

World  
Watch  
Research

# Afghanistan: Full Country Dossier

December 2022



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

December 2022

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# Introduction

## World Watch List 2023

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	14.4	98	96	94	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.7	92	91	92	92	91
3	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	88	87	85	86
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.2	89	88	88	87	86
5	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.1	16.3	9.1	88	91	92	90	87
6	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.6	14.8	14.4	16.7	88	87	85	80	80
7	Pakistan	13.4	13.8	14.8	14.8	12.9	16.7	86	87	88	88	87
8	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.8	15.8	16.5	10.7	86	85	86	85	85
9	Afghanistan	15.4	15.7	15.4	16.1	16.6	4.6	84	98	94	93	94
10	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	9.4	83	79	79	85	87
11	India	12.3	13.1	13.0	14.8	13.3	15.7	82	82	83	83	83
12	Syria	13.2	14.1	13.6	14.1	14.1	11.3	80	78	81	82	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.9	15.8	16.7	2.4	80	81	78	79	77
14	Myanmar	12.5	11.6	13.9	13.9	12.9	15.4	80	79	74	73	71
15	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.8	16.0	16.4	0.2	77	77	77	78	78
16	China	12.9	10.0	12.7	14.5	15.6	11.1	77	76	74	70	65
17	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	10.3	15.1	15.0	76	70	67	66	68
18	Iraq	14.1	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	4.6	76	78	82	76	79
19	Algeria	14.1	14.1	11.5	13.7	15.1	4.8	73	71	70	73	70
20	Mauritania	14.5	14.2	13.3	14.1	14.2	1.3	72	70	71	68	67
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	13.9	12.7	15.6	1.5	71	71	71	73	74
22	Colombia	11.8	8.9	13.1	11.3	10.4	15.4	71	68	67	62	58
23	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.5	9.6	13.8	15.6	71	68	67	66	48
24	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	68	66	68	70
25	Vietnam	11.8	9.6	12.8	14.6	14.4	6.9	70	71	72	72	70
26	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	14.1	15.7	0.6	70	69	70	70	69
27	Cuba	13.1	8.3	13.1	13.2	14.9	7.0	70	66	62	52	49
28	Niger	9.4	9.5	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.4	70	68	62	60	52
29	Morocco	13.2	13.8	10.9	12.2	14.5	4.8	69	69	67	66	63
30	Bangladesh	12.6	10.7	12.8	11.3	10.6	10.7	69	68	67	63	58
31	Laos	11.7	10.2	13.3	14.2	14.0	5.0	68	69	71	72	71
32	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.6	68	65	63	43	43
33	Indonesia	11.3	12.0	11.6	11.1	9.2	12.8	68	68	63	60	65
34	Qatar	14.2	14.1	10.5	13.2	14.4	1.5	68	74	67	66	62
35	Egypt	12.7	13.5	11.6	12.1	10.8	7.0	68	71	75	76	76
36	Tunisia	12.0	12.8	10.4	12.0	13.5	6.5	67	66	67	64	63
37	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.6	67	66	64	56	55
38	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	11.0	10.5	13.9	67	65	64	60	61
39	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.4	12.1	10.6	66	66	65	63	65
40	Bhutan	13.2	12.3	11.6	13.9	14.2	1.1	66	67	64	61	64
41	Turkey	12.8	11.5	11.8	13.0	11.5	5.7	66	65	69	63	66
42	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.5	66	63	62	57	56
43	Malaysia	12.8	14.3	11.4	12.2	11.1	3.9	66	63	63	62	60
44	Tajikistan	13.8	12.2	12.3	12.8	13.4	1.1	66	65	66	65	65
45	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.9	65	65	64	60	54
46	Brunei	14.8	14.6	10.1	10.9	14.4	0.4	65	64	64	63	63
47	Oman	14.0	14.1	10.3	13.3	12.9	0.6	65	66	63	62	59
48	Kazakhstan	13.2	11.6	11.9	12.7	14.2	1.1	65	64	64	64	63
49	Jordan	13.0	14.0	10.5	12.3	12.7	2.0	65	66	64	64	65
50	Nicaragua	10.8	5.9	11.9	12.8	13.6	9.4	65	56	51	41	41

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	13.3	64	63	62	61	61
52	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	64	63	62	60
53	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	15.6	63	61	58	55	52
54	UAE	13.4	13.4	9.9	11.2	12.8	1.1	62	62	62	60	58
55	Nepal	12.0	9.8	9.4	13.0	12.6	4.4	61	64	66	64	64
56	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	0.6	60	59	56	56	56
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.3	9.7	10.3	12.0	2.0	60	59	58	60	57
58	Azerbaijan	13.2	10.0	9.5	12.0	13.6	0.6	59	60	56	57	57
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.2	11.0	10.4	12.0	2.0	59	58	58	57	56
60	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	7.6	58	55	53	56	48
61	Russian Federation	12.3	7.9	10.3	11.8	12.8	2.0	57	56	57	60	60
62	Sri Lanka	12.8	9.1	10.6	11.3	9.5	3.9	57	63	62	65	58
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	8.9	57	50	42	42	41
64	Venezuela	6.0	4.6	11.7	10.2	11.4	11.7	56	51	39	42	41
65	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	11.1	55	52	48	48	43
66	Bahrain	12.7	13.3	8.7	10.7	8.8	0.9	55	57	56	55	55
67	Honduras	7.1	5.0	11.9	7.6	9.8	11.9	53	48	46	39	38
68	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	51	46	43	42
69	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	9.2	14.8	51	48	47	48	47
70	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	5.4	49	44	43	41	42
71	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	3.0	48	43	47	45	46
72	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.0	46	43	43	44	44
73	El Salvador	7.7	4.2	10.6	7.4	9.1	6.7	46	45	42	38	30
74	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	42	42	42	43
75	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	1.1	44	44	43	43	43
76	Belarus	9.5	3.8	4.8	9.4	12.1	3.3	43	33	30	28	35

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## Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

# WWL 2023 Situation in brief / Afghanistan

## Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

Afghanistan: Population (UN estimate for 2022)	Christians	Chr%
40,754,000	Thousands	OD estimate

## Map of country



Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	84	9
WWL 2022	98	1
WWL 2021	94	2
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

## Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Afghanistan:	
Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Clan oppression	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups
Dictatorial paranoia	Non-Christian religious leaders, Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Organized crime cartels or networks
Organized corruption and crime	Violent religious groups, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups, Organized crime cartels or networks, Government officials
Ethno-religious hostility	Government officials, Ethnic group leaders, Non-Christian religious leaders, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, One's own (extended) family, Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups

*Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.*

### Brief description of the persecution situation

Almost all Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are not able to practice their faith openly. Leaving Islam is considered shameful and punishable by death under the prevailing Islamic law. If exposed, Christian converts have to flee the country. The family, clan or tribe must save its 'honor' and deal with any known convert. After the Taliban took over government control on 15 August 2021, most Christians tried to leave the country and/or went into hiding. The take-over proved to be a game-changer especially for women, who are confined to the walls of their homes once again, but also for ethnic and religious minorities, including Christian converts, who are seen as apostates. As the Taliban consolidate power - despite appearing to be far from unified -, Christian converts are having to adapt and conform to the rigid form of society implemented.

### Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Afghanistan has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)
3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

Afghanistan is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christian converts are killed on suspicion of their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Women converts are forcibly married and forced to recant their beliefs (ICCPR Art. 23.3 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Afghans are assumed to be Muslims and are not allowed to change their religion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians cannot display any religious images or symbols (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Children of Christian converts are forced to adhere to Islamic religious precepts and receive Islamic teaching (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)

### Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

No specific examples can be given for security reasons. For more information, please refer to the section on Violence below.

### Specific examples of positive developments

There are no examples of positive developments in the country.

### External Links - Situation in brief

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>



# WWL 2023: Keys to understanding / Afghanistan

## Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Afghanistan Analysts Network - AAN	AAN	<a href="https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/">https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/</a>	17 May 2022
Amnesty International 2021/22 report (154 countries)	AI report 2021/22 (pp.64-67)	<a href="https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf">https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/POL1048702022ENGLISH.pdf</a>	17 May 2022
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	<a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12011352">https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12011352</a>	17 May 2022
Bertelsmann Transformation Index report 2022 (137 countries)	BTI report 2022	<a href="https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/AFG">https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/AFG</a>	17 May 2022
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook summary	<a href="https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/static/fd00b44e12e3769e57d57c1a5da3a826/AF-summary.pdf">https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/static/fd00b44e12e3769e57d57c1a5da3a826/AF-summary.pdf</a>	17 May 2022
Crisis24 country report (Garda World - 193 countries)	Crisis24 Afghanistan	<a href="https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/afghanistan">https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/afghanistan</a>	17 May 2022
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021 (187 countries)	EIU Democracy 2021 (p.16)	<a href="https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf">https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/eiu-democracy-index-2021.pdf</a>	17 May 2022
FFP's Fragile States Index 2022	FSI 2022	<a href="https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/">https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/</a>	3 August 2022
Freedom House's 2022 Democracy index (29 countries - Afghanistan not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2022	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores</a>	
Freedom House's 2022 Global Freedom index (210 countries)	Global Freedom 2022 Afghanistan	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2022">https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2022</a>	17 May 2022
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report (70 countries - Afghanistan not included)	Freedom on the Net 2021	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores</a>	
Human Rights Watch World Report 2022 (country chapter) 100+ countries	HRW 2022	<a href="https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan">https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan</a>	17 May 2022
Internet World Stats 2022	IWS 2022	<a href="https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#af">https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#af</a>	17 May 2022
RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index (180 countries)	World Press Freedom 2022	<a href="https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan">https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan</a>	17 May 2022
Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2021	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/afg">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/afg</a>	17 May 2022
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators (country profile) – covering 189 countries	HDI profile	<a href="https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/AFG">https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/AFG</a>	8 June 2022
US State Department's 2021 International Religious Freedom country report	IRFR 2021	<a href="https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/">https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/afghanistan/</a>	6 June 2022
USCIRF 2022 country reports (15 CPC and 12 SWL countries)	USCIRF 2022	<a href="https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Afghanistan.pdf">https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-04/2022%20Afghanistan.pdf</a>	17 May 2022
World Bank country overview - 178 countries	World Bank country overview	<a href="https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan">https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan</a>	18 May 2022
World Bank country profile data	World Bank profile 2020	<a href="https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=AFG">https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=AFG</a>	18 May 2022
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook 2022 - 147 countries	Macro Poverty Outlook South Asia 2022	<a href="https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-sar.pdf">https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/5d1783db09a0e09d15bbcea8ef0cec0b-0500052021/related/mpo-sar.pdf</a>	18 May 2022

## Recent history

It is not often that a single date turns out to be a game-changer for a whole country, but Afghanistan experienced such a date in the previous reporting period (WWL 2022). The 15 August 2021 marked the date when the Taliban took over power after the elected government had fled the country. The take-over was surprisingly swift and although it is not known where the Taliban will steer the country in detail, a general direction has become clear already and the [prediction](#) in the WWL 2022 documentation has unfortunately come true: "In 1996 the Taliban seized control of Kabul and imposed radical Sharia law until 2001 when they were ousted from power by the US-led international military invasion. There are signs that many of the Taliban's policies of the 1990s are now making a re-appearance" (WWR, Afghanistan - Full Country Dossier, January 2022, p.8). These signs continue to amass, although the Taliban seems to be a far from unified movement (see below: Political and legal landscape).

In 2004 the first presidential and in 2005 the first parliamentary elections were held for more than 30 years. Hamid Karzai became the first president.

In 2014 NATO formally ended its combat mission in Afghanistan. However, international troops continued to be based in the country and the Taliban continued to control certain areas. Talks between the US government and the Taliban collapsed in September 2019, but the USA [signed](#) an agreement with the Taliban on 29 February 2020 and withdrew almost one third of its remaining troops by end of June 2020 (The Guardian, 29 February 2020). The new US administration's [announcement](#) in April 2021 to withdraw all of its troops by 11 September 2021 at the latest was a real game-changer - and the hasty and messy process of withdrawal by the end of August 2021 damaged the image of the USA far beyond Afghanistan. While some visitors report an [eerie silence](#) in Kabul (ICG, 9 June 2022), there have been a [spate of attacks](#) by Islamic State group forces (ISKP) in April and May 2022 in many other areas of the country (Times of India, 27 May 2022). The killing of al-Qaeda leader Aiman al Zawahiri at the end of July 2022 in a downtown district of Kabul belied the Taliban's claims of having nothing to do with al-Qaeda (see below: Security situation).

The small groups of Christians in the country have had to adapt to the new circumstances by either relocating within the country, seeking refuge abroad for security reasons, or by trying to stay put but more deeply hidden. They are affected by the insecurity and the difficult economic situation (worsened by the COVID-19 crisis). As the Taliban consolidates power, Christians cannot expect any space in society and they may also be affected by possible infighting between the various Taliban factions as well as by the Taliban's battle against ISKP.

## Political and legal landscape

The announcement (and implementation) of a complete foreign troop withdrawal changed the political landscape fundamentally, although all actors were still in place. Before the USA announced its military withdrawal, the 'peace talks' in Doha had made little tangible process. The fact that the Taliban had chosen one of their top clerics as chief negotiator, who was "reputed to be a [hardliner](#) dedicated to sustaining the jihad until an Islamic emirate can be re-established in Afghanistan", showed in hindsight that agreements were tough or even impossible to reach (RFE/RL, 10 September 2020).

The swift Taliban progress, taking over the country in a few weeks and the more or less non-existent resistance of the Kabul authorities, shocked observers but also showed that institution-building in Afghanistan had remained weak. It also proved true what has been said already for many years, namely that Afghan loyalty is first to one's family and clan or tribe, not to a country or nation. A resistance movement did emerge in the mountainous north, bolstered by the remains of the Afghan National Defense Force. However, the Taliban took control of the [whole of Afghanistan](#) after a successful final military offensive in the mountainous province of Panjshir, 100km north of Kabul (BBC News, 6 September 2021). Opposition forces are still regrouping, but are not holding appreciable territory, are not (yet) supported by neighboring countries and cannot be classed as a coordinated armed resistance movement.

There were no real [surprises](#) when, on 7 September 2021, the Taliban announced the names of various officials whose task was to form a new interim government (ICG, 9 September 2021); it is worth remembering that the earlier Taliban government was termed 'interim' throughout their time in power between 1996 and 2001. All calls for an inclusive government went unheard.

None of those serving in the former government under President Ghani were included in the Taliban government, nor were any women included. The fact that the ethnic set-up is almost exclusively Pashtun - of the 33 ministers only two are Tajik and one Uzbek - shows that consolidation of power and unity within the Taliban movement were dominant motives. The inclusion of ministers still appearing as 'wanted' on international terrorist lists and the strong representation of the Haqqani network (which has strong ties with Pakistan) show that another main goal may have been to share the spoils of victory. The Taliban's final [government line-up](#) added nothing substantial to make it more inclusive of ethnic minorities or even women (Afghan Analysts Network - AAN, 7 October 2021). It also did not come as a surprise that the Taliban leader ordered the [re-introduction of harsh Sharia punishments](#) (including amputations and executions) for certain crimes, (BBC News, 15 November 2022).

At the same time, the announcement in March 2022 that secondary schools for girls would re-open soon, only to be canceled at the last minute when girls were already lining up to enter schools, shows at least two things: First, the Taliban is not unified in its policy approach; and secondly, it does not really seem to care about the echo of international donors, given that this drama unfolded shortly before a major international donor conference held on 31 March 2022. It seems that conservative elements in the Afghan government are dominant, at least for the time being. Although details in reports vary about how the U-turn came to pass, it is clear that such a decision could only have been taken by the [highest authority of the Taliban](#), Emir Hibatullah Akhundzada, himself (AAN, 29 March 2022). Consequently, the results of the most recent [donor conference](#) on 31 March 2022, which ended with pledges for slightly more than half of what the UN had sought, illustrates the dire situation Afghanistan is in (The Guardian, 31 March 2022). In any case, a rare example illustrating a certain lack of unity within the Taliban occurred when the Taliban's deputy foreign minister, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, [publicly criticized](#) the Taliban leadership for banning girls from attending secondary school education in a speech broadcast on television on 22 May 2022 (Gandhara, 2 June 2022).

The small Christian community faces a difficult future. At the same time as the Taliban are in the process of consolidating power, Afghan society faces an emboldened ISKP which has been reinforced with radical elements freed from prison, disgruntled Taliban fighters and other insurgents. As early as November 2021, the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, stated that the ISKP is now [active in all provinces](#) (Reuters, 17 November 2021), although estimations of their size vary. Regional warlords could pose another challenge, although so far, there are no signs of a coordinated, armed resistance movement. In the WWL 2022 reporting period there was mention of ethnic (and religious) groups [arming themselves](#) and sending a clear message to the Taliban that they would defend their territory and people (AAN, 4 June 2021); however, this could not be confirmed in the WWL 2023 reporting period. This does not mean it is not happening, but ethnic-based fighting is unlikely in the short term. Should the Taliban continue to neglect ethnic minorities or restrict them, this might change. In such a case, the Christian minority can easily find themselves caught in the middle of such confrontations. A Taliban spokesman [denied outright that Christians exist](#) in Afghanistan, when he was directly asked about it (Voice of America, 16 May 2022); this is the official standpoint of the Taliban.

Women's rights in Afghanistan have long been fragile, even prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Reflecting this, Afghanistan performed poorly in Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#), ranking 166th out of 167 countries and criticized for several discriminatory laws ([OECD, 2019](#)). Under Taliban rule, it has now slipped even further to last place ([Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22](#)). Since the start of the peace process, the Taliban consistently claimed to guarantee women's security in Afghanistan. Upon taking over the country, they [publicly stated](#) that women would be allowed to continue to be active in society and benefit from their rights, working 'shoulder to shoulder' with the Taliban within Islamic Sharia (Al-Jazeera, 21 August 2021). Since the Taliban take-over however, human rights organizations have consistently condemned the Taliban's treatment of women. Women are no longer allowed to travel further than 45km without a male chaperone (Forbes, 12 April 2022) and in a move that has to be understood as symbolic, the Taliban dissolved the Ministry of Women's Affairs and re-installed in the very same building the notorious and dreaded Ministry of Vice and Virtue, a body that was notorious for some of the worst violations against women in the Taliban's previous reign of power ([Human Rights Watch, 2022 World Report](#)).

Child marriage rates remain high, with 28% of girls and 7% of boys being married before the age of 18 ([Girls Not Brides, accessed July 2022](#)), and is expected to rise under Taliban rule due to the increasingly dire economic situation; Parents are selling their young daughters in order to make the remainder of the family survive ([UNICEF statement, 12 November 2021](#); [World Vision, August 2022](#))

## Religious landscape

The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians in Afghanistan is "thousands". According to WCD April 2022 statistics, more than 99% of the population is Muslim and there are also small groups of Hindus, Bahai and Buddhists (among others). For security reasons, no WCD breakdown is shown here. 90% of Muslims in Afghanistan follow Sunni Islam, while approximately 9.7% adhere to Shiite Islam. The Hazara tribe is predominantly Shiite, while the main ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtu, are Sunni. They dominate the political landscape but are in need of such minorities as the Uzbeks and Tajiks to exercise power.

Even before the Taliban took power, from an official point of view, there were no Christians in the country apart from some international military staff, diplomats and NGO workers. After the withdrawal of international troops and the related exodus of other international staff, the number of Christians has indeed declined. Indigenous Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible.

Against this religious backdrop, daily life is challenging for both Christian men and women and they are forced to live out their faith in secret. Female converts may be forcibly married to a Muslim or confined to the walls of their home while men face imprisonment, torture and death threats. Under Taliban rule, women are now expected to cover-up fully in public ([The Washington Post, 14 May 2022](#)), and men are also pressured to conform to Taliban expectations, such as growing a beard and having an approved haircut ([BBC News, 26 September 2021](#)).

## Economic landscape

According to the UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Gross National Income:** 2,229 USD (in 2017 PPP)
- **Rate of multidimensional poverty:** 55.9% of the population are in multi-dimensional poverty and a further 18.1% are vulnerable to it. 54.5% of the population are living below the national poverty line.
- **Remittances:** 4.54%

According to the World Bank profile:

- Afghanistan is classified by the World Bank as a low-income economy.
- **GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international USD):** 1.971 (2020)
- **Birth rate:** The birth rate has been declining over the decades and stands at 3.1.
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** The annual GDP growth rate is declining and stood at an estimated 1.54% for 2019, and at -2.4% for 2020.
- **Poverty gap at 5.50 USD a day (2011 PPP):** n/a

The most recent summary of socio-economic data in Afghanistan at the time this dossier went to press was published in the [UNDP Snapshot](#) ("Afghanistan since August 2021: a socio-economic snapshot", 5 October 2022).

Afghanistan is a land-locked country and faces multiple challenges in its economy. Maybe the most obvious is that due to decades of civil war, the country has suffered widespread destruction. Its infrastructure is in poor condition and limited in capacity; it also has a very challenging geography with high mountains and harsh weather conditions. The country cannot currently take advantage of its rich mineral resources (most likely including oil and gas as well) as these commodities need foreign investment and safe transportation, which in turn require political stability. Even China, which is commodity-hungry and willing to take more risks than most other investors, remains cautious. The challenges of [governing the TAPI pipeline](#) (delivering oil from Turkmenistan via and to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) is a telling example (NBR, 22 June 2021). Despite Beijing's desire to see the Belt and Road Initiative make further progress, China is well aware of Afghanistan's reputation of being a "graveyard of empires".

For many years, Afghanistan was classified as a "rent-seeking" economy, meaning that a broad segment of its income came from international donors. According to an AAN Special Report published in May 2020, [48% of the current government budget](#) was funded by international aid. But those were just the official figures: The report estimated the actual percentage to be closer to 75% - and in former years this probably even reached 90%. These funds largely dried up with the withdrawal of international troops and many international NGOs. Almost immediately after the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan, the IMF estimated that its economy would [fall by 30%](#) (Reuters, 19 October 2021) and according to the World Bank's country overview, total public spending is estimated to have declined by 60%. Most Western donors are struggling to find ways of keeping humanitarian aid flowing without recognizing or even supporting the Taliban government. The aid that other states have pledged, e.g., [China](#) with a 31 million USD fund of COVID-19- relief, will not be able to replace the levels of international aid Afghanistan

was used to and is in need of (BBC News, 9 September 2021). And while the World Bank reports that an increase of humanitarian contributions in the form of 'in-kind support' has helped Afghan people to survive (and to some extent avoid expected disasters), distributing humanitarian aid in a [collapsed economy](#) while navigating a very uncertain political situation poses its very own challenges (AAN, 23 May 2022).

Not surprisingly, farmers and other citizens relied more heavily on the production of illicit drugs to make money and earn a living. Traditionally, this has been opium and the crop is still widely planted and harvested. Although the Taliban issued a [ban](#) on its growing and processing in April 2022 (AAN, 14 April 2022), the implementation does not seem to be very strict, especially as farmers have few alternatives in the current economic crisis and the Taliban will take its share for an income as well. According to the most recent report of UNODC, the opium cultivation in Afghanistan [grew by 32%](#) (UNODC Research Brief, 1 November 2022). Another challenge has been the surge in production of chemical drugs such as methamphetamine, as has been [reported in detail](#) by the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction in November 2020. Observers are particularly [concerned](#) about this because significant amounts of these drugs are always consumed in-country (BBC News, 24 November 2020).

Farms are also facing increasing challenges. 42.8% of the total workforce are employed in agriculture and according to the World Bank even 60% of all households derive at least some income from agriculture and 74% are still living in rural areas. Even those farmers producing fruit and licit crops faced challenges, as the fall-out from the war, a persistent drought in the southern Kandahar region and closed borders led to [fruit and crops](#) being harvested, but then rotting on trucks as farmers were unable to export them (AAN, 7 April 2022). Meanwhile, there are claims that [global warming and climate change](#) are leading to a thinning and breaking apart of Afghan glaciers and a change in the pattern of rainfall, causing droughts to become more common and widespread (AAN, 6 June 2022). Pressure to improve efficiency is high: While the population has tripled since the 1960s, the amount of available arable land has not increased.

The Taliban announced that in the first seven months of 2022, Afghanistan had [exported 1.85 billion USD](#) worth of goods and the main markets have been neighboring Pakistan, India, Tajikistan and China (Tolo News, 8 November 2022). The Taliban government also signed a [preliminary deal](#) with Russia on the delivery of gas and wheat (Al-Jazeera, 28 September 2022), in what can be seen as a sign of how challenging the economic situation has become. Even though it needs to be seen how such a deal will be implemented, it signals a broadening of international ties, especially remarkable given the history of the Soviet-Afghan war in 1979-1989.

The [fourth wave of COVID-19](#) hit Afghanistan at the beginning of 2022. While the health system was totally overwhelmed, the Taliban advised citizens that - according to Sharia - keeping oneself healthy is a must (AAN, 20 April 2022). Afghanistan is especially vulnerable because Iran and Pakistan (which were seriously affected by COVID-19) are close neighbors, where hundreds of thousands of Afghans live (see below: Social and cultural landscape). The crisis also caused great difficulties for the many [day laborers](#) in the country (AAN, 3 December 2020).

Christians in Afghanistan share the lot of their fellow countrymen. Since any exposure of their Christian faith would certainly mean discrimination, the loss of livelihood and possibly even their very life, they are careful to hide their faith. Due to their Christian convictions, they will not actively participate in opium production and the general drug trade, but it is difficult for them to stand up against it as well.

Women have long been among the most economically vulnerable in Afghanistan, in part due to low education and employment rates, and patrilineal inheritance practices ([OECD, 2019](#)). Afghanistan's education system has historically suffered from decades of sustained conflict, with low enrolment rates in rural areas, particularly for girls ([UNICEF, accessed June 2021](#)). Since the resurgence of Taliban rule, only the re-opening of schools for boys was announced in September ([Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2021](#)). Women have become increasingly reliant on men as the breadwinners, due to diminishing employment and education opportunities (see above: *Political and legal landscape*, and below: *Social and Cultural landscape*).

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook and UNDP's HDI profile:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The largest ethnolinguistic groups are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch and others. The Afghan Constitution mentions 14 different ethnic groups
- **Main languages:** The two main languages are Dari (a Farsi dialect) and Pashtu
- **Urbanization rate:** While it is difficult to come across reliable data, according to a 2016 World Bank report, 54% of the urban population in Afghanistan lived in Kabul and its urbanization rate is one of the highest of the world. The official CIA figure is 26.6%.
- **Literacy rate:** 37.3% (15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 3.9 (1.9 for girls, 6.0 for boys)
- **Health and education indicators:** Afghanistan has a pupil-teacher ratio in primary school of 49:1. There are 2.8 doctors and 4 hospital beds per 10,000 people

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Age:** The population under the age of 14 is 41.3%; the population above 65 is 2.7% (2021)
- **Education:** The completion rate for primary education is 84% (2019)
- **Unemployment:** 13.3%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 79% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** According to the UN's International Organization for Migration ([IOM, accessed 11 July 2022](#)), as of November 2021 (last report available on the website), there were over 5.5 million people living internally displaced. In 2021, an additional 660,000 IDPs have been added and more than 1.17 million undocumented Afghans had been forced to return, almost all from Iran (only a small number from Pakistan). In the UNDP Snapshot (see above: "Economic landscape"), it is estimated that from 2021 to April 2022 around 2.5 million Afghans left the country, while only 1.1 million returned from abroad in the same timeframe (page 26).

According to the HDI profile:

- **Human Development Index (HDI):** With a score of 0.511, Afghanistan ranks 169th of 189 listed countries, dropping two places in ranking since 2013 and seeing a slowing HDI growth in the last decade.
- **Life expectancy:** 64.8 years
- **Median age:** 18.4
- **GINI coefficient:** n/a
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.655, Afghanistan ranks 157th of 162 listed countries
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 11.1%, the youth (between 15 and 24) unemployment rate 17.4%, the rate of youth neither in school or employment is 41.8%.
- **Labor Force Participation rate:** 48.9% (21.6% female and 74.7% male)

Afghanistan faces a multitude of challenges besides the recovery from decades of war and the continued attacks by ISKP. The country is split up into a variety of ethnic groups which are strong in different parts of the country. It seems that all are aiming to secure their own position and are not interested in the well-being of Afghanistan as a whole. The Pashtuns are often regarded as being most dominant, but even within the Pashtun community, divisions occur along tribal lines as well. These splits became apparent in the 'peace talks in Doha as well. The Taliban are a Pashtun movement and are clearly dominated by this ethnicity. A well-known Afghani saying states: "First my tribe, then my people and then the country". Political cooperation is constantly affected by mistrust and it is worrying that ethnic groups see the need to arm themselves and publicly state that they will defend their people against insurgents.

An understanding of terms like 'civil society' does not yet exist in Afghanistan, so pressure groups caring for social development and/or issues concerning women, minorities or human rights can do little to influence the country's political development and can even become a target for attacks. Groups supporting the rule of law, participation in the political process or government accountability are quickly suspected of being agents of the international community, furthering the agenda of the West. These are also often labelled as 'non-believers'. This would seem to apply also to Western NGOs working in the country, including the few Christian ones. This attitude within society is echoed in the US State Department's IRFR 2021, when it states on page 23: "NGOs reported some Muslims remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization." The Taliban has carried out [targeted killings](#) of "collaborators" with the old government and of citizens claimed to be "militants" (Human Rights Watch, 7 July 2022).

A [UNICEF country report](#) published in May 2018 showed what the dire situation in the country means for civilians, especially for children: 44% of all children in the age between 7 and 17 were not attending school, 60% of whom were girls. The out-of-school rate increased for the first time since 2002. According to the [UNICEF 2021 Humanitarian Situation report](#), at least four million children were out of school. It is hard to see how the next generation will have any real perspectives without education and without any improvement in security and the economic situation. Before the Taliban took over full government control in 2021, in those areas ruled by the Taliban, schools were often allowed to function and, in some regions, girls were allowed to



attend classes up to a certain age. However, many school buildings were dilapidated and damaged by the war and the Taliban did nothing to repair or renovate them, as a [report](#) from April 2020 showed (USIP, 30 April 2020).

The immediate aftermath of the Taliban take-over of the government in Kabul in August 2021 sent mixed signals in this respect. Even before the take-over was complete, reports were coming in from the provinces that women were being [forced to leave their jobs](#), for example in banks (Reuters, 13 August 2021). The subject of education illustrates perfectly that the Taliban is not yet following a uniform approach. It was reported that girls in northern Afghanistan (such as in [Mazar-e-Sharif](#)), can still attend school classes as long as they follow strict dress regulations (Reuters, 12 October 2021). However, the so-called 'Islamic Emirate' (as Taliban likes to refer to its government set-up) had at that time only been in full power for a few months and it could be that such regional differences will gradually disappear with time. The delayed and then largely cancelled re-opening of secondary school education for girls (see above: *Political and legal landscape*) has a [devastating](#) impact on the future perspectives for girls (Reuters, 30 June 2022).

According to the report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction ([SIGAR](#)) published on 12 July 2019, the number of users of drugs (such as opium and heroin) within Afghanistan rose to between 2.9 million and 3.6 million in 2015, which is one of the world's highest per capita rates (more recent numbers are not available). This also indicates that many people, especially the younger generation, are lacking any real future perspectives.

While COVID-19 continued to have a strong impact on Afghanistan, especially with the arrival of a fourth wave in early 2022 (see above: Economic landscape), most people found themselves struggling with the consequences of the economic collapse in family life, even those belonging to [more wealthy households](#) (AAN, 23 December 2021). The World Food Program estimated that [23 million Afghans](#) would suffer from acute food insecurity in the 2021/2022 winter months (Gandhara, 25 October 2021). In the growing desperation, reports emerged from IDP camps that families have been increasingly resorting to [selling their girls](#), some as young as four, to survive (CNN, 2 November 2021). The devastating economic crisis is grinding on relentlessly and up to 20 million people are facing level 3 ('crisis') or level 4 ('emergency') [food insecurity](#) according to the World Food Program's criteria (Human Rights Watch, 4 August 2022). To what extent international donors can dare to trust the Taliban is a question of major importance even for cooperating with the delivery of [humanitarian aid](#) on the large scale needed (International Crisis Group, 12 August 2022). The same is true for neighboring countries as well.

Christians were and are affected by these circumstances just like the wider population. During the COVID crisis, for instance, although social-distancing measures did give converts a little bit more freedom for their own personal worship, being in lock-down with non-Christian family members also put them in additional danger.

Afghanistan is a deeply patriarchal society which is heavily dominated by the Islamic religious landscape, and in which women are viewed as second-class citizens. Women and girls face restrictions in almost all areas of daily life and became increasingly vulnerable within the context of the COVID-19 crisis ([United States Institute of Peace, 10 June 2020](#)) and under Taliban rule ([Unherd, 27 May 2022](#)). The dire economic and social situation and the restrictions not to leave

the house are especially hard for widows, of which there are tens of thousands - if not hundreds of thousands - in the country. Their and their families' survival is in jeopardy ([Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 2022](#)).

## Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2022):

- **Internet usage:** 22.9% of the population - survey date: December 2021
- **Facebook usage:** 10.7% of the population – survey date: January 2022  
(According to [Napoleon Cat](#), as of June 2022 only 17.7% of Facebook users were women).

According to the World Bank country profile:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 58 per 100 people (2020).

According to available data, Afghanistan is one of the few countries in the world where the number of Internet users has decreased, but these statistics are not very reliable. Still, it is likely that citizens (converts from Islam in particular) will have more access to online Christian resources (especially resources in Farsi, which is related to the Dari language). As long as intervention from the new Taliban government remains low, this is likely to strengthen the small Christian community, which is often made up of isolated converts. However, Internet access is more available in urban areas, especially Kabul, which alone makes up more than half of the country's urbanization. With the Taliban taking over control of the country, it is likely that such access will become increasingly difficult and risky.

Due to country instability, Afghanistan was not listed in the Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2021 report. However, in November 2017, VOA News reported that the authorities had at times [blocked social media services](#) temporarily to prevent insurgency groups using WhatsApp, Telegram, Twitter and Facebook to spread propaganda. Independent media reporting has become much more [difficult and dangerous](#) with the government take-over by the Taliban (AAN, 7 March 2022). Not only is the Taliban putting pressure on reporters and published content (leading not least to self-censorship), but the dire economic situation has also caused numerous independent media outlets to go out of business.

As Afghanistan Analysts Network showed in a series of reports, [access to telecom services](#) (AAN, 13 June 2019) was limited particularly by Taliban control. The Taliban also enforced [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they controlled (prior to the August 2021 take-over) in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara, 30 October 2020). This applied predominantly to rural areas; it should be noted that the World Bank claims that the [urbanization rate](#) of Afghanistan is the highest in South Asia (World Bank Factsheet, accessed 8 January 2022), only topped by smaller countries such as the Maldives and Bhutan. So, the gap between cities and rural areas is growing. Overall, the country's technological development is slow and very hindered by the dire security situation.

Reflecting the gender gap in relation to technology access, a Georgetown report revealed that Afghanistan scored worst for female cell phone usage out of 170 countries (Georgetown, [Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22, p.21](#)). It is therefore harder for women to access

digital Christian resources or online Christian communities.

## Security situation

Violent attacks across the country continued throughout 2021 and civilians have been paying a high price, especially those from a minority background. Al-Qaeda is present and active in the country, even though the Taliban claim otherwise; the Islamic State group has made inroads into the country, boosted by an influx of foreign Sunni militants, many calling themselves "Islamic State of the Khorasan Province" (ISKP), and formed largely out of splinter groups of former Taliban fighters. On 5 September 2022, Islamic State group ISKP conducted the first embassy attack since the Taliban took control in August 2021. The suicide bomb blast targeted [the Russian embassy](#) in Kabul, killing two employees (Al-Mayadeen, 5 September 2022), showing that the security situation is less stable than the Taliban would like to admit. ISKP has mainly been targeting [religious minorities](#) like the Hazara and other Shiites in an effort to sow further sectarian discord (Human Rights Watch, 6 September 2022). Afghanistan is also likely to continue serving as a gathering-point for groups from the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other dismantled militia, who opposed the peace negotiations. The [killing](#) of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a US drone strike in the early hours of 31 July 2022 in central Kabul has left the Taliban in an awkward position (BBC News, 2 August 2022).

China is running a military base in Tajikistan on the border to Afghanistan (RFE/RL, 14 October 2021) and is building a second one. ISKP fired [rockets](#) across the border to neighboring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in April and May 2022, showing that the Taliban is not completely in control and is struggling to keep its promise that no attacks on other countries would be made from Afghan territory (Gandhara, 11 May 2022). But the relationship with neighboring Pakistan has become more strained as well. While the Pakistani government has been quick in praising the Taliban take-over of Afghanistan, it is coming to realize that the relationship with its neighbor's new rulers will pose serious challenges. Radical Islamic groups in Pakistan (such as the TTP) have been emboldened by this victory and one TTP emir even said that his organization is a [branch](#) of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Long War Journal, 15 December 2021). While this statement by the TTP emir may be an outlier, it shows how close the ties between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are, illustrated especially by, but not limited to, the Haqqani network. This clearly has Islamabad worried, but it seems that the risk is deemed manageable, at least for the time-being.

Another sign that being neighbors with an Afghanistan ruled by Taliban is not smooth sailing were the [border clashes](#) along the Durand line, which Pakistan is fencing off at the moment (Dawn, 3 January 2022). There was also the death of [three senior commanders](#) of Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) travelling in southern Afghanistan when their car hit a mine (Gandhara, 7 August 2022). All these killings are making the country an even less hospitable and secure place for TTP (and the general population). And while Pakistan [accused](#) the Taliban of harboring leaders of militant groups, the Taliban were complaining that Pakistan allowed its air space to be used for drone strikes (Gandhara, 30 September 2022).

The National Resistance Front poses a [challenge](#) as well (Foreign Affairs, 19 August 2022), although the claim that it is actively fighting in 12 provinces may be something of an exaggeration, especially as it is not supported by any outside force. It remains to be seen how the various ethnic groups will react now that the Taliban take-over is firmly established. Reportedly, many had prepared themselves for the time after the withdrawal of international troops by equipping and showcasing militias (AAN, 4 June 2021). After the IS suicide attack on a Hazara Shiite mosque in northern Kunduz which killed at least 46 in October 2021 (AP News, 8 October 2021), the Taliban were quick to promise Hazaras that they would be protected like all other Afghan citizens. However, with each successful IS-attack, trust in the Taliban's ability and/or willingness is being put to the test.

Against the backdrop of decades-long conflict and instability, life has always been immensely challenging for Christians. In rural locations, the social control is much higher, not just by families, but also by society at large. Following on from the Taliban take-over in August 2021, the security of both Christian men and women has become increasingly fragile, causing many to flee the country. In an increasingly patriarchal, Islamic context however, the rights of women and minorities are a primary point of concern. Afghan women took to the streets to protest new policies in September 2021 and to demand equal rights, although were violently beaten ([BBC News, 8 September 2021](#)). Christian girls reportedly fear being abducted as Taliban brides ([Sat-7, 20 September 2021](#)) while men and boys' risk being forcibly recruited into the new army as in earlier years ([GFATF, 20 September 2021](#)).

## Trends analysis

### 1) The security situation is not improving

The Taliban's swift take-over of power came as a surprise to most observers, although with hindsight, there were many indications of what was to come. The ISKP has been contesting the Taliban fiercely but is unlikely to affect Taliban rule in general. However, every rocket attack on neighboring countries breaks the Taliban's promise in the 2020 withdrawal agreement stating that no terrorist attacks would be carried out on other countries from Afghan territory. These rocket attacks not only add to the security worries faced by Afghanistan's weary neighbors, they are also an embarrassing proof that the Taliban does not have the security situation under control. This is also the case for [every attack](#) on ethnic and religious minorities by ISKP (Gandhara, 5 May 2022). On 30 September 2022, a powerful detonation destroyed a tutoring-center in Kabul, where young women were preparing to sit for their [university entrance exams](#). 53 people died, among them 46 women and girls (Voice of America, 3 October 2022). When [women demonstrated](#) in various cities against such lack of security (Al-Jazeera, 3 October 2022), Taliban security forces responded with little tolerance using threats, insults and brute force to disperse the protesters.

It is no small task to rule a whole country and it is important to see how different Afghanistan has become compared to twenty years ago. To give just one example, when the Taliban first ruled in Kabul in 1996, the city had around 500,000 inhabitants; it now has 4.5 - 5 million. In Kabul itself, it is very likely that many within the Taliban feel they have bitten off more than they can chew. The challenge of managing a 400,000 administrative staff apparatus taken over from the republican era is daunting. The Taliban [administration](#) is far from unified, and it also seems

that guidance from the leadership is not always as clear as Taliban on the ground need (ICG, 9 June 2022).

## **2) Ruling Afghanistan may pose a challenge for Taliban's unity**

It needs to be kept in mind that the Taliban are by no means a uniform and unified organization; some members may indeed be more interested and even focused on governing, while others may be focusing on the continued fighting or in spreading the jihadi success formula into other regions. Any Taliban-government measures not seen as Islamic enough may swell the numbers of disgruntled defectors joining the ISKP. The fact that a deputy foreign minister could publicly criticize the Taliban leadership (see above: *Political and legal landscape*) is highly unusual and points to the challenges the Taliban are facing. According to a [report](#) by Gandhara: 'There is believed to be growing competition between the Haqqani network - a Taliban faction based in the east - and a faction of Taliban co-founders in the south of the country. There is also a smaller and less powerful faction of ethnic Tajik and Uzbek Taliban commanders who are based in northern Afghanistan.' (Gandhara, 2 June 2022). However, it is the strength of the Islamic State group forces which is most worrying.

An in-depth report by AAN underlines the challenging mix of factors which the Taliban are having to deal with: These include the differing interpretations of Islamic teachings, the frustrations being aired about the implementation of rules, and the changed situation in Afghanistan in comparison to 1996 (AAN, 15 June 2022). The three-day "[Grand gathering](#)" organized by the Taliban in June 2022 was described as being a mixture of a religious gathering and a traditional 'loya jirga', since businessmen and other people of influence were also invited to participate (Gandhara, 30 June 2022). However, no women were allowed, and significant decisions still need to emerge. It is likely that the most important issues are not being decided in this format anyway. Still, its significance could be seen by the fact that for the very first time the Taliban supreme leader, Mawlawi Haibuatullah Akhundzada, left his home in southern Kandahar and appeared in Kabul.

While no one can predict what is going to happen, the situation is far from stable. Families, clans and society in general will increasingly look for stability within their own groups, which is likely to increase the pressure on Christian converts to conform with Islamic religious duties and keep their faith hidden, unnoticed by anyone.

## **3) The economic and social situation is deteriorating**

Besides the security situation, the socio-economic outlook adds to the impetus for emigration. Tens of thousands of mainly young men have left Afghanistan in order to look for work in Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and other countries. With the withdrawal of international troops, a whole [service industry catering for foreign troops](#) stationed in the country has lost its livelihood (Gandhara, 1 May 2021). COVID-19 also put a strain on the administration and the death toll appears quite high. According to estimations by the UN from as early as 11 January 2022, 22.8 million people in Afghanistan (55% of the population) were in immediate need of [humanitarian relief](#), in addition to 5.7 million displaced Afghans in five neighboring states (OCHA, 11 January 2022). Due to the strict implementation of Sharia law by the Taliban government, (Western) donors have not been very motivated to send humanitarian aid, give financial assistance or

cooperate with this regime, as shown in the [preparatory talks with Taliban delegates](#) in January 2022 in Oslo (Lowy Institute, 1 February 2022). At the same time, the humanitarian aid that reaches the country, e.g., via the World Food Program, is not sufficient for the levels required. There are also reports of [aid being distributed](#) under dubious criteria which (even under the new Taliban government) are not regarded as being blatantly corrupt (AAN, 23 May 2022). This may add to people's growing unhappiness and encourage emigration in order to survive. More than 50% of the population is younger than 20 years old and the high population growth (combined with the return of refugees and migrant workers) only exacerbates the problem. Unemployment, poverty and inflation rates remain very high. Due to a lack of future perspectives, many young people get involved in drug-trafficking or join militant groups. Christians are affected by these challenges as well.

#### **4) The Taliban seems not to be focused on improving the life of people**

The Taliban seem to be most interested in implementing their vision of a truly Islamic society. They are making progress with their [religious policing](#), limiting the visibility of women in public, enforcing dress and hairstyle codes and forcing imams to hold rollcalls for the attendance of the obligatory prayers at mosques (Gandhara, 6 January 2022). The to-and-fro on admitting girls to attend secondary school has already been mentioned above. The Taliban are holding firmly to their vision of 'true Islamic governance', as outlined in a comprehensive [report](#) by the US Institute of Peace entitled 'Afghan Taliban views on legitimate Islamic governance – Certainties, Ambiguities and areas for Compromise', published on 28 February 2022. At the same time, the Taliban did not lose time and started [collecting taxes](#) immediately after they took over the government (AAN, 28 September 2022).

The [governing system](#) implemented by Iran seems to be the preferred model, with Mullah Hasan Akhund, chief of the Taliban's leadership council 'Rehbari Shura', leading the government, while Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada is to provide spiritual guidance (Reuters, 8 September 2021). The new interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is the son of the founder of the Haqqani network, which is classified as a terrorist group by the USA. Some observers see a déjà-vu of the 1990s or even something worse. Rules which even block families from enjoying a [stroll in the park together](#) by banning women from parks altogether show how strong the morality police has already become (Reuters, 11 November 2022). Such rules may even provide the seed for a new generation of Afghan people taking up arms. They definitely show that in such a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan there is little to no room for religious minorities. Another development points to this fact as well: As religious education is a high priority for the Taliban, and they also announced that they would be [building new madrassas](#) in each province of Afghanistan (Gandhara, 25 June 2022). Given that the very name of the Taliban means "students (from a madrassa)", it seems likely that these schools are intended for indoctrination and recruitment.

#### **5) Neighboring countries and regional powers wield influence**

Much of the population long for peace, are fed-up with the violence and do not trust groups like the Taliban or IS. With the new political situation, it becomes visible once again how Afghanistan is a field of interest for its immediate neighbors like Pakistan and Iran, and also for regional and world powers like Russia and China. The attacks against Tajikistan and Uzbekistan mentioned above under "Security situation" are a reminder that Afghanistan is home to large ethnic minori-

ties and remains a tinderbox for a potentially widening conflict. Tajikistan has been the only Central Asian country openly opposing Taliban rule. Pakistan, which is home to a large part of the Taliban leadership, seems to be preparing itself for the changes by [closing off](#) its 2670-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan. A border-fence is under construction which cuts off many families with ties on both sides of the border and traders doing business on both sides (Gandhara, 5 February 2021). This will hardly keep militants from seeping into the country and has grave social consequences for the communities. It also has consequences for the small Christian community in Afghanistan which will become even more isolated. Recent [border clashes](#) along the border, called the "Durand line", show the level of discontent and are another potential source for widening conflict (Dawn, 3 January 2022).

A [very visible visit](#) by Pakistan's Chief of Intelligence (and potential next army chief) in Kabul as the Taliban was putting its government together was most probably carried out to assist in brokering between the various Taliban factions (Gandhara, 7 September 2021). On the other hand, the Taliban has been successful in brokering yet another ceasefire [extension](#) between Pakistan and the violent Islamic group, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is largely based on Afghan soil (Long War Journal, 18 May 2022). However, the series of earlier ceasefires has shown that the root problem of the conflict has not yet been tackled and cross-border attacks continue.

China shares a short border with Afghanistan and is wary of any potential Muslim insurgents; it clearly has interests in the country. However, China undoubtedly knows Afghanistan's infamous reputation as being the "[graveyard of empires](#)", so it will no doubt be careful not to get drawn into involvement in the security situation (The Interpreter, 30 July 2021). So far, expectations of large Chinese investment have not come to fruition. The Taliban leaders sought help from the international community after the devastating earthquake in Paktika and Khost provinces in June 2022.

While the response from Western governments was largely unenthusiastic, the [response from China and also from India](#) was swift (Jamestown Foundation, 1 July 2022). Those governments still do not officially recognize the Taliban regime, but diplomatic contact is deepening. The Taliban's contact with India may be a major headache for neighboring Pakistan and complicate an already tense situation in the region. All in all, the Taliban is having to cope with a complex network of international and regional geopolitics, leading one research report quip "You cannot choose your [neighbors](#)" (USIP, 1 September 2022). Christians will be extra vulnerable in these insecure times and try to remain undiscovered as best they can.

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- Trends analysis: border clashes - <https://www.dawn.com/news/1667422/pak-afghan-border-fencing-issue-to-be-resolved-diplomatically-says-queshi>
- Trends analysis: very visible visit - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-influence-taliban-afghanistan/31448569.html>
- Trends analysis: extension - <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2022/05/afghan-taliban-brokers-ceasefire-between-pakistan-and-ttp.php>
- Trends analysis: graveyard of empires - [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/taliban-china-afghanistan/2021/07/28/fdfbe024-ef88-11eb-81b2-9b7061a582d8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-china-afghanistan/2021/07/28/fdfbe024-ef88-11eb-81b2-9b7061a582d8_story.html)
- Trends analysis: response from China and also from India - <https://jamestown.org/program/briefs-368/>
- Trends analysis: neighbors - <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/09/you-cant-choose-your-neighbors-talibans-testy-regional-relationships>

## WWL 2023: Church information / Afghanistan

### Christian origins

Christianity may have reached Afghanistan by the 2nd century AD. According to traditions passed on by Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339 AD), the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew brought the Christian message to Parthia and Bactria, which includes today's north-western Afghanistan. The congregations which grew up developed into the Nestorian Church and Afghan cities like Herat, Kandahar and Balkh became bishopric seats. In the 13th century a Christian ruler converted to Islam and became Sultan, leading to a decline in the number of followers of Christianity, which was nearly completely extinguished by the reign of Timur in 1405.

In the 17th century, Armenian merchants came to Kabul and in time a small Christian community developed, but this Armenian community was forced to leave the country by 1871. Attempts at building a Protestant church in Kabul came to an end in 1973. Today, Christianity has been pushed underground completely. It is claimed that in the basement of the Italian embassy, there is still a legally recognized church, the only one in the country. But it is not publicly accessible and therefore only serves expatriate Christians.

### Church spectrum today

For security reasons no WCD breakdown is shown here. Most Christians are converts from other religions, but no details can be published.

### Areas where Christians face most difficulties

- **Main areas for Islamic oppression:** It seems safe to say that Taliban power in the south, east and northwest of the country has the deepest roots. At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the whole country is strictly Islamic, so Christians are facing difficulties wherever they are in the country. As a general rule, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities.
- **Main areas for Clan oppression:** Family and clan affiliation is strong across the country and even extends into cases where (predominantly) young men migrate to the cities. Filial piety and clan loyalty is expected and given in such cases as well.
- **Main areas for Organized corruption and crime:** Whereas criminal activities and corruption occur countrywide, drug production and distribution are particularly dominant in the south. But again, it is hard to identify a pattern.

### Christian communities and how they are affected

**Communities of expatriate Christians:** In the WWL 2023 reporting period, it was decided to include expatriate Christians as a separate WWL category again since NGOs have started (re-)staffing their work in Afghanistan. Due to the moderately improved security, expatriates are no longer restricted to highly secured compounds. However, it is impossible for them to mix with Afghan Christians and hence they are still involuntarily isolated.

**Historical Christian communities:** These do not exist in Afghanistan.

**Converts to Christianity:** Different communities of converts exist in Afghanistan. There are those who left as asylum seekers for Western countries and found the Christian faith and then returned to tell others; those who came from the first converts to Christianity in the 20th century - which accounts for a majority of the Christian underground church network; and those who recently converted after being exposed to teaching and evangelism through radio, Internet, satellite TV or word of mouth. All these Christians come from a Muslim background and try their utmost not to be discovered by family, friends, neighbors or the wider community. Depending on the family, they may even have to fear for their lives. For them, living openly as a Christian is simply not possible - even the suspicion of being a Christian can bring severe persecution. This is true under Taliban rule as well.

**Non-traditional Christian communities:** These do not exist in Afghanistan.

## WWL 2023: Persecution Dynamics / Afghanistan

### Reporting period

01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022

### Position on the World Watch List

Afghanistan: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2023	84	9
WWL 2022	98	1
WWL 2021	94	2
WWL 2020	93	2
WWL 2019	94	2

*Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods*

For many years, Christians in Afghanistan endured the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. In terms of scoring for the spheres of life, Afghanistan and North Korea did not differ at all, scoring the maximum for each of the five spheres. However, the take-over of the government by the Taliban changed everything, as this meant that many Christians relocated within the country for security reasons or tried to leave the country. As a result, many (if not all) house-churches closed, Christians had to leave behind everything they owned and the violence score in WWL 2022 increased to an unprecedented level of 15 points. For WWL 2023, it was impossible to obtain concrete evidence of a similar level of violence occurring. As a result, the violence score dropped sharply from 15.0 to 4.6 points. While details are given in the *Violence section* below, it has to be emphasized here that this does not mean that the country has become safer for Christians. A second change is the return of the expatriate community as a separate category (see explanation in *Christian communities* above); as some questions across the *spheres of life* are limited to converts, this has led to a decrease in the score for pressure. Again, this does not mean that the situation for converts has improved in any way.

The overall score for Afghanistan remains extremely high. This does not mean that each and every Christian in the country is being forced to flee (although each and every Christian will hide his or her faith even more carefully with the Taliban in power); it does not mean that church life is not possible at all or that house-churches cannot meet at all. It also does not suggest that the persecution situation cannot get worse again.

## Persecution engines

Afghanistan: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Strong
Clan oppression	CO	Very strong
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Very strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Strong

*The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### **Islamic oppression (Very strong), blended with Dictatorial paranoia (Very strong)**

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan neither allows any Afghan citizens to become Christians nor recognizes converts as such. Conversion is seen as apostasy and brings shame on the family and the Islamic community. Therefore, converts hide their new-won faith as far as possible. As one country expert shared, the Islamic ideology of Wahhabi Islam, which comes through links with Saudi Arabia, is widely practiced in the country and it has been used successfully to attack and destroy invaders. With power now in the hands of the Taliban, which is more inclined to radical Islamic views, all Afghan citizens are facing strict limitations in everyday life inspired by Islamic tenets - and women even more so. Christian converts do not have any space to deviate from the behavior expected from everyone. The extreme violence used by groups related to IS (e.g., Islamic State in the Khorasan Province/ISKP) has translated into a high number of people being killed in attacks or displaced as discussed above under the heading Security situation. IS appears to have begun a "holier than thou"-competition, trying to brand the Taliban as un-Islamic. The fallout and likely increasing violence will find religious minorities, including Christians, in the crosshairs. The Taliban will do whatever it sees necessary to stay in power and keep its own movement unified.

Christians of Afghan nationality are all converts with a Muslim background. If they are discovered, they face discrimination and hostility (including death) at the hands of family, friends and community. Muslim religious leaders will most likely be the instigators and the local authorities can be involved, too. The Taliban will put an even stronger emphasis on frequent mosque attendance, increasing the role of religious leaders. According to a survey published in November 2019 (the latest available data), Afghan people display the [highest levels of confidence](#) in their religious leaders and in the media - far ahead of their trust in any politicians. More than 57% of respondents said they would welcome religious leaders being more involved in politics, but some provinces saw percentages of up to 98.5%.

### **Clan oppression (Very strong), blended with Ethno-religious hostility (Strong)**

A country expert stated: "Ethno-religious norms and traditional belief systems are dominant. Society is very traditional and slow to change. Pashtuns in particular have a strong codex, but other tribes also adhere to their traditions." Another country expert added: "The Hazara are considered the most vulnerable as they are all Shia (they are visible due to their facial features which resemble Mongolians)." The Taliban are a Sunni Pashtun movement. The concept of nation is alien to the Afghan way of thinking. One's own family comes first, followed by the clan and then the tribe – and all of these are much more important than the country as a whole, which may have been one underlying reason why the Taliban experienced so little resistance in the take-over. People are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone dares to turn from his tribe to embrace something new and maybe even foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to make that person return to traditional norms. If this does not happen, such a person will be looked upon as a traitor of the community and hence excluded. This applies to all 'deviations' but even more if someone turns to Christianity. The Christian religion is considered to be Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam, and leaving Islam is seen as treason. As already mentioned above, the US State Department's 2021 IRFR states on page 23 that "some Muslims remained suspicious of development assistance projects, which they often viewed as surreptitious efforts to advance Christianity or engage in proselytization."

### **Organized corruption and crime (Strong)**

Criminal gangs work hand in glove with many of the extremist organizations and provide support for revenue streams which involve human trafficking of minorities, murder for hire, theft and intimidation of rivals and informers. One country expert said: "Crime and violent crime has been on the rise and affects those living in less secure urban areas or areas dominated by warlords and drug-lords. For some, this poses a more immediate threat than the wider political conflict." The lack of exportable goods has led to a huge trade imbalance, causing the country to be in constant financial debt. A stunning 80% of the GDP comes from the informal sector and so corruption and crime are omnipresent. This also affects Christians because they belong to the low-income majority of society. One of the main economic problems Afghanistan faces is that growing illicit drugs such as opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop; details are to be found in the [UN report](#) published in November 2018. The Taliban have been heavily involved in drug production; before taking over the government, estimations were that 70-80%

of all drug trafficking profit were being channeled into funding Taliban activities. The income from poppy cultivation not only funds armed militant groups, it also fuels corruption.

## Drivers of persecution

Afghanistan: Drivers of Persecution									
	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY STRONG		STRONG	VERY STRONG				VERY STRONG	STRONG
Government officials	Very strong		Strong	Very strong				Very strong	Strong
Ethnic group leaders	Very strong		Strong	Very strong				Strong	
Non-Christian religious leaders	Very strong		Strong	Very strong				Very strong	
Violent religious groups	Very strong		Strong	Very strong				Strong	Very strong
Ideological pressure groups	Weak		Weak	Weak					
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Very strong		Strong	Strong				Medium	
One's own (extended) family	Very strong		Strong	Strong				Medium	
Revolutionaries or paramilitary groups	Strong		Strong	Strong				-	Very strong
Organized crime cartels or networks	Weak		Weak	Very weak				Medium	Strong

*The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.*

### Drivers of Islamic oppression and Dictatorial paranoia

- Government officials (Very strong):** Since Afghanistan - as stated in the now obsolete Constitution - is an Islamic state, all other religions are seen as alien to the country and consequently government officials are hostile towards all signs of Christianity. The term "government official" increasingly means a member of the Taliban (sometimes even with religious credentials) and the growing power of the revived "Ministry of Virtue and Vice" is already strongly felt across society. The approach towards Christian converts, if discovered, will not change in that respect. Political parties, which had been a driver up to August 2021, have been ruled out now.



- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders, violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Very strong):** As explained above, ethnic and religious leaders are stronger and more powerful than government officials, and sometimes there is an overlap of the different roles. Ethnic group leaders are the law in many parts of the country, religious leaders are often coopted or volunteer to do a sort of grid management, e.g. by checking who is not attending the mosque frequently. The small, but very violent IS influence, puts additional pressure on the already hidden group of Christians. As one country researcher said: "Although things may have got worse - things for Christians facing persecution have not changed that much. It is the access to data by the Taliban which was collected by the former government (identity card databases etc.) that makes this situation particularly dangerous."
- **Families (Very strong):** Although this depends on the family's general ethos, for most families a conversion brings shame, and the family will do much - in some cases everything necessary - to bring the convert back to Islam and to atone for the shame. With the Taliban in power, the pressure on families to follow 'the right version of Islam' will increase and the tolerance for any kind of deviation (whether real or only perceived) shrinks.
- **Normal citizens (Very strong):** What has been said for families can be said about the wider community (neighbors and friends) as well. Control within society is very strong and leaving Islam is seen as a rejection of Afghan culture and society which needs to be stopped - if needed, by mob violence.

#### **Drivers of Clan oppression blended with Ethno-religious hostility**

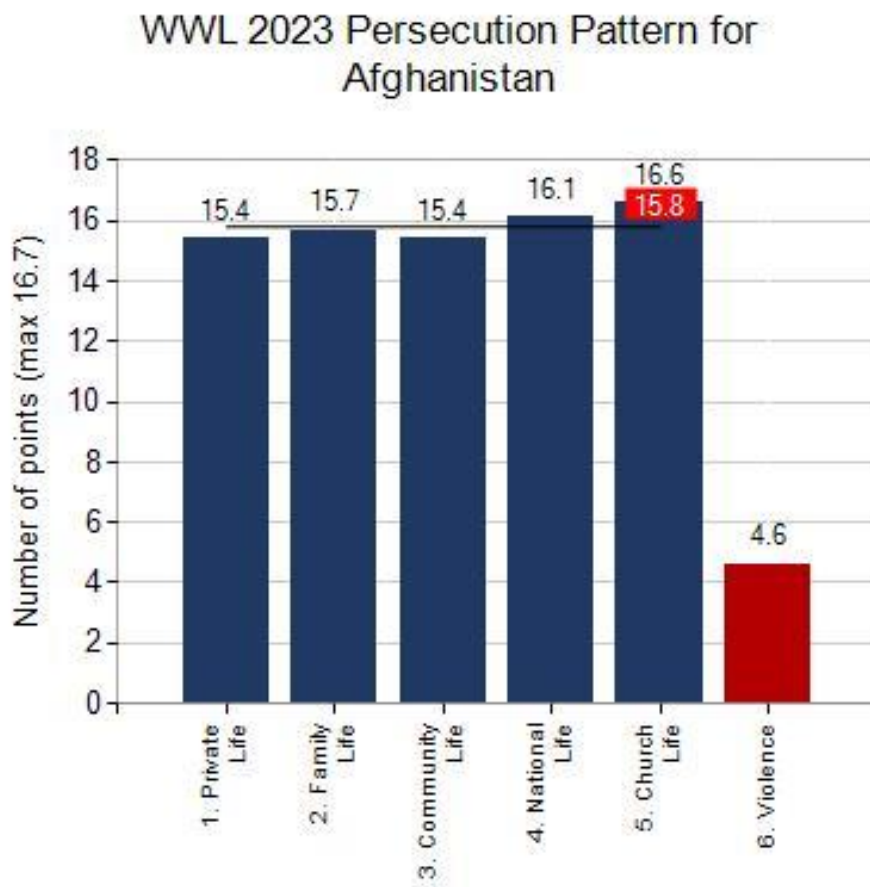
- **Government officials (Very strong):** As Afghanistan is organized first and foremost along ethnic lines, affiliation to an ethnicity and tribe is the highest priority and needs to be protected and defended above all else, not just on the national, but even more so on the provincial and district level.
- **Ethnic group leaders, Islamic leaders and violent religious groups (Very strong):** Ethnicity, often backed by religious affiliation, defines a person's being and consequently, ethnic leaders wield a strong influence over people. The very same dynamics described for *Islamic oppression* are active in this respect as well.
- **Normal citizens and (extended) Family (Strong):** Everyone leaving his or her given community, for example by changing his or her religion to Christianity, is seen as committing treason and in need of being brought back. The very same drivers already mentioned under *Islamic oppression* are active here as well, since in Afghan culture, ethnic and religious identity are regarded as being one and the same.

#### **Drivers of Organized corruption and crime**

- **Government officials (Strong):** The central government in Afghanistan has always been weak and its officials, especially at the local level, have done everything to capitalize on the (limited) power and authority they hold. So far, the Taliban neither seem to be willing nor able to break this pattern. When Christians are exposed or simply oppose illicit practices, they are in a weak position, and no-one will protect them. They can even become a high value hostage to barter over and be used for striking deals.

- **Violent religious groups and revolutionaries or paramilitary groups (Very strong):** It is a well-known fact that opium cultivation and trade is particularly intense in the southern province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. The revenue from the drug trade is an important source for financing, especially as many other sources have dried up, and anyone seen as endangering this business (or is simply in its way) is driven away by all means necessary.
- **Organized crime cartels or networks (Strong):** The drug-lords - of any affiliation - will protect their business and transportation routes at all costs. Christians, who are deeply hidden in society anyway, will have no protection against them at all if discovered.

## The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2023 Persecution pattern for Afghanistan shows:

- The pressure on Christians in Afghanistan is at an extreme level but showed a lower average (15.8 points across all spheres of life) compared to WWL 2022. The decision to include the expatriate community of Christians as a separate research category again led to a (technical) decrease of 3.2 points. With the take-over of the government by the Taliban, control of Islamic piety and the implementation of strict Islamic intensified, especially for women and girls. Christian converts are having to face the fact that many can be more easily exposed now that the Taliban hold all government records. As a result, they need to comply with all rules and remain 'hidden believers'. The lower scores should not be understood to mean that the situation for converts has improved.

- While extreme scores for pressure in the *Family, Private* and *Community spheres* are typical for strictly Islamic countries, the extreme pressure in the *National sphere* and the nearly maximum score in *Church sphere* highlight two things: i) a government relying on strictly interpreted Islamic rules and a basically tribal society; and ii) the impossibility of any organized church being able to function within the country. Taliban rule has simply continued this already existing situation. All promises to international bodies about making attempts to live up to and implement human rights standards have evaporated.
- The violence score fell to 4.6 points, since there was no concrete evidence to confirm a similar level of violence as in WWL 2022. While details are given in the *Violence section* below, it has to be emphasized here that a lack of concrete evidence does not mean that higher levels were not occurring in reality.

## Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

*In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2023 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).*

## Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

### **Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points)**

Any Christian materials will attract attention as it points to the interests of its owner and is therefore carefully avoided. Christians will try to keep as little Christian material in their homes or in their private belongings as possible since there is always the danger of searches. Even the use of material on communication devices or via the Internet (which is not available in all regions) is done with the utmost caution and may need to be un-installed and reloaded depending on the local situation. According to a report, the Taliban already enforced [cellphone checks](#) in the regions they controlled before taking over the government of the whole country, in order to make people follow their strict rules (Gandhara-RFE/RL, 30 October 2020). Many Christian converts completely disposed of cell phones and other devices after the Taliban take-over and relocated in an effort to hide.

### **Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (4.00 points)**

No one will reveal symbols or any other signs of Christianity in Afghanistan, as this will lead to a public outcry and harsh consequences and directly point to the converts themselves. Even members of the expatriate community will avoid showing any hint of their Christian faith, as it may be interpreted as proselytizing, thus illustrating the levels of pressure experienced. And even just showing interest in any religion other than Islam, runs the risk of being strongly opposed.

**Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (4.00 points)**

Converts always have to be very cautious as even the suspicion of having converted can lead to severe consequences such as arrest and the destruction of homes. Families often hide their faith from their own children and have to exercise great caution when speaking with other people about faith-related issues. As they can never know which members of their clan have been recruited by or sympathize with the Taliban, they are intensely cautious about whom they trust in regard to their faith. Even if their names are not passed on to the Taliban, there will be consequences if their faith is known. Social control is high, and it is difficult to hide newly won Christian faith over a long period of time, especially if the convert has children. Additionally, converts are in a catch-22 situation as they do not want to send their children to an Islamic madrassa but cannot speak about Christian faith to their young children either, because that would be too dangerous.

**Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)**

Afghanistan is an Islamic nation and any deviation from Islam is forbidden by law and tradition, and conversion is punishable. The new Taliban government's position (as well as that of the average Afghan in the street) remains that Afghans cannot be Christian and that it is illegal and impossible to have any other faith than Islam. Converts are dealt with "swiftly and silently", as stated by one country expert, but this may change and be done more publicly if the Taliban want to set an example, especially with the implementation of harsh Sharia punishment as announced by the Taliban leader (see *Political and legal landscape*). Since society is tightly knit, social control is high and keeping things private is difficult; as a result, converts run a high risk of being discovered, depending on the circumstances.

**Additional Block 1 information:**

*Given the high pressure under which converts in Afghanistan find themselves, it is clear that they also have great difficulties in meeting each other and need to exercise the utmost care when they are listening to Christian radio or programs in the internet, especially as there is very little privacy in Afghan culture. Additionally, as many Christians have relocated inside the country, this adds to the difficulties. Still, these programs enjoy a growing audience. Praying and Bible reading for oneself is only possible when converts are sure they are alone. In May 2021, a small group of Christians decided they wanted to have 'non-Muslim' added on their ID cards; as a consequence, they were hunted down after the information fell into the hands of the Taliban. Biometric data systems in the hands of Taliban authorities are recognized as being a far-reaching danger for many Afghan citizens ([HRW, 30 March 2022](#)). During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the related economic and social crisis and also due to the very restricted environment and insecure future Afghans are facing, many Afghans have become more open and keener to talk about the deeper issues of life; however, this does not diminish the overall risk associated with sharing the Christian faith.*

## Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

### **Block 2.1: Babies and children of Christians have automatically been registered under the state or majority religion. (4.00 points)**

In Afghanistan, Islam is the only religion under which citizens can be officially registered; as a result, every Afghan is registered as Muslim. Anything else is unacceptable and unthinkable. As stated above under *Private sphere*, the few Christians who tried to opt for "non-Muslim" in their ID cards paid dearly for it.

### **Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (4.00 points)**

Even under the previous government (under President Ghani), preserving Islamic teachings and tenets has always been the prerogative. These efforts increased with the Taliban's government take-over. As a country expert stated: "The arrival of the Taliban meant that everyone has to attend the mosque, this will be checked to see if there are people who are just pretending. This puts converts at greater risk." Even if the implementation is still patchy and varies per region, it illustrates the problems parents are facing. Parents who teach their children Christian faith risk exposure. When it is noticed that such children have a different opinion from the majority, or simply speak out carelessly and innocently about their beliefs, the Christian family will need to leave the region for its own safety. Therefore, it is a question of whether parents are willing to take such a risk.

### **Block 2.11: Spouses of converts have been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce. (3.50 points)**

As a country expert said: "Converts are fearful of sharing their faith with their spouse as it could get them killed. If a convert shares his faith with his spouse he/she is likely to be thrown out of the family house, the marriage terminated, and possibly he/she is beaten or killed, as converts represent a dishonor to the family." At the very least, there is pressure on spouses to divorce or - as divorce is uncommon - nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. The strongest pressure is put on any woman whose husbands have accepted the Christian faith. Her parents will try to achieve a divorce and cause great trouble in the family. Converts are sometimes sent to a mental hospital, since families believe that no sane person would ever leave Islam. This reasoning makes it also easier to nullify a marriage.

### **Block 2.13: Christians have lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity. (3.50 points)**

A country researcher stated: "It is safer to leave the country or the region as there will be the likelihood of great pressure to reconvert back to your original faith. Those who choose to stay, end up in serious difficulty, and suffer hardship and can be killed. Others choose to leave and hide." Losing inheritance rights (or the custody of children) are serious consequences, but they have to be put in perspective.

### **Additional Block 2 information:**

*Converts face many more limitations than those listed above. Baptism as the most visible sign of becoming a Christian is considered a crime punishable by death. Baptisms therefore have to be carried out in secret. As most Christians will keep their conversion secret, they will be buried according to Islamic rites. If Afghans are discovered to have become Christians, their children will automatically be taken away and given to adoption by Muslim families. Those children will be harassed in their new family and at school. If a family succeeds in keeping their conversion secret, the children will have no option but to continue attending madrassa classes and are likely to grow up confused about the divergent beliefs if they know about the Christian faith of their parents.*

## **Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere**

**Block 3.1: Christians have been harassed, threatened or obstructed in their daily lives for faith-related reasons (e.g. for not meeting majority religion or traditional dress codes, beard codes etc.). (4.00 points)**

With the Taliban take-over, this kind of pressure has grown exponentially. As a country expert explained, there is no other way for Christian converts than to adapt to the rules and "play the role of a Muslim". This includes questions of dress code, but also includes the failure to attend the mosque or indeed to grow a beard. If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head-covering she will draw unwanted attention and locals will press her into wearing one.

**Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (4.00 points)**

Whether an Afghan is known as a Christian (e.g., in a more tolerant family) or unknown, participation in Islamic activities such as Namaz (prayer), mosque visits, fasting, Eid celebrations, funerals, births, weddings, sacrifices etc. is expected and even mandatory under Taliban rule. Converts are also pressured into attending mosque prayers, especially on Fridays. This kind of pressure will be implemented throughout the country, including cities.

**Block 3.9: Christians have faced disadvantages in their education at any level for faith-related reasons (e.g. restrictions of access to education). (3.50 points)**

Christian parents fear sending their children to school because they want to protect them from Islamic indoctrination and from revealing their hidden Christian identity. If they are discovered and are not immediately exposed, they will be pressured into leaving school without being given the necessary documents to continue school elsewhere. Of course, Christian students have to follow the general curriculum, which puts a strong emphasis on Islam. As a country expert explained: "Madrassas are the main form of education for those living in the rural areas, therefore Christians are limited and severely restricted in gaining an education. In urban areas they have to pretend to be Muslims so that they can access even other schools." Since the Taliban take-over girls have been refused the possibility of continuing their secondary education.

**Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

If Christian converts are discovered, they will certainly be taken away for investigation and interrogation. These interrogations are intense, regardless of whether they are carried out by the Taliban, ISKP or any other group. Individual Christians often know very little about church networks in the country. If identified, church leaders receive particular attention.

**Additional Block 3 information:**

*Any convert discovered will lose access to community resources and healthcare. Communities exercise immense pressure to ensure allegiance and order; consequently, they monitor everyone. Whoever is seen as deviating is put under pressure to return to the mainstream religious and political views, be it by physical torture or by using occult practices which are widespread in Afghanistan.*

## Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

**Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)**

The Constitution - since August 2021 suspended by the Taliban - guaranteed that adherents of other religions were free to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 of the Constitution, which stated that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, led to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording was flexible and it did not state what may be deemed as inappropriate and against Islam, in practice accusations of conversion were equated with blasphemy and neither Christians nor other religious minorities (including non-Sunni Muslims) enjoyed freedom of religion. Meanwhile, the country is back under the direct rule of Sharia law and it does not look likely that the Taliban plan to implement a new constitution.

**Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (4.00 points)**

As a country expert explained: "The media is afraid to contradict the Taliban line - Christians are not recognized by the media as they do not want to bring attention to any Christian activity, this would be seen as promoting Christianity. Communication against Christians takes place at the grassroots levels, with leaders and militants targeting Christians." In general, Christians are seldom the topic of media reports, but if they are, the reporting is always distorted and stirs up anti-Christian sentiment, e.g., by exaggerating the number of Christians in the country. The voice of independent media has been strongly reduced since the Taliban took over power (see above: *Technological landscape*).

**Block 4.4: Christians have been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)**

All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian (or of having interest in or connections with the 'Christian West') is monitored and often hindered if it is suspected that a journey is being conducted for faith-based reasons (e.g., to attend a conference). The Taliban is known for notoriously strict and frequent searches.

**Block 4.13: Christians have been accused of blasphemy or insulting the majority religion, either by state authorities or by pressure groups. (3.50 points)**

The punishment for blasphemy is not so much a rights issue as it is a societal one; the punishment is carried out swiftly by the local religious authorities, jihadist groups or (since the Taliban take-over) by government officials. In many cases, blasphemy charges are reportedly made for reasons of personal enmity or envy. Even a mere suspicion or allegation can end in immediate death or the individual fleeing.

**Additional Block 4 information:**

*Christians are discriminated against when they have to deal with the authorities. Christians have difficulties in running their own businesses and of course face unjust treatment when they have to stand trial. If they have experienced such problems, it is usually (and officially) not because of their faith, but due to other alleged crimes (e.g. due to treason by working with foreign intelligence agencies, murder or drug dealing). Even people only suspected of being a Christian are likely to face similar ordeals. Smear campaigns can be run against them, rumors spread, causing people to look more deeply at their lifestyle, asking questions like "Why don't you pray as much as we do?, Why do you shave?, Why don't you attend the mosque regularly? etc."*

## Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

**Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)**

There is no publicly accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is reported to be in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and only open for the small number of expatriates still working in the city - mainly diplomatic and military staff. Any form of meeting noted by the Taliban receives high attention, this includes meetings carried out by expatriates as well. Christian groups (no matter how small they are) have to be cautious about how they meet. A country expert states: "Churches are underground and held in secret; many people are not able to share their faith openly, sing loudly or meet for communion. Therefore, 'church services' tend to look like a group of people meeting over a meal".

**Block 5.11: Pastors or other Christian leaders (or their family members) have been special targets of harassment for faith-related reasons. (4.00 points)**

Leaders of Christian groups are not known in public. As one country expert stated, if the radical groups or Muslim society in general knew who was a Christian leader, they would kill him, in order to intimidate Christians in his network and seek to destroy the group or a whole network.

**Block 5.14: Openly selling or distributing Bibles (or other Christian materials) has been hindered. (4.00 points)**

All Christian material is hidden and there is no possibility for distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced, although it is still done. Due to the scarceness of Christian materials, Christians in Afghanistan consistently seek good sources, but they have to practice extreme caution.



#### **Block 5.4: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities inside their place of worship. (3.75 points)**

Convert fellowships can only gather with the utmost caution and only when it is clear that the members know and trust each other. Precautionary measures such as changing locations etc. make it very difficult to meet as church. Teaching and worship can only be carried out in private premises. After the Taliban take-over, many Christians relocated within Afghanistan for security reasons or tried to flee abroad. This made gatherings even more difficult and often impossible. At a somewhat lower risk level, expatriate Christians are able to meet, if they strictly remain among themselves and the meetings are low-key.

#### **Additional Block 5 information:**

*Christians cannot set up charitable organizations, openly integrate converts into their meetings, train their own leaders or ask for the registration or building of a church. Open work of any kind among youth is not possible. A country expert states: "Youth are very much at risk due to the recruitment of young people to fight in the wars against different factions. We are seeing a new kind of war - which is a war of showing the rest of the country who is more extreme than the other." In this kind of conscription race, everyone working openly with youth will be perceived as a competitor for their hearts and minds. Finally, the Afghan Church is deeply underground and as far as the official view is concerned, non-existent, hence they are also not able to speak out against any incident of persecution.*

## **Violence**

*Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse).*

Due to security concerns, few details can be published. Incidents continue to be extremely difficult to verify since many Christians have i) gone into hiding; ii) relocated within the country; iii) tried to leave the country; and iv) disposed of their cell phones for security reasons. Another reason for the decrease in the violence score is that despite their double vulnerability (as convert Christians, often coming from an ethnic minority background) or even triple vulnerability (as women), in many cases, it has been impossible to determine whether they were targeted because of their Christian faith or for other reasons, e.g., for having cooperated with the former government, or with Western forces, or NGOs etc.

With the government take-over by the Taliban in August 2021, violence greatly increased; the Taliban got access to records and reports held by the former government, so it became easier to identify Christians, as entities such as the Ministry of the Interior or security forces reportedly held data on suspected Christians. For example, a few Christians had changed their ID card to "non-Muslim" in May 2021. Because of this access to government records, many more Christians had to go into hiding and relocate within Afghanistan or abroad. This was and is particularly true for the "known Christians".

In the WWL 2023 reporting period:

- **Christians killed:** Although exact numbers cannot be given for security reasons, some Christians have been killed for their faith. That the number is lower than in the WWL 2022 reporting period does not mean that the situation for Christians improved in any way. According to Sharia law, if a convert is not willing to repent, he is punishable with death.
- **Christians attacked:** The Taliban has prioritized the hunting down of anyone who either openly spoke out against them or was aligned with anything the new rulers do not approve of, e.g. being involved with the previous government. Whatever they perceive as a threat to their authority, will be targeted. This naturally includes Christians, who have to be dealt with for religious reasons.
- **Christians detained:** Detention is very violent and it is aimed at investigating and identifying Christian networks. The end-result of a detention is often pre-determined.
- **Churches attacked:** Afghanistan has not had an official church building for almost fifty years. With the Church deeper underground than in the previous WWL reporting periods, they have been less visible for attack. Added to this is the fact, that the Taliban has had other priorities to deal with and has not explicitly been targeting non-Muslim and Shia citizens. Where Christians experienced violence, it was normally the same as for other Afghans who had worked with the former government and armed forces and was not a faith-related issue. When the Church is deeper underground, incidents may, of course, occur which are not reported. Additionally, the Taliban take-over led to many Christians fleeing. However, in many cases, house churches are family-based which means that when a family flees, they are 'taking their church with them'. Such a situation is not considered as a church attacked or closed in the WWL methodology (this is not only the case in Afghanistan, but for other countries as well). This is not to say that church life and gatherings are not strongly affected by a life in hiding or on the run.
- **Christian homes attacked:** No matter if converts have been abducted, had to go into hiding within the country or even try to relocate abroad, they lost their homes, most of which were either destroyed or taken over by neighbors or Taliban fighters moving in.
- **Christians raped/forcefully married:** There have been reports of women and girls being taken and married to young Taliban fighters who want 'spoils of war'. However, it could not be confirmed that they have been targeted because of their Christian faith. This does not mean that such cases do not happen, or that Christian women or girls do not experience this. It means, however, that it could not be established that they were targeted because of their Christian faith.

## 5 Year trends

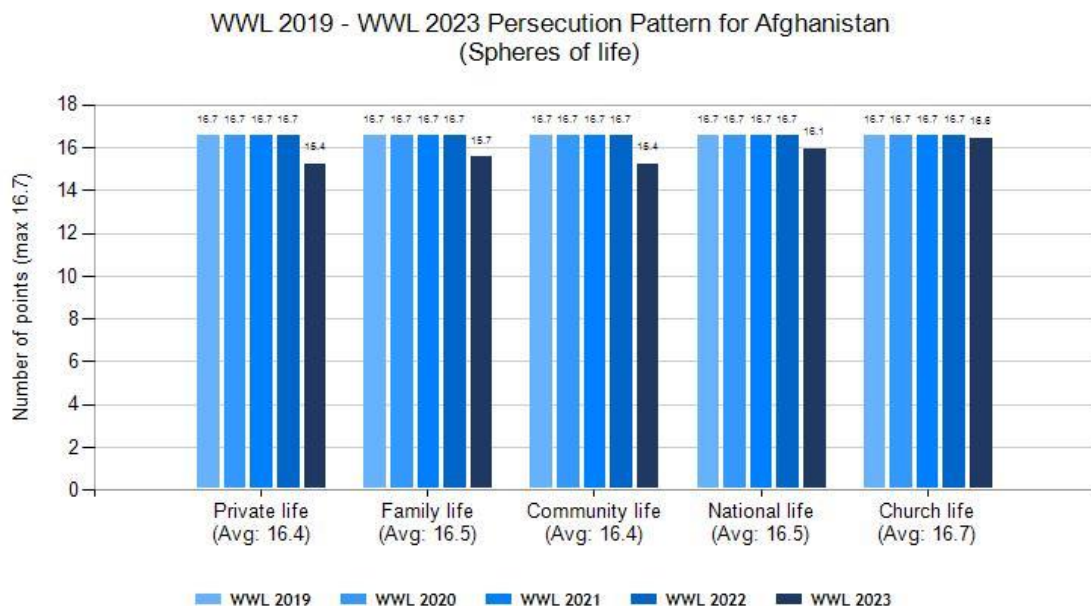
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

## 5 Year trends: Average pressure

Afghanistan: WWL 2019 - WWL 2023 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2023	15.8
2022	16.7
2021	16.7
2020	16.7
2019	16.7

The chart shows how the average pressure in the period WWL 2019 - WWL 2022 was at maximum level. Due to the constant decrease in the number of expatriate Christians working for NGOs in the country and the very delicate security situation, this category of Christian community had not been included in the scoring since WWL 2018. However, since the number of expatriate Christians is growing again and they are not limited to highly secured compounds anymore, in WWL 2023, this category is included again. As a result, the average pressure on Christians (technically) decreased to 15.8 points.

## 5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



In the period WWL 2019 - WWL 2022, the score for pressure in each *sphere of life* consistently reached the maximum level of 16.7 points, as the only category of Christians were converts. Due to the reasons explained above (i.e., the inclusion of the expatriate Christian community as a separate category again), in WWL 2023, the score for pressure in each sphere of life decreased somewhat.

## 5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



From WWL 2019 - WWL 2021, the violence score was stable within the range 10.0 - 10.6 points. With the government take-over by the Taliban, it became more necessary than ever for Christians to stay hidden and follow all Taliban's Islamic rules. In WWL 2023, for the reasons mentioned above in the *Violence section*, the score decreased considerably, since it was not always possible to obtain verified evidence of violent incidents targeting Christians for their faith. How many Christians left their homes voluntarily, went abroad, or have been abducted and killed is extremely hard to verify. Added to this, due to security concerns, many Christian converts went deeper underground, choosing to dispose of their cell phones since these had clearly become a liability.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced marriage; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Trafficking; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied/restricted healthcare; Enforced religious dress code; Violence – psychological
Technological	-

The swift take-over of Afghanistan by the Taliban in August 2021 effectively stopped the advancement of women's rights, in a country where women have long had a lower social status and been viewed as second class citizens. Women from religious minorities, including Christians, are especially vulnerable. In an early announcement following their take-over, a Taliban statement declared: "Our women are Muslim. They will be happy to be living within our frameworks of Sharia" ([Al-Jazeera, 17 August 2021](#)). Since then, the Taliban has faced international condemnation for severely hindering girls' access to education and women and girls face further restrictions on movement, appearance and work ([Gandhara, 6 October 2022](#)).

Female converts also face extreme pressure on a familial and societal level, facilitated in part by the limited role women play in Afghan society and their few rights to social protection. Although conversions usually happen together as a family unit in Afghanistan, when a woman decides to convert to Christianity on her own, she is likely to keep it a secret. If her faith is discovered, she is vulnerable to physical abuse and being put under house arrest. She may also be forcibly married to a Muslim or sold for sexual enslavement. Forced marriages and rape are used as tools for forced (re-)conversion, particularly against women and girls from a Muslim background. A young female Christian convert can be forced to marry a non-Christian (often older) with relative ease. Reflecting the severity of the situation, a country expert reports that some women and girls have committed suicide to avoid such a fate. Due to Afghanistan's honor-shame culture, women are unlikely to report instances of rape or sexual abuse due to both the stigma attached and the lack of legislative justice.

According to a country expert, in the first few weeks after the take-over, Christian women and girls were being targeted and abducted in order to be forcibly married to Taliban fighters, with fathers being forced to give up their daughters at gunpoint. The expert explained that women are perceived as "spoils of war" but there are doubts as to whether this is ongoing.

In light of such circumstances, female converts choose to keep their faith secret from their families. This means they have fewer opportunities to connect with other believers.

## Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	-
Security	Abduction; Trafficking; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

The Taliban take-over also increased pressure on Christian men. Men and boys had experienced particular fear around being forcibly recruited to join the Taliban's new army; the extent to which this is still ongoing is unclear ([The Portal Centre, 26 October 2021](#)). Church leaders - the majority of whom are men - have also been specifically targeted by the Taliban; many have disappeared, others have been beaten, tortured and killed.

As men are at the forefront of public life, male Christians are extremely vulnerable to community and family pressures if their faith is discovered. They will be harassed, socially isolated, beaten or killed. If married, they will likely have their wives and children taken away from them. Given that men and boys have greater freedom of movement, they are additionally vulnerable to kidnapping, sexual violence, or killing, in the streets. A country expert summarizes: “The acts of daily violence on men and boys are now greater as women are not allowed alone on the streets.” In light of this, Christian men choose to keep as low a profile as possible, with some choosing low-level positions in the workplace so as not to gain unwanted attention. They are forced to live, work and identify as Muslims. Since men are the economic providers in their household, families rely on them financially. If male converts are killed, female family members are left vulnerable to exploitation and poverty.

There is a tradition of abusing young boys in Afghanistan, as well as girls. According to a country expert, this is “part of a culture of pedophilia in the region, which is linked to attacks on minorities and those weaker than them whom they can abuse.” Christian boys, deemed to have no worth on the basis of their faith, are thus vulnerable to this form of exploitation.

## Persecution of other religious minorities

The small numbers of Sikh, Hindu and Bahai followers in Afghanistan hardly have more freedom than Christians do, their sole advantage being that they are not perceived as being Western and alien. This does not mean, however, that they are not targeted for attack. In July 2018, the only Sikh candidate for parliamentary elections was killed in a [bomb attack](#) (NYT, 2 July 2018). Attacks against the Shiite Hazara have become much more common [since 2018](#) (RFE/RL, 16 November 2018). Among the most devastating attacks was in the previous reporting period (WWL 2022), when a bomb-attack against a [school in Kabul](#) was carried out in a predominantly Hazara quarter on 8 May 2021. The attack claimed the lives of 85 people, predominantly girls (The Diplomat, 19 May 2021).

According to US State Department IRFR 2021 (page 3):

- “UNAMA reported a resurgence of these attacks against the Shia Hazara group, nearly all for which ISIS-K claimed responsibility. ISIS-K also conducted such attacks against other groups. In total, for the first six months of the year, 20 incidents targeted the Shia Hazara community resulting in 143 killed and 357 injured, compared with 19 attacks attributed to ISIS-K and other anti-government elements in 2020. According to UNAMA, during the second half of the year, attacks claimed by or attributed to ISIS-K increased and expanded beyond the movement’s previous areas of focus in Kabul and the eastern part of the country. Between August 19 and December 31, the United Nations recorded 152 attacks by the group in 16 provinces, compared with 20 attacks in five provinces during the same period in 2020. In addition to targeting the Taliban, ISIS-K also targeted civilians, in particular Shia minorities, in urban areas. ISIS-K claimed responsibility for suicide attacks on two Shia mosques in Kunduz and Kandahar cities on October 8 and 15. On October 8, an ISIS-K suicide bomber killed 70 to 80 members of the Hazara community at a mosque in Kunduz. On October 15, a suicide bomber attack targeting the largest Shia mosque in Kandahar, the Fatima Mosque (also known as the Imam Bargah Mosque), killed more than

50 worshippers and injured at least 100. Two December 10 attacks in western Kabul targeting a predominantly Shia Hazara neighborhood remained unclaimed at year's end."

- Additionally (page 4): "Christians and Ahmadiyya Muslims reported they continued to worship only privately and in small groups, at home or in nondescript places of worship, to avoid discrimination and persecution. Prior to the Taliban takeover in August, observers said local Muslim religious leaders continued their efforts to limit social activities, such as concerts, which they considered inconsistent with Islamic doctrine."

According to USCIRF 2022:

- Page 1: "The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has monitored and reported on religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan for more than two decades, but 2021 was particularly difficult. Following U.S. withdrawal from the country, the Taliban took control on August 15, 2021. The Taliban's victory was calamitous for many reasons, including the detrimental effect it had on religious freedom. USCIRF has long raised concern that the Taliban's brutal application of its extremist interpretation of Sunni Islam violates the freedom of religion or belief of all Afghans who do not adhere to that interpretation, including Muslims and adherents of other faiths or beliefs. With the Taliban's return to power, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan, and the overall human rights situation, significantly deteriorated in 2021. Religious minorities faced harassment, detention, and even death due to their faith or beliefs. The one known Jew and most Hindus and Sikhs fled the country. Christian converts, Baha'is, and Ahmadiyya Muslims practiced their faith in hiding due to fear of reprisal and threats from the Taliban. Years of progress toward more equitable access to education and representation of women and girls disappeared."
- Page 12: "In 2021, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan worsened as the Taliban took control of the country on August 15. Despite initial statements from the Taliban that they had reformed some elements of their ideology, Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban's harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam and adherents of other faiths or beliefs are at risk of grave danger. Reports indicate that the Taliban continue to persecute religious minorities and punish residents in areas under their control in accordance with their extreme interpretation of Islamic law."
- Consequently, Afghanistan was recommended for being included on the "Special Watch List".

Further information:

In addition to the attacks against minorities already mentioned in this dossier, minorities in general face a [stark choice](#): Either they convert to Islam, or leave the country, or face being killed (The Spectator, 9 July 2021).

In 2021, the last known Jew in Afghanistan [decided to leave](#) Kabul for Israel, due to an ever-deteriorating security situation and increasing hardships in daily life (Gandhara, 29 March 2021). However, statements such as "last" are hard to verify since religious minorities are often well-hidden. AP News reported that the [last Jew](#) may have actually been a woman, leaving later in September 2021 (AP News, 29 October 2021). In a [factsheet](#) on Afghanistan, USCIRF gave an overview of religious minorities in October 2021.

## Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

### **Islamic oppression, blended with Dictatorial paranoia and Clan oppression**

If the Iranian model is indeed the best Afghanistan can hope for under the Taliban, political rule will most likely be submitted to a council of religious rulers. However, it will be a different system to the Islamic Emirate they ruled from 1996 to 2001, since that was a model which the Taliban have already admitted they could not and would not want to revive. But even then, any system with a layer of dominating theocracy would mean no space for religious minorities (including Christians) – and arguably even less space than they have now. The first year of Taliban rule has basically been a variation of their previous regime in Afghanistan without any attempt to adopt a more inclusive system of government. The overall goal is to stay in power and keep the Taliban movement unified. Clan identity will become even more important in a torn and Taliban-ruled country, as could be seen by the preparations being made by ethnic militias. Leaving the clan by following a different religion becomes even more unacceptable under such circumstances.

### **Organized corruption and crime**

As long as opium cultivation and trade make up a significant part of the insurgent groups' budget and also fill the coffers of powerbrokers and politicians, organized crime will flourish. The even larger margins of meth production may multiply the organized crime problem, as it is not bound by growing crops in certain places. The same goes for the illicit trade of precious stones, ores and timber. Anyone perceived as obstructing these 'industries' (including Christians) will face violent opposition, starting from simply being pushed away.

## External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: highest levels of confidence - [https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019\\_Afghan\\_Survey\\_Full-Report.pdf](https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2019_Afghan_Survey_Full-Report.pdf)
- Persecution engines description: UN report - <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-drop-from-peak-opium-cultivation-the-2018-afghanistan-survey/>
- Block 1.3: It has been dangerous to privately own or keep Christian materials. (4.00 points): cellphone checks - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-mines-afghan-phone-data-in-bid-for-control/30919738.html>
- Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere: HRW, 30 March 2022 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/30/new-evidence-biometric-data-systems-imperil-afghans>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Al-Jazeera, 17 August 2021 - <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Gandhara - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-inspects-girls-schools-expels-pubescent/32068471.html>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Male description: The Portal Centre, 26 October 2021 - <http://www.theportal-center.com/2021/10/taliban-to-build-new-army-in-afghanistan/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: bomb attack - <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/02/world/asia/afghanistan-sikhs-bombing.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: since 2018 - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-why-are-the-taliban-attacking-hazaras/29604830.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: school in Kabul - <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/school-attacks-on-afghanistans-hazaras-are-only-the-beginning/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: stark choice - <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/leave-convert-or-perish-the-fate-of-afghanistan-s-minorities>



- Persecution of other religious minorities: decided to leave - <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/jews-hundus-sikhs-exodus-from-afghanistan/31175748.html>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: last Jew - <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-lifestyle-canada-religion-middle-east-893baa3e2849b0081882d06d1da07535>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: factsheet - <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20China%20Factsheet.pdf>

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the new Research & Reports page of the website od.org. As in earlier years, they are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) using the following links:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Afghanistan>