

WWL 2022 Summary of Trends (revised February 2022)

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1. Taliban takeover boosts jihadists’ belief in eventual success – globally

The Taliban’s takeover of government in Afghanistan gave jihadists globally a profound psychological boost, not least across Asia. In neighboring Pakistan, the Taliban there strengthened as Islamist groups celebrated. Others may get bolder; Indonesia’s [Jemaah Islamiyah](#)¹, which carried out the 2002 Bali bombings, has ties to the Taliban.

Across Africa, jihadists frequently operate in countries which suffer from a corrupt and weak government and administration; they now see it as a matter of time before the foreign forces supporting the fight against them leave. One example is al-Shabaab, which has been fighting the government of Somalia and its allies (the African Union forces) for the past decade. Here, the “underground” Church is already small and scattered, as in Afghanistan.

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continues to see the most violence against Christians. Ranked on that alone, the Democratic Republic of Congo – plagued by the Alliance of Democratic Forces, now openly affiliated to the Islamic State group – and the Central African Republic join Nigeria – which once again scores the maximum points possible – in the top ten for violence. This year, it’s become clear that neither Christians nor other minority groups can count on the security apparatus commanded by the Nigerian Federal Government for their protection. Colleges, schools, churches, villages and community leaders continue to be targeted for kidnappings, killings, injuries and destruction of livestock and livelihoods especially by Fulani militants, as well as known jihadist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province.

Mozambique and Cameroon also make the top 10 for violence, due to jihadists there and across the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and southern Niger) and in the Sahel - Mali, Burkina Faso and western Niger. Four of these seven Sub-Saharan countries were not even in the WWL Top 50 in 2014. (Chad is not in the WWL 2022 Top 50, but at no. 63, and is termed a “Persecution Watch Country”).

¹ <https://www.benarnews.org/english/commentaries/asean-security-watch/taliban-abuza-08162021185452.html>

2. Global Church increasingly ‘displaced’ or ‘refugee’ – adding to its vulnerabilities

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees² says about 84 million people were forcibly displaced in 2021, either within their own country, or – for 26 million – across borders. Many of them are Christians fleeing persecution: Hundreds of thousands are affected by Islamist violence (e.g. in the Sahel region) or are fleeing forced conscription (Eritrea), civil conflict (Sudan), state repression (Iran), and/or family oppression due to their faith. The vast majority remain in their region, displaced in-country or as refugees.

In parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (including north-east Kenya), research indicates that the Christian population has simply emptied out and gone. In the past few years, hundreds of churches have been closed in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger – joined this year by 470 in Nigeria alone. If Christians were to return, it’s likely violent jihadist attacks would resume.

Once displaced or travelling, they risk extortion, human trafficking, rape and detention, especially if they ever reach Libya.

Christians IDPs and refugees continue to live in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan amongst others. If they’re a minority in their countries of origin they can report extra vulnerabilities if they’re in camps: they can experience discrimination by officials (especially if they’ve converted from a Muslim background) and even be denied humanitarian and other practical assistance. This can be true even in Western settings.

Christian women report their leading source of persecution as sexual assault. WWL researchers received reports of women and children subjected to rape, sexual slavery, harassment and more, both in camps and especially while they journeyed in search of safety. Poverty and insecurity compound their vulnerability; some are forced into prostitution to survive.

For these and other reasons, many Christian refugees prefer to avoid camps altogether, meaning they’re never registered and so don’t qualify for food aid, trauma support and so on. Their children may miss out on education, too.

Conflict in Myanmar targets the Christian-majority Chin State and Christian minority populations (e.g. Kachin, Kayah, Shan State); the Burmese military bombed churches and also killed or detained pastors. Research indicates that 200,000 Christians have been displaced and a further 20,000 of them have fled the country during the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Elsewhere, across parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and in parts of Asia, Christians leave their homes and countries reluctantly, having no other way to escape constant discrimination and pressure in the legal, political, economic and social spheres. This steady ‘exodus’ weakens existing churches as youths migrate from countries as different as Nigeria and Malaysia.

² <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

3. China’s model of centralized control of religion leads the world

As China’s economic prowess and influence grows – with its infrastructural Belt and Road initiative now including a “digital technology” component – so has Chinese nationalism. This requires social stability, enforced from above with “orders”, rather than by choice, freedom of speech or of other belief systems. Chinese religious leaders realize they must conform. New rules from May 2021 require them to “love the motherland, support the leadership of the Communist Party and the socialist system”. They must not “endanger national security, undermine national unity” or “divide the country.”

Meanwhile, new rules limit the extent of citizens’ contact with foreigners in the country³.

Under Communist ideology in the Americas, the pandemic continued to be used as a pretext to surveil churches and impose greater restrictions. In Cuba, after mass protests in July, Catholic and Protestant leaders who spoke out for social justice were detained, tortured and fined excessively. In Nicaragua and Venezuela too, ruling parties promoted smear campaigns against Catholic bishops, cancelled registration permits and closed churches.

This model, if not ideology, is emulated recently in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Malaysia, joining others such as the Central Asian states, all of which have increased restrictions on dissenters from ‘One country, one people, one religion’.

Minorities continue to suffer discrimination in societies made increasingly suspicious of them, especially by mainstream and social media [see [Open Doors’ India report](#)⁴].

Where authoritarianism combines with Islam, Christians suffer. Instability in the MENA region since the Arab Spring of 2011 means that dictatorial measures often continue against the historical and other established and non-traditional churches, as well as against Muslim converts in particular. Algeria, for instance, ordered three more Protestant churches to close this year (to add to 13 others which remain shut).

4. Authoritarian governments and even criminal gangs continue to use COVID restrictions to weaken the Church

China’s swift and draconian response to COVID-19 is well-documented. Where the need for restrictions ended, in some regions many official Three Self churches, as well as un-registered churches, were not permitted to re-open, forcing them into smaller ‘cell groups’ meeting in homes or online. Meantime, reports from counties in Henan and Jiangxi provinces, for example, said surveillance cameras are now in all state-approved religious venues.

At the same time, some Bible apps were banned from online stores. After the arrest of one man for ‘illegal operation’ of an online Christian bookstore, officials began a [nationwide investigation](#)⁵ into all

³ China mulls new rules on foreigners to ‘prohibit religious extremism’ - CNN

⁴ <https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Destructive%20Lies-Full%20version-DIGITAL-ODUK-2021.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.csw.org.uk/2021/11/24/press/5489/article.htm>

his customers, including a request for anyone who bought a book by a jailed famous pastor⁶ to return it!

The pandemic appeared to provide "proof of concept" that surveillance by digital technology worked inside the country sufficiently that it is in demand globally, not least by other authoritarian governments. In Vietnam, for instance, state and non-state actors used COVID-19 outbreaks to slander churches, even to instigate [criminal investigations](#) against one church⁷.

From West Africa to Central America, government focus on fighting the pandemic continued to enable jihadist and/or organized criminal groups to further consolidate and/or expand their power and territorial control, as the World Watch List reported last year.

Any good news at all?

The Pope's visit to Iraq's region desecrated by Islamic State was generally seen as a success, despite fears it could cause a COVID outbreak; it encouraged more Christians to consider returning to rebuild.

A Colombian Catholic nun, Gloria Argoti, was freed by Islamist militants in Mali (Oct 2021) after nearly five years' captivity. She said her faith had helped her to survive the ordeal.

⁶ Pastor Wang Yi, of Early Rain Church, Chengdu

⁷ <https://www.iirf.eu/news/other-news/covid-19-leads-to-prosecution-of-house-church-group/>