

# AFGHANISTAN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies restrict religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced legal restrictions. The government was deferential to prevailing societal opinion on religious tolerance or lack thereof. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Although the constitution proclaims that, "[f]ollowers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of law," it also states that Islam is the "religion of the state" and that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam." The lack of government responsiveness to the needs of or protection for minority religious groups and individuals contributed to constraints on religious freedom. No religious minorities were in detention for practicing their faith at the end of the year.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Within the majority Muslim population, relations among the different denominations continued to be difficult. The Shia minority continued to face some societal discrimination and its relationship with the Sunni majority deteriorated slightly. Non-Muslim minority groups, particularly Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, continued to be targets of persecution and discrimination. Shia and Sunni Islamic clergy, as well as many citizens, interpreted conversion from Islam as contravening the tenets of Islam. Conversion, considered an act of apostasy and a crime against Islam, could be punishable by death if the convert did not recant. Local Hindu and Sikh populations, although allowed to practice publicly, continued to encounter problems obtaining land for cremation and harassment during major religious celebrations. They also continued to face discrimination in the labor market and in public schools. Most local Bahais and Christians did not publicly state their beliefs or gather openly to worship, out of fear of discrimination, persecution, detention, or death.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom and religious tolerance with government officials and religious leaders as part of its overall policy to promote religious freedom. The U.S. embassy continued to send political, civil society, and religious leaders to the United States to participate in programs aimed at increasing understanding of religious freedom and tolerance, human rights, and gender rights.

## Section I. Religious Demography

Reliable data on religious demography is difficult to obtain because an official nationwide census has not been conducted in decades. U.S. government estimates

## AFGHANISTAN

indicate a population of approximately 30.4 million, with Sunni Muslims comprising 80 percent of the population, Shia Muslims making up about 19 percent, and other religious groups comprising less than 1 percent. The Ismailis, who self identify as a Shia denomination, comprise approximately 5 percent of the total population. Leaders of minority religious communities estimate there are 350 Sikh families and 30 Hindu families. Estimates of the Bahai and Christian communities are less clear because neither group practices openly for fear of persecution. Reportedly, the Christian community is between 500 and 8,000 persons and the Bahai community is approximately 2,000 persons. In addition, there are small numbers of practitioners of other religions. There is one known Jewish citizen.

There are three active gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) in Kabul and 10 in other parts of the country; there were 64 gurdwaras throughout the country before the mujahideen era, when many were seized. There are five remaining Hindu mandirs (temples) in three cities: two in Kabul, one of which shares a wall with a mosque, one in Jalalabad, one in Helmand, and one in Kandahar.

Afghanistan's last known Jew maintains Kabul's sole synagogue, and there are also three defunct synagogues in Herat, which are no longer in use for lack of a Jewish community. There are no public Christian churches. Afghan Christians worship alone or in small congregations in private homes. Many Afghan Christians converted while living as refugees in third countries. Chapels and churches for noncitizens of various faiths are located on several military bases, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and at the Italian embassy in Kabul. Buddhist foreigners are free to worship in Hindu temples.

Followers of the Bahai faith have practiced in the country for approximately 150 years. The community is predominantly based in Kabul, although some Bahais remain in Kandahar.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies expressly restrict religious freedom. Full and effective enforcement of the constitution is a continuing challenge due to its potentially contradictory commitments and the lack of a tradition of judicial review. Article 2 of the constitution explicitly states that followers of religions other than Islam are "free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law." Article 7 specifically obligates the

## AFGHANISTAN

state to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes commitments to religious freedom and the right to change one's religion. However, Article 3 of the constitution also declares that Islam is the official "religion of the state," that "no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam," and that "the provisions of adherence to the fundamentals of the sacred religion of Islam and the regime of the Islamic Republic cannot be amended."

Although the constitution expressly protects free exercise of faith for non-Muslims within the limits of the law, in situations where the constitution and penal code are silent, such as apostasy and blasphemy, the constitution also instructs courts to rely on the Hanafi School of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence in a way that best serves justice. The Office of Fatwa and Accounts within the Supreme Court interprets Hanafi jurisprudence when a judge needs assistance in understanding its application. Courts continue to rely on Hanafi interpretations of Islamic law, even in cases which conflict with the country's international commitments to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The constitution also grants that Shia law may be applied in cases dealing with personal matters where all parties are Shia. There is no separate law applying to non-Muslims.

The constitution requires that the president and vice president be Muslim and does not distinguish in this respect between Shia and Sunni. This requirement is not explicitly applied to government ministers or members of Parliament, but each of their oaths includes swearing allegiance and obedience to the principles of Islam.

In July 2009, President Karzai signed an amended version of the Shia Personal Status Law. The law provides that in family legal matters involving the Shia minority, courts should rely on Ja'fari Shia jurisprudence. Some prominent Shias praised the law for officially recognizing Shia jurisprudence, and some groups hailed the law for officially recognizing the Shiite minority.

The criminal code makes no specific references to religious conversion. However, in the absence of a provision in the constitution or other laws, Article 130 of the constitution instructs that court decisions should be in accordance with constitutional limits and Hanafi religious jurisprudence to achieve justice. Under some interpretations of Islamic law, converting from Islam to another religion is deemed apostasy and considered an egregious crime. Male citizens over age 18, or female citizens over age 16 of sound mind, who convert from Islam have three

## AFGHANISTAN

days to recant their conversions or possibly face death by stoning, deprivation of all property and possessions, and/or the invalidation of their marriage.

The criminal code also makes no specific references to spoken or written utterance of insults or profanity against deities, religions, sacred symbols, or religious books; courts therefore rely on Islamic law to address this issue. Blasphemy – which can include anti-Islamic writings or speech – is a capital crime under some interpretations of Islamic law. For males over age 18 and females over age 16 of sound mind, an Islamic judge may impose a death sentence for blasphemy. Similar to apostates, those accused of blasphemy are given three days to recant or face death.

The General Directorate of Fatwas and Accounts under the Supreme Court ruled in May 2007 that the Bahai faith was distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy. It held that all Muslims who converted to the Bahai faith were apostates and all Bahais were infidels. The ruling creates uncertainties for the country's small Bahai population, particularly on the question of marriages between Bahai women and Muslim men. Citizens who convert from Islam to the Bahai faith risk persecution, similar to Christian converts, in theory up to and including the death penalty.

The government does not designate religion on national identity cards and does not require individuals to declare belief in Islam in order to receive citizenship; however, the state, including the courts, traditionally considers all citizens to be Muslim. Therefore some basic citizenship rights of non-Muslims are not explicitly codified. As a result, non-Muslims can be tried under Hanafi jurisprudence. In practice, courts do not always accord Muslims and non-Muslims the same rights. For example, non-Muslims can be married to each other as long as they do not publicly acknowledge their non-Muslim beliefs. In addition, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman, but the woman must first convert if she is not an adherent of one of the other two Abrahamic faiths (Christianity or Judaism). Moreover, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man.

The penal code addresses “Crimes against Religions” and states that a person who attacks a follower of any religion shall receive a short-term prison sentence of not less than three months and a fine of between 3,000 and 12,000 Afghanis (\$60 to \$240), although it does not specifically address blasphemous remarks. The penal code also says persons who forcibly stop the conduct of rituals of any religion, and those who destroy or damage permitted places of worship where religious rituals are conducted, or who destroy or damage any sign or symbol of any religion, shall be subject to a medium-term prison sentence. This is defined in the criminal code

## AFGHANISTAN

as confinement in a jail for not less than one, nor more than five, years and/or a fine of between 12,000 and 60,000 Afghanis (\$240 to \$1,200).

The constitution protects freedom of expression and of the press; however, the media law includes articles detrimental to freedom of religion and expression. Among other prohibited categories, Article 45 prohibits production, reproduction, printing, and publishing of works and materials contrary to the principles of Islam, works and materials offensive to other religions and denominations, publicizing and dissemination (promotion) of religions other than Islam, and articles and topics that harm the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of persons, especially children and adolescents. Many authorities and most of society view proselytizing by adherents of other faiths as contrary to the beliefs of Islam.

The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes offensive and un-Islamic material offers the potential for restrictions on and abuse of press freedom and intimidation of journalists. These rules also apply to non-Muslims and foreign-owned media outlets. An amendment to the media law instructs National Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), the state-run media outlet, to provide balanced broadcasting that reflects the culture, language, and religious beliefs of all ethnic groups in the country. The law, however, also obligates RTA to adjust its programs in light of Islamic principles and national and spiritual values.

The Ulama Council is a group of influential Sunni and Shia scholars, imams, and Muslim jurists from across the country. Its senior members meet regularly with the president and advise him on Islamic moral, ethical, and legal problems. The council is nominally independent of the government, but its members receive financial support from the state. Through contacts with the presidential administration, the parliament, and ministries, the council or its members advise on the formulation of new legislation or the implementation of existing law. Although it is well-represented in provincial capitals, the council has much less reach in villages and rural areas, where decisions are made based on tradition and local interpretations of Islamic law. The council has urged individuals to avoid conduct that could be perceived as insulting local traditions and religious values on the grounds that “safeguarding our national honor and Islamic values is the obligation of every citizen.”

The Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs (MOHRA) is the primary ministry handling religious affairs. MOHRA’s responsibilities include sending citizens on the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages, collecting revenues for funding religious activities, identifying and acquiring property for religious purposes, providing

## AFGHANISTAN

religious teaching to children, issuing fatwas, testing imams, and raising public awareness of religious problems. Both Sunnis and Shias are permitted to go on pilgrimages, and the government imposes no quota for either group.

The licensing and registration of religious groups are not required, although the government has registered some mullahs (religious leaders). Mullahs working for MOHRA are generally proposed for registration by local residents and approved by the ministry; there are no explicit educational requirements for mullahs to register. The number of mullahs working in the country is unknown, but estimates range up to 120,000. The MOHRA has registered approximately 3,500 imams, who receive a government monthly salary of 3,350 Afghanis (\$67). In some registered provincial mosques, local residents pay the salaries of mullahs. Many other mullahs are not registered due to lack of capacity and funding to support more mullahs at mosques, as well as security problems in the provinces. New mosques are opened or built based either on the government's development plans or on proposals by local residents, which MOHRA must subsequently approve.

There are no explicit restrictions on religious minority groups to establish places of worship or to train clergy to serve their communities; however, very few public places of worship exist for minorities due to small congregations.

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) Directorate of Curriculum Development has responsibility for creating curriculum guidelines for public schools. A number of government-affiliated madrassahs in the capital and other provinces where there is sufficient security offer Islamic and secular education in accordance with MOE curricula that include 60 percent religious education and 40 percent general education. There are 902 MOE-sponsored madrassahs throughout the country serving about 250,000 students, including several in Kabul, Balkh, Nangarhar, and Herat provinces. MOHRA also operates 1,300 primary-level madrassahs with about 300,000 students. Graduates from government madrassahs are eligible to attend state universities. The country has 60 higher-level madrassahs that bestow a degree equivalent to a bachelor's degree, including four higher-level madrassahs for female students.

The MOE requires that independent madrassahs be accredited and disclose their funding sources. The Department of Islamic Education within the MOE provides a standardized curriculum to registered madrassahs. During the year, there were no additional madrassahs built using private funds; however, it is difficult to account for all madrassahs, since many continue to operate without registering. Madrassahs must route funding from private or international donations through the MOE or risk being banned. This system allows the government to monitor

## AFGHANISTAN

assistance to institutes of learning funded by known entities. The government solicits donations for the support of madrassahs from Muslim countries and private individuals.

The educational curriculum places considerable emphasis on religion. According to the constitution, the “state shall devise and implement a unified educational curriculum based on the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam, national culture, and in accordance with academic principles, and develop the curriculum of religious subjects on the basis of the Islamic sects existing in Afghanistan.” The public school curriculum includes Islamic content, but no content from other religious groups. The national curriculum and textbooks emphasize nonviolent Islamic terms and principles. However, in 2011, media reports and independent analysts suggested that departments of education at the district level had made agreements with the Taliban to revise the curriculum in provincial schools in return for halting attacks against students and teachers, including attacks on girls’ schools. This curriculum allegedly includes teaching of Taliban-influenced principles. The MOE has denied those reports. There is no restriction on parental religious teaching, and non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools.

There are schools for Sikh children in Ghazni, Helmand, and Kabul. There are no Sikh schools in Jalalabad, despite estimates that nearly one-quarter of the Sikh population lives there. The government provides limited funding for Sikh schools, including for teachers for the basic curriculum. A few Sikh children attend private international schools. There are no Christian schools in the country. Hindus do not have separate schools, but sometimes send their children to Sikh schools.

The constitution allows for political parties provided that “the program and charter of the party are not contrary to the principles of the sacred religion of Islam.” The government bans the pan-Islamic movement Hizb ut-Tahrir – which calls for the overthrow of existing governments to create a unified Muslim state – as an “extremist organization.”

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Prophet Mohammed’s Birthday, First Day of Ramadan, Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-e-Qurban, and Ashura.

### **Government Practices**

## AFGHANISTAN

There were reports of abuse of religious freedom, including one report of imprisonment and detention.

In January, media reported on the case of Baljit Singh, a 23 year-old Sikh. Detained in 2010 on charges of falsely claiming Afghan citizenship after the United Kingdom deported him, Singh was in detention for over 19 months until being released on February 1. Singh alleged that during his detention, fellow prisoners and prison guards beat him on multiple occasions, insulted him, and forced him to remove his turban. Singh also alleged that he was deceived into converting to Islam while in prison; officials recorded and later broadcast his conversion on Tolo television. Officials from the attorney general's office disputed the claims of mistreatment and told media that non-Muslim prisoners routinely converted to Islam in the belief they would receive more lenient treatment. Singh was granted asylum and returned to the United Kingdom in July.

Members of minority religious groups continued to suffer discrimination, and the government often did not protect minorities from societal harassment. The government enforced existing legal restrictions on religious freedom selectively and in a discriminatory manner. During the year, there were no incidents involving individuals attempting to proselytize, but some faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported continued monitoring by government entities.

The right to change one's religion was not respected either in law or in practice. Muslims who converted from Islam risked annulment of their marriages, rejection from their families and villages, and loss of employment. Legal aid for imprisoned converts from Islam remained difficult due to most lawyers' personal objection to defending apostates. By the end of the year, there were no reported cases of national or local authorities imposing criminal penalties on converts from Islam. There were no known cases of converts still in custody from previous years.

There were no reports of persons being sentenced to death or executed for blasphemy.

There were reports of international aid organizations being falsely accused of or being affiliated with proselytizing. Some Christians avoided situations where they might be perceived as seeking to spread their religion to the larger community.

In October Kandahar provincial security forces expelled over 30 mullahs along areas near the border with Pakistan. The government alleged the mullahs were Pakistani infiltrators linked to the Taliban and intent on promoting a violent

## AFGHANISTAN

extremist agenda. Provincial officials claimed the mullahs lacked necessary identity or registration documents to preach in mosques.

As in previous years, Hindus and Sikhs complained of not being able to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs due to interference by those who lived near the cremation sites. On two occasions, Sikh religious leaders organized demonstrations to protest the government's failure to protect their rights. While the government provided land upon the intervention of a Sikh senator, some Sikhs complained that the land was far from any major urban area and in an insecure region, thus rendering it unusable. Bahais also could not attend to their dead in accordance with their customs. Although community representatives expressed concerns over land disputes, they often chose not to pursue restitution through the courts for fear of retaliation, particularly when powerful local leaders occupied their property. There were no known reports of targeted discrimination against Hindus or Sikhs by the government, as opposed to apostates and Bahais.

At least two Sikhs served in government positions, including one as a senior economic advisor to President Karzai and one as a presidentially appointed member of the upper house of parliament. Sikh leaders complained that they lacked political representation, noting that most Afghans fail to distinguish between Hindus and Sikhs despite significant religious differences. They also continued to complain about a lack of guaranteed seats in parliament. The constitution affords 10 seats for the Kuchi (Sunni) ethnic group but offers no such arrangements for other minority communities.

The government provided free electricity to mosques. The Hindu and Sikh communities did not receive free electricity for their mandirs and gurdwaras, which were charged as business entities and paid higher rates. As of the end of the year, the government had not addressed repeated requests from the two communities to receive the same treatment as mosques.

Although Hindus and Sikhs had recourse to dispute resolution mechanisms such as the Special Land and Property Court, in practice the communities felt unprotected.

There were no cases cited under the 2007 Supreme Court ruling declaring the Bahai faith distinct from Islam and a form of blasphemy.

The predominantly Shia Hazara community accused the government of providing preferential treatment to Sunni Pashtuns and of ignoring minorities, especially Hazaras. However, the government made efforts to address historical tensions

## AFGHANISTAN

affecting the Hazara community. In June, Hazara politicians expressed outrage over a book the Afghanistan Academy of Sciences attempted to publish that allegedly portrayed Hazaras as un-Islamic. President Karzai dismissed four academics and denounced the book.

Although four Ismailis serve as members of parliament, some members of the Ismaili community complained of being marginalized from positions of political authority.

The government continued to emphasize ethnic and intrafaith (Muslim) reconciliation indirectly through support to the judicial, constitutional, and human rights commissions composed of members of different ethnic and Islamic religious (Sunni and Shia) groups. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and MOHRA worked together to give women the opportunity to attend mosques.

### **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations**

During the year there were reported abuses targeted at specific religious groups by terrorist organizations. As in previous years, killings of religious leaders and attacks on mosques were attributed to al-Qaida and Taliban members. In October insurgents assassinated the head of the Uruzgan Provincial Ulama Council, Mawlawi Abdul Samad. Sources reported antigovernment elements continued to target religious leaders based on their links to the government or their particular interpretations of Islam. Members of the Taliban also monitored the social habits of local populations, imposing their interpretation of Islamic law on populations inhabiting areas under their control.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, especially in the case of the Hazara ethnic group, which is predominantly Shia, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

Relations between the different branches of Islam remained somewhat strained, despite relative harmony compared to years past. Historically, the minority Shia faced discrimination from the majority Sunni population. As Shia representation increased in government, overt discrimination by Sunnis against the Shia community decreased. However, Sunni resentment over growing Shia influence was expressed widely and often linked to claims of Iranian efforts to influence

## AFGHANISTAN

local culture and politics. Most Shia are members of the Hazara ethnic group, which was traditionally segregated from the rest of society for a combination of political, historical, ethnic, and religious factors, some of which resulted in conflicts.

Although there were reported incidents of unofficial discrimination, and treatment varied by locality, Shia generally were free to participate fully in public life. For example, in Herat province, which has a large Shia population of Tajik and Hazara origin, both Shia and Sunni leaders indicated a high degree of harmony and stated that Shia were free to participate in public life. Many young Herati Shiites, however, cited the low number of Shia in senior and middle-level government positions as a structural problem designed to limit Shia political influence in the province.

During the Ashura holiday celebrations in November, violent protests erupted at Kabul University after Sunni students attempted to prevent Shiite students from performing rituals associated with the holiday. At least two students were killed and ten others sustained injuries.

Although there was some harassment of Ismailis during the year, in January prominent Ismailis were lauded for inaugurating the world's largest Quran. Several prominent non-Ismaili Muslim leaders participated in the inauguration ceremony. Ismaili leaders reported that their community was better integrated into mainstream society than in previous years.

Non-Muslim minorities such as Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians continued to face social discrimination and harassment, and in some cases violence. This treatment was not systematic, but the government made minimal effort to improve conditions. Public opinion continued to be openly hostile toward Afghan converts to Christianity and to proselytizing by Christian organizations and individuals, including in cases where groups were falsely accused of proselytizing. Practicing Muslims and charities operated by Afghan Muslims were wrongly accused of proselytizing about Christianity or conversion to Christianity as a way to discredit the organizations.

In February, an accidental burning of Qurans at an international military base sparked riots throughout the country, resulting in 30 deaths and over 200 injuries. President Karzai called for "dialogue and calm" while other top government officials offered condolences to the families of those killed.

## AFGHANISTAN

The Hindu population, which is less visibly distinguishable than the Sikh population (whose men wear a distinctive headdress), faced less harassment, although both groups reported being harassed by neighbors in their communities. Both communities, although allowed to practice their religion publicly, reportedly continued to face discrimination, including intimidation. In November a group of Muslims threw rocks at a Sikh group carrying out cremation rituals in a designated area in Kabul; local police reportedly did not provide assistance.

Many in the Sikh and Hindu communities did not send their children to public school because of reported abuse, harassment, and bullying by other students. In previous years, Hindus and Sikhs sent their children to private Hindu and Sikh schools, but many of those schools closed since the community's deteriorating economic circumstances and shrinking population have made private schooling unaffordable for most families. Sikh leaders also reported economic discrimination and lack of labor market access.

Local religious officials continued to confront women regardless of religion over their attire and behavior. In rural areas and some urban areas, many women wore a burqa (dress that covers the full body and face, including the eyes) in public. Since the fall of the Taliban, many women in urban areas no longer wore the burqa, but almost all wore some form of head covering either by personal choice or due to societal pressure.

Local religious leaders also put pressure on various social activities. In August, Afghan singer Shafiq Mureed cancelled a planned concert in Herat after local mullahs denounced the concert as "immoral." The minister of information and culture commented that the concert was cancelled to avoid security incidents.

Residual effects of years of civil strife, Taliban rule, and popular suspicion regarding outside influence and the motivations of foreigners led to negative societal opinion of international community efforts and donor projects. These were often incorrectly associated with Christianity and proselytism.

During the year, an estimated 30,000 pilgrims performed the Hajj.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. government is committed to working with the Afghan government to promote religious freedom and tolerance, introduce the public to diverse perspectives, and enhance the capacity of the government to counter violent

## AFGHANISTAN

extremism. The U.S. government discussed religious freedom, religious tolerance, human rights, and combating violent extremism with government officials.

Senior embassy leaders significantly expanded their dialogue on religious freedom, hosting regular meetings with key religious, government, and civil society figures. During Ramadan, the embassy and a number of civilian personnel across the country hosted iftar dinners with key government, civil society, and religious leaders to underscore U.S. government respect for Islam and commitment to religious freedom. The U.S. government also worked with civil society organizations to promote religious freedom and tolerance, such as a program to send religious leaders to Muslim-majority countries with a tradition of interfaith cooperation to gain greater exposure to interfaith issues.

The U.S. embassy formally established a working group to counter violent extremism. The working group coordinates embassy efforts to support traditional voices that oppose violent extremism, expose Afghans to diverse perspectives and promote religious tolerance. The working group pursued a project to obtain moderate textbooks for government-run madrassahs. By law, government-run madrassahs teach a 40 percent secular curriculum to their students.

The embassy actively promoted professional and cultural ties among local citizens, the United States, and Muslim-majority countries with a tradition of interfaith cooperation. The embassy coordinated a variety of exchange, speaker, artistic, and information programs to generate an exchange of ideas between U.S. and Afghan citizens on democracy and civil society, human rights and religious freedom, Islam in America, and other subjects. The embassy worked with a civil society organization to send a group of prominent Muslim religious leaders to visit Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan to discuss religious tolerance and combating violent extremism.

The embassy also sent religious leaders and madrassah instructors from around the country to participate in various exchange programs in the United States. The embassy funded the visits of prominent Muslim American activists to Afghanistan and supported the visits of Muslim scholars from other countries to conduct seminars and speaking tours for religious leaders and civil society organizations to discuss religious tolerance and human rights principles.

Field-based U.S. government staff conducted outreach to provincial community and religious leaders and routinely included them in their local initiatives. During the year, the U.S. military assisted in repairing government-run madrassahs and

## **AFGHANISTAN**

provided equipment to support secular components of madrassah education to stem the outflow of Afghan religious students to schools associated with violent extremists located along the Pakistani border.

The embassy worked with civil society organizations to promote religious freedom and tolerance. This included working with an Afghan civil society partner to host seminars to engage Pashtun religious leaders to promote peace and democracy.

The embassy also provided a small grant to improve access to MOHRA facilities for persons with disabilities, thereby facilitating their ability to register to participate in the Hajj pilgrimage.