these factors differ in origin, they collectively reduce the practical ability of individuals and communities to exercise Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Understanding this broader political, social and security context is essential for interpreting the government restrictions, societal discrimination and patterns of persecution analysed in the following assessment chapters.

Figure 3.C.6. Political, Social and Security Context Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. <https://www.amnesty.org>

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. (2024). *Afghanistan humanitarian response overview*.

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3.C.7 The Freedom of Religion or Belief Ecosystem

Understanding the Contemporary FoRB Environment

The preceding sections have examined Afghanistan's historical development, religious composition, legal framework, institutional architecture and broader political and security environment. Together, these elements provide the structural context within which Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is experienced.

This section integrates those findings into a single analytical framework describing how the contemporary FoRB ecosystem operates. Rather than viewing violations of religious freedom as isolated events, NORF conceptualises them as the outcome of interacting legal, institutional, political, social and security mechanisms.

This systems-based perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of both the immediate restrictions experienced by individuals and the structural conditions that sustain those restrictions over time.

The NORF FoRB Ecosystem Model

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan is shaped by six mutually reinforcing components.

1. Ideological Governance

The first component is the ideological character of the state itself.

Following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, governance has become explicitly grounded in a particular interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Political legitimacy, executive authority and judicial interpretation derive from the same religious framework.

Unlike constitutional democracies where religion and state institutions may operate independently, Afghanistan's governing structure integrates religious doctrine into executive decision-making.

Consequently, FoRB restrictions frequently originate not from administrative failure but from the governing philosophy itself.

FoRB significance

Religious conformity is embedded within state governance.

2. Legal Framework

The second component concerns the legal environment.

The suspension of the 2004 Constitution and reliance upon religious decrees create a legal system in which protections for religious minorities depend largely upon administrative interpretation rather than enforceable constitutional rights.

This produces considerable legal uncertainty for communities whose beliefs differ from officially recognised religious doctrine.

FoRB significance

Legal uncertainty increases institutional vulnerability.

3. Institutional Enforcement

The third component consists of institutions responsible for implementing religious policy.

The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, religious courts, provincial authorities and security institutions collectively translate ideological principles into administrative practice.

These institutions influence:

- public worship;
- religious education;
- dress;
- gender interaction;
- public morality;
- conversion;
- religious expression.

Implementation therefore occurs through everyday governance rather than solely through criminal prosecution.

FoRB significance

Administrative enforcement shapes daily religious practice.

4. Societal Norms

Formal institutions operate alongside powerful community expectations.

Family structures, tribal authority, religious leaders and local social networks reinforce prevailing interpretations of acceptable religious behaviour.

For converts from Islam, social sanctions frequently precede or exceed formal legal consequences.

These may include:

- family rejection;
- forced marriage;
- community exclusion;
- loss of employment;
- displacement;
- threats of violence.

FoRB significance

Societal pressure reinforces institutional restrictions.

5. Security Environment

The fifth component consists of security dynamics.

Although nationwide armed conflict has declined since 2021, religious minorities continue to face serious security risks.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) remains the principal source of organised extremist violence targeting Shi'a Muslims and other minority communities.

Consequently, religious freedom is influenced simultaneously by state restrictions and non-state violence.

FoRB significance

Security threats amplify institutional discrimination.

6. International Environment

The final component comprises international monitoring and engagement.

United Nations mechanisms, humanitarian organisations, foreign governments and international NGOs continue documenting religious freedom conditions and providing humanitarian assistance.

However, international actors possess limited leverage over domestic governance.

International engagement therefore contributes primarily through:

- documentation;
- humanitarian assistance;
- diplomatic pressure;
- accountability mechanisms.

FoRB significance

External scrutiny increases transparency but has limited direct influence on domestic FoRB conditions.

Interaction Between the Six Components

These six components should not be understood independently.

Instead, they reinforce one another.

Ideological governance shapes legislation.

Legislation guides institutional practice.

Institutional practice reinforces societal expectations.

Societal expectations discourage religious diversity.

Security threats increase reliance upon coercive institutions.

Limited international influence reduces external pressure for reform.

Together these interactions create a self-reinforcing ecosystem that substantially constrains Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Communities Most Affected

The ecosystem affects communities differently.

Community	Principal Drivers
Christian converts	Apostasy doctrine; family pressure; institutional enforcement
Shi'a Muslims (Hazara)	Sectarian discrimination; ISKP violence; limited protection
Sikhs	Demographic decline; insecurity; discrimination
Hindus	Emigration; limited institutional protection
Bahá'ís	Legal non-recognition; concealment
Ahmadi Muslims	Religious exclusion; absence of legal recognition
Women	Religious regulation; gender-specific restrictions
Persons with no religion	Criminalisation; social exclusion

The differing experiences of these communities demonstrate that FoRB restrictions cannot be understood solely through legal analysis or conflict statistics.

Integrated Ecosystem Assessment

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that Freedom of Religion or Belief is determined not by a single institution or legal provision but by the interaction of multiple reinforcing systems.

Legal rules, ideological governance, administrative enforcement, community expectations, security dynamics and international engagement operate together to shape the practical exercise of religious freedom.

Accordingly, improvements in one area alone—for example, changes in legislation—would be unlikely to produce substantial progress unless accompanied by corresponding changes in institutional practice, societal attitudes and security conditions.

This ecosystem perspective provides the analytical foundation for the empirical assessment presented in the following chapters, where government restrictions, societal discrimination, violence, persecution and future risks are examined using the integrated NORF methodology.

Figure 3.C.7 The NORF Freedom of Religion or Belief Ecosystem: Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. <https://www.amnesty.org>

Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: Afghanistan*. <https://www.hrw.org>

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. (2024). *Human rights in Afghanistan: Annual report 2024*.

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U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2024). *Annual report 2024*.

U.S. Department of State. (2024). *2023 Report on international religious freedom: Afghanistan*.

3.C.8 NORF Analytical Assessment Framework

Analytical Framework for Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief

The preceding sections have described Afghanistan's historical development, religious composition, institutional structures and broader political environment. The purpose of this section is to explain how NORF evaluates the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment using a transparent and reproducible analytical framework.

Rather than relying on individual incidents or isolated indicators, NORF assesses FoRB through the interaction of multiple structural dimensions. This approach recognises that religious freedom is shaped simultaneously by constitutional arrangements, institutional practice, societal dynamics, security conditions and patterns of violence.

The framework is designed to support systematic comparison across countries and over time while maintaining transparency regarding evidence quality and analytical confidence.

The NORF Assessment Model

NORF evaluates each country through seven analytical dimensions.

1. Constitutional and Legal Protection

This dimension examines whether domestic law recognises and protects Freedom of Religion or Belief in accordance with international human rights standards.

Assessment includes:

- constitutional guarantees;
- recognition of religious communities;
- restrictions on conversion;
- blasphemy and apostasy provisions;
- equality before the law;
- compatibility with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very Low Protection

The constitutional framework that existed prior to 2021 has been suspended and no comparable constitutional guarantees currently exist.

2. Institutional Implementation

Legal guarantees do not necessarily reflect actual practice.

This dimension evaluates:

- government implementation;
- judicial independence;
- administrative practice;
- institutional oversight;
- access to remedies;
- accountability.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very Weak

Religious governance is implemented primarily through Taliban institutions with limited independent oversight.

3. Societal Freedom

FoRB is also shaped by community behaviour.

Assessment considers:

- discrimination;
- social exclusion;
- family pressure;
- community violence;

- religious intolerance;
- freedom to change religion.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Extremely Restricted

Social expectations reinforce institutional restrictions, particularly regarding conversion from Islam.

4. Security Environment

The fourth dimension evaluates physical security.

Indicators include:

- attacks on religious communities;
- terrorist activity;
- protection of places of worship;
- displacement;
- intimidation;
- regional variation.

Assessment for Afghanistan

High Risk

ISKP attacks continue to affect Shi'a Muslims and other minority communities, while security conditions remain uneven.

5. Violence Against Religious Communities

NORF distinguishes between general insecurity and violence directly affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Assessment includes:

- killings;
- injuries;
- kidnappings;
- disappearances;
- attacks on religious institutions;
- forced displacement;
- destruction of religious property.

Where possible, all indicators are disaggregated by religious community.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Severe

Violence disproportionately affects minority communities, particularly Hazara Shi'a, while Christian converts remain at extreme risk despite the scarcity of publicly verifiable incident data due to clandestine religious practice.

6. Future Risk

NORF evaluates future trajectories rather than relying solely on historical evidence.

Assessment considers:

- institutional stability;
- political developments;
- security trends;
- demographic change;
- extremist activity;
- international engagement.

Assessment for Afghanistan

Very High

No evidence presently indicates significant structural improvement in the FoRB environment over the short to medium term.

7. Evidence Confidence

Every assessment includes an explicit confidence rating based upon:

- source reliability;
- methodological transparency;
- independent verification;
- consistency across datasets;
- recency of evidence.

NORF does not assign confidence according to the seriousness of violations but according to the quality of available evidence.

Assessment for Afghanistan

High Confidence

Multiple independent organisations report highly consistent findings regarding legal restrictions, institutional practice and the vulnerability of religious minorities.

Evidence Sources

The Afghanistan assessment is based upon systematic review and triangulation of evidence from:

- United Nations;
- UNAMA;
- OHCHR;
- USCIRF;
- U.S. Department of State;
- European Union Agency for Asylum;
- Open Doors;
- Human Rights Watch;
- Amnesty International;
- Freedom House;
- V-Dem Institute;
- peer-reviewed academic literature.

Where datasets employ different methodologies, NORF reports them separately and explains methodological differences rather than combining incompatible figures.

Evidence Confidence Framework

NORF applies four confidence levels throughout the report.

Confidence	Definition
High	Multiple recent, independent and methodologically robust sources converge on the same finding.
Moderate	Evidence is generally consistent but contains some limitations or gaps.
Low	Limited, inconsistent or partially verified information.
Insufficient	Available evidence does not permit reliable assessment.

This framework applies equally to legal analysis, institutional assessment, violence data and future risk.

Methodological Principles

Every conclusion in this report follows six methodological principles:

1. Evidence precedes interpretation.
2. Multiple independent sources are preferred.
3. Legal and practical implementation are assessed separately.
4. Violence is analysed as a pattern rather than an incident list.
5. Different religious communities are assessed independently according to documented evidence.

6. Every analytical judgement includes an explicit confidence assessment.

These principles are applied consistently across all NORF country assessments.

Integrated Assessment

The Afghanistan assessment demonstrates why a multidimensional methodology is necessary.

If FoRB were assessed solely through constitutional law, Afghanistan would appear to lack legal safeguards.

If assessed solely through conflict data, many restrictions affecting Christian converts, Bahá'ís or Ahmadi Muslims would remain invisible.

If assessed solely through persecution reporting, broader institutional drivers would receive insufficient attention.

By integrating constitutional, institutional, societal, security and violence dimensions, the NORF framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of how Freedom of Religion or Belief is experienced in practice.

This analytical framework forms the basis for the empirical assessment presented in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.8 The NORF Analytical Assessment Framework for Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. <https://www.amnesty.org>

European Union Agency for Asylum. (2024). *Country guidance: Afghanistan*.

Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025: Afghanistan*.

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3.C.9 Evidence Base and Methodological Considerations

Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Closed and High-Risk Environments

The assessment of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan presents significant methodological challenges. Unlike open societies, where government statistics, independent civil society organisations and media reporting provide multiple sources of information, Afghanistan is characterised by restricted civic space, limited press freedom, constrained access for international observers and the clandestine nature of several religious communities.

Consequently, the availability of evidence varies substantially across different aspects of the FoRB environment. While legal developments, government decrees and attacks on publicly identifiable communities are often well documented, violations affecting converts from Islam, underground Christian networks and other concealed communities are inherently more difficult to verify through conventional data collection methods.

For this reason, NORF adopts a **triangulation-based methodology**, combining multiple independent sources and explicitly distinguishing between documented evidence, analytical inference and areas where available information remains insufficient.

Source Triangulation

No single dataset provides a complete picture of religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan.

Accordingly, this assessment draws upon complementary sources with different methodological strengths, including:

- United Nations reporting (UNAMA, OHCHR);
- U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Reports;
- U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF);
- Open Doors World Watch List;
- Human Rights Watch;
- Amnesty International;
- European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA);
- Freedom House;
- V-Dem Institute;
- peer-reviewed academic research.

Each source contributes different forms of evidence. United Nations mechanisms primarily document legal developments, institutional practice and verified human rights violations. Human rights organisations provide detailed qualitative documentation of individual cases and structural restrictions. Persecution-monitoring organisations such as Open Doors contribute specialised evidence concerning clandestine Christian communities, while academic literature provides historical and comparative context.

NORF does not privilege one source category over another; instead, findings are assessed according to their methodological transparency, consistency with other independent sources and relevance to the analytical question under consideration.

Challenges in Measuring Religious Persecution

Several characteristics of Afghanistan complicate quantitative measurement of FoRB violations.

Hidden Religious Communities

Christian converts, Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims and some individuals identifying with no religion frequently conceal their beliefs due to fear of legal sanction, family rejection or violence.

Consequently:

- population estimates remain uncertain;
- many violations are never publicly reported;
- incident-based datasets underestimate actual exposure to risk.

The absence of documented incidents therefore cannot be interpreted as evidence that persecution is absent.

Restricted Access

International organisations operate under significant access constraints in parts of Afghanistan.

Field verification may be limited by:

- security conditions;
- administrative restrictions;
- communication barriers;
- protection of confidential sources.

As a result, many findings rely upon corroborated interviews, remote monitoring and multiple independent reports rather than direct observation.

Divergent Methodologies

Different organisations employ different definitions of religious persecution.

For example:

- United Nations reporting generally documents violations verified according to international human rights standards.
- Open Doors measures pressure and violence specifically affecting Christian communities.
- USCIRF focuses upon state practice and international legal standards.
- Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International examine broader human rights implications.

These methodological differences explain why datasets may produce different quantitative estimates without necessarily contradicting one another.

NORF therefore reports such figures separately and explains their methodological basis rather than combining incompatible datasets.

Evidence Confidence Assessment

To ensure transparency, every major analytical conclusion in this report is accompanied by an explicit evidence-confidence rating.

Confidence reflects the quality of available evidence rather than the severity of the reported violation.

NORF applies four standard confidence levels.

Confidence Level	Definition
High	Multiple independent, recent and methodologically robust sources converge on the same conclusion.
Moderate	Evidence is generally consistent but subject to some limitations or incomplete verification.
Low	Limited or inconsistent evidence requiring cautious interpretation.
Insufficient	Available information does not permit reliable assessment.

This framework applies consistently throughout all NORF country assessments.

Analytical Boundaries

NORF distinguishes between four different forms of evidence.

Documented Facts

Events or legal developments confirmed by reliable independent sources.

Verified Patterns

Repeated incidents demonstrating consistent behavioural trends.

Analytical Assessment

Interpretation derived from multiple independent sources and supported by established evidence.

Future Risk Assessment

Evidence-informed judgement regarding probable future developments based upon identifiable structural drivers.

Maintaining these distinctions allows readers to distinguish clearly between observed evidence and analytical interpretation.

Implications for the Afghanistan Assessment

The methodological challenges described above have several implications for interpreting the findings presented in Part B.

First, quantitative indicators should be understood as **minimum documented levels of violation** rather than complete measures of religious persecution.

Second, comparisons between different religious communities must account for variations in visibility, reporting opportunities and methodological approaches.

Third, particular caution is required when assessing clandestine communities such as Christian converts. In these cases, structural indicators—including legal prohibitions, documented patterns of enforcement and expert assessments—may provide a more reliable measure of FoRB risk than incident counts alone.

Finally, the consistency of findings across multiple independent international organisations provides a strong basis for concluding that Afghanistan remains one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief, despite unavoidable limitations affecting precise quantitative measurement.

Overall Methodological Assessment

Afghanistan represents one of the most challenging environments in which to document Freedom of Religion or Belief. Nevertheless, the convergence of evidence from international organisations, academic research, specialised FoRB monitoring bodies and humanitarian agencies provides a sufficiently robust basis for systematic assessment.

By combining source triangulation, explicit evidence-confidence ratings and clear distinctions between documented facts and analytical interpretation, the NORF methodology seeks to maximise both transparency and scientific credibility while acknowledging the inherent limitations associated with research in closed and conflict-affected environments.

This methodological approach provides the foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the following chapters.

Figure 3.C.9. Evidence Base and Methodological Framework for Assessing Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan



References (APA 7th edition)

Amnesty International. (2024). *The state of the world's human rights: Afghanistan*. <https://www.amnesty.org>

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3.C.9.B Structural Drivers of Freedom of Religion or Belief Violations

Explaining the Structural Drivers of the Contemporary FoRB Environment

The preceding sections have described Afghanistan's historical evolution, religious demography, legal framework, institutional architecture, political context and the methodological basis for the NORF assessment. Collectively, these provide the context necessary to identify the principal structural drivers that shape contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).

NORF distinguishes between **structural drivers** and **triggering events**. Triggering events—such as individual attacks, arrests or administrative decrees—may alter the intensity or visibility of violations over time. Structural drivers, by contrast, are the enduring political, legal, institutional and societal conditions that enable or sustain recurring patterns of restrictions on religious freedom.

Understanding these structural drivers is essential for interpreting observed patterns of persecution, assessing future risk and identifying realistic policy responses.

Driver 1: Ideological Governance

The principal structural driver of Afghanistan's contemporary FoRB environment is the integration of religious doctrine into the governing system.

Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, political legitimacy, executive authority and judicial interpretation have become closely integrated through the Taliban's interpretation of **Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence**. Religious doctrine therefore functions not only as a source of personal belief but also as the organising principle of public administration, legislation, education and judicial decision-making.

Unlike constitutional democracies in which competing legal principles balance religious liberty with other fundamental rights, Afghanistan's current governance model does not maintain an institutional separation between religious authority and executive power.

Consequently, restrictions affecting religious minorities are frequently systemic rather than incidental.

FoRB significance

Religious conformity is embedded within the governing philosophy itself, making ideological governance the most influential driver of the current FoRB environment.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 2: Legal Uncertainty and the Absence of Constitutional Guarantees

The suspension of the 2004 Constitution has fundamentally altered Afghanistan's legal architecture.

Although the former constitutional framework provided only qualified protection for Freedom of Religion or Belief, it nevertheless established identifiable legal institutions, procedural safeguards and judicial mechanisms through which certain rights could be asserted.

Since 2021, governance has increasingly relied upon decrees, religious rulings and administrative directives rather than a comprehensive constitutional framework. This has reduced legal predictability for all citizens while disproportionately affecting minority religious communities whose beliefs fall outside officially accepted interpretations.

For Christian converts, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims, the absence of explicit constitutional protection substantially increases legal vulnerability.

FoRB significance

Legal uncertainty reinforces institutional discretion and limits the predictability of religious freedom protections.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 3: Institutional Enforcement

Restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief are implemented through an interconnected network of institutions rather than through legislation alone.

The **Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice**, religious courts, provincial authorities, security agencies and local administrative structures collectively translate ideological principles into everyday governance.

These institutions influence:

- religious expression;
- public worship;
- education;
- media;
- family life;
- gender relations;
- religious conversion;
- community organisation.

Consequently, many FoRB restrictions arise through routine administrative practice rather than criminal prosecution.

FoRB significance

Institutional implementation transforms ideological principles into lived reality.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 4: Social Conformity and Community Enforcement

Afghan society remains characterised by strong family structures, tribal networks and community-based authority.

Religious identity is closely associated with social belonging, honour and collective identity. Individuals who depart from accepted religious norms may therefore experience social consequences independent of formal state action.

Documented consequences include:

- family rejection;
- forced marriage;
- community exclusion;
- economic marginalisation;
- displacement;
- threats or intimidation.

This dynamic is particularly significant for converts from Islam, whose greatest immediate risk frequently originates within family or community networks before any interaction with formal authorities.

FoRB significance

Societal pressure reinforces legal and institutional restrictions, producing multiple layers of constraint on religious freedom.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 5: Violent Extremism

Although the Taliban exercises effective territorial control over most of Afghanistan, violent extremist organisations continue to influence the FoRB environment.

The **Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)** remains the principal non-state actor responsible for religiously motivated attacks targeting Shi'a Muslims, particularly Hazara communities. Since 2021, ISKP has repeatedly attacked mosques, educational institutions, commemorative ceremonies and civilian gatherings associated with Shi'a communities, resulting in substantial casualties.

While the Taliban and ISKP differ ideologically and politically, the continued presence of ISKP contributes significantly to insecurity among minority religious communities.

FoRB significance

Non-state extremist violence compounds institutional restrictions and increases the physical insecurity of religious minorities.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 6: Weak Accountability

Independent mechanisms capable of investigating alleged FoRB violations remain extremely limited.

Constitutional review no longer functions, national human rights institutions have been substantially weakened, independent civil society organisations operate under severe restrictions and domestic media capacity has declined significantly.

Consequently, individuals experiencing discrimination or persecution possess few effective avenues through which violations may be documented, investigated or remedied.

The absence of institutional accountability reduces deterrence and contributes to the persistence of restrictive practices.

FoRB significance

Weak accountability enables structural restrictions to continue with limited institutional oversight.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 7: Humanitarian Vulnerability

Afghanistan continues to experience one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.

Widespread poverty, food insecurity, internal displacement, declining public services and limited economic opportunities increase the vulnerability of already marginalised populations.

Although humanitarian conditions do not themselves generate religious persecution, they amplify its consequences by reducing resilience, limiting mobility and increasing dependence upon local authorities and community structures.

Minority religious communities with limited social protection may therefore experience disproportionately severe impacts.

FoRB significance

Humanitarian vulnerability functions as a multiplier of existing religious inequalities.

Evidence confidence: High

Driver 8: International Isolation and Limited External Leverage

Afghanistan's de facto authorities remain without broad international recognition, while diplomatic engagement is focused primarily on humanitarian assistance, counter-terrorism and regional stability.

International organisations—including UNAMA, OHCHR, USCIRF and humanitarian agencies—continue to document FoRB conditions and advocate for human rights protections. However, external actors possess limited leverage over domestic policy.

As a result, international monitoring contributes significantly to transparency but has thus far produced only limited structural change in the domestic FoRB environment.

FoRB significance

Limited external influence reduces the capacity of international mechanisms to improve religious freedom conditions in the short term.

Evidence confidence: High

Interaction Between Structural Drivers

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that FoRB restrictions emerge through the interaction of multiple mutually reinforcing structural drivers.

Ideological governance shapes legal norms.

Legal norms determine institutional practice.

Institutional practice reinforces societal expectations.

Societal conformity discourages religious diversity.

Weak accountability reduces opportunities for legal challenge.

Humanitarian vulnerability amplifies community dependence.

Violent extremism increases insecurity among minority communities.

International isolation limits external incentives for institutional reform.

Rather than functioning independently, these drivers form an integrated system in which changes within one component frequently influence the operation of others.

Communities Most Affected

Religious Community	Principal Structural Drivers	Overall Structural Risk
Christian converts	Apostasy doctrine; institutional enforcement; family and community pressure	Extreme
Hazara Shi'a	Sectarian discrimination; ISKP violence; limited institutional protection	Very High
Bahá'ís	Legal non-recognition; institutional exclusion; concealment	Extreme
Ahmadi Muslims	Religious exclusion; absence of legal recognition	Extreme
Hindus	Demographic decline; insecurity; limited institutional protection	Very High

Religious Community	Principal Structural Drivers	Overall Structural Risk
Sikhs	Targeted insecurity; demographic collapse; institutional marginalisation	Very High
Women across religious communities	Religious regulation; gender-specific restrictions; administrative enforcement	Very High
Persons identifying with no religion	Criminalisation of irreligion; social exclusion; legal vulnerability	Extreme

Integrated NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that Afghanistan's contemporary Freedom of Religion or Belief environment is shaped primarily by structural rather than episodic factors. Restrictions arise from the interaction of ideological governance, legal uncertainty, institutional enforcement, societal conformity, extremist violence, weak accountability, humanitarian vulnerability and limited international leverage.

This finding has important implications for policy. Durable improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief are unlikely to result from isolated legal amendments or temporary security gains alone. Sustainable progress would require coordinated changes across constitutional arrangements, institutional practice, accountability mechanisms, societal acceptance and civilian protection.

Accordingly, the empirical assessment in Part B examines individual violations not as isolated events but as observable manifestations of these deeper structural drivers.

Fig. 9.C.9.B



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3.C.9.C Violence, Intimidation and Security

Patterns of Violence Affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in Afghanistan differs fundamentally from patterns observed in many other conflict-affected states. Rather than a single, uniform pattern of religious persecution, the available evidence demonstrates several overlapping forms of violence involving different perpetrators, different target communities and different motivations.

The most severe documented violence has primarily affected **Hazara Shi'a Muslims**, who have repeatedly been targeted in mass-casualty attacks by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). At the same time, **Christian converts** face an exceptionally high risk of severe persecution because discovery of their religious identity may result in arrest, detention, disappearance, torture or extrajudicial killing. However, because almost all Afghan Christians practise their faith clandestinely, verified quantitative incident data remain extremely limited.

NORF therefore distinguishes between **documented violence**, **structural exposure to violence**, and **evidence-informed risk**, thereby avoiding both under-reporting and overstatement.

Patterns of Perpetration

Analysis of available evidence indicates three principal categories of perpetrators.

Taliban Authorities

Although the Taliban exercises effective governmental authority throughout most of Afghanistan, documented patterns indicate that restrictions affecting Christians and other minority communities primarily arise through:

- arrest;
- arbitrary detention;
- interrogation;
- intimidation;
- surveillance;
- restrictions on religious practice;
- enforcement of religious conformity.

Documented public executions of Christians remain extremely difficult to verify independently following 2021. Nevertheless, multiple international organisations conclude that Christian converts continue to face an exceptionally high risk if their religious identity becomes known because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations applied by the de facto authorities.

Pattern

Institutional coercion.

Evidence confidence: High.

Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

ISKP remains the principal perpetrator of large-scale religiously motivated violence.

According to UNAMA, the United Nations Security Council, Human Rights Watch and other independent monitoring organisations, ISKP has repeatedly conducted attacks against:

- Shi'a mosques;
- Hazara educational institutions;
- religious commemorations;
- civilian gatherings;
- places associated with minority religious communities.

Between **2021 and 2024**, multiple suicide bombings and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks resulted in **hundreds of civilian deaths and injuries**, with Hazara Shi'a communities bearing the greatest documented burden. While annual casualty figures vary by source and methodology, the pattern of repeated attacks against Shi'a civilians is consistently documented across independent reporting.

Pattern

Mass-casualty terrorism targeting religious communities.

Evidence confidence: High.

Community and Family Networks

For Christian converts, the immediate threat frequently originates not from organised armed groups but from family members, local communities and informal social networks.

International reporting consistently documents that discovery of conversion may lead to:

- family expulsion;
- forced marriage;
- honour-related violence;
- community exclusion;
- denunciation to authorities;
- disappearance.

These incidents are rarely captured in official statistics because victims frequently conceal their identity or flee before formal reporting becomes possible.

Pattern

Community-based coercion.

Evidence confidence: Moderate–High.

Communities Most Affected

The character of violence differs substantially between religious communities.

Christian Converts

Reliable quantitative estimates remain unavailable because virtually all Afghan Christians worship secretly.

Nevertheless, independent assessments by Open Doors, USCIRF and the U.S. Department of State consistently conclude that:

- discovery of conversion creates an exceptionally high risk of persecution;
- Christians remain unable to worship publicly;
- detention, torture and disappearance remain credible risks;
- many documented cases cannot be reported publicly without exposing victims or surviving family members.

Accordingly, the absence of publicly verified annual casualty figures should **not** be interpreted as evidence that Christians are not subject to severe persecution.

NORF Risk Assessment

Extreme

Hazara Shi'a Muslims

Hazara Shi'a communities remain the most heavily documented victims of large-scale religious violence.

UNAMA and other independent monitoring bodies have documented repeated attacks on:

- mosques;
- schools;
- educational centres;
- commemorative ceremonies;
- civilian neighbourhoods.

These attacks have caused **hundreds of deaths and injuries** since the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The persistence of these attacks demonstrates a sustained pattern rather than isolated incidents.

NORF Risk Assessment

Very High

Hindus and Sikhs

Although the remaining Hindu and Sikh communities are now very small, they continue to experience insecurity, discrimination and long-term demographic decline.

Large-scale attacks have become less frequent primarily because relatively few members of these communities remain in Afghanistan. However, this demographic decline itself reflects decades of cumulative persecution, insecurity and forced emigration.

NORF Risk Assessment

Very High

Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims

Available evidence regarding physical attacks remains limited.

However, both communities experience profound legal and institutional exclusion.

The clandestine nature of these communities makes comprehensive documentation difficult.

NORF Risk Assessment

Extreme

Geographical Patterns

Violence is not evenly distributed across Afghanistan.

The highest documented levels of religiously motivated violence have occurred in:

- **Kabul**
- **Balkh**
- **Bamyan**
- **Daikundi**
- **Herat**
- **Nangarhar**
- **Kunduz**

The highest concentration of ISKP attacks has been recorded in eastern Afghanistan and Kabul, while Hazara communities in central Afghanistan continue to face elevated security risks.

For Christian converts, risk is generally **nationwide**, reflecting the legal and societal consequences associated with religious conversion rather than geographically concentrated violence.

Violence Indicators

Indicator	Christians	Hazara Shi'a	Hindus & Sikhs	Bahá'ís / Ahmadis
Targeted killings	Documented but underreported	Extensive	Limited recent reporting	Rarely documented
Arbitrary detention	High risk	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Abduction / disappearance	Credible documented risk	Documented	Limited	Limited
Religious site attacks	No public churches	Repeated mosque attacks	Historic gurdwara and temple attacks	None publicly documented
Forced displacement	High	High	Very High (historical)	Moderate
Public worship	Impossible	Restricted but possible	Extremely limited	Impossible

Violence Trends (2021–2025)

The available evidence indicates three distinct trends.

First, large-scale terrorist attacks by ISKP remain concentrated against Shi'a communities.

Second, Christian persecution remains characterised primarily by concealment rather than publicly reported attacks, making structural indicators more informative than annual casualty figures.

Third, the overall reduction in conventional armed conflict since 2021 has **not** resulted in corresponding improvements in Freedom of Religion or Belief.

This distinction is particularly important.

Reduced battlefield violence should not be interpreted as reduced religious persecution.

Integrated NORF Assessment

The empirical evidence demonstrates that violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan follows distinct patterns depending upon the religious community concerned.

For **Hazara Shi'a Muslims**, the predominant threat is repeated mass-casualty terrorism conducted by ISKP.

For **Christian converts**, the predominant threat arises from the combination of legal vulnerability, institutional enforcement and community-based coercion. Because the Christian community necessarily remains clandestine, incident statistics alone substantially underestimate the level of persecution. Structural indicators—including the criminalisation of apostasy, documented enforcement practices and consistent findings from independent monitoring organisations—therefore provide a more reliable measure of risk than publicly verified casualty counts.

Accordingly, NORF concludes that Afghanistan's FoRB environment is characterised by **multiple, community-specific patterns of violence and intimidation**, each requiring separate empirical assessment. Future monitoring should continue to report verified killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, attacks on places of worship and other grave violations separately for each religious community whenever reliable evidence permits, thereby ensuring that severe persecution—including that affecting Christians—is neither obscured through aggregation nor overstated beyond the available evidence.

Fig 3.C.9.C

FIGURE 3.C.9.C



VIOLENCE, INTIMIDATION AND SECURITY PATTERNS AFFECTING RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AFGHANISTAN (2024–2025)

Community-specific patterns of persecution, violence and restrictions
Derived from empirical findings in Sections 3.C.3–3.C.9

OVERALL EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE

HIGH

Multiple independent sources consistently document violence, including terrorist attacks, persecution, intimidation and systematic restrictions.

PATTERN TYPE	AFFECTED COMMUNITIES	DESCRIPTION OF PATTERN	DOCUMENTED EXAMPLES (2024–2025)	FREQUENCY (2024–2025)	SEVERITY LEVEL	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE
A Mass-casualty Terrorist Attacks 	Hazara Shi'a Muslims Sikh Community	- Coordinated attacks on places of worship, religious gatherings, and community spaces. - Carried out primarily by ISKP. - Intent to kill large numbers and instill fear.	- Sept 2024 – ISKP attack on Shi'a mosque, Kabul (10 killed). - May 2024 – ISKP attack near Hazara community center, Daikundi (6 killed). - Apr 2025 – ISKP attack on Sikh gurdwara, Kabul (2 killed).	Frequent (Multiple incidents) 	Severe 	 HIGH
B Institutional Persecution & Apostasy Prosecution 	Christian Converts Ahmadi Muslims	- Conversion from Islam treated as apostasy. - Arrest, detention, ill-treatment and pressure to renounce faith. - Risk of death remains according to legal framework and practice.	- Ongoing arrests and detentions of Christian converts in multiple provinces. - Converts denied legal protection and access to justice. - Reports of torture and forced renunciation.	Ongoing (Continuous pattern) 	Severe 	 HIGH
C Arbitrary Detention & Disappearances 	Christian Converts Shia Muslims (Hazara) Ahmadi Muslims	- Arbitrary arrests without warrant or due process. - Secret detention and incommunicado holding. - Cases of enforced disappearances.	- Multiple reports of converts detained by intelligence services in 2024–2025. - Hazara community members detained without charge. - Families unable to locate detained relatives.	Common (Regular occurrence) 	High 	 HIGH
D Community Intimidation & Social Coercion 	Christian Converts Ahmadi Muslims Hindus	- Families and individuals face threats, coercion and violence to abandon faith. - Social boycott, forced marriage and displacement. - Community pressure to report religious identity.	- Converts pressured by families to renounce faith. - Ahmadis face harassment and threats in daily life. - Hindus and Sikhs report forced conversions of women and community intimidation.	Widespread (Nationwide pattern) 	High 	 HIGH
E Restrictions on Religious Practice & Expression 	Bahá'is Ahmadi Muslims Hindus Sikhs	- Denial of registration and legal recognition. - Prohibition of worship, religious education and public expression. - Confiscation of literature and closure of places of worship.	- Bahá'is unable to register institutions or hold gatherings. - Ahmadis barred from mosques and Islamic education. - Hindu and Sikh cultural and religious activities restricted.	Widespread (Nationwide pattern) 	Moderate-High 	 HIGH
F Displacement & Forced Migration 	Hazara Shi'a Muslims Hindu & Sikh Communities Religious Minorities (overall)	- Targeted violence and threats force displacement. - Internal displacement within Afghanistan. - Cross-border migration due to insecurity.	- Hazara families displaced from mixed areas after ISKP attacks. - Hindu and Sikh families leave rural areas due to threats. - Continued out-migration of religious minorities.	Common (Regular occurrence) 	High 	 HIGH

VIOLENCE PATTERNS BY COMMUNITY (SUMMARY)							KEY PERPETRATORS		EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE LEGEND	
COMMUNITY	A	B	C	D	E	F	OVERALL RISK LEVEL			
Christian Converts							EXTREME	ISKP	Primary perpetrator of mass-casualty terrorist attacks against Hazara Shi'a and Sikh communities.	HIGH Evidence is extensive, consistent and corroborated from multiple independent sources.
Hazara Shi'a Muslims							VERY HIGH	Taliban De Facto Authorities	Enforcement of restrictive laws and policies, arrests, detentions and persecution.	MODERATE-HIGH Evidence is generally consistent but subject to limitations in coverage or verification.
Ahmadi Muslims							VERY HIGH	Local Actors & Community Members	Intimidation, social coercion, forced conversions and reporting of individuals.	LOW Evidence is limited, uncorroborated or based on single-source reporting.
Bahá'is							HIGH	Criminal Networks	Extortion, forced displacement and targeted violence in some areas.	INSUFFICIENT Available information does not permit reliable assessment.
Hindus							HIGH			
Sikhs							HIGH			

KEY MONITORING INDICATORS (Examples)	NORF ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK				HORIZONTAL CONSIDERATIONS	
☒ Number of violent attacks on religious communities ☒ Arbitrary arrests and detentions of religious minorities ☒ Forced conversions and renunciations ☒ Restrictions on places of worship and religious practice ☒ Displacement and refugee outflows ☒ Incidents of social intimidation and threats	EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE	VIOLENCE & INTIMIDATION PATTERNS	COMMUNITY RISK ASSESSMENT	STRATEGIC PRIORITIES (3.C.10)	Do no harm and conflict sensitivity	Gender-sensitive approaches
					Protection of sources and data security	Coordination and information sharing



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3.C.10 Evidence-Based Strategic Priorities for Engagement

From Evidence to Policy-Relevant Engagement

The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Afghanistan's Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) environment is shaped by interacting structural drivers rather than isolated violations. The analysis further shows that different religious communities experience different forms of risk, requiring differentiated rather than generic responses.

Accordingly, the priorities presented below are **not policy prescriptions based on political preference**. They are evidence-based engagement priorities derived directly from the findings of this assessment. Each priority is explicitly linked to the structural drivers identified in Section 3.C.9.B and the documented violence patterns analysed in Section 3.C.9.C.

This approach creates a transparent analytical chain from **evidence** → **structural explanation** → **strategic engagement priorities**, allowing readers to evaluate how each conclusion has been reached.

Priority 1 – Strengthen Protection for Communities Facing the Highest Documented FoRB Risk

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers: 3.C.9.B (Drivers 1–5)
- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

The assessment demonstrates that Afghanistan's religious communities do not experience equal levels or forms of persecution.

Christian converts remain among the communities at greatest structural risk because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under prevailing interpretations applied by the de facto authorities. The clandestine nature of Christianity in Afghanistan means that verified annual incident counts are limited, yet the convergence of legal analysis, institutional practice and independent monitoring consistently indicates an exceptionally high level of risk.

At the same time, **Hazara Shi'a communities** continue to experience repeated mass-casualty attacks conducted primarily by ISKP, while **Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs** remain vulnerable through differing combinations of legal exclusion, insecurity and social discrimination.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Future engagement should prioritise community-specific protection strategies rather than treating all religious minorities as a single category.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 2 – Improve Documentation and Evidence Collection

Evidence Base

- Structural Driver 6 (Weak Accountability)
- Structural Driver 8 (International Monitoring)
- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

The report identifies significant under-documentation of violations affecting clandestine religious communities, particularly Christians, Bahá'ís and Ahmadi Muslims.

Incident statistics alone therefore underestimate the extent of persecution experienced by communities whose survival depends upon remaining invisible.

Strategic Engagement Priority

International monitoring mechanisms should continue strengthening documentation through transparent source triangulation while maintaining strict protection of confidential sources. Future reporting should continue to distinguish clearly between documented incidents, verified patterns and evidence-informed risk assessments.

Where reliable evidence permits, killings, abductions, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, destruction of places of worship and restrictions on religious practice should be reported separately for each religious community.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 3 – Strengthen Accountability and Institutional Transparency

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers 2, 3 and 6

Assessment

The absence of independent judicial oversight, constitutional review and effective complaint mechanisms reduces accountability for documented FoRB violations.

Institutional transparency therefore remains central to improving long-term protection of religious freedom.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Domestic accountability mechanisms remain limited. Consequently, independent documentation by international organisations, human rights mechanisms and specialised FoRB monitoring bodies continues to play an essential role in preserving evidence, supporting transparency and informing future policy development.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 4 – Address Community-Specific Violence

Evidence Base

- Violence Assessment: 3.C.9.C

Assessment

Violence affecting Freedom of Religion or Belief differs substantially between religious communities.

Hazara Shi'a communities face repeated terrorist attacks by ISKP.

Christian converts primarily face institutional persecution, community coercion and the constant threat associated with discovery of their religious identity.

These differing patterns require different analytical and policy responses.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Protection strategies should distinguish between:

- mass-casualty terrorism;
- institutional persecution;
- community-based coercion;
- targeted intimidation;
- restrictions on religious practice.

Analytical aggregation should not obscure these distinct patterns.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 5 – Integrate Freedom of Religion or Belief into Humanitarian and Development Assistance

Evidence Base

- Structural Driver 7 (Humanitarian Vulnerability)
- Structural Driver 8 (International Engagement)

Assessment

Afghanistan remains one of the world's largest recipients of international humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian needs are substantial and assistance remains essential for millions of Afghans.

The evidence presented in this assessment also indicates that existing structural inequalities may increase the vulnerability of certain religious communities if equal access to assistance cannot be assured.

Strategic Engagement Priority

International donors, humanitarian organisations and implementing partners should consider integrating FoRB-sensitive analysis into programme design, monitoring and evaluation where operationally feasible.

This includes assessing whether assistance reaches vulnerable communities equitably, identifying barriers affecting minority religious communities and ensuring that humanitarian assistance is delivered in accordance with the internationally recognised humanitarian principles of **humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence**.

The objective is **not** to condition life-saving humanitarian assistance upon political developments, but to strengthen evidence-based monitoring so that assistance reaches all vulnerable populations without discrimination.

Evidence confidence: High

Priority 6 – Strengthen FoRB Mainstreaming in International Engagement

Evidence Base

- Structural Drivers 1–8

Assessment

International engagement with Afghanistan increasingly combines humanitarian assistance, diplomatic dialogue, sanctions implementation and human rights monitoring.

Freedom of Religion or Belief is one of several internationally recognised human rights requiring systematic consideration within these engagement frameworks.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Governments, multilateral organisations and humanitarian agencies should consider incorporating FoRB assessments into broader policy planning in the same manner that many organisations already integrate gender equality, child protection, conflict sensitivity and anti-corruption safeguards.

Such assessments should identify potential barriers affecting religious communities and evaluate whether programmes unintentionally reinforce existing patterns of exclusion.

Evidence confidence: Moderate–High

Priority 7 – Support Long-Term Evidence-Based Monitoring

Evidence Base

- Entire Afghanistan Assessment

Assessment

The Afghanistan case demonstrates that changes in the FoRB environment often occur gradually through shifts in institutional practice, societal norms and security conditions rather than through single events.

Reliable longitudinal monitoring is therefore essential for detecting both deterioration and improvement.

Strategic Engagement Priority

Future monitoring should continue to collect comparable longitudinal data using standardised indicators, community-specific reporting and explicit evidence-confidence assessments. This will strengthen future NORF reporting and improve the capacity of governments, international organisations and researchers to identify emerging risks and evaluate policy effectiveness over time.

Evidence confidence: High

Integrated NORF Assessment

The evidence indicates that effective engagement on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Afghanistan requires responses that are proportionate to the documented drivers of restriction and violence. The priorities identified above do not advocate predetermined political outcomes; rather, they identify where the available evidence suggests that sustained engagement is most likely to improve transparency, accountability and the protection of vulnerable communities.

A central finding of this report is that **different religious communities face different forms of persecution**. Christian converts remain exposed to exceptional structural risks associated with apostasy, concealment and community denunciation. Hazara Shi'a communities continue to face repeated large-scale terrorist attacks by ISKP. Other minorities—including Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs—experience distinct patterns of exclusion and insecurity. Consequently, future policy responses should remain evidence-based, community-specific and transparent regarding both the strengths and limitations of the available evidence.

Strategic Traceability Matrix

Strategic Priority	Principal Evidence	Related Structural Drivers	Evidence Confidence
Protection of highest-risk communities	3.C.9.C	Drivers 1–5	High
Documentation and evidence collection	3.C.9.C	Drivers 6 & 8	High
Accountability and institutional transparency	3.C.9.B	Drivers 2, 3 & 6	High
Community-specific violence responses	3.C.9.C	Drivers 4 & 5	High
FoRB-sensitive humanitarian assistance	3.C.9.B	Drivers 7 & 8	High
FoRB mainstreaming in international engagement	3.C.9.B	Drivers 1–8	Moderate–High
Longitudinal monitoring	Entire assessment	All drivers	High

Fig 3.C.10



REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 3 – References.

Note: Priorities are evidence-based and do not imply political judgments.

Figure Version: NORF 3.3.4
Country: Afghanistan | Assessment Period: 2024–2025 | Source: See references

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3.C.11 Executive Country Summary

Afghanistan remains one of the most hazardous environments in the world for Christians and for the exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, virtually all constitutional and institutional protections for religious freedom have been dismantled and replaced by governance based on the Taliban's interpretation of Hanafi Sunni Islamic jurisprudence. Religious conversion from Islam is treated as apostasy, public Christian worship is impossible, and known or suspected Christians face severe risks including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and extrajudicial killing. The remaining Christian community survives almost exclusively as an underground network of converts forced into complete secrecy.

The evidence presented throughout this chapter demonstrates that persecution in Afghanistan is not driven by isolated incidents but by the interaction of mutually reinforcing structural, societal, and security factors. State authorities, local communities, family networks, and extremist organisations collectively create an environment in which Christians have virtually no safe space to practise, express, or manifest their faith. The collapse of judicial independence, the absence of legal remedies, and widespread impunity further intensify these risks, leaving victims without meaningful protection.

Across the NORF analytical framework, Afghanistan records consistently elevated risk across all principal dimensions of Christian persecution. Government restrictions are pervasive and systematic, societal hostility remains exceptionally high, and the security environment continues to expose Christians to lethal violence from both state and non-state actors. These overlapping pressures produce cumulative risks that are substantially greater than any single indicator considered in isolation.

The geographic distribution of risk is uneven but universally severe. Urban centres under close Taliban control present heightened surveillance and enforcement risks, while rural provinces combine ideological control with limited state accountability, enabling local actors to enforce religious conformity through intimidation and violence. Consequently, regional variation reflects differences in methods of persecution rather than meaningful differences in overall risk.

The integrated NORF assessment identifies Afghanistan as a **Very High Christian Persecution Risk** environment and one of the most restrictive FoRB contexts globally. This assessment is consistent with the findings of USCIRF, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Aid to the Church in Need, and other independent monitoring organisations, all of which document persistent, systematic, and severe violations of religious freedom affecting Christians and other religious minorities.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that Afghanistan meets the threshold for sustained and systematic violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief. The convergence of state policy, extremist ideology, societal enforcement, and the absence of legal protection produces one of the world's most comprehensive environments of Christian persecution, warranting continued classification within the highest NORF risk category.

NORF Assessment Statement

Afghanistan

Based on the evidence presented throughout this assessment, NORF concludes that **Afghanistan constitutes one of the world's most restrictive environments for the exercise of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).**

This assessment is supported by consistent findings across independent governmental, intergovernmental, academic and civil society sources documenting severe restrictions on religious freedom, the absence of effective legal protection, institutional enforcement of religious conformity, and persistent violence affecting religious minorities. The convergence of these independent evidence streams provides **high confidence** in the overall assessment.

NORF finds that restrictions on FoRB in Afghanistan are **systemic rather than episodic**. They arise from the interaction of ideological governance, legal structures, institutional practice, societal enforcement and continuing security threats. These mutually reinforcing factors create an environment in which the free manifestation of religion or belief is severely constrained for multiple religious communities.

The evidence indicates that persecution is **community-specific** and cannot be adequately understood through aggregate indicators alone. **Christian converts** face an exceptional level of structural vulnerability because conversion from Islam is regarded as apostasy under the prevailing legal and religious framework, making public Christian worship effectively impossible and forcing believers to practise their faith in complete secrecy. **Hazara Shi'a Muslims** remain disproportionately exposed to mass-casualty attacks by Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), while **Bahá'ís, Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs** continue to experience varying combinations of legal exclusion, discrimination and insecurity.

The assessment further concludes that publicly reported incident statistics alone do not adequately reflect the severity of persecution experienced by clandestine religious communities. For Christians in particular, concealment of religious identity is itself a defining characteristic of the persecution environment. Consequently, NORF places greater analytical weight on the convergence of legal analysis, institutional practice, verified patterns of abuse and independent source triangulation than on incident counts alone.

Applying the NORF analytical framework, Afghanistan is assessed as presenting:

Assessment Dimension	NORF Assessment Evidence Confidence	
Government Restrictions	Extreme	High
Societal Pressure	Extreme	High
Violence Against Christians	Very High	Moderate–High*
Violence Against Other Religious Communities	Very High	High
Institutional Protection	Very Low	High
Accountability	Very Low	High
Overall FoRB Environment	Extreme	High

*Moderate–High confidence reflects the inherent difficulty of documenting abuses against clandestine Christian communities rather than uncertainty regarding the overall risk.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that Afghanistan meets the threshold for **systematic, widespread and severe violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief**. Current conditions provide little evidence of near-term structural improvement. Without significant institutional, legal and political change, the risk of continued severe persecution of Christians and other vulnerable religious communities is assessed to remain **very high** over the medium term.

NORF Confidence Statement

Overall Analytical Confidence: **HIGH**

NORF's conclusions are based on systematic triangulation of evidence from United Nations mechanisms, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the U.S. Department of State, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Open Doors, academic research and other specialised monitoring organisations. While access constraints and the clandestine nature of some religious communities limit the completeness of incident reporting, the consistency of findings across independent sources supports a **high level of confidence** in the overall assessment.

FIGURE 3.C.11



NORF

Nordic Observatory
for Religious Freedom

EXECUTIVE COUNTRY DASHBOARD

AFGHANISTAN

NORF Freedom of Religion or Belief Assessment (2024–2025)

OVERALL NORF RISK

EXTREME

EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE

HIGH

1. COUNTRY SNAPSHOT



Population

~43 million

Capital

Kabul

Government

Islamic Emirate
(de facto Taliban administration)

Majority Religion

Sunni Islam (~85–90%)

Largest Minority

Shi'a Muslims (primarily Hazara)

Christians

Small clandestine convert community;
no officially recognised churches

USCIRF Status

Country of Particular Concern
(recommended)

2. NORF FoRB ASSESSMENT

	Government Restrictions		EXTREME
	Societal Pressure		EXTREME
	Violence Against Christians		VERY HIGH
	Violence Against Other Religious Communities		VERY HIGH
	Legal Protection		VERY LOW
	Institutional Accountability		VERY LOW

3. CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION PROFILE



RISK LEVEL

EXTREME

★★★★★

DOCUMENTED PATTERN

Public Christian worship is impossible.

Conversion from Islam is treated as apostasy under prevailing law and religious doctrine.

Christian community exists only underground; believers live in complete secrecy.

Discovery of Christian faith may result in arbitrary detention, torture or extrajudicial killing.

Extreme underreporting due to clandestine conditions and fear of reprisal.

4. COMMUNITIES AT GREATEST RISK

COMMUNITY	PRINCIPAL THREAT	NORF RISK
Christian Converts	Apostasy, state enforcement, community denunciation	EXTREME
Hazara Shi'a Muslims	ISKP attacks, sectarian discrimination	VERY HIGH
Bahá'ís	Legal exclusion, denial of rights	EXTREME
Ahmadi Muslims	Non-recognition, legal discrimination	EXTREME
Hindus	Discrimination, insecurity, forced emigration	VERY HIGH
Sikhs	Insecurity, demographic decline, emigration	VERY HIGH

5. PRINCIPAL STRUCTURAL DRIVERS

Ideological governance

Restrictive legal framework

Institutional enforcement of ideology

Societal conformity and coercion

ISKP violence and extremist activity

Weak accountability and impunity

Humanitarian vulnerability and poverty

International isolation and limited leverage

6. KEY EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Christianity survives almost exclusively underground.

Religious conversion cannot be practised or expressed openly under any circumstance.

Hazara communities remain the primary target of ISKP mass-casualty attacks.

Legal protections for FoRB are effectively absent.

Independent monitoring and verification remain severely constrained.

Hidden communities and fear of reprisal mean documented incidents are a minimum estimate of actual violations.

7. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Protect highest-risk religious communities, especially Christian converts and Hazara

Improve independent documentation and information access

Strengthen institutional accountability and justice mechanisms

Integrate FoRB considerations into humanitarian and development responses

Support long-term international monitoring and diplomatic engagement

8. FUTURE OUTLOOK

CURRENT TRAJECTORY

Stable to Deteriorating

MEDIUM-TERM FoRB OUTLOOK

VERY HIGH RISK

Conditions unlikely to improve in the medium term without fundamental political and institutional change.

9. NORF ASSESSMENT STATEMENT

Afghanistan constitutes one of the world's most restrictive environments for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The convergence of ideological governance, legal restrictions, institutional enforcement, societal coercion and continuing extremist violence creates an environment of sustained and systematic persecution affecting Christians and multiple other religious communities.

10. EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE

HIGH

Multiple independent sources converge on the principal findings in this assessment.

Underreporting of incidents affecting clandestine communities remains a significant limitation.

11. KEY SOURCES

USCIRF (2024)

U.S. Department of State (2024)

UNAMA & OHCHR (2024)

Human Rights Watch (2024)

Amnesty International (2024)

Open Doors World Watch List (2025)

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (2024)

Aid to the Church in Need (2024)

Academic and regional analyses (2024)

REFERENCES (APA 7th edition): See Section 3 – References.

Figure Version: NORF 3.3.4

Country: Afghanistan

Assessment Period: 2024–2025

Source: See references



Fig 3.C.11.B Christian persecution risk heat map Afghanistan

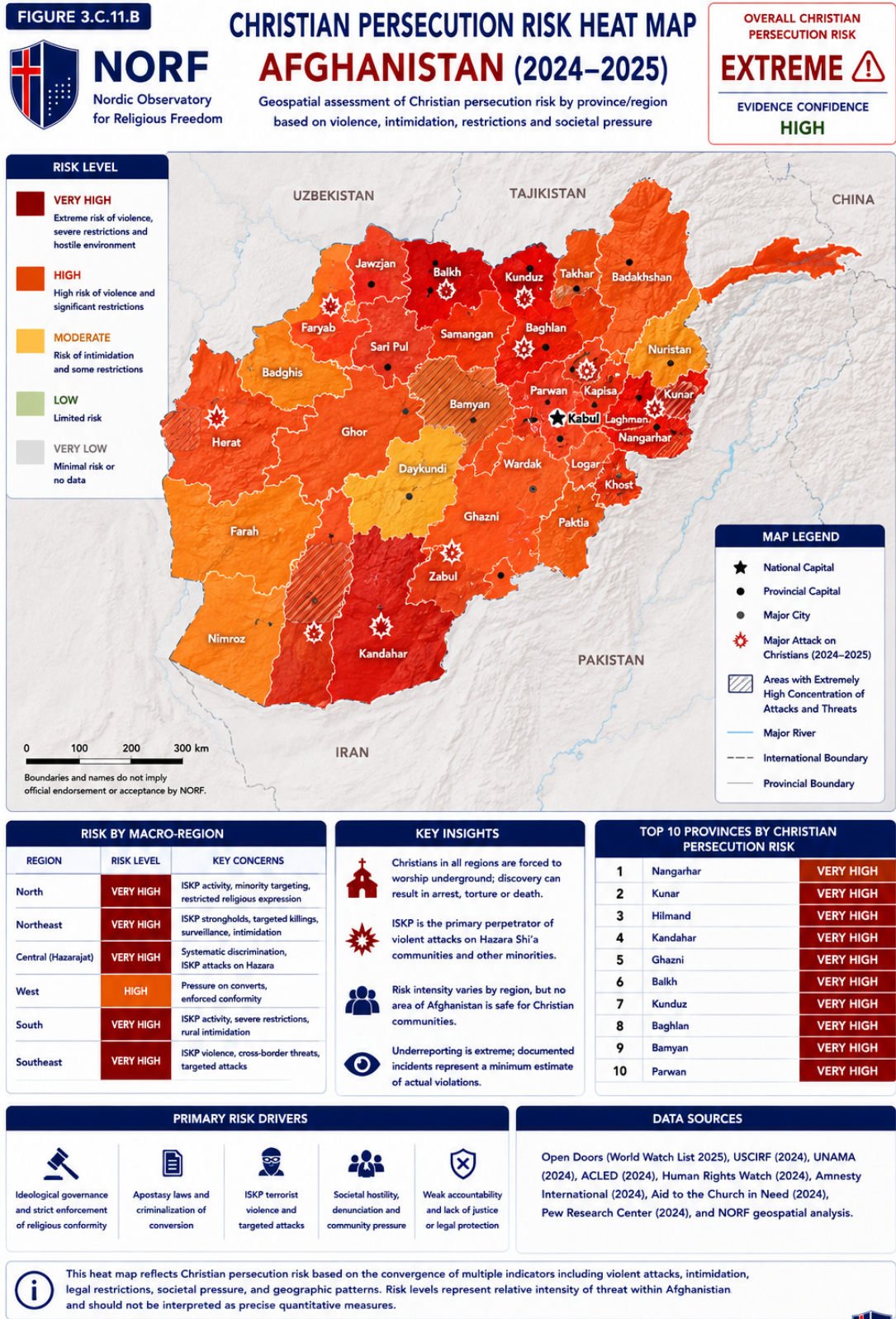


Fig 3.C.11.C Integrated FoRB risk map Afghanistan

