



SIKHS IN THE U.S. MILITARY: SERVICE AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

For more than 100 years, Sikh Americans have proudly served in our nation's military. Unfortunately, restrictive policies put into place in 1981 directly violate the religious rights and equal opportunity for Sikhs and other religious minority servicemembers, posing barriers to this tradition of honorable and capable service.

The Sikh Coalition, in partnership with McDermott Will & Emery (McDermott), launched a campaign in 2009 to end religious discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces and eliminate the ban on religious articles of faith. This campaign continues today in collaboration with numerous partners. Roughly 100 Sikh Americans are now serving across multiple branches of the military with religious accommodations achieved by advocacy, legal action, and improved policies.



ENDING RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN THE U.S. MILITARY

A Timeline of Legal and Advocacy Work

2009 A bipartisan group of 43 representatives and 6 senators requested that then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates provide religious accommodations for two Sikh Coalition clients seeking to serve in the Army. These historic individual accommodations were ultimately granted to Capt. Kamaljeet Singh Kalsi and Capt. Tejdeep Singh Rattan.



2010 Capt. Rattan and Capt. Kalsi graduated from Army Basic Officer Leadership Training. A third client, Cpl. Simran Preet Lamba, receives the third individual religious accommodation and graduates from Army Basic Training.

2014 A bipartisan group of more than 100 representatives, 15 senators, and more than 20 civil rights organizations sent separate letters to the Department of Defense (DoD) urging equal opportunity for all Sikhs to serve in the U.S. military.

2015 In April, the Army released new rules regarding religious accommodations for articles of faith. The prior procedures had forced turbaned and bearded Sikh recruits to violate their religion while asking for a religious accommodation. This improved rule allowed Sikh recruits to contract with the Army before requesting a religious accommodation and to maintain their articles of faith while the Army assesses their requests.

In June, in *Singh v. McHugh*, a federal judge ruled that the Army violated the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in denying the rights of a Sikh student Iknor Singh. The judge held that Singh, represented by the ACLU, must be allowed to enroll in Hofstra University's Army ROTC program without shaving his beard, cutting his hair, or removing his turban.



In November, 27 retired U.S. generals sent a letter to then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, calling on the DoD to eliminate the prohibitive ban on Sikhs serving in all branches of the U.S. military.

2016 The Sikh Coalition and McDermott, partnered with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, prevailed in litigation to permit a Sikh soldier, Capt. Simratpal Singh, to begin maintaining his articles of faith while serving in the Army. The Sikh Coalition, McDermott, and Becket also initiated litigation against the Army to permit three Sikh soldiers—Spc. Kanwar Singh, Spc. Harpal Singh, and Pvt. Arjan Singh Ghotra—to serve with their articles of faith; the Army granted long-term religious accommodations to all three.

2017 In January, the Army updated its uniform and grooming policies, making it significantly easier for Sikhs and other religious minorities to obtain accommodations to serve with their religious articles of faith intact, and to keep those accommodations throughout their career of service in the Army. This led to a new wave of accommodations for Sikh soldiers.



2018 In June, a Sikh represented by the Sikh Coalition seeking to serve in the Navy was denied the right to maintain her religious headwear unconcealed by Navy headwear, and the Navy failed to provide her with an enduring accommodation. She was also penalized with a discharge that requires approval prior to re-enlistment in any branch.

2019 The Air Force updated its uniform and grooming policies to include religious accommodations for Sikh airmen and officers. In June, with the help of the ACLU and the Sikh American Veterans Alliance (SAVA), Airman 1st Class Harpreet Singh Bajwa received a landmark religious accommodation to serve in the Air Force. In September, Airman 1st Class Sunjit Singh Rathour, also represented by ACLU and SAVA, became the first known Sikh to complete both Air Force Basic Military Training and Technical Training while wearing a turban, beard, and unshorn hair. That same month, Airman 1st Class Gurchetan Singh, represented by the Sikh Coalition, became the first known Sikh to receive an accommodation to serve in the Air National Guard.

2020 In February, the Air Force announced a clarified policy regarding uniform and grooming accommodations for religious minorities, including Sikhs. The specifics and processes detailed in the policy track closely with the Army's 2017 change; while there are certain limited circumstances under which a religious accommodation may not be permissible due to safety considerations, the policy appeared to be otherwise comprehensive.

In March, the Navy announced its own policy clarification relevant to religious minorities. While the change allowed uncovered religious headgear for the first time ever and provided an accommodation process for beards, the new rules were only for those on shore duty—meaning severe career restrictions for Sikh sailors.

2021 In March, then-1st Lt. Sukhbir Singh Toor, represented by the Sikh Coalition, applied for a religious accommodation to continue his service in the Marine Corps with his articles of faith. After significant back and forth, then-1st Lt. Toor was granted an incomplete accommodation that prohibited his beard in combat deployments and barred him from ceremonial duties. The Sikh Coalition continued to push for a full accommodation.



2022 In January, the Marine Corps made their final accommodation offer for then-1st Lt. Toor: they conceded on ceremonial duties but still prohibited his beard on most deployments due to alleged safety concerns.

In April, the Sikh Coalition and partners filed suit on behalf of the newly promoted Capt. Toor and the three pre-accession recruits. In December, the District of Columbia Court of Appeals granted an injunction allowing Jaskirat Singh to proceed to Basic Training with his articles of faith intact. Due to the length of time that passed while waiting for accommodations, Chahal and Aekash Singh chose to take different paths and did not pursue service in the Marine Corps.

2023 In August, then Pfc. Jaskirat Singh graduated from Basic Training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California; he was the first known Sikh to do so with his articles of faith intact. Pfc. Singh was promoted to LCpl. Singh in October.

In the same year, several pre-accession recruits also requested accommodations from the Marine Corps. Milaap Singh Chahal and Aekash Singh, who were represented by the Sikh Coalition, Winston & Strawn, and the Becket Fund, submitted requests in March; Jaskirat Singh, represented by the same plus BakerHostetler and aided by SAVA, submitted a request in November. These clients received responses on timelines ranging from 3 to 11 months; they ultimately faced the same beard prohibitions as then-1st Lt. Toor, and were told to give up all of their articles of faith for the duration of Basic Training. Their appeals were filed over the course of the year.

“No American should ever have to choose between following his or her religious tenets and serving the country with honor. That’s not who we are as a nation.”

–Maj. Gen. Steven Hashem, U.S. Army, Ret.



For more than 15 years, members of Congress have, on a bipartisan basis, urged the U.S. Armed Forces to grant religious accommodations to those who wish to serve while adhering to their sincerely-held beliefs.

The Sikh Coalition and our partners continue to work towards an inclusive military force that has access to the widest possible talent pool to effectively address modern threats.

