

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

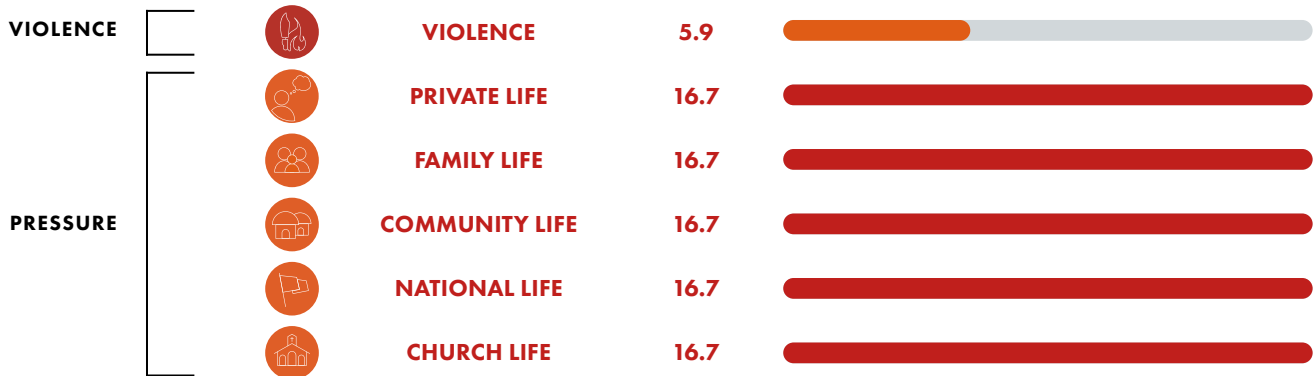
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**3**

## Yemen



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

The church in Yemen is composed mostly of converts from a Muslim background and their children, who need to live out their faith in secret. They face violations of religious freedom from the authorities (including detention and interrogation), family, and from radical Islamic groups who threaten apostates with death. Yemeni tribal identity is heavily entangled with Islamic identity. Therefore, Christians face severe community pressure and violence from their tribe for leaving Islam. Converts to Christianity who are married to Muslims risk forced divorce and loss of custody of their children. Christians are suffering from the general humanitarian crisis in the country, but Yemeni Christians are additionally vulnerable as emergency relief is distributed preferentially through mosques to local Muslims, who discriminate against those not considered to be devout Muslims.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Dr. Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi

### POPULATION

31,155,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

A few thousand (OD estimate)

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

In transition



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	A few thousand	-

Source<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, the Houthis (a Shia Muslim minority from northern Yemen), frustrated by the policies of President Abdrabbuh Hadi's regime, aligned themselves with the military and took control of the capital, Sana'a. Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, which then formed a coalition to reinstall him, protect its own border, prevent Yemen from splintering, and counteract the influence of Iran, the Shia regional rival to majority-Sunni Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia expected its air power to quickly defeat the Houthi insurgency, but civil war has dragged on, resulting in nearly 100,000 deaths and 250,000 displaced people. Nearly 80% of the population needs assistance. As is often the case within war zones, minorities are particularly vulnerable, as violent extremist groups such as Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda can act with impunity against those they wish to harm.

In the interests of security, no WCD breakdown of religions can be published. The Open Doors estimate for the number of Christians is 'a few thousand'. Over 99% of the population are Muslim and there is also a significant Hindu minority of over 200,000 adherents, most of them migrant workers from India and Nepal. Yemeni culture is majority Arab tribal and overwhelmingly Muslim. Yemeni Christian converts are at great risk of being killed, not just ostracized or expelled, by their families, clans and tribes. Before the

current civil war began in 2015, there were thousands of expatriates, often working in development, who were allowed to worship in registered churches in Aden and Sana'a. Most of these Christians have been forced to leave the country due to the dangerous situation, and some of their churches have been ransacked. As a result of the war, most of the country's Christians are indigenous converts.

There are also large numbers of Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians refugees currently living in Yemen. Converts from Islam risk losing their lives; they may face the death penalty, or radical Muslims are likely to want to kill them if their new faith is discovered.

## How the situation varies by region

The situation is dangerous for Christians all over Yemen. Some areas are particularly threatening, such as in the south, where there is a strong al-Qaeda presence. Converts from Islam to Christianity have also indicated that there is more pressure in the Shiite Houthi controlled areas in the north (comprising approximately one third of Yemen's territory) than in areas under the control of the Sunni Hadi government. However, a source connected to migrant Christians of traditional Christian backgrounds has said that they experience less restrictions in Houthi controlled areas than elsewhere. Houthi controlled areas are heavily policed and any dissenting opinion is rigorously repressed and likely to lead to imprisonment and torture.

<sup>1</sup> According to OD-estimate

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

Almost all western expats have left the country because of the war, for security reasons. In a combination of racial discrimination and violations of religious freedom, migrant Christians who are left behind face intimidation and discrimination from society and violence from radical Islamic movements. However, because their numbers have declined significantly, and the Church is now mostly made up of native Christians, the expatriate Christian category is currently not scored in the WWL analysis.

### Historical Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### Converts to Christianity

At least 95% of the Yemeni church is made up of converts from Islam. Vulnerability for converts remains very high throughout the country due to traditional family/community/tribal attitudes, the impunity with which radical Islamic groups are able to operate and the refusal of state (or de facto state) authorities to tolerate any form of dissent.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

The Yemeni Constitution declares Islam the state religion and Sharia the source of all legislation. Proselytism is prohibited, and Muslims are forbidden from converting. Islam is a key part of the identity of Yemeni tribes, while militant organizations such as the Houthis, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and IS seek to implement a puritanical form of Islam. They are the main drivers of this Islamic oppression and have actively targeted and killed Christians.

### Clan oppression:

Yemeni society is primarily tribal, with central government authority often playing a secondary role in terms of governance. Islamic identity is intertwined with ethnic identity. In many areas, tribal elders enforce tribal law and custom, which prohibit members from leaving or marrying outside of the tribe, especially to a Christian. Punishment for disobedience can be death or banishment.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Yemen has been under dictatorship since the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was president until 2012. Within the context of conflict, the survival instinct of warring parties is inevitably strong. Reports in 2018 suggested that, in Houthi controlled areas, increasingly harsh measures were being taken by the Houthi administration against individuals or associations deemed to be a threat by the ruling authority. This has continued and includes members of religious minority communities.

### Organized corruption and crime:

Christians are particularly likely to be victims of crime, since they are often viewed as foreigners and associated with the West. They are vulnerable since the lack of rule of law provides greater impunity to those who commit crimes against them.

# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Within Yemen’s patriarchal, Islamic context, a female converting to Christianity is considered shameful for her family. Typically, female converts from a Muslim background are denied their telephone and isolated in the home. They might further be physically and mentally abused, raped or even killed to ‘restore the honor’ of the tribe or family. Forced marriage to a strict Muslim is a common solution to bring a young convert into line. Due to strict family monitoring, women have limited access to information about Christianity, resulting in fewer women becoming Christians.

- Denied access to Christian religious materials
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual

## MEN

Life in general in Yemen is tremendously difficult in an ongoing war with no religious freedom. Christian men and boys can be forced to join militias, which impacts their education and future, not just because of the amount of time military service takes from their lives, but also because of the highly-controlled Islamic environment in which training takes place. Male converts to Christianity primarily face pressures in the

public sphere; they risk losing their job, being beaten and being imprisoned. Consequently, many Christian men flee the country.

- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Forced to flee town / country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Violence – physical

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	3	89
2022	5	88
2021	7	87
2020	8	85
2019	8	86

*Yemen’s score increased by one point compared to WWL 2022. The main reason is an increase in the number of reported violent incidents against Christians, such as opposition and limitations experienced by informal churches. Also, more Christians were being detained for a long time and pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity is at extreme levels in all spheres of life.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons, no details can be published here.

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## Private life

All Yemenis are considered Muslims. Converts to Christianity run the risk of honor killing or physical violence if their families or communities discover their faith. Private worship has become particularly risky for Christians in areas controlled by radical Muslims. AQAP and IS control large parts of the country.

## Family life

As Yemeni society is strictly Muslim, there is immense familial pressure against conversion, seen as a shameful insult to the family's honor. Any Christian ritual or celebration must be held in secret. For Yemeni Christians from a Muslim background with children, there is strong family and societal pressure to ensure that children are brought up according to Islamic norms. There is a high risk of loss of custody if the new faith of their parents is discovered. Disapproving families often seek to 'correct' a young convert through an arranged marriage to a conservative Muslim spouse. Further refusal can lead to imprisonment, 'honor' killing by family members or an attack by militant Islamic groups.

## Community life

The ongoing conflict and resulting humanitarian crisis have created exceedingly difficult conditions for Christians in Yemen. New converts whose faith is discovered face pressure to recant. Refusing to recant results in, at best, imprisonment or violence, and, at worst, killing. Communal pressure is more likely in rural villages, where religious leaders are more integrated with families and privacy is more difficult. Christian converts who hide their faith are considered less devout Muslims because they do not (or less often) attend mosque. As a result, they are deprioritized in distribution of food and aid.

## National life

According to Yemen's criminal code, conversion from Islam to another religion is apostasy, which is a capital offense. In employment, if managers suspect that an employee is Christian, then it is practically impossible for him to receive a promotion. Perpetrators of crimes against Christians, including so-called 'honor crimes', are likely to receive impunity, given the weak rule of law in much of Yemen. Tribal justice systems (which are widely applicable) expect the head of the family to carry out punishment. In more official systems, Islamic principles are likely to be applied, which will greatly

disadvantage converts from Islam. Even those who executed four nuns in Aden and 12 staff members of a Christian nursing home in 2016 were not investigated.

## Church life

The three official church buildings (all located in Aden, on Yemen's south coast) which served expatriate Christians or refugees (mainly Ethiopian) have been damaged in the war and are closed. Christians may only meet at secret locations. Distribution of religious materials is forbidden by law and the punishment is severe. Churches that organize humanitarian efforts risk being attacked. This was the case on March 4, 2016, when militants attacked and killed 16 people in an elderly care home in Aden, operated by a Christian charity founded by Mother Theresa.



# International obligations & rights violated

Yemen 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)

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

- Christian converts are pressured by the state and society to recant their conversion (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians suffer from biased distribution of emergency relief because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christian converts, male and female, face divorce and lose custody of their children because of their conversion (ICCPR Art. 23 and CEDAW Art. 16)
- Distribution of non-Islamic religious material is forbidden by law (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Female Christian converts are forced to house imprisonment and held hostage because of their faith (ICCPR Arts. 9 and 12 and CEDAW Art. 15)

## Situation of other religious minorities

Other religious minorities facing rights violations in Yemen are Baha'i and Jews. Radical Muslims consider Baha'is to be infidels, and so they are discriminated against. They can be imprisoned and tortured, mostly by Houthi authorities. They also face pressure to recant their faith. The tiny Jewish community, mostly based in the capital, are viewed by Houthi rebels as the enemy. The rebels seek to erase them. The Houthis forced the last three Jewish families out of the country in 2021, leaving only a few behind.



# Open Doors in Yemen

Open Doors raises prayer support for Christians in Yemen.



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#### About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

*All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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