

# TURKMENISTAN'S PRISON SYSTEM

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Satellite Images Show What the Turkmen Government Will Not





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## **About Crude Accountability**

Crude Accountability is an environmental and human rights non-profit organization that works with communities in the Caspian and Black Sea regions, which struggle against threats to local natural resources and negative health impacts. Crude Accountability works on the local, national, regional, and international levels in partnership with communities and organizations committed to a just and environmentally sustainable world. Based in Northern Virginia, Crude Accountability also collaborates with other environmental organizations in the United States.

## Glossary

**High resolution imagery**—high resolution imagery is generally considered to be 300 dpi (dots per inch) or greater.

**Islamists**—among the disappeared are those “Islamists” who have been accused of Islamic fundamentalism or non-traditional Islam in the view of the government of Turkmenistan.

**Kartser**—an isolation punishment cell for temporary solitary confinement of those accused of violating the rules in prison.

**Landsat 30m resolution imagery** - Landsat 30 m imagery bands capture pixels that are about 30 meters across (this varies with latitude). In other words, a 30-meter pixel represents an area on the ground that is 30 meters across.

**Maximum security prison**—a grade of high security level used by [prison](#) systems in various countries, which pose a higher level of [security](#) to prevent prisoners from escaping and/or doing harm to other inmates or security guards.

**Minimum security prison**—a prison with the lowest levels of restrictions on prisoners' movements and activities.

**NMRs**—Nelson Mandela Rules

**Novemberists**—the disappeared who were arrested in November/December 2002 and accused of allegedly organizing a coup against then president Niyazov.

**OSCE**—Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

**Parasha**—a receptacle for excrement in a prison cell, connected to a sewer, or, less commonly, portable.

**Planet SkySat satellites**—a constellation of 21 high-resolution Earth imaging **satellites** owned and operated by the commercial company **Planet Labs**.

**Shizo**—(шизо—штрафной изолятор) a department of a correctional institution where cells for violators of the detention regime are located. A person placed in a punishment cell is significantly limited in his rights.

**UNSMRTP**—UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

**UNWGEID**—United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary

# Introduction

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Turkmenistan is a small country in Central Asia, bordered by the Caspian Sea, Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. This country of approximately 6 million people<sup>1</sup> is an important player in the international energy markets, with the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world. It is also, as Human Rights Watch states, “one of the world’s most oppressive and closed countries.”<sup>2</sup> Turkmenistan lacks a free press, a fair and transparent legal system, and space for civil society. The Turkmen government also represses those who express their religious freedom, denies COVID within its borders, and restricts freedom of movement for its citizens, even inside the country. It is ranked by Freedom House as “not free” and 2 out of 100 on the free scale, with Tibet, Syria, and South Sudan tied for first place as least free.<sup>3</sup>

Turkmenistan is also host to a brutal and opaque prison system, in which hundreds of individuals are detained, imprisoned, tortured, and forcibly disappeared. According to the 2021 World Prison Brief, 35,000 people are incarcerated in Turkmenistan.<sup>4</sup> The number of prisoners per 1,000 people in Turkmenistan is higher than that of its Central Asian counterparts, and considerably higher than in most western European countries.<sup>5</sup> Because the Turkmen government has not provided prison access to international observers such as the International Red Cross and UN observers, it is difficult to know for certain what the actual numbers are.

Prison conditions in Turkmenistan are notoriously brutal, as we reported in 2014 in “Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan.”<sup>6</sup> Inhumane conditions, an unjust

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=TM>, accessed May 4, 2023. Some sources put the population much lower: <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-population-decline-exodus/31355045.html>, July 12, 2021, accessed May 4, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/turkmenistan>, accessed March 30, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>, accessed March 30, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/turkmenistan>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/2010102\\_5\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/2010102_5_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> <https://provetheyarealive.org/ovadan-depe-medieval-torture-in-modern-turkmenistan/>.

legal system, inadequately trained prison staff, and a brutal and authoritarian regime that carries out collective punishment make for conditions in which prisoners and guards alike live in fear of a misstep.

This report focuses on the prison system in Turkmenistan using a combination of analysis of satellite imagery, witness accounts, and research conducted by Omanos Analytics, the Prove They Are Alive! campaign, and Crude Accountability. It builds on previous efforts we began in 2014, and attempts to fill in some of the remaining holes on this topic.

In this report we explain why we have selected the sites included for analysis, the methodology and findings of our satellite imagery analysis, the implications of these findings on human rights in Turkmenistan, and how international human rights standards are violated by the Turkmen government. We close with a conclusion and recommendations for the international community.



# Site Selection

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This report focuses on two main sites, which were identified by Crude Accountability and the Prove They Are Alive! campaign as locations of possible new construction within Turkmenistan’s prison system. The sites are Akdash prison-old and new-and the Ovadan Depe prisons complex-with a possible new site, which is the subject of much speculation. These prisons were selected because they have maximum security regimes and imprison political prisoners as well as those convicted of non-political crimes and others caught up in the prison system. Identified by colleagues as areas of possible prison expansion, we worked together with Omanos Analytics to try to understand what the detected changes mean in the context of the prison system.



Fig. 1 A map of Turkmenistan. Landsat satellite image obtained October 2023.

## Akdash Prison

Akdash prison is located near the village of Akdash, approximately 15 kilometers from the city of Turkmenbashi, near the Caspian Sea coast.<sup>7</sup> It is a penal colony with minimum security, maximum security, and special security regimes.<sup>8</sup> Many prisoners sent to Akdash worked in the country's police system, including in the security services, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior, and the National Security Ministry.<sup>9</sup>

In 2010, the estimated prisoner population at Akdash was 1,732 inmates—three times more than the colony was designed to accommodate.<sup>10</sup> The Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights and Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association reported cases of ill treatment and torture at the facility, including beatings, inadequate hygiene and nutrition, and housing of prisoners ill with tuberculosis and other contagious diseases with healthy prisoners.<sup>11</sup>

Reports of expansion of the facility at Akdash, presumably at least in part due to reports of overcrowding, match the information gathered by Omanos via satellite imagery, to be discussed below.

## Ovadan Depe Prison

Ovadan Depe is the name of a settlement in the Karakum desert approximately 50 kilometers from Ashgabat. Ovadan Depe is also the location of two prisons: one is a "penitentiary regime colony,"<sup>12</sup> and the other is a "maximum security regime,"<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 8.

<sup>10</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p.8

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

essentially constituting two different prisons. The maximum security regime (shaped like the Cyrillic letter Ж) of Ovadan Depe (AH-T/2) holds most of the Novemberists<sup>14</sup> and many other political prisoners who are considered to be a threat to the regime.<sup>15</sup> To the southeast of the Ж shaped wing of the prison lies the colony for serious crime recidivists (AH-K/3). According to a Prove! campaign source, in 2007, the population of Ovadan Depe was approximately 1,000 prisoners.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, sources have communicated to the campaign that a third colony may be located in Ovadan Depe following the closing of a penitentiary regime colony (BLT/5) near Turkmenbashi in 2008.<sup>17</sup> Some of the prisoners who had been held at this facility in Turkmenbashi were transferred to a temporary colony at Ovadan Depe under the same designation (BLT/5). The capacity of this third colony is alleged to be 400.<sup>18</sup> In 2008, following unrest in Ashgabat,<sup>19</sup> the Turkmen government also arrested and sent alleged Islamists to Ovadan Depe.<sup>20</sup>

To date, no international monitors have been allowed into the prison; much of what we know comes from witness accounts and satellite imagery gathered in 2014 by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the Prove! campaign.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In November 2002, a group of individuals allegedly attempted to overthrow the Turkmen government in a coup attempt. Those arrested, charged, imprisoned, and in many cases disappeared, are known as the Novemberists.

<sup>15</sup> Prove They Are Alive! source.

<sup>16</sup> Prove They Are Alive! source.

<sup>17</sup> <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/06/25/jail/>

It should be noted that the prison was demolished allegedly due to underpopulation

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/201010\\_25\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/201010_25_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 18

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.rferl.org/a/Shootout\\_Reported\\_In\\_Turkmen\\_Capital/1199774.html](https://www.rferl.org/a/Shootout_Reported_In_Turkmen_Capital/1199774.html).

<sup>20</sup> Prove They Are Alive! source.

<sup>21</sup> <https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Final-O-D-Report-September-2014-compressed.pdf>

# Methodology & Findings

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In June 2022, Crude Accountability partnered with data analysts at Omanos Analytics to obtain satellite images of the Turkmen prison sites at Ovadan Depe and Akdash. This report uses that information to expand on Crude Accountability's 2014 report on Ovadan Depe,<sup>22</sup> in response to accounts received from contacts in-country that both prison sites have undergone significant development in the ensuing years.

In this section, we utilize the satellite imagery and objective analysis provided by Omanos Analytics to describe how the prison sites at Akdash and Ovadan Depe have evolved in recent years to draw conclusions regarding the implications of these changes for conditions at the sites. These conclusions are Crude Accountability's alone, supported by our organization's years of experience researching the Turkmen prison system. Witness accounts help to both corroborate our findings, and shed light on areas of confusion.<sup>23</sup> Despite these resources, some questions remain unanswered about these prison sites, which only further emphasizes the need for transparency on the part of the Turkmen government.

## Akdash Prison

### *Old Akdash*

Construction at the Akdash prison site began in 1996.<sup>24</sup> Human rights defenders have tracked activity at the prison since the 1990s, and numerous images of the site are available for viewing. The site referred to as 'Old Akdash' was well-covered with free high-resolution imagery up until the end of 2021. In the interest of

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<sup>22</sup> <https://provetheyarealive.org/ovadan-depe-medieval-torture-in-modern-turkmenistan/>.

<sup>23</sup> The Prove They Are Alive! campaign and Crude Accountability have spoken with individuals who either were prisoners in the Turkmen prison system or are family members of those who have been imprisoned.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 8.

including more contemporary imagery, Omanos Analytics obtained high resolution images of the Old Akdash prison site from 2022.

Periodic additions of small buildings, constructed from a range of materials (perhaps even some informal structures), suggest that the prison population of Old Akdash has steadily risen between 2004 and 2021.

The earliest satellite image of the site included in this report is dated June 2004, acting as a useful baseline image taken prior to the rapid development of the 2010s.



*Fig. 2 High resolution imagery of the Akdash prison site, dated June 2004. Imagery shows the Old Akdash compound.*

High resolution imagery dated July 2013, just prior to construction of the 'New Akdash' site, shows efforts to enlarge the compound at Old Akdash through expansion of its perimeter wall, as well as construction of what Crude Accountability refers to as a second prison building, which features 8 "open air cells." By June 2016, when the next batch of satellite imagery was captured, the expanded perimeter wall had been finished, and small-scale expansion of infrastructure within this perimeter was visible. Obtaining imagery from 2016 was requested in response to reports from Crude Accountability contacts that active development at the Akdash prison site was ongoing from 2014; satellite imagery corroborated these reports.





*Fig. 3 High resolution imagery of the Akdash prison site, dated June 14, 2016. Construction of the new perimeter wall is almost complete.*

High resolution imagery from Google Earth, dated February 2019, revealed that the main checkpoint building of Old Akdash had been demolished and rebuilt to connect the complex to New Akdash, which shares walls and supporting infrastructure with Old Akdash. Further small scale infrastructure expansion, particularly in the areas surrounding the checkpoint building, continued, and the previously “open air cells” have now been covered with a roof.



*Fig. 4 High resolution image from Google Earth, dated February 21, 2019. Imagery shows the construction of New Akdash and infrastructure within the perimeter wall of Old Akdash*

Since 2020, satellite imagery has shown little activity at the Old Akdash site, apart from continued construction of small buildings within its perimeter, and the expansion of cultivated land along the southern and eastern edges of the perimeter. The most recent satellite image obtained of Old Akdash is dated August 1, 2022, and was captured by Omanos Analytics using Planet SkySat satellites; it was taken with a resolution of about 60 cm. This expansion of cultivated land, visible in the aforementioned high resolution image, confirms that the facility at Old Akdash is still in use as of mid-2022.





Fig. 5 High resolution imagery obtained from Planet SkySat satellite, dated 1 August 2022.

## *New Akdash*

Landsat 30m resolution imagery obtained by Omanos Analytics showed construction in the area north of Old Akdash from at least late 2014, consistent with reports from Crude Accountability contacts. Imagery from the Sentinel 2



satellite, captured at 10m resolution in 2015, showed ample evidence of development at the site of 'New Akdash'.

Given the close proximity of the New Akdash site to Old Akdash (they share walls and supporting infrastructure), free high resolution imagery of the site was available through 2021, and utilized as part of this report. This proximity to Old Akdash also makes it highly likely that New Akdash is a prison.

High resolution imagery captured in both May and June of 2016 shows evidence of active development on-site throughout the year; incomplete buildings as of the May 2016 imagery appear to be completed in the June 2016 imagery. Construction of new buildings and the completion of the sites' larger structures was ongoing throughout 2016, and a large outdoor athletic facility was also constructed around this time, featuring a running track and sports fields.

Satellite imagery dated February 2019 indicates that construction at New Akdash was largely completed. Between early 2019 and late 2021, multiple high resolution images were available; these images showed little evidence of change at the New Akdash site, apart from vehicles being located in different positions between images. However, an area of cultivated land located just outside the perimeter wall of the site appears to have been in active use throughout 2019-2021.



*Fig. 6 New Akdash, constructed next to Old Akdash in June 2016, and appearing to be complete in early 2019.*

The most contemporary satellite image obtained of New Akdash is dated August 1, 2022, and was captured by Omanos Analytics using Planet SkySat satellites; it was taken with a resolution of about 60 cm. This imagery continued to show little evidence of development at the sites, lending further credence to reports received by Crude Accountability that the facility at New Akdash is not yet fully operational, owing to financial instability within Turkmenistan connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, among other factors.



*Fig. 7 High resolution imagery from Planet SkySat satellites dated August 1, 2022. No further development is visible in August 2022.*

## **Ovadan Depe Prison**

Satellite imagery confirms that construction and development in varying forms has occurred at the Ovadan Depe prison complex between 2009 and 2022. The two main prison compounds at Ovadan Depe have undergone expansion from mid-2014. These developments suggest an increase in Ovadan Depe's prison population, however this cannot be confirmed by satellite imagery. Ongoing maintenance and continued use of small scale agricultural land into 2022 indicates that these facilities are still in use.

Unlike the Akdash prison site, the Ovadan Depe prison site was only covered with free high-resolution imagery up to 2014. Therefore, Omanos Analytics was tasked with obtaining additional satellite imagery of the site from 2021 and 2022. Crude Accountability's 2014 report on Ovadan Depe, undertaken in partnership with the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), features high resolution satellite imagery from 2002, 2009, and 2010. This report picks up where that report left off.

High resolution imagery, taken from Google Earth and dated July 2010, shows the original facilities of Ovadan Depe, consisting of two main prison compounds, both with high double perimeter walls with guard towers on each corner.



*Fig. 8 High resolution imagery of Ovadan Depe from Google Earth dated July 2010. Top left panel shows the whole site, including the outer perimeter "control strip." Top right panel shows a close up of the construction area within the site. Bottom left shows the southern compound of Ovadan Depe. Bottom right shows the northern compound of Ovadan Depe.*

A third walled area, connected to the northernmost of these compounds, appears to be for prison and security personnel, given the presence of what is seemingly a garage/storage area, as well as the comparatively lax security (single layered perimeter wall). High resolution imagery shows active construction ongoing in an area just west of Ovadan Depe's southernmost compound (the 'active construction site'), as well as a trench encircling the Ovadan Depe site (~0.5 to 1 km from the walled compounds). Crude Accountability contacts referred to this as the outer "control strip" perimeter of the complex.



Between 2010 and 2012, little change was visible within the Ovadan Depe complex apart from evidence of continued development within the active construction site, where the foundations for 3-4 buildings were added.

The next batch of imagery, gathered from Google Earth and dated September 2014, marks a period of active expansion. We chose this time frame in response to reports received from Crude Accountability contacts regarding rapid development on the Ovadan Depe prison site. These reports of rapid development were substantiated by satellite imagery, which shows the two main prison compounds at Ovadan Depe under active expansion throughout 2014. The foundation for a third large building within the southern compound was added (see bottom left panel below, Figure 9), with approximately the same dimensions as the two existing main buildings within the complex. Given that there are walls surrounding these main buildings, these are likely for prisoner accommodation; the completion of the third large building could increase the capacity of the compound by up to 50%. While there were no visible additions made to the buildings within the northern compound, the expansion of a drainage/wastewater channel outside of its perimeter may indicate an increase in prison capacity, although Ovadan Depe, as far as the campaign is aware, has never been filled to capacity.



*Fig. 9 High resolution imagery of Ovadan Depe from Google Earth dated September 2014. Top left panel shows the facilities within the site perimeter. Top right panel shows a close-up of the construction area within the site. Bottom left shows the southern compound of Ovadan Depe, bottom right shows the northern compound of Ovadan Depe.*

New buildings located in the area south of the main complex at Ovadan Depe were visible in imagery from 2018 obtained by the Prove They Are Alive! campaign. The lack of heavy duty walls surrounding these buildings indicates that they are not used for prisoner accommodation, and may rather be used for prisoner visitation. As of 2014, there were reports of visitation at Ovadan in the old prison, which continued, including for previously disappeared prisoners accused of Islamic extremism.

Imagery from Bing Maps, dated September 2021, was obtained by Omanos Analytics, who utilized imagery from the Sentinel 2 satellite to accurately date the Bing Maps image. Also obtained by Omanos Analytics was satellite imagery of Ovadan Depe dated August 1, 2022, captured using Planet SkySat satellites; it was taken with a resolution of about 60 cm. These images showed evidence of continued resurfacing and maintenance work, as well as the completion of the projects undertaken between 2012 and 2014 on site. Couple this with continued use of cultivated land, as well as the movement of vehicles between recent images taken of the site, and it can be stated with confidence that Ovadan Depe prison is still in use.



*Fig. 10 High resolution imagery from Planet SkySat satellites dated August 2022. Top left panel shows the facilities within the site perimeter. Top right panel shows a close-up of the construction area within the site. Bottom left shows the southern compound of Ovadan Depe, bottom right shows the northern compound of Ovadan Depe.*

## **Unknown Site—A Prison or Something Else?**

Unsubstantiated rumors of a 'New Ovadan', not referring to expansion of the original Ovadan Depe prison complex, may refer to a large new facility located along the road to Ovadan Depe (~20 km east of Ovadan). Construction of this 'Unknown Site' began in 2014; it appears to be completed and in use as of mid-2022. The compound cannot be confirmed as a prison, however it shares many architectural similarities with 'New Akdash'. Although there are several hypotheses about the use of this site, our research indicates that it is very probably related to Ovadan Depe prison.

### *Hypotheses About the Purpose of the Unknown Site*

Utilizing satellite imagery of Ovadan Depe and Old Akdash we can engage in some informed speculation as to the purpose of the Unknown Site.

High resolution satellite imagery of the Unknown Site was available from Google Earth in 2008, 2009, 2014, 2017, and multiple dates throughout 2018. Omanos Analytics was tasked with obtaining contemporary satellite imagery of the site from 2022 as well.

The Unknown Site shares a number of architectural similarities with the New Akdash compound, which, given its close proximity to Old Akdash, a confirmed prison, lends a certain plausibility to reports received by Crude Accountability that New Akdash and the Unknown Site (New Ovadan) could have been built according to new standards of prison building in Turkmenistan. The structure of each site's perimeter wall is similar; both are single layered, with the side on which the entrance is placed appearing to be partially transparent, and the other three sides appearing to be solid concrete. Both sites also house outdoor exercise or sports facilities within their perimeter walls. Additionally, the buildings within New Akdash and the Unknown Site are similar in both size and appearance, although the roofing materials are different.

High resolution imagery dated September 2014 shows initial construction underway at the Unknown Site, which is consistent with reports received by Crude Accountability that construction on 'New Ovadan' began the same year. Further



high resolution imagery, dated September 2017, shows a large perimeter wall constructed on site; the buildings within this wall were at varying stages of completion. Imagery captured in October 2018 was helpful in tracking the pace and scale of development on site during a period of high activity. By this time, roofs were in place on most buildings, however one building towards the southeast of the compound remained partially roofed throughout 2018. It is unclear whether this was due to incomplete construction, or if these were intended to be “open air cells.” One building located in the southeastern corner of the compound appears to have a ramp leading underground, suggesting further underground facilities at the site.



*Fig. 11 High resolution imagery from Google Earth dated September 2014. Top left panel shows the area of the unknown site. Top right panel shows a close-up of the small compound originally alone on the site. Bottom panel shows a close-up of the construction on the site.*

The compound appears to have four guard towers, and its single layered perimeter wall is made of solid concrete on three sides; the road-facing side of the perimeter wall appears to be semi-transparent. A further walled compound is also visible at the site, located on the eastern edge of the main compound. This compound has a single-layer perimeter wall containing a large main building and four smaller buildings. Within this smaller compound, there is well maintained vegetation, and the road-facing wall also appears to be semi-transparent and even decorative.



*Fig. 12 High resolution imagery from Google Earth dated September 2017. Top left panel shows the area of the unknown site. Top right panel shows a close-up of the small compound originally alone on the site. Bottom panel shows a close-up of the construction on the site.*

Satellite imagery of the Unknown Site, dated August 1, 2022 and captured using Planet SkySat satellites, appears to indicate that construction on site is completed. In total, the compound consists of about 15 buildings. Most of the buildings have

large silver features on their roofs, some appearing to be pipework, indicating that they are likely ventilation systems. Akin to the smaller compound, the main compound is planted with well-maintained vegetation. Towards the road-facing north perimeter wall are outdoor sports facilities, with structures surrounding them that may serve as spectator seating. A large parking lot near the entrance to the compound is also in use, containing some 40 vehicles at the time of image capture. Satellite imagery from 2022 also confirms the construction of a small runway on site. This contemporary imagery was vital, given that since the pandemic, it has become especially difficult for Crude Accountability contacts to gather any information about this Unknown Site.





Fig. 13 High resolution imagery from Planet SkySat satellites dated August 2022. Top left panel shows the area of the unknown site and appears to be in use, including a plane and landing strip visible. Top right panel shows a close-up of the small compound originally alone on the site. Bottom panel shows a close-up of the construction on the site.

Conversely, the Unknown Site is different in many respects when compared to the Ovadan Depe and Old Akdash prison sites. The visible infrastructure at the Unknown Site, both within its perimeter and outside of it, is distinct from that of Ovadan Depe and Old Akdash. The level of security visible at the Unknown Site is lower than that visible at Ovadan and Old Akdash; a single-layer perimeter wall as opposed to larger double-layer perimeter walls. Also notable is the lack of cultivated land in the immediate vicinity of the Unknown Site; the sites at Ovadan and Akdash all have established areas of cultivated land, likely used for small-scale agriculture. Some infrastructure located outside of the perimeter of the Unknown Site is wholly unique to it. Most interesting is the small landing strip located just south of the compound; a plane is visible in the imagery as well (see Figure 13). The Unknown Site is also the only site analyzed to have a large parking lot, located just north of the compound along the main road.

## **Is the Unknown Site a Factory?**

Inside sources and media releases indicate that a new metallurgy plant was under construction in the area near Ovadan Depe around 2018,<sup>25</sup> and some have suggested that the Unknown Site houses this factory. The new plant was developed by the Turkmenistani company, “Turkmemdemironumleri,” which has an existing metallurgy plant in the same region since 2009.<sup>26</sup> The timing on the development of this new factory and the captured satellite imagery may overlap.

When we compare the images of the unknown site with images of the already existing metallurgy plant in Turkmenistan, Turkmemdemironumleri, which is located a few kilometers south of the Unknown Site, there are immediate differences. The existing plant has an open storage area that looks as though it holds metals. This feature is missing from the Unknown Site in the satellite imagery. The existing plant also contains exhaust pipes, which are a necessity for heat intensive processes associated with metalurgy. This feature is missing from the Unknown site. Finally, the unknown Site contains vast plaza-like areas, garden areas, and a jet-strip with a hangar. These features are inconsistent with the features of Turkmemdemironumleri’s existing metallurgy plant.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://frankfurt.tmconsulate.gov.tm/ru/news/25379>

<sup>26</sup> <https://turkmemdemironumleri.com.tm/>

Based on this information, we conclude that the third facility is not the metallurgy plant, and is, rather, affiliated with the Ovadan Depe prison facility.



Fig. 14 High resolution imagery from CNES Airbus Maxar dated August 2023. Top panel shows the area of the Turkmen Demir Onumleri factory. Bottom left panel highlights the outdoor storage facility of the factory. Bottom right panel highlights an exhaust/ventilation system.



## Unknown Site Affiliated with Ovadan Depe

Numerous factors indicate that the unknown site is affiliated with Ovadan Depe and holds a similar level of strategic significance as the prison itself.

As indicated above, construction on the Unknown Site extended for eight years. The start of construction was just after the first international reactions to the Prove They Are Alive! campaign, which commenced in 2013. It is possible that the two events are connected. We observed similar correlations when the Norwegian Helsinki Committee published a report on the Dashoguz women's prison in 2011; soon after the release of the report, the government of Turkmenistan modernized the prison.<sup>27</sup> Pauses in the construction process coincided with the 2017 Asian games, when nearly all the state's resources were diverted to that project.<sup>28</sup> This concentration of state resources then shifted to the development of the city of Arkadag, the brainchild of former president Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov and named for the president's "title," in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

### *Place of Construction*

Between 2013-2014, the territory on which the new site is located housed only one noticeable object: a security garrison that maintains the outer perimeter of Ovadan Depe, serving as the outmost checkpoint for Ovadan Depe from the E003 P-1 highway. According to inside sources, this garrison is of high-security importance and secrecy and any objects within its immediate vicinity, and that of Ovadan Depe, are likely to have a similar status. The garrison is still a separate building, and is visible on Figures 11, 12, 13.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/norwegian-helsinki-committee-on-turkmen-prison-a-clear-order-must-go-out-to-end-these-horrible>, accessed September 25, 2023.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-asian-games-winners-losers-money-berdymukammedov/28762293.html>, accessed September 25, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-arkadag-potemkin-city-berdymukammedov/32192689.html>, accessed September 25, 2023.

## *Dogs*

Another similarity among the Ovadan Depe, New Akdash, and unknown sites is also an indicator of the latter's purpose, dog training facilities. Across all three sites, we have identified facilities with elongated, visible obstacle courses. These courses share similarities with courses designed to train police and military dogs, with obstacles designed to simulate climbing, jumping, and crawling. Dogs not only indicate a security presence but also play a psychological factor for both the prisoners and those outside the prison, warning all from violating the rules of the facility.

## *Airstrip*

While the airstrip appears at first look to be an oddity, closer inspection illustrates the actual purpose of the runway and adjunct facilities. At the very end of the runway, next to what is believed to be a hanger, is a drone (see Figure 15). The presence of this UAV indicates that the airstrip is a drone base. It is likely that this drone base serves the entire area around Ovadan Depe and is purposed with tracking prisoners who might attempt to escape or individuals trying to enter the security perimeter of the prison. The base may also provide surveillance for other strategic objects, including military-related, and warehouses located north of the Ovadan Depe prison area.





Fig. 15 Runway strip with a parked drone, Apple Satellite Image.



Fig. 16 Apple satellite images obtained October 2023. Zoomed in photo of airplane.

The jet that is visible in the satellite imagery (see Figure 13, top-left panel, and Figure 16) may be inoperable. In close inspection of the aircraft, it appears that the horizontal stabilizer and the elevators, which control the pitch of the aircraft, are missing. This would mean the aircraft would have incredible difficulty, if even possible, controlling its altitude or even getting off the ground. The aircraft, therefore, is likely inoperable and is possibly a fake/decoy. This further suggests the purpose of the airstrip as a drone base.

### *SWAT or Special Forces Hypothesis*

One hypothesis for the Unknown site is that it is a SWAT or special forces training facility. This could correlate with the training facilities for dogs, the presence of a drone base, and the central square area that appears similar to a parade ground. The imagery provided also shows what appears to be personnel on the central square lined up in a drill-like fashion. If the unknown site were to serve as a training/garrison purpose, there would need to be extensive areas for special

vehicle parking. Beyond the visible outdoor parking, there would likely also be garage parking, and there are several facilities within the site that may provide this.

## *Conclusion*

All factors indicate that the unknown site is affiliated with Ovadan Depe and holds a similar level of strategic significance as the prison itself. The extended period of construction correlates with state resources held up in two other projects, indicating the sight is not affiliated with the private sector. The place of construction is within the outermost perimeter of Ovadan Depe, a maximum-security prison. The site contains similar facilities to both Ovadan Depe and Akdash for training security dogs. The airstrip for the unknown site houses a UAV and its location between the outer perimeter of Ovadan Depe and other strategic facilities to the north suggest the drone base provides surveillance for the entire sector. Finally, the parade-like square and personnel lined up on the square further indicate that the facility is used for security purposes, housing a garrison and/or a training ground. Inside sources have hypothesized that this new facility may house prisoners, or that it may act as a type of "Potemkin village" or fake facility for display to diplomats and watchdogs. Crude Accountability can neither confirm nor deny this hypothesis.

# Putting the Findings into a Human Rights Context

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Turkmenistan's dismal history of prison abuse, human rights violations, and opacity with regard to its legal and penal systems makes the Omanos findings particularly relevant in the contemporary context.

## Isolation

Although Akdash prison is located on the outskirts of the village of Akdash, not far from the city of Turkmenbashi, prison inmates are isolated from the world behind walls and inside a space of physical isolation. The situation at Ovadan Depe is even worse. It is located 50 kilometers from Ashgabat deep in the Karakum desert, where extreme weather creates even more hardship.

Visitation at both sites—for those who are allowed family visits—is conducted in an area away from the cell blocks, and is strictly supervised as in most maximum security prisons. As the Prove campaign reported in 2020,

“...visitation occurs in a several story building. Prisoners are held in another building<sup>30</sup> and brought to the visitation area. According to this account, the prisoners are already there when the visitors are brought in. Numerous accounts state that visitation occurs through a glass window, speaking through a telephone, and lasts for forty minutes. One source indicated that their meeting lasted longer than forty minutes, and that the conversation took place by phone through a glass wall. One of the prisoner's hands was handcuffed under the table and the other hand was holding the telephone. They were unable to see the person in the next booth, but the conversation

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<sup>30</sup> Newer information provided to the Prove campaign indicates that visitation takes place not in a separate building as reported here, but rather in a different wing of the same building.

was audible. In this account, the campaign learned that a police officer was standing behind the prisoner and behind the visitor.”<sup>31</sup>

## **Enforced Disappearances**

The Ovadan Depe prison has been documented as the prison into which the government of Turkmenistan has forcibly disappeared hundreds of individuals in violation of international law.

The act of enforced disappearance is a means of torture and degrading treatment, which strips the individual of their identity and separates them from the outside world, including from their family and designated representatives. Political prisoners, those imprisoned for their religious beliefs, those accused of economic crimes, and civil society activists have been forcibly disappeared in Turkmenistan.<sup>32</sup> The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has documented 162 cases of enforced disappearances in the country’s prison system.<sup>33</sup> This is a conservative count; the actual number is likely much higher.

## **Visitation**

In those instances when prisoners are granted visitation at Ovadan Depe, the campaign has acquired limited information about this practice. We believe that visitation was granted in some cases because of the international outcry over enforced disappearances and the Prove! campaign’s demand for greater access to prisoners.

In old Ovadan from 2008-2009, visitations were carried out on the first floor of one of the “arms” of the Ж corpus, near the entry. Prisoners were allowed to speak with their visitors through glass, using a telephone. In this same block, there are

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<sup>31</sup> Turkmenistan’s Prison System and Political Prisoners: A briefing paper by the Prove They Are Alive! Campaign, February 2020, p. 2. <https://provetheyarealive.org/turkmenistans-prison-system-and-political-prisoners/>

<sup>32</sup>[https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Disappeared-in-Turkmenistans-prisons\\_report\\_Prove\\_November-2021\\_final.pdf](https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Disappeared-in-Turkmenistans-prisons_report_Prove_November-2021_final.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Read the report for full details of the disappeared.



administrative offices, which relatives could use for visits. Previously, prisoners were taken for visitation to Ashgabat. Then, for several months or a year, the premises of the second complex of Ovadan were used for visits, until the official opening of this colony. The campaign does not have information about visitation at Akdash, except that prisoners in the special block were not allowed visitation when Niyazov was president.

## **Torture**

In addition to enforced disappearances, Turkmenistan's prison system also engages in torture at Ovadan Depe and Akdash.

Akmuhammed Bayhanov, who spoke with the Prove They Are Alive! campaign, spent six months inside Ovadan Depe prison until he was amnestied in 2007. In his account, Bayhanov provides details of the appalling treatment and housing of the prisoners inside.

Bayhanov describes his own experience in solitary confinement, being placed in a kartser<sup>34</sup> for 5 days. While in this literal hole in the ground with hardly enough space to move, Bayhanov was ordered to wear a robe that stated "traitor of the nation," to add to his humiliation. The only toilet available to him was a parasha<sup>35</sup> located underneath him, yet it was overflowing. He had no access to water, was exposed to the elements, was provided a marginal food ration of 20 grams of bread, half a cup of tea, and watery soup, and was only able to wash himself with his own urine.<sup>36</sup>

Bayhanov describes routine and brutal beatings as well. He attests that all prisoners receive an initiation beating, described by a secondary source as utilizing batons and dogs. Bayhanov often saw new prisoners arrive via stretchers and knocked unconscious. In one particular case, Bayhanov details a mass beating

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<sup>34</sup> A kartser is a round, 3 meter tall cell resembling a well, at the bottom of which a prisoner is placed as a punishment and means of torture. A tiny window at the top barely lets any light in.

<sup>35</sup> A type of latrine typically squatted over.

<sup>36</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 17.

where prisoners were made to strip down, forced into a squatting position, and subsequently beaten on their forearms, knees, heels, and kidneys until they fell.<sup>37</sup>

Novemberists—a group accused of allegedly organizing a coup against then-President Saparmurat Niyazov in November 2002—were forced to march in circles in their cells from morning to evening. Novemberists were dragged in chains and with all four limbs bound routinely. One eyewitness reported screaming from the adjacent interrogation room in the detention center he was being held in, only to be shown a six-inch needle that was reportedly used on the individual just next door to him. The contents of the parashas for the Novemberists were also routinely thrown on their cell walls by the guards.<sup>38</sup>

Bayhanov describes the systemic use of torture within Ovadan Depe. He states that he heard about inmates receiving life sentences in solitary confinement.<sup>39</sup> A secondary source confirmed that at least one member of the Novemberists received a 25-year sentence to be served in solitary confinement. The Novemberists were forbidden from making any noise, including speaking with other prisoners. Bayhanov reported that the only way these prisoners could make their presence known to anyone was through shouting in an attempt to inform newly arrived prisoners of their presence.<sup>40</sup>

According to TIHR and Turkmen Independent Lawyers Association, inmates at Akdash have also been beaten and tortured.<sup>41</sup>

The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has received credible reports that numerous prisoners who were sent to Ovadan Depe, including Novemberists, were tortured in pre-trial detention and denied medical treatment before and after arriving at Ovadan Depe. The conditions of the prison are harsh for any prisoner, but especially for someone who arrives there after having been beaten, drugged, and tortured.

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<sup>37</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, pg 17.

<sup>39</sup> <http://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FInal-O-D-Report-September-2014-compressed.pdf>, p 13.

<sup>40</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p 16.

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/20101025_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), pp.8-9.

## **Prison Accommodations**

Ovadan Depe prison is composed of concrete and is located in the Karakum Desert, where temperatures can range between 50 degrees centigrade to -20 degrees centigrade. First-hand testimony states that there is no air conditioning in the prison and that heating is often non-operational. The combination of glassless windows and concrete walls leaves the prisoners exposed to extreme temperature ranges, and the elements, for extended periods.<sup>42</sup>

Bayhanov describes a mosquito infestation within the prison, the likely result of standing water and improper drainage.<sup>43</sup> As Bayhanov states in his testimony, part of this improper drainage was linked to the parashas, which may or may not be linked to a proper sewage system.<sup>44</sup>

Bayhanov describes in more detail the state of the windows within a particular wing of the Ovadan Depe prison that holds the Novemberists. The cells of this wing contain closed and barred windows, which are covered by sheets of metal,<sup>45</sup> eliminating the possibility of sufficient natural light and fresh air to reach these cells.

## **Exercise & Access to the Outdoors**

Bayhanov describes irregular access to outdoor exercise areas. He would sometimes have access to the outdoor rooms located on the top of the prison once weekly, once daily, or sometimes months would go by without any access. Bayhanov further states that the Novemberists never had access to these areas.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 14.



## Medical Care

Bayhanov testifies that there was some medical care provided at the facility, but this was nowhere near adequate. Bayhanov described weekly visits by medical staff, but only ever received vitamins from those visits.<sup>47</sup> According to Alternative Turkmen News,<sup>48</sup> a mass blood test was conducted in the prison between 2013-2014 to check for cases of Tuberculosis. 260 cases were detected yet only a few critically ill inmates received hospital care.

Testimony by Geldy Kyarizov,<sup>49</sup> who was held in Ovadan Depe for five months, further demonstrates the inadequate health care available in the prison. According to his cellmates, before Kyarizov arrived, his space in the cell was occupied by Geday Akhmedov. Akhmedov had diabetes but received no medical treatment for the condition while imprisoned in Ovadan Depe. A month or two before his death, Akhmedov could not move or use the toilet on his own. When he had succumbed to his condition, the cellmates reported that his body was left in the cell to rot in the scorching summer heat for two days before it was removed.<sup>50</sup>

Kyarizov confirms the presence of medical staff, occasional visits, and some forms of medication, however, what he describes is far from adequate. Kyarizov states that doctors would occasionally conduct medical visits with the inmates, but these visits were always conducted through metal doors. The doctor was never permitted to enter the cells. Medical staff would occasionally provide medication, such as Analgin, Trimol, cold medicine, and Nitroglycerin but these were always in low supply. Medicinal treatment for diabetics was unavailable. Medical staff would state that they had too little funding and too many other prisons to tend to, leading to low supplies of medication. Kyarizov also details an interaction in which prisoners had their vitals (blood pressure and heart rate) checked, followed by injections with what doctors claimed were “vitamins.” Kyarizov testifies that the same syringe was used for every inmate and that the inmates were too afraid to take the “vitamins.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> <https://habartm.org/archives/1245>

<sup>49</sup> [http://provetherealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Five\\_Months\\_in\\_Ovan\\_Depe.pdf](http://provetherealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Five_Months_in_Ovan_Depe.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison, p. 7.

Kyarizov frequently experienced food poisoning,<sup>52</sup> leading to his weight dropping by 40 kilograms.<sup>53</sup> Kyarizov never describes any sort of treatment he received for this, nor any concern by the medical staff for such a drastic drop in weight.

Reports of death from tuberculosis and other disease were included in the 2010 report, Turkmenistan's Penitentiary Facilities.<sup>54</sup>

## Food Supply

Both the testimonies of Bayhanov and Kyarizov demonstrate an inadequate quality and quantity of food given to the prisoners. Bayhanov states that prisoners would often only receive porridge with pumpkin, sometimes receiving small lumps of spaghetti, and two slices of bad bread. Water was supplied in the cells but was of poor quality.<sup>55</sup> Instead, inmates drank tea. While held in the kartser, Bayhanov only received a daily ration of 20 grams of bread, a watery soup, and half a cup of tea.<sup>56</sup> Bayhanov states that prisoners never received any form of meat.

Kyarizov's description of food within the prison is similar to that of Bayhanov's. Inmates were given a soup composed of crushed wheat grains, sometimes with a piece of potato or a small onion, for breakfast. Roughly once a week, meat skin, fish bones, or eyes would be added to the soup. Additionally, prisoners received slightly sweetened tea in a plastic mug with a half-centimeter-thick slice of bread. Lunch and dinner consisted of the same soup, sometimes replaced with fish soup. Prisoners were given a camelthorn infusion instead of tea during lunch and dinner.<sup>57</sup>

Describing the bread, Kyarizov states that each new shipment of flour to the prison was first dumped on asphalt and pushed around with brooms, leading to dirt and

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<sup>52</sup> Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009\\_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/201010\\_25\\_8-7penitentiary\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/201/201010/201010_25_8-7penitentiary_en.pdf), p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> The Ovadan Depe Prison: Medieval Torture in Modern Turkmenistan, p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison, pp. 5-6.

small rocks being mixed in with the bread and porridge. The bread was also chilled in a refrigerator and allowed to mold before serving.<sup>58</sup>

Kyarizov describes the water supplied at the prison as usually rusty and muddy.<sup>59</sup>

## **Death & Burial**

One of the questions before our team as we reviewed the images identified by Omanos Analytics was whether there is a cemetery or burial ground on or near the territory of Akdash and Ovadan Depe. The Prove They Are Alive! campaign has determined from our research over the past ten years that 29 disappeared prisoners have died in custody.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, there are numerous unconfirmed rumors that others of the disappeared have died in prison. Some of the bodies of the dead have been returned to their families. Others have not. Satellite imagery did not uncover a cemetery near or on the grounds of either prison, but the question remains: Where are those bodies buried?

Testimony to the Prove They Are Alive! campaign from a Turkmen contact provides a potential answer to this question. According to information the Prove campaign received from a former prisoner who was released in 2009, a prisoner who died at Ovadan Depe was buried and identified only with a number in a cemetery in a suburb of Ashgabat. The deceased was not a political prisoner and their body was not requested by the family. The source spoke with the head of the medical unit of Ovadan.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Five Months in the Secret Ovadan Depe Prison, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> [https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Disappeared-in-Turkmenistans-prisons\\_report\\_Prove\\_November-2021\\_final.pdf](https://provetheyarealive.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Disappeared-in-Turkmenistans-prisons_report_Prove_November-2021_final.pdf), p.3.

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous source to Prove They Are Alive! campaign

# International Standards

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Turkmenistan's government—and in particular its prison system—violates numerous international human rights standards. The Ovadan Depe prison complex is a physical testament to the systemic use of enforced disappearances in Turkmenistan, which is a gross violation of international human rights law and the United Nations' principles to protect basic human rights, rules of prisoner treatment, and OSCE policy.

## Enforced Disappearances

Enforced disappearances represent a grave violation of the rights of the disappeared and their families, straddling the principles of human rights and prisoner treatment. According to the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances,<sup>62</sup> the practice of involuntary or enforced disappearances violates the following rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>63</sup> and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:<sup>64</sup>

- The right to recognition as a person before the law;
- The right to liberty and security of the person;
- The right not to be subjected to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;
- The right to life, when the disappeared person is killed;
- The right to an identity;
- The right to a fair trial and to judicial guarantees;

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<sup>62</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/FactSheet6Rev3.pdf>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>

- The right to an effective remedy, including reparation and compensation;
- The right to know the truth regarding the circumstances of a disappearance.

The practice of enforced disappearances is also a form of inhuman and degrading treatment both for the disappeared and their families, violating the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.<sup>65</sup>

The rules for the treatment of prisoners under international law are established under the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (UNSMRTP)<sup>66</sup> with additions under the Nelson Mandela Rules (NMRs).<sup>67</sup> With regard to the prisoner's right to contact with the outside world, the Standard Minimum Rules state:

- "Prisoners shall be allowed under necessary supervision to communicate with their family and reputable friends at regular intervals, both by correspondence and by receiving visits.
- Upon the death or serious illness of, or serious injury to a prisoner, or his removal to an institution for the treatment of mental affections, the director shall at once inform the spouse, if the prisoner is married, or the nearest relative and shall in any event inform any other person previously designated by the prisoner.
- Every prisoner shall have the right to inform at once his family of his imprisonment or his transfer to another institution."

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<sup>65</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading>

<sup>66</sup>[https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal\\_justice/UN\\_Standard\\_Minimum\\_Rules\\_for\\_the\\_Treatment\\_of\\_Prisoners.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/pdf/criminal_justice/UN_Standard_Minimum_Rules_for_the_Treatment_of_Prisoners.pdf)

<sup>67</sup> <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/PDF/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>



Additionally, the NMRs expand upon these principles in the following manner:

- "All prisoners shall be treated with the respect due to their inherent dignity and value as human beings. No prisoner shall be subjected to, and all prisoners shall be protected from, torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, for which no circumstances whatsoever may be invoked as a justification. The safety and security of prisoners, staff, service providers and visitors shall be ensured at all times.
- Prisoners shall be allowed, under necessary supervision, to communicate with
  - their family and friends at regular intervals
    - (a) By corresponding in writing and using, where available, telecommunication, electronic, digital and other means; and
    - (b) By receiving visits.
- Prisoners shall be provided with adequate opportunity, time and facilities to be visited by and to communicate and consult with a legal adviser of their own choice or a legal aid provider, without delay, interception or censorship and in full confidentiality, on any legal matter, in conformity with applicable domestic law. Consultations may be within sight, but not within hearing, of prison staff.
- Every prisoner shall have the right, and shall be given the ability and means, to inform immediately his or her family, or any other person designated as a contact person, about his or her imprisonment, about his or her transfer to another institution and about any serious illness or injury. The sharing of prisoners' personal information shall be subject to domestic legislation.
- In the event of a prisoner's death, the prison director shall at once inform the prisoner's next of kin or emergency contact. Individuals designated by a prisoner to receive his or her health information shall be notified by the director of the prisoner's serious illness, injury or transfer to a health institution. The explicit request of a prisoner not to have his or her spouse or nearest relative notified in the event of illness or injury shall be respected.

- The prison administration shall treat the body of a deceased prisoner with respect and dignity. The body of a deceased prisoner should be returned to his or her next of kin as soon as reasonably possible, at the latest upon completion of the investigation. The prison administration shall facilitate a culturally appropriate funeral if there is no other responsible party willing or able to do so and shall keep a full record of the matter."

The OSCE's policy with regard to enforced disappearances is enshrined in Ministerial Decision No. 7/20 "Prevention and eradication of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."<sup>68</sup> The document highlights concerns over enforced disappearances in the region and demonstrates the organization's commitment to the eradication of the practice within the OSCE region. The decision provides a set of recommended steps for the participating states to implement which focus on pursuing legislative, political, transparent, cooperative, and compensatory avenues of resolution.

## **Other Violations to the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners & Nelson Mandela Rules**

### **Torture**

First-hand accounts of treatment in the Ovadan Depe prison, described above, give us a clearer look into the medieval-styled horrors of the Turkmenistani prison system. These horrific acts of torture are in strict violation of the above-mentioned international laws, UN rules, and OSCE policies, including the UNSMRTP and NMRs:

#### Rule 1

All prisoners shall be treated with respect, inherent to their dignity and value as human beings, and shall not be subject to torturous, degrading, or cruel treatment.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/2/479762.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 1, p. 8.

### Rule 43

Disciplinary actions that amount to torture, cruel, degrading, or inhuman treatment is strictly prohibited. Particularly, indefinite solitary confinement, prolonged solitary confinement, placement of a prisoner in a dark or constantly lit cell, corporal punishment or the reduction of a prisoner's diet or drinking water, and collective punishment are prohibited. Instruments of restraint may never be used as a form of disciplinary action.<sup>70</sup>

### Rule 45

Solitary confinement should be applied only in exceptional cases and as a last resort sanction. The action should last for as short amount of time as possible, subject to independent review, and may only be authorized by a competent authority. Solitary confinement can not be imposed based on the nature of a prisoner's sentence.<sup>71</sup>

## Accommodations

Both Akdash and Ovadan Depe fall short of complying with the international standards for prison accommodations. Overcrowding, failure to provide adequate hygiene, and other discomforts are rampant. In this regard, the UNSMRTP and NMRs stipulate the following:

### Rule 13

Accommodations for the housing of prisoners must meet all requirements of adequate health, air content, minimum floor space, lighting, heating, ventilation, and address climatic conditions.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 43, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 45, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 13, p. 10.

#### Rule 15

Bathroom installations must meet adequate conditions for prisoner use, being clean, operational, and in decent order.<sup>73</sup>

#### Rule 17

All areas of the prison used by prisoners regularly must be kept clean and in scrupulous condition at all times.<sup>74</sup>

#### Rule 14

Prisoner accommodations for work and living must have windows large enough to allow prisoners to read/work by natural light and must allow the entrance of fresh air, regardless of existing ventilation systems.<sup>75</sup>

### **Exercise & Outdoor Access**

Exercise and access to outdoor activity is another stipulation of the UNSMRTP and NMRs. The UNSMRTP and NMRs state:

#### Rule 23

Prisoners must have access to at least one hour of outdoor exercise or work; weather permitting.<sup>76</sup>

### **Medical Care**

Proper access to adequate healthcare is a necessity for the survival of prisoners and is required under the UNSMRTP and NMRs.

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<sup>73</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 15, p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 17, p. 11.

<sup>75</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 14, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 23, p. 12.

With regard to rules of medical attention for prisoners, the UNSMRTP and NMRs state:

#### Rule 27

All prisoners must have immediate access to medical care in urgent cases. Prisoners who require specialized treatment or surgery must be transferred to either specialized institutions or civil hospitals. Prison hospitalization services must be adequately staffed and equipped to provide appropriate treatment and care.<sup>77</sup>

#### Rule 30

A physician or other qualified health-care providers must examine and speak with all prisoners immediately following admission to the facility and thereafter as necessary for each prisoner. Particular attention should be paid to identifying healthcare needs and measures of treatment, identifying ill-treatment of prisoners prior to arrival, identifying mental/psychological stresses from imprisonment with measures taken to address any concerns, identifying and clinically isolating prisoners infected with contagious disease, and determining the physical fitness of prisoners for work and exercise purposes.<sup>78</sup>

#### Rule 32

The relationship between the health-care provider and the prisoners should be governed by the same standards and ethics that are applied to normal patients. Particularly, the protection of a prisoner's physical and prisoner health, the prevention and treatment of disease, adhering to the principles of prisoner autonomy and informed consent, and maintaining the confidentiality of the prisoners medical information, unless this would negatively affect the health of the prisoner.<sup>79</sup>

#### Rule 34

If while in examination or treatment of the prisoner, it becomes apparent to the medical-provider that there are signs of torture, cruel, or inhuman treatment, such cases must be documented and reported to a competent higher medical,

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<sup>77</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 27, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 30, p. 13.

<sup>79</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 32, p. 14.



administrative, or judicial authority. Measures must be followed to maintain the safety of the prisoner and associated persons.<sup>80</sup>

#### Rule 35

The health-provider must regularly inspect the prison and advise the prison administration on the preparation of food, with regard to quantity, quality, and service, the sanitation of the institution and the hygiene of the prisoners, the suitability and cleanliness of prisoner's clothing and bedding, environmental, climate, ventilation, and lighting conditions of the prison, and observance of the provision of proper exercise.<sup>81</sup>

The prison director must take this advice into consideration and take immediate steps to implement that advice. If the ability to implement this advice is not within the rights of the director, or should they disagree with that advice, the director must submit a report to a higher authority with the advice and recommendations of the health-provider.<sup>82</sup>

#### Rule 46

Health-care providers must report to the prison director immediately should they discover adverse effects of disciplinary actions or other measures on the physical or mental health of a prisoner. They must advise the director if they consider it necessary to terminate or alter any such measures or actions with regard to the health of the prisoner.<sup>83</sup>

Health-care providers have the authority to review and recommend changes to the involuntary separation of a prisoner to ensure that such measures do not exacerbate the condition, health, or disability of the prisoner.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 34, p. 14.

<sup>81</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 35, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 46, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## Food Supply

With regard to the provision of food for prisoners, the UNSMRTP and NMRs state:

### Rule 22

Every prisoner shall be provided food of adequate nutritional value for health and strength, of adequate quality for consumption, that is well prepared and served at consistent hours. Additionally, drinking water, of adequate quality, must be available to the prisoner whenever it is necessary, according to the prisoner.<sup>85</sup>

Based on the witness testimonies, it is clear that the Ovadan Depe prison violated the rules set forth in the UNSMRTP and NMRs with regard to torture, adequate accommodations, exercise, outdoor access, medical care, and the provision of food. The treatment prisoners received while held in Ovadan Depe is in direct contrast to the values of the UN and OSCE, violating international law and the rules for the treatment of prisoners.

While there are claims and descriptions of improvements made to the prison under the previous presidency of Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, this information has not been verified by a credible third party. The prison still operates under the current presidency of Sedar Berdymukhamedov and individuals continue to be forcibly disappeared within the prison.

Turkmenistan, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as a member of the UN General Assembly, and as an OSCE participating state is obligated to adopt all of the recommendations listed across both the UN and OSCE. It is legally obligated to uphold international law, as detailed in the treaties it has signed. The continued operation of Ovadan Depe, in its current capacity as a tool for systemic enforced disappearances, and its gross violations to the UNSMRTP and NMRs, is in direct violation of Turkmenistan's international obligations.

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<sup>85</sup> United Nations General Assembly, "A/RES/70/175", December 17, 2015, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/443/41/pdf/N1544341.pdf?OpenElement>. Rule 22, p. 12.

# Conclusion

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The authoritarian government of Turkmenistan has built a prison system that appears to have been created not only to separate prisoners from society, but also to isolate them from the world, from each other, and to disconnect them from their humanity. Those who oppose the regime are threatened with imprisonment in a system from which they are unlikely to return, and at which their loved ones may not be able to visit them, or send parcels and letters. Prisoners are denied adequate medical care and legal representation. They are physically isolated from their compatriots—not only because they are behind bars, but especially in the case of Ovadan Depe, because they are banished to the middle of the Karakum desert.

The violent practices that former President Niyazov and his brutal regime put in place over 20 years ago continue today. Enforced disappearances, prison violence, torture, and maltreatment of prisoners continue today in Turkmenistan. The former President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov had the opportunity—multiple opportunities—to change the culture of authoritarianism, including in the prison system, and he chose not to do that. By all appearances, his son, Serdar Berdymukhamedov, is choosing to continue the brutality of his father and Niyazov before him.

Turkmenistan’s complete failure to comply with its international commitments—whether to the United Nations, the OSCE, or international conventions—is blatantly obvious when looking at the prison system through its physical construction or the impacts that construction and those who manage it have on its inmates and the population of Turkmenistan overall.

The obligation of the international community is to hold Turkmenistan’s government to account for these gross violations of human rights. We are seeing, around the world, and especially in the Eurasian region, a bunkering, a hunkering down of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Governments, including Turkmenistan’s, are imprisoning those who oppose the regime—even those who do not have political ambitions or take on the government directly. Turkmenistan’s continued impunity in this area creates a space in which other authoritarian

governments can expand their authoritarian practices. Holding them to account is our job—whether we are activists, policy makers, diplomats, politicians, or concerned citizens of our respective countries.

Furthermore, as we witness the human rights violations perpetrated throughout Eurasia, including in other Central Asian countries, in Belarus, and in Russia, we observe the brutal techniques of the Turkmen regime used in other places. The press recently reported that Aleksey Navalny, the Russian opposition leader who is serving 11 ½ years on politically motivated charges, was sent for the 13th time to solitary confinement since his conviction in 2021.<sup>86</sup> The solitary confinement cell (shizo)—much like the ‘karster’ in Turkmenistan’s prison system—is designed for brutality: cell dimensions are 10 feet by 6.5 feet, and the yard in which he is allowed to exercise for an hour each day is the same size.<sup>87</sup> According to Navalny’s spokesperson, he lost 18 pounds in a recent stint in solitary confinement.<sup>88</sup> Vladimir Kara Murza, another Russian opposition figure, reportedly lost 37 pounds while in detention awaiting trial, in which he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for speaking out about atrocities in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>89</sup> Reports from Kazakhstan describe similar circumstances, and stories of widespread torture against prisoners.<sup>90</sup> Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions are also common.<sup>91</sup> In Belarus, political prisoners are also tortured and forced to endure unsanitary and overcrowded conditions.<sup>92</sup>

These reports are reminiscent of the horror stories from Ovadan Depe specifically and the Turkmen prison system more broadly. The replication of these horrific

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<sup>86</sup><https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/jailed-kremlin-critic-navalny-says-he-is-back-solitary-conditions-hellish-2023-04-11/>, April 11, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/14/alexei-navalny-prison-ill-poisoned/>, April 14, 2023.

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/jailed-kremlin-critic-navalny-says-he-is-back-solitary-conditions-hellish-2023-04-11/>, April 11, 2023.

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/17/1168667764/vladimir-kara-murza-prison-sentence>, April 17, 2023.

<sup>90</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-prison-torture-letters/31372148.html>, July 22, 2021, accessed May 4, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-prisoners-packed-in-cells-endure-degrading-conditions-in-coronavirus-lockdown/30838547.html>, September 14, 2020, accessed May 4, 2023.

<sup>92</sup> <https://by.usembassy.gov/on-the-sentencing-of-political-prisoners-in-belarus/#:~:text=Political%20prisoners%20are%20held%20in,and%20are%20denied%20medical%20care>. Accessed May 8, 2023.

conditions in the region is easier when the west fails to speak loudly about the human rights violations taking place.



# Recommendations

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1. Turkmenistan should immediately and unconditionally stop the practice of enforced disappearances, allowing prisoners access to medical and legal representation and visitation and parcels from their loved ones.
2. Turkmenistan should immediately open its prisons to international monitors, including the International Red Cross and other human rights organizations. Monitoring groups should also include the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention of the United Nations.
3. The international community should provide modern, human rights based training for prison personnel and police in Turkmenistan to educate them on best practices in prisons around the world.
4. Concerned nations and international bodies should exert more international pressure on the Turkmen government by raising-at bilateral and multilateral forums-the issues of prison conditions, enforced disappearances, and denying access to legal and medical assistance.
5. Human rights organizations and civil society groups should continue monitoring Turkmenistan prison conditions.
6. Individuals responsible for human rights abuses in Turkmenistan including in the prison system should be held accountable for their actions and crimes on the international level.



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