

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

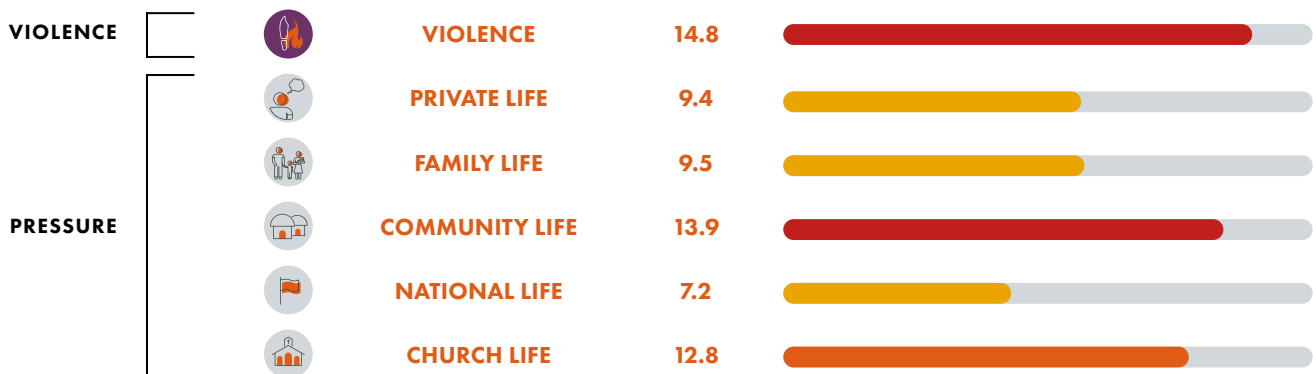
WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
33

Niger



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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).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

The families of converts from Islam attempt to make them renounce Christianity either by threats or use of force. The country is under increasing threat from jihadists, active in the west and south east. In the areas effectively controlled by the jihadists, Christians face extremely challenging situations. Christians have been hindered from celebrating Christian weddings. Communal worship and meetings of Christians are conducted with caution in such areas due to the threat of violence from radical Islamist groups. The jihadist ideology is also affecting the community as many are becoming ultra-conservative. As a result, Christians face discrimination in the public sector and are rarely able to secure employment within the local government services. Denying promotion to Christians is common practice. The legal process for registration of churches is very long and arduous.

¹World Watch Research measures pressure across all spheres of life as well as violence (full methodology [here](#) – password: freedom).

Quick facts

LEADER

President Mohamed Bazoum

POPULATION

25,006,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

64,700 (0.3%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Semi-presidential Republic



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	64,700	0.3
Muslims	24,144,000	96.6
Ethno-religionists	771,000	3.1
Agnostics	13,400	0.1

Source³

Niger declared independence from France in 1960. Since then, the country has seen at least four military coups. However, since President Mahamadou Issoufou came to power in 2011, political and civil groups have been able to assemble peacefully, the situation for journalists and the freedom of the press has improved, and Niger is on the way to forming a multi-party democracy. In the recent past there have been concerns about the 'securitization' of Niger's foreign policy and domestic politics. Since the beginning of 2021, Niger witnessed an uptick in jihadist violence especially in the 'tri-border' region between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, with an estimated 300 people being killed in attacks in the first three months. Radical Islamist groups are opposed to the secular nature of the government. The country is battling against various radical Islamist groups: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) on its northern western border with Mali; Boko Haram on its southern border with Nigeria.

Niger is a Muslim majority nation. An estimated 96.5% of the country's population follow Islam. Most Muslims in Niger are members of either the Tijaniya or Qadiriya Sufi orders, although Islamists seek to disassociate the population from Sufism and encourage Salafism. The legal landscape in Niger remains discriminatory towards women and girls, particularly in respect to marriage. Niger has the highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 76% of [girls married before 18](#).

How the situation varies by region

The areas outside the main cities, especially outside the capital city, are the main areas where Christians experience persecution. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, militants have been able to expand their sphere of influence.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians in Niger are not forced into isolation.

Historical Christian communities

Both Protestant and Catholic churches belong to this category. They suffer from the rise in Islamic militancy

²Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2021)

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in Niger and, in the past few years, have been attacked by armed groups such as Boko Haram in the departments of Diffa, near the border with Nigeria. Pastors and church leaders from these villages have been forced to flee to larger cities, fearing for their safety. Such incidents have also been observed in the department of Tillabéri. Many historical Christian communities in areas close to Nigeria live under fear of violent attack.

Converts to Christianity

In some cases, the pressure on converts from Islam is particularly pronounced, especially in the private, family and community spheres of life. Parents and relatives may oppose a family member's conversion to Christianity more than the government. Radical Islamic imams and teachers influence ordinary Muslim people to attack and chase away converts and any Christians found ministering to converts.

Non-traditional Christian communities

Baptist, Evangelical and Pentecostal groups are present in Niger and face pressure. This category faces the same kind of pressure as historical Christian communities. Compared to converts from Islam to Christianity, this groups is less vulnerable to societal pressure.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Although Niger is a Muslim majority nation, religion is understood to be a private matter and is not politicized by the state. In fact, the state tries to maintain the separation of state and religion, but this separation is increasingly under pressure. Muslim religious leaders of the Izala group, a radical Islamic group originating in northern Nigeria, are active in Niger and threatening the freedom of Christians. Other Islamic pressure groups like the Tariqa ('the way' in Arabic, the Sufi way of approaching Allah) are active in certain parts of the country (such as Maradi and Niamey). Izala and Tariqa create pressure on minority religions and on Muslims they consider to be deviating from Islam. Niger has a history of good relations between most Muslim believers and the much smaller minority faiths. Nonetheless, Niger's battle against Boko Haram has stoked local intercommunal tensions and undermined the security and freedom of Christians in the country.

Organized corruption and crime:

President Issoufou has made it one of his main priorities to combat corruption within the government. Anti-corruption measures have now become law, targeting government officials, their family members and all political parties. In the same way, there are now laws to counter [conflict of interest](#) issues in awarding contracts, and the bribery of public officials by private companies is officially illegal. However, corruption is a problem in the judiciary and impunity is a serious challenge facing the country. Office-holders who break the law and engage in corrupt practices attract adverse publicity but are not adequately prosecuted. This situation affects society negatively, including the Christian population.

Clan oppression:

For most of the population, Islam is regarded as being part of their ethnicity. If you are a Nigerien, you are a Muslim. Anything to the contrary is regarded as betrayal, which causes converts to Christianity and other indigenous Christians to face persecution.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Like many other countries in the Sahel, females are vulnerable to abduction, rape and sexual abuse by extremist groups and others. Families often do not report instances of rape out of fear it will impact the victim’s marriage prospects, and due to the attached stigma and shame. Female converts additionally face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man and raped. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights.

- Denied custody of children
- Denied inheritance or possessions
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Male converts risk being rejected by their families, chased out of their family home, or put under house arrest. Highlighting the psychological impact of such pressures, a country expert shared: “On many occasions, we heard stories of converts losing their mind because of long detention in isolation.” Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs, or have their business boycotted by the Muslim community. As men are usually the financial providers, this leaves

his family vulnerable. Boys risk abduction and forced recruitment into the ranks of militant groups.

- Abduction
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced out of home/expulsion
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Incarceration by government
- Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
- Violence - physical

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	33	67.54
2021	54	61.56
2020	50	59.74
2019	58	52.13
2018	58	45.00

Niger re-entered WWL 2022 with an increase of six points. The rise was mainly due to the ongoing pressure and violence orchestrated by violent Islamic militants in the Sahel region. Violence increased by over four points. Pressure across other spheres of lives has increased. Just like in Mali and Burkina Faso, the jihadists have expanded their areas of influence in the country.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

- A church was vandalised during a terrorist attack on Fantio village in the region of Tillabéri, Niger, which left five dead and two seriously injured. The militants vandalized walls, burned hymnbooks and vestments.
- **In June 2021**, Islamist militants attacked the predominantly Christian village of Dolbel in the Tillabéri region of south-western Niger.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2022	10	20	43	1000
2021	2	10	100	100

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - see here for full results. 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

Religion is considered a private matter by the state in Niger. However, the separation between religion and state has come under increasing pressure from radical Islamic groups such as the Izala group who are opposed to the secular nature of the government. This adversely impacts the Christians in Niger since the region is already very influenced by activities of Boko Haram and AQIM.

Family life

Converts to Christianity can face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man and raped. Christian parents can, by law, apply for custody of the children, but in practice, Christian parents fail to succeed. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity. Other Christians do not face this form of persecution and are generally allowed to practice their faith in private.

Community life

Christians with a Muslim background are treated as outcasts by the local communities and at times face violent attacks. Christians have been hindered from celebrating Christian weddings in border regions under Islamist control. Christians are not treated equally in the public sector, are rarely able to secure employment within local government services and are frequently denied promotion. Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs because of their faith, or have their business boycotted by the Muslim community.

National life

The attacks by Boko Haram, Islamic State group (IS) affiliates and other radical Islamic groups continue to cause fear among the Christian community. The lack of security in the country has affected the Christian community significantly. As jihadists are targeting Christians as well as the state authorities, Christians must be careful to keep a low profile. Many Christians who have escaped the conflict are living in internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Bosso, Yebbi, Maiduguri and Yola. There is also ongoing community violence.

Church life

Communal worship and meetings of Christians must be conducted with caution due to the threat of violence from militant groups. Christians have occasionally been hindered from gathering for meetings, and the legal process for the registration of churches is very long and difficult.



International obligations & rights violated

Niger 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)

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

- Christians can be harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Christians often experience beatings and pressure to renounce their faith (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 10)
- Christian converts experience pressure and violence from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians can face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christian converts lose custody of their children and inheritance rights (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Churches face several obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings and to receive licenses for legal recognition (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020), there are no hindrances for specific faiths from the side of the government: “The government prohibits open air, public proselytization events by all religious groups due to expressed safety concerns. There is no legal restriction on private, peaceful proselytization or conversion of an individual from one religious faith to another as long as the group sponsoring the conversion is registered with the government.” However, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Bahai, who are mostly present in major urban centers, do face the threat of violence from radical Islamic groups and have to tread carefully so as not to attract too much attention or provoke persecution.



Open Doors in Niger

Open Doors has been involved in Niger since 2011 through local churches and partners. Our vision for Niger is for Christians to understand persecution and respond to it biblically, enjoy greater economic stability, continue to reach out to others, have pastors that are servant leaders and are properly disciplined. Our programs include:

- Persecution preparedness training
- Economic empowerment programs
- Training in cross cultural outreach and care for new believers
- Servant leadership training
- Discipleship training



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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: © 2021 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- 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 2022 ranking and reports, can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

All photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
