Know Your Rights: Sikhs in the U.S. Army
(Updated May 14, 2015)

This document provides general information on uniform and grooming rules for Sikhs who are interested in serving in the U.S. Army. This information pertains only to the U.S. Army and is not intended as legal advice. To request specific legal assistance on your matter, please contact the Sikh Coalition’s Legal Program. (The Sikh Coalition does not have information about the rules of other branches of the military.)

1. What is the current U.S. Army policy regarding Sikh religious headwear and grooming?

The U.S. Army’s uniform and grooming regulations do not allow soldiers, officers, or other Service members to wear turbans or keep unshorn hair and beards.¹ However, prospective or current Sikh Service members can apply for a religious exemption (an exception) to this policy. On January 22, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense published revisions to Instruction 1300.17, titled “Accommodation of Religious Practices Within the Military Services.” According to Instruction 1300.17, the Military Departments will accommodate individual expressions of sincerely held beliefs – including grooming and appearance practices based on religious beliefs – unless the accommodation could have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, safety, health, good order and discipline.² The U.S. Army has indicated³ that it will consider exceptions to its policies on a case-by-case basis only – considering the unique facts of each case, mission accomplishment and military necessity. Thus, the general rule is that Sikhs still cannot serve with unshorn hair/beards and turbans.

2. What is the process for requesting a religious accommodation in the U.S. Army for Sikh recruits?

A Sikh recruit⁴ who wishes to maintain their articles of faith while serving in the U.S. Army, including a turban and unshorn hair/beard, must first comply with initial U.S. Army requirements for enlistment. These requirements include passing military entrance examinations, such as the ASVAB test, and meeting all background, physical and medical requirements. If qualified, the U.S. Army rules require the Sikh recruit to first enlist with the Future Soldier Training Program (FSTP) or Delayed Entry Program (DEP).⁵ After enlisting, a Sikh future soldier must submit a religious

⁴At this time, the accommodation process outlined in this section applies to prospective Sikh Service members only. Current Sikh Service members who wish to begin wearing their articles of faith and need to request a religious accommodation must comply with the procedures outlined in Army Regulation 600-20, paragraph 5-6(i), Army Command Policy, available at http://www.apd.army.mil/pdffiles/r600_20.pdf (updated Nov. 6, 2014).
⁵See USAREC Message 15-032 Update, From Headquarters USAREC to All Recruiting Personnel, Religious Accommodation Exceptions to Policy (Released April 2015).
accommodation request to their immediate commander in order to serve with their articles of faith. The request must contain a handwritten or typed statement from the future soldier requesting a religious accommodation and the reason for the request.

After the Sikh future soldier submits this religious accommodation request (also known as an Exception to Policy) to his/her commander, the U.S. Army will take the following steps in processing the request, and will include the below information in the accommodation packet, which will be submitted up the chain of command to the Army G-1, Deputy Chief of Staff, for a decision:

1.) A Company Commander memorandum which will contain the future soldier’s identifying information and the reason for the accommodation request;
2.) A Brigade Chaplain memorandum – addressing the religious basis and sincerity of the soldier’s request after a one-on-one in person or phone conversation;
3.) A Battalion Commander endorsement of the request;
4) A Brigade Commander endorsement of the request;
5.) The completed exception packet, titled “Religious Accommodation Exception,” will be submitted to the U.S. Army Recruiting Command Headquarters for endorsement;
6.) The U.S. Army Recruiting Commander will complete an endorsement and submit the completed package to the TRADOC Commander for further endorsement;
7.) The TRADOC Commander will submit the final package, with endorsements, to the Army G-1, Deputy Chief of Staff, for final decision.
8.) Under Department of Defense Instruction 1300.17, a decision will be made by the G-1’s office within thirty (30) days. However, a Sikh will be allowed to enlist in the Future Soldier Training Program or the Delayed Entry Program for a minimum of 180 days to allow for the processing of religious accommodation requests consistent with the procedures outlined above.

The Deputy Chief of Staff, Army G-1, has the sole authority within the U.S. Army to make decisions on a religious accommodation request to the U.S. Army’s uniform and grooming policies. These decisions cannot be made by recruiters or commanders, although commanders can provide endorsements as the request moves up the chain of command to the G-1’s office.

3. Can I maintain my religious articles of faith while my religious accommodation request is pending?

Under recent policy changes within the U.S. Army only, future soldiers are no longer required to adhere to the U.S. Army’s uniform and grooming requirements, as outlined in Army Regulation 670-10, while their religious accommodation requests are pending. During this processing time, a Sikh recruit will enlist in the Future Soldier Training Program (FSTP) or Delayed Entry Program (DEP) for a minimum period of 180 days. While in the FSTP or DEP, a future Sikh soldier will not be shipped to training and/or an assignment, and can wear their turban and maintain unshorn hair (and a beard) while a decision is pending.

4. What happens if my religious accommodation request is denied?

If the religious accommodation request is denied, the future soldier does not need to ship to basic
combat training and/or continue their service; rather, the applicant has the option to either ship to training as scheduled and comply with Army uniform and grooming requirements OR request a discharge.

An applicant may also appeal a denial to maintain/wear the Sikh articles of faith, but the U.S. Army rules provide that appeals will be considered only if they are not based upon substantially the same grounds or if they are not supported by substantially the same evidence as a previously disapproved application.9

5. Can the Sikh Coalition represent me if I want to request a religious accommodation?

The Sikh Coalition will not be able to represent every Sikh who wants to join the U.S. Army. The Sikh Coalition’s goal is to end the thirty-year policy of excluding Sikhs from the U.S. Army. To do this, we need to present the strongest individual cases to the Army - a common civil rights technique. A strong case will force the Army (or a court) to focus on the heart of the issue – discrimination against Sikhs. A weaker case will allow the Army (or a court) to make a negative decision on a technicality and avoid the issue of discrimination. Thus, the Sikh Coalition will assess each case on its merits, and we will only move forward with the strongest cases. However, we are happy to provide information (such as this Know Your Rights document) to all interested community members about the process of requesting a religious accommodation and general information about Sikh religious practices and/or Sikh military history to include in an accommodation request.

To request legal assistance, fill out our online form here: http://www.sikhcoalition.org/request-legal-assistance.

9 See Army Regulation 600-20, paragraphs 5-6i (12).
**U.S. Army Religious Accommodation Exception to Policy Workflow Process**

Source: USAREC Message 15-032

- 8 step process
- 6 interim recommendations
- 1 final decision by G-1
- Potentially six months (or more) in holding pattern

**Soldier Requires ETP for Religious Accommodation**

**Enters Future Soldier Training Program**

1. ETP Request from Soldier

2. Company Commander Memo

3. Brigade Chaplain Memo

4. Battalion Commander Endorsement

5. Brigade Commander Endorsement

6. USAREC Endorsement

7. TRADOC Endorsement

8. G-1 FINAL DECISION

**“Religious Accommodation Exception” (#1-5) Packet Submitted to HQ USAREC**

**Packet (#1-7) Submitted to G-1 for Decision**
U.S. Army Religious Accommodation Exception to Policy Workflow Process
Source: USAREC Message 15-032

KEY DOCUMENTS

1. ETP Request from Soldier
   *Future Soldier Statement Religious Accommodation Memo*

2. Company Commander Memo
   *Company Commander Memo Religious Accommodation Exception*

3. Brigade Chaplain Memo
   *BDE Chaplain Memo Religious Accommodation Exception*

4. Battalion Commander Endorsement
   *BN Commander Endorsement Religious Accommodation Exception*

5. Brigade Commander Endorsement
   *BDE Commander Endorsement Religious Accommodation Exception*

6. USAREC Endorsement
   *USAREC Commander Endorsement Religious Accommodation Exception*

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