

TLP CLEAR – DISSEMINATION UNLIMITED



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TLP-C THE THREAT TO AFGHAN CHRISTIANS 24AUG26

KNOW THE TARGET – WATCH THE TARGET – LOOK DEEPER -EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

Matthew 11:12 "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force."

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The threat to Afghan Christians

The Christian minority in Afghanistan faces the threat of being violently erased

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The threat to Afghan Christians

The Christian minority in Afghanistan faces the threat of being violently erased

By **Martin Parsons**, 8 August, 2026

<https://thecritic.co.uk/the-threat-to-afghan-christians/>

11 September 1996 was the day Afghanistan's main eastern city Jalalabad first fell to the Taliban. Shortly afterwards bin Laden moved into a compound just outside the city and began planning his future campaign of terror. Maybe that was why five years later the al-Qaeda leader chose that date to launch what we now know as the 9/11 attacks on America.

At the time, my Norwegian housemate and I were some of the first western aid workers to live in Jalalabad. That morning I received an urgent message to go to a meeting at the aid agency's head office in Peshawar, across the Pakistan border. I threw the office keys to Dag and headed to the bus stop. Later that night, he also arrived in Peshawar having had to organise our staff evacuation as the Taliban unexpectedly seized Jalalabad. A few weeks later when the border re-opened we were able to go back and live under Taliban rule.

Not long after that a man in an outlying village told the Taliban, his neighbour, who he had fallen out with, was a secret Christian. The Taliban searched his house and found an Afghan Bible. They took the man outside, told him to renounce his Christian faith and return to Islam. When he refused and held firm to his faith, they hanged him.

It was a harbinger of what was to come, we heard stories of Afghan Christians being killed, some by being made to walk through minefields as human mine-clearers. Some accounts at least could be verified, but what we witnessed on a daily basis was the sheer brutality of the Taliban.

People were beaten up in the bazaar, forced to go to the mosque to pray, bodies of "immoral women" were dumped in the river. Women were banned from the street without a male family member, a decree which potentially condemned thousands of war widows to starvation. While the roads were dotted with checkpoints where vehicles were searched by the Taliban, with each location adorned by confiscated cassette tape as the Taliban had banned music as unislamic.

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The Taliban's predictability

Today, part of me wants to say that nothing's changed. The Taliban's actions are actually quite predictable. They are largely based on a sharia'a textbook known as the *Hedaya* that has been taught in Afghan and Pakistani madrassas for centuries.

There was a furore in the western media at the beginning of the year because part of the Taliban's new criminal law mentioned "slaves" and "masters". Actually, that's because those terms occur in the *Hedaya*, not just in the section on slavery but as a whole series of incidental references in other sections. Slavery of non-Muslims is in fact, legal in all the main schools of shari'a — it is just western style laws which make it illegal in most Islamic countries. So, it is perfectly possible that at some point the Taliban will formally reintroduce slavery and slave trading — just as Boko Haram and Islamic State did more than a decade ago. Still, as far as we know, they haven't yet.

However, what should really concern us is the apostasy law. Execution within three days for any sane, adult male who leaves Islam and refuses to "repent". Life imprisonment with regular beatings for women. While children are to be imprisoned until they reach maturity, with the adult penalty then applied.

That's why for the last five years Afghan Christians, who possibly number 10,000 or so, have been living in hiding, constantly moving from place to place, seeking to avoid detection. It's not an unreasonable fear. Even before the Taliban seized Kabul in August 2021, Afghan Christians had been receiving letters and text messages saying "we know where you are, we're coming for you".

Christians are uniquely vulnerable because, unlike other religious minorities, their existence was never acknowledged by any of the Western-backed governments that existed between the Taliban being ousted in 2001 and their return in 2021. That has allowed the Taliban to deny the existence of Afghan Christians and treat any they find as apostates from Islam, even though many are actually second or third generation Christians.

Before the Taliban seized Afghanistan in 1995-96 the country had sizable religious minorities, including a Hindu and Sikh community estimated to have been 200-250,000

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strong and a small Jewish community with a synagogue in Kabul. To identify them as non-Muslims, the Taliban forced Hindus and Sikhs to wear yellow cloth badges, not wholly dissimilar to those the Nazis forced on the Jews. Unsurprisingly, the prospect of the Taliban's return led to almost all the surviving remnants of these three ancient communities, who had lived in Afghanistan for centuries, fleeing to India and Israel respectively.

Today, Afghan Christians are almost the only non-Muslim minority left. They now fear the Taliban are about to complete the job of religiously cleansing the country of its entire non-Muslim population. Many people claim the killing of various groups around the world amounts to genocide. However, they generally fail to meet the requirement in the 1948 Genocide Convention for proof of the intention to commit genocide. However, the clear statement in the *Hedaya* and Taliban decrees that those deemed apostates should be killed, almost certainly provides the necessary evidence of intention. So, yes, Afghan Christians are at risk of genocide.

The two images of the Taliban

What has changed since the first period of Taliban rule is that the Taliban are now far more tech and media savvy. Since 2013 they have had an office in Qatar, seeking to present a positive image of themselves to the west. In February 2020 they even wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* entitled “What we the Taliban want”, which was published with the subtitle “I am convinced the killing and maiming must stop, the deputy leader of the Taliban writes”.

The Taliban media offensive clearly worked, as less than a fortnight later, the US government signed the Doha agreement with the Taliban. US forces would withdraw in exchange for a mere reduction in the number of attacks and a promise that Afghanistan would never again be a haven for terrorists to attack the USA, as al-Qaeda had done. Since seizing power in August 2021, the Taliban media offensive has continued. One of the most extraordinary aspects of this has been the Taliban's attempt to promote an Afghan tourist industry.

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In fact, it is far easier to get a visa as a tourist, than as a journalist. Of course, no tourist guide who wants to survive is going to show westerners anything other than what the Taliban want them to see. But it is all part of an attempt to persuade the west that the Taliban are now different – and above all that the west should recognise them as a legitimate government. This is a kudos that the Taliban leadership desperately crave, with Russia currently the only country to formally recognise them.

What we are now seeing is significant parts of the liberal media and political establishment in the west beginning to buy into that idea. Even Nigel Farage has talked about negotiating a returns deal with the Taliban, which would appear to necessitate removing them from the UK's list of proscribed terrorist organisations.

The power struggle within the Taliban

To date the Taliban actions towards Afghan Christians appear to have primarily focused on collecting data on who the Christians and who they are connected to. Since their return to power the Taliban have been routinely searching through people's mobile phones at checkpoints and downloading data. This has caused outrage in this conservative Islamic society, as it lets them see pictures of other men's wives and daughters. However, the Taliban have justified this breach of Islamic purdah on the grounds that they are collecting data about dissidents. Clearly they are collecting this data for a purpose, and at some point in the future they intend to use it to cleanse the country of its dissidents, with Afghan Christians being one of the largest such groups.

Whilst some Afghans have been executed for apostasy and there is evidence of extra-judicial killing of Christians, as far as we can tell there has not so far been any large scale killing of Christians as apostates. In fact, on a number of occasions the Taliban appeal court has actually commuted sentences of execution for religious offences down to terms of imprisonment. This appears to reflect a power struggle between the bulk of the Taliban who regard it as self-evident that the *hudud* penalty for apostasy should be applied and a section of the Taliban leadership, who want to hold off on doing so for now. The latter are prepared to countenance delaying this aspect of shari'a enforcement so as not to jeopardise the possibility of western recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate government.

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So, can we trust the Taliban?

Recent history sounds some major alarm bells about the intentions of the Taliban. Whilst the US kept its side of the extraordinarily lopsided Doha deal, the Taliban did not. In fact, by mid-2023, less than two years after the withdrawal of western military forces, al-Qaeda were back in Afghanistan. A report to the UN Security Council that year revealed that at least two Taliban governors and the deputy head Taliban intelligence were actually al-Qaeda members and al-Qaeda had re-established suicide bomber training camps in eastern Afghanistan.

While in February last year, the Taliban announced it no longer considered the Doha agreement valid, claiming its timeframe had “expired”. In other words, the Taliban saw the Doha agreement as a vehicle to allow them to return to power and having done so regarded it as superfluous to their needs.

So, what about the estimated 10,000 or so Afghan Christians? At the moment their fate hangs by a thread. The Taliban have clearly collected a whole mass of data on them and are just waiting to act on it. What appears to be holding them back at the moment is the glimmer of hope western diplomatic recognition. However, that hope is currently the only effective leverage western nations have over the Taliban. If the USA or the UK or any other western democracy actually recognises the Taliban that leverage will be as superfluous to the Taliban’s needs as the Doha agreement now is.

The lives of thousands of Afghan Christians now hang by that gossamer thread — solely determined by how long the Taliban supreme leader Hibatullah Akhundzada decides to delay the imposition of the *hudud* penalty of apostasy on them.///END///

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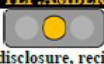
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