

WORLD WATCH LIST 2022

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
49

Kuwait



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

Expatriate Christians are relatively free to worship. However, places registered for worship are very small for the number of people gathering and this can lead to tension between Christian groups. Obtaining more property is extremely difficult. Proselytizing is strictly forbidden and will lead to expulsion from the country. Converts from a Muslim background face pressure from both family and the community to recant their Christian faith. They risk discrimination, harassment, police monitoring and intimidation by radical groups. Moreover, conversion from Islam to another faith is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters. Expatriate Muslims converting to Christianity experience pressure similar to that in their home countries, as they are often living within their own national or ethnic communities. There are hardly ever reports of Christians being killed, imprisoned or harmed for their faith.

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

Quick facts

LEADER

Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

POPULATION

4,361,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

520,000 (11.9%)²

MAIN RELIGION

Islam

GOVERNMENT

Constitutional Monarchy (emirate)



Context

| Main Religions | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians | 520,000 | 11.9 |
| Muslims | 3,612,000 | 82.8 |
| Hindus | 164,000 | 3.8 |
| Agnostics | 35,000 | 0.8 |

Source³

Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy and was the first Arab country in the Gulf to have an [elected parliament](#). It tries to keep a neutral position at international level and ranks better than its neighbors in civil liberties and freedom of the press. However, [political dissent is stifled](#) and there are serious problems with migrant workers' rights.

The Constitution enshrines Islam as the state religion and Islamic law as a main source of legislation. Yet, the Constitution also guarantees freedom of religious practice as long as it 'does not conflict with public policy or morals'. 70% of Kuwaitis are Sunni but there is a significant Shia minority. Most Christians are expatriates but a small number are converts from Islam and around 300 are indigenous Kuwaiti Christians.

How the situation varies by region

Kuwait is a very small country and the risks faced by Christians, especially converts from Islam, depend on which community they belong to rather than the geographical area where they live.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

Expatriate Christians make up the majority of Christians in Kuwait. [There are seven officially-recognized Christian churches](#): the National Evangelical Church (Protestant), the Roman Catholic Church, the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church. Groups can conduct worship services without government interference provided they do not disturb neighbors or violate laws on proselytizing.

Historical Christian communities

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

Converts to Christianity

Converts from Islam to Christianity face pressure from family, community, radical Muslims and the authorities. Pressure includes discrimination, harassment, police

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

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monitoring and intimidation. Conversion away from Islam is not officially recognized and is likely to lead to legal problems in personal status and property matters.

Non-traditional Christian communities

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

Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Islamic oppression:

Society is generally conservative. Historically, Kuwaitis were tolerant towards non-Muslims, though this has started to change due to the growing influence of radical Islamic groups who do not want Christians in the country. Kuwaiti citizens are known to have fought for Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Society and government enforce conservative Islamic customs in public, for example by enforcing public dress codes, prohibiting the drinking of alcohol and by cracking down on any criticism of Islam.

Clan oppression:

In Kuwait, tribalism is mixed with Islam and especially affects converts from Islam to Christianity. Conversion is regarded not only as religious betrayal but also as disloyalty to family and tribe. Families can alienate converts or put strong social pressure to make them return to Islam.

Dictatorial paranoia:

Although the country has one of the strongest parliaments in the region, the ruling royal Sunni family still dictates everyday life. The government is restrictive in many ways. Registering a church is a complicated and lengthy procedure and the government does not allow any criticism of state affairs. (In 2016, two MPs who were critical of the government and their allies received prison sentences.) Expatriates who speak out against the government will likely be deported and [journalists](#) whose articles insult the Emir often face prosecution.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

In a country where the foreign population outnumbers the indigenous population, the ill-treatment of foreign domestic maids, many of whom are Christian, is a major issue. Sexual abuse is hugely prevalent, and COVID-19 has intensified domestic abuse. Native Kuwaiti Christian women from Muslim backgrounds encounter severe family pressure to reject their new faith. They risk house arrest, sexual harassment, divorce, and pressure to marry a Muslim. They are also threatened with honor killings. Women from Muslim backgrounds are legally unable to marry non-Muslims, restricting the establishment of Christian households.

- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Forced divorce
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Violence - sexual

MEN

Among the small number of Kuwaiti converts to Christianity, most pressure comes from family and community. This is felt most keenly by women and girls, followed by younger men, followed by older men, reflecting more general levels of status and freedom. Men who convert to Christianity risk family rejection, simultaneously losing respect and financial support. Often this results in male converts from Islam to Christianity being forced to leave the family home, creating difficulties in employment and severely limiting their marriage prospects. Christian men are especially subject to discrimination at work.

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Forced out of home/expulsion



WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution score out of 100 |
|----------|---|------------------------------|
| 2022 | 49 | 63.57 |
| 2021 | 48 | 63.07 |
| 2020 | 43 | 61.89 |
| 2019 | 43 | 59.76 |
| 2018 | 34 | 61.17 |

Kuwait's one point increase from WWL 2021 to WWL 2022 was due to a slight increase of pressure in the 'private' and 'family' spheres of life. Whereas expatriate Christians are relatively free to practice their beliefs, converts from Islam bear the brunt of persecution as they face severe opposition from both family members and the local community.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

Violent incidents against Christians are rarely reported. Incidents where Christian migrant workers are targeted probably go unreported because it is in nobody's interest to publicize details; the victim wants to keep their job and others are not interested in recording such occurrences. Secondly, it is difficult to discern whether or not mistreatment is due to a worker's Christian faith.

However, it is estimated that thousands of expatriate Christians face abuse, which increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report by Amnesty International ('All Work No Pay', 2019), despite promises to improve conditions, thousands of migrant workers still suffer from labor abuses. In an earlier report ('My Sleep Is My Break', 2014), Amnesty International highlighted practices of sexual abuse of female migrant workers, many of whom are Christian.

| WWL Year | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians imprisoned or punished by the government | Christians raped and/or sexually assaulted | Christians physically or mentally abused |
|----------|--|---|--|--|
| 2022 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10 |
| 2021 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 10 |

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

Although conversion from Islam to Christianity is not legally prohibited, only conversion to Islam is officially recognized. Kuwait is a conservative and tribal society, and conversion is seen as a betrayal of Islam and family values. It is fiercely opposed. Expatriate Christians can be accused of proselytism when speaking about their faith with Muslims, which will lead to deportation. Wearing a cross can lead to negative remarks or other types of harassment, especially when working in a Kuwaiti home (as a domestic worker, for example).

Family life

All children born to Kuwaitis, including converts to Christianity, are considered to be Muslim. A female Kuwaiti Christian from a Muslim background is only legally allowed to marry a man also born Muslim. Converts often do not receive any inheritance from their deceased parents; by leaving Islam they have dishonored the family.

Community life

Christians are monitored not only by the government but also by society, and people will inform

security services if they are aware of activities such as evangelism. Known Kuwaiti converts are discriminated against and have great difficulty in finding employment. Christian expatriate workers can experience discrimination at work. Their Christian faith is an extra vulnerability in this regard, although racism also often plays a major role.

National life

The Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and conversion from Islam cannot be recognized due to apostasy provisions in Islamic law. Only Christian organizations with a clear benefit for Kuwaiti society, such as a hospital, will be welcomed.

Church life

The government has prohibited non-Muslim missionaries from working in the country. Openly integrating converts within church communities or organizing activities directed at Muslim youth would be seen as a clear sign of proselytism. Selling Christian materials is only permitted within a church compound. In previous years, the distribution of Christian material by an expatriate has led to deportation of the offender.



International obligations & rights violated

Kuwait 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)

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

- Christian converts experience pressure from their family and community to renounce their faith (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Children of Christian converts are automatically registered as Muslim (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians are harassed in the workplace and face discrimination because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26)
- Ownership and consultation of religious literature is severely restricted beyond international permitted limitations (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)
- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Churches face several obstacles to obtain permits for the construction of new buildings (ICCPR Arts. 21 and 26)

Situation of other religious minorities

Religious minorities (such as the Shia community) experience discrimination and must operate carefully. Groups such as Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs are relatively free to practice their faith in private, although they lack facilities to worship and must take care not to disturb their neighbors or advertise events. Conservative groups within parliament view all non-Muslim religious activities with suspicion and regularly oppose them. In recent years, human rights activists and others have been convicted for spreading atheism and secularism.

Open Doors in Kuwait

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



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.
