

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

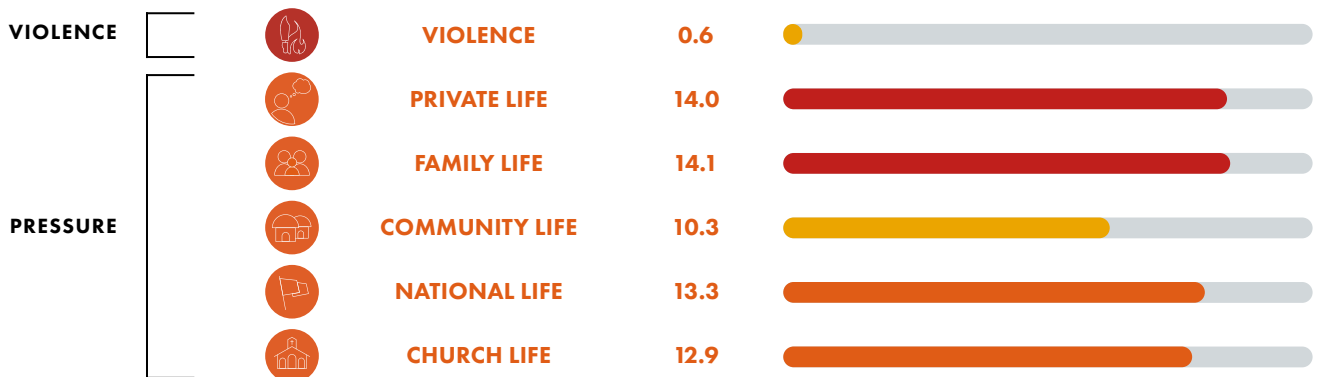
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**47**

## Oman



### 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

Converts from Islam to Christianity are put under pressure from family and society to recant their faith. They can be expelled from their jobs and homes and face problems with child custody and inheritance. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience similar pressures as in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. Expatriate Christian communities are tolerated, but their facilities are restricted and meetings are monitored to record any political statements and the attendance of any Omani nationals. All religious organizations must be registered with the authorities.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

Sultan and Prime Minister Haytham bin Tariq bin Taimur Al-Said

### POPULATION

5,324,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

193,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Islam

### GOVERNMENT

Absolute Monarchy



## Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	193,000	3.6
Muslims	4,766,000	89.5
Hindus	277,000	5.2
Buddhists	34,500	0.6

Source<sup>2</sup>

The country is ruled by a monarch (Sultan Haitham bin Tariq since January 2020) and classed as authoritarian. The former monarch was credited with abolishing slavery, forging relations with the USA, bringing stability to the economy, and election reforms.

According to [Middle East Concern](#), Islam is the state religion and forms the basis of legislation. There are severe sanctions for blasphemy against Abrahmic religions. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs closely regulates and monitors all religious activities, including Islamic. Religious leaders must be registered and only approved messages can be given in mosques. Prior permission is required for publication or distribution of religious

materials. Non-Muslim worship is only permitted on premises officially designated for that purpose.

Most Omanis practice a brand of Islam unique to Oman called Ibadism, which has been characterized as “moderate conservatism”, a mixture of austerity and tolerance. According to [experts](#), Ibadis do not believe in violence against those who leave Islam and tend to tolerate Christians, leading to Oman being internationally presented as a model of tolerance and diplomacy. However, pressure on Omani converts from Islam to Christianity (and on expatriate Christians involved in proselytizing) remains very high. Most Christians are expatriates, concentrated in urban areas and come from the Philippines, India, and Western countries.

## How the situation varies by region

Omani society is still very tribal. Social and family control, and thus pressure, is generally higher in rural areas, while urban areas offer the possibility for converts to live a more anonymous life.

<sup>1</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

## Who is affected?

### Communities of expatriate Christians

There are a number of expatriate communities (including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant), located mainly in urban areas such as Muscat and Sohar in the north and Salalah in the south. Their facilities are restricted in order not to offend nationals.

### Historical Christian communities

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

### Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from Islam risk isolation and pressure to renounce their faith from family and society. They can also lose child custody, as the law prohibits a father who leaves Islam from retaining paternal rights over his children.

### Non-traditional Christian communities

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



## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### Islamic oppression:

Converts to Christianity from an Omani Muslim background face the highest levels of pressure from family, who see conversion as a betrayal of family honor and will likely expel converts from their home. For converts from Islam originating from elsewhere (e.g., Pakistan or the Levant), much depends on the response within their surrounding community in Oman. As long as they do not create unrest, they have less to fear from the Omani government, although their Omani employers can fire them, which would result in deportation if they could not find another job. Conversion is not recognized by the government and Omani converts have been interrogated by officials, commanded to stop meeting, and have faced legal problems and threats of losing their jobs and homes. Proselytizing is illegal and punishable under the law. No Christians have been officially prosecuted for proselytizing, but some have been expelled from the country without due process in recent years.

### Clan oppression:

Tribal values are blended with Islamic values: to be Omani is to be Muslim, and to leave the faith is a dishonor and shame to family and society. Converts face the risk of being ostracized or subject to immense pressure to return to Islam.

### Dictatorial paranoia:

Oman has an authoritarian government that imposes criminal penalties for dissent and intimidates the media. Social media and phones may be monitored to suppress any government criticism.



# How are men and women differently affected?

## WOMEN

Women are in a vulnerable position in Oman’s conservative society, where fathers, husbands, and male guardians exert significant control over their lives. Women have no voice in society, so they are not expected to have their own religious opinions. It is extremely difficult for women to convert to Christianity, facing house arrest and being isolated from other Christians. Unmarried converts may also be pressured to marry a Muslim to force them to return to Islam. Housemaids, many of whom are Christian domestic migrant workers, experience sexual abuse and slave-like treatment.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family / house arrest
- Violence – physical
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

## MEN

It is very difficult for Muslim men to convert to Christianity in Oman. Converts risk social ostracism from families and communities. They are likely to lose the financial support of their families and the necessary connections to find or maintain a job in Oman’s network-based society. This impacts dependent family members, as men are traditionally

their family’s breadwinners. If married, he will lose custody of his children and he might be divorced. Converts may also be exiled from their home, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied custody of children
- Discrimination / harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work / job / business
- Forced out of home / expulsion
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	47	65
2022	36	66
2021	44	63
2020	42	62
2019	44	59

*Average pressure remained at an extremely high level for Christians, especially converts from Islam to Christianity. The one-point drop in score was mainly caused by fewer reported violent incidents during WWL 2023. Christians remain closely monitored by the government.*



# Examples of violence in the reporting period

- During the WWL 2023 reporting period, no cases of physical abuse by the authorities were reported. However, Christians in Oman, especially converts from a Muslim background, are strictly monitored by the security services, forcing them into self-censorship.
- Many Omani converts from Islam to Christianity keep their new faith strictly secret. Physical and mental abuse by family members often remains hidden as well.
- The expatriate Christian community remains monitored and applies self-censorship when it comes to proselytism and other Christian activities.

WWL Year	Christians abducted	Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians forced to flee their countries
2023	0	10*	0	0
2022	1	10*	1	10

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

## Private life

Expatriate Christians who publicly talk about their Christian faith can be accused of proselytism, which can lead to deportation. Oman is one of the few countries where Islam is the state religion, but conversion is not a crime as long as it is not done publicly. Given the tribal culture, however, a convert will be ostracized and lose all social security normally provided by the family.

## Family life

All children born to Omani parents, including converts to Christianity, are considered Muslim. Non-Muslim children cannot be exempted from compulsory Islamic classes within state schools. A convert husband will lose his right to custody upon divorce (this would not be different for a convert wife, but women, in general, do not have custody rights).

## Community life

Christians, especially converts and expatriates suspected of evangelism, are monitored by the government and society, who will inform the security services if they are aware of any “suspicious circumstances”. They can be interrogated by the police. In a tribal society like Oman, employment is often obtained via (family) relationships. Known Omani converts will not be able to get a job. Christian expatriate workers can experience discrimination. Their

Christian faith is an extra vulnerability in this regard, although racism also often plays a negative role.

## National life

The Omani Constitution (Article 28) only guarantees the “freedom to practice religious rites” under the condition that they “do not ... contradict morals”. Hence, there is no freedom to convert from Islam to Christianity. Christians will try to keep a low political profile in order to avoid provoking a hostile reaction from the government. Only Christian organizations offering a clear benefit to Omani society (e.g., a hospital) are welcomed.

## Church life

Churches apply self-censorship and are careful not to organize public activities or print large quantities of Christian material that would be interpreted as proselytism. The government would likely act against any church integrating converts. The publication, importing, and distribution of religious materials are heavily regulated; churches are no longer allowed to use their own channels for importing Bibles.

# International obligations & rights violated

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

1. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
2. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
3. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

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

- Children of Christian converts are forced to receive Muslim religious education and to participate in religious ceremonies and festivals that are not in line with their religious beliefs (CRC Art. 14)
- Female converts to Christianity do not have the option of marrying a Christian spouse, as women registered as Muslims are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim (CEDAW Article 16)



## Situation of other religious minorities

Hindus, Buddhists, and non-Ibadi Muslims are relatively free to practice their own beliefs. The [US State Department \(IRFR 2021\)](#) states that other non-Muslim groups are relatively free to gather in designated areas, but overcrowding remains a problem. They also continue to meet in private locations, although this is officially prohibited. In addition, religious groups struggle to register with the government, as procedures are not clear. All licensed imams “must deliver sermons within politically and socially acceptable parameters”. The government introduced these measures to avoid political discontent being expressed in the mosques. Atheism is viewed with suspicion in Oman and was described at a high-level event as a “behavioral psychological problem”. The event was attended by high-ranking (religious) officials, including the Grand Mufti ([Oman Observer, 24 May 2022](#)).



### Open Doors in Oman

Open Doors raises prayer support for the believers and church in the Arabian Peninsula.

#### 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).

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

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