

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
1

Afghanistan



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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 ($6 \times 16.7 = 100$).¹ Red = extreme level, orange = very high, yellow = high

Key findings

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 must flee the country. Many went into hiding after the Taliban took over the government on 15 August 2021. This proved a game-changer not only for women and ethnic minorities,

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

but also for religious minorities, including Christian converts, who are seen as apostates. The family, clan or tribe must save its ‘honor’ by disposing of the Christian. With the Taliban’s grip on power growing stronger and reaching into more and more districts, the situation for Christian converts is becoming increasingly challenging. Once the Taliban has consolidated power, Christian converts will have to adapt and conform to the rigid form of society implemented.

Quick facts

LEADER

Hibatullah Akhundzada

POPULATION

38,914,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

Thousands (OD estimate)

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan



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Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	Thousands	-

Source²

Afghanistan has not known peace for more than 40 years. This has left the infrastructure, economy and social fabric in ruins, and had led to widespread Islamic radicalization, criminal activity and corruption. The Taliban held power over roughly three quarters of the country from 1996 until 2001. From 15 August 2021, the Taliban took control over the country again and the so-called ‘interim government’ shows that it is interested in including neither ethnic nor religious minorities nor women. Many ministers are familiar faces from the first Taliban rule (and are on international terror lists) and most news coming out of the country points to a reprise of their harsh interpretation of Islam. The new government faces unprecedented challenges. Already Afghanistan is extremely poor with 54.5% of the population living below the poverty line. The instability has led many

farmers to rely heavily on illicit drugs like opium as a source of income. With a dire COVID-19 situation and the end of international support and financing, the level of poverty will increase. The most telling example of the changes in Afghanistan is the situation in Kabul. When the Taliban left in 2001, this was a rather small capital with 500,000 inhabitants; before the group seized power again in 2021, it was a buzzing city with at least five million people. A strong increase in the numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) and an expected increase in refugees in neighboring countries will add to instability likely to affect the region as well. The UN estimates 23 million people will face [acute food insecurity](#) this winter.



²According to OD-estimate

How the situation varies by region

At the time of writing, it is too early to say how far the Taliban rule will be contested in any meaningful way. A first resistance movement in the Northern Panjshir valley quickly broke down. A more formidable challenger could be the Islamic State Khorasan Province, which attacked Taliban convoys in Eastern Afghanistan. However, Christian converts cannot expect any different treatment by them; it may become more violent and volatile. Generally, control and supervision in rural areas is stricter than in most cities. However, the whole country is strictly Islamic and therefore Christians face severe difficulties wherever they are discovered, by families or authorities.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Communities of expatriate Christians are very few in number and most of them have left the country in the reporting period.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background try their utmost not to be discovered by family or the wider community. Being discovered is an immediate risk to their lives.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Islamic extremist groups such as the Taliban have a long history in Afghanistan and target any apostates. Since the Taliban is now the government, with all limitations, they have the means to target apostates. Minorities are caught in the middle of the fight between Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Taliban.

Clan oppression:

Conversion from Islam is perceived as a threat to the predominantly Islamic identity of the country. The collectivistic nature of the Afghan family unit leaves little room for privacy, which means a high risk of discovery and severe compulsion from within the clan structure and the wider community.

Ethno-religious hostility:

Afghans are deeply entrenched in caring for their families, villages and tribes. If someone turns from his tribe to embrace something seen as foreign, this results in high pressure being exerted to ensure that person returns to traditional norms. Additionally, the Christian religion is considered Western and hostile to Afghan culture, society and Islam.

Organized corruption and crime:

80% of the country's GDP comes from the informal sector. Corruption and crime are omnipresent. One problem faced by Afghanistan is that growing illicit drugs such as opium is much more lucrative than virtually any other crop. The income from poppy cultivation funds both armed militant groups and corruption. This particularly affects Christians who tend to be from the low-income sections of society.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

With the takeover by the Taliban, progress made toward rights and protections for women is the subject of international concern and is rapidly deteriorating under Taliban control. At the time of writing this report, girls are banned from returning to school and there are many reports of women being pressured to dress ‘properly’ and stay at home. Persecution of Christian women is facilitated by the weak position of women in society. Converts are vulnerable to divorce or being put under house arrest. They can be sold into slavery or prostitution, beaten severely, forced to marry a Muslim (in an attempt to re-convert her), and sexually abused. Reporting and recourse for such abuse is unlikely due to stigma and insufficient legislative protection.

- Abduction
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - sexual
- Violence - verbal

MEN

Many men and boys face severe pressure and violence from their families if their faith is discovered. The Taliban pressurizes men to show that they are good Muslim heads of family by praying five times a day, attending mosques, fasting and wearing a ‘proper’ beard. They face ridicule, imprisonment, torture, sexual abuse and potentially death because of their faith. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their fighter groups. Male converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid being

exposed by not taking part in religious practices in the marketplace. If discovered, they will experience harsh discrimination from employment authorities, leaving them and their dependents financially vulnerable.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence - death
- Violence - physical
- Violence - psychological
- Violence - verbal
- Violence - sexual

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution score out of 100
2022	1	98.33
2021	2	93.52
2020	2	93.33
2019	2	93.89
2018	2	93.33

Christians in Afghanistan endure the same extreme levels of pressure as in North Korea, although by different means and actors. However, with the takeover of the government by the Taliban, many Christians either tried to leave the country or relocate within the country for security reasons. As a result, many churches closed and Christians had to leave behind everything they owned. Therefore, the violence scored increased to 15 points. This high score does not mean every Christian in Afghanistan is fleeing the country, nor does it imply that church life is impossible. However, there is no suggestion that persecution will not worsen in the future, or that the situation in North Korea has improved.



Examples of violence in the reporting period

For security reasons no details can be published here.

Private life

Conversion to Christianity is strictly forbidden and harshly punished. The tight-knit tribal society means social control is high and privacy is difficult to maintain. As a result, converts run a high risk of being discovered. According to a [report](#), the Taliban had already enforced cell phone checks in the regions they controlled, prior to August 2021, in order to enforce their strict rules. Many Christian converts completely disposed of their cell phones and other devices after the Taliban take-over and relocated to other areas in an effort to hide.

Family life

The collectivistic nature of the Afghan social system means Christians must exercise extreme caution when practicing their faith, as even the suspicion of having converted from Islam can lead to severe consequences like arrest or destruction of homes. There is strong pressure to divorce or nullify a marriage in the case of a Christian spouse. Since the Taliban government requires children to be raised as Muslims, Christian spouses face the loss of custody of their children. Christian converts need to play the role of a Muslim in any aspect of life.

Community life

With the Taliban takeover, this pressure has grown exponentially. The Open Doors field expert says there is no option for Christian converts other than to 'play the role of a Muslim'. This includes questions of dress code, attendance at mosque whether or not a man grows a beard. If a Christian woman chooses not to wear a head-covering she will draw unwanted attention and locals will try to manipulate her into wearing one. Christian students have to follow the general curriculum, which puts a strong emphasis on Islam. Christian girls are excluded from education like girls and women in general (although the implementation is not uniform, yet). With many Christian converts currently relocating, children are often not attending school. It is safer to leave the country or the region as there is a likelihood of great pressure to reconvert back to the original faith. Those who chose to stay end up in serious difficulty, suffer hardship and can be killed.

National life

The Constitution, now suspended by the Taliban, guaranteed that adherents of other religions are free to exercise their faith. However, Article 3 of the



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Constitution, which states that no law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of Islam, led to restrictions in many areas. Although the wording was flexible and 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. Now, the country is back to the direct rule of Sharia law and it is not yet clear if the Taliban plan to implement a new constitution. All travel by anyone suspected of being a Christian is monitored and often hindered if suspected that a journey is being undertaken for faith-based reasons. The Taliban is known for notoriously strict and frequent searches (previously, at checkpoints, and now, in raids).

Church life

There is no publicly-accessible church in Afghanistan. The only functioning chapel is placed in the basement of the Italian embassy in Kabul and is only open for the small number of expatriates still working in the city. Christian groups (however small) must be cautious about how they meet. According to the Open Doors field expert, churches are underground and held in secret. The ceremonies for church just look like a group of people meeting over a meal. All Christian material are hidden. They have to be kept safe from prying eyes lest they are discovered, forcing the people to flee or face serious consequences of violence from the local 'jirga' court. There is no possibility for distributing or selling Bibles and other Christian materials; even sharing electronically can have life-threatening consequences if traced. Open work among youth is not possible since they are at risk due to the recruitment of young people to fight in the wars against different Taliban/ISIL-K factions. In this kind of conscription race, anyone working openly with youth is perceived as a competitor for their hearts and minds.



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International obligations & rights violated

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 Art. 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)

Situation of other religious minorities

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reports that: "According to minority religious leaders, due to the small size of their communities, only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of violent attacks on the community, societal discrimination, and lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups also reported continued interference with efforts to cremate the remains of their dead, in accordance with their customs, by individuals who lived near cremation sites. Despite requesting and receiving local authority support for security during their cremation ceremonies, the Hindu and Sikh communities continued to face protests and threats of violence that prevented them from carrying out the sacred practice." The [last known Jew in Afghanistan](#), a woman, left the country for Israel in September 2021 due to the deteriorating security situation.



Open Doors in Afghanistan

Because of the sensitive nature of our work, and the increasing risks faced by our partners and the people they serve, we cannot provide country specific information for countries in the Persian Gulf and beyond. Open Doors is active in the Persian Gulf countries through the ALIVE network of partner churches, but we cannot say what we exactly do where.

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.
