

World
Watch
Research

Tunisia: Full Country Dossier

January 2022 (revised version)



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Man in Tunisia (c) Alamy

Introduction

World Watch List 2022

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
1	Afghanistan	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	15.0	98	94	93	94	93
2	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	13.1	96	94	94	94	94
3	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	8.5	91	92	92	91	91
4	Libya	15.6	15.5	15.9	16.2	16.3	11.5	91	92	90	87	86
5	Yemen	16.7	16.6	16.5	16.7	16.7	5.2	88	87	85	86	85
6	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.6	11.1	88	88	87	86	86
7	Nigeria	13.8	13.8	14.3	14.5	14.4	16.7	87	85	80	80	77
8	Pakistan	13.6	14.0	15.1	14.9	13.1	16.7	87	88	88	87	86
9	Iran	14.5	14.6	13.6	15.8	16.5	10.4	85	86	85	85	85
10	India	12.7	12.7	12.9	14.7	13.3	15.6	82	83	83	83	81
11	Saudi Arabia	15.1	15.1	15.0	15.9	16.7	3.1	81	78	79	77	79
12	Myanmar	12.4	11.5	13.8	13.4	13.1	14.8	79	74	73	71	65
13	Sudan	13.4	13.4	14.3	13.6	15.7	8.5	79	79	85	87	87
14	Iraq	14.0	14.6	14.0	14.8	13.9	6.9	78	82	76	79	86
15	Syria	12.9	13.8	13.5	14.3	13.9	9.3	78	81	82	82	76
16	Maldives	15.4	15.3	13.7	15.8	16.5	0.4	77	77	78	78	78
17	China	12.6	9.8	12.2	14.4	15.5	11.1	76	74	70	65	57
18	Qatar	14.2	14.1	11.1	13.0	14.3	7.2	74	67	66	62	63
19	Vietnam	11.3	9.7	12.7	14.1	14.5	8.7	71	72	72	70	69
20	Egypt	12.7	13.2	11.5	12.7	10.8	10.0	71	75	76	76	70
21	Uzbekistan	14.9	12.7	14.1	11.8	15.6	1.7	71	71	73	74	73
22	Algeria	14.0	14.0	11.1	13.4	14.1	4.1	71	70	73	70	58
23	Mauritania	14.3	13.9	13.1	14.0	14.1	0.9	70	71	68	67	57
24	Mali	9.4	8.2	13.9	10.3	12.8	15.0	70	67	66	68	59
25	Turkmenistan	14.5	11.3	13.6	13.3	15.7	0.6	69	70	70	69	68
26	Laos	12.0	10.3	13.2	13.3	14.1	5.9	69	71	72	71	67
27	Morocco	13.1	13.8	10.8	12.8	14.2	3.9	69	67	66	63	51
28	Indonesia	11.3	11.5	11.5	11.0	9.6	13.5	68	63	60	65	59
29	Bangladesh	11.8	10.7	12.9	11.3	10.2	11.3	68	67	63	58	58
30	Colombia	11.5	8.8	13.1	11.0	9.9	13.3	68	67	62	58	56
31	CAR	9.0	8.6	13.6	9.6	11.4	15.6	68	66	68	70	61
32	Burkina Faso	9.4	9.7	12.0	9.6	12.1	14.8	68	67	66	48	-
33	Niger	9.4	9.5	13.9	7.2	12.8	14.8	68	62	60	52	45
34	Bhutan	13.4	12.4	11.7	13.7	13.8	1.7	67	64	61	64	62
35	Tunisia	11.9	12.7	10.6	11.3	13.4	6.5	66	67	64	63	62
36	Oman	13.8	14.0	10.3	13.2	13.4	1.5	66	63	62	59	57
37	Cuba	12.3	8.1	12.6	13.2	14.0	5.9	66	62	52	49	49
38	Ethiopia	9.9	10.3	13.1	10.3	12.3	9.8	66	65	63	65	62
39	Jordan	12.9	14.0	11.0	12.3	12.5	3.0	66	64	64	65	66
40	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	12.0	15.6	66	64	56	55	33
41	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	11.3	7.9	12.5	15.6	65	63	43	43	-
42	Turkey	12.6	11.5	11.4	13.2	11.6	4.6	65	69	63	66	62
43	Mexico	10.3	8.3	12.5	10.8	10.3	12.6	65	64	60	61	59
44	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	7.2	13.1	15.4	65	64	60	54	38
45	Tajikistan	13.8	12.3	12.0	12.6	13.2	0.7	65	66	65	65	65
46	Brunei	14.8	14.5	10.3	11.0	13.2	0.6	64	64	63	63	64
47	Kazakhstan	13.4	11.6	11.1	12.6	13.5	1.7	64	64	64	63	63
48	Nepal	12.4	9.8	9.9	13.6	12.7	5.2	64	66	64	64	64
49	Kuwait	13.5	13.7	9.8	12.3	13.1	1.1	64	63	62	60	61
50	Malaysia	12.5	14.3	11.5	11.6	10.2	3.3	63	63	62	60	65

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020	Total Score WWL 2019	Total Score WWL 2018
51	Kenya	11.7	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	11.1	63	62	61	61	62
52	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.9	11.4	11.3	9.4	7.8	63	62	65	58	57
53	Comoros	12.7	11.1	11.2	12.4	14.2	0.9	63	62	57	56	56
54	UAE	13.4	13.6	10.1	11.8	12.2	1.3	62	62	60	58	58
55	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	13.7	61	58	55	52	53
56	Azerbaijan	13.1	9.9	9.3	11.0	13.4	3.3	60	56	57	57	57
57	Palestinian Territories	13.0	13.4	9.8	10.2	12.0	0.9	59	58	60	57	60
58	Djibouti	12.3	12.3	11.1	10.0	12.2	0.7	59	56	56	56	56
59	Kyrgyzstan	12.9	10.1	11.1	10.4	12.0	1.5	58	58	57	56	54
60	Bahrain	12.5	13.2	9.1	11.1	10.2	0.9	57	56	55	55	57
61	Nicaragua	9.1	5.6	11.1	11.8	11.3	7.6	56	51	41	41	-
62	Russian Federation	12.3	8.0	10.2	10.6	12.3	2.2	56	57	60	60	51
63	Chad	11.5	8.2	10.2	9.6	10.3	5.6	55	53	56	48	40
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.7	9.2	9.6	8.1	52	48	48	43	-
65	Venezuela	5.6	4.5	11.2	9.4	11.1	9.6	51	39	42	41	34
66	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	10.1	11.4	7.8	51	46	43	42	-
67	Rwanda	8.1	5.5	6.7	10.3	10.1	9.3	50	42	42	41	-
68	Honduras	7.2	5.1	10.5	7.7	9.2	8.7	48	46	39	38	-
69	Uganda	8.1	4.6	7.4	6.7	9.1	11.7	48	47	48	47	46
70	El Salvador	7.7	4.6	10.7	5.7	9.1	7.2	45	42	38	30	-
71	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	9.8	2.4	44	43	41	42	-
72	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.7	8.3	8.8	1.7	44	43	43	43	-
73	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	7.0	8.1	2.0	43	47	45	46	-
74	South Sudan	5.7	0.9	7.0	6.3	7.8	15.0	43	43	44	44	-
75	Ivory Coast	9.8	8.6	8.2	5.5	7.9	2.0	42	42	42	43	-
76	Israel	9.8	8.4	5.6	6.6	6.6	4.3	41	40	38	39	40

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2022 reporting period was 01 October 2020 - 30 September 2021.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology including appendices can be found on the [World Watch List Documentation](#) page of the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).

Effect on data-gathering during COVID-19 pandemic

In the WWL 2022 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grass-roots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of In-country networks, Open Doors country researchers, External experts, WWR analysts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that – as in the previous reporting period – WWL 2022 scoring, analysis and documentation has maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

External Links - Introduction

- Sources and definitions: World Watch List Documentation - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>

WWL 2022 Situation in brief / Tunisia

Map of country



Brief country details

Tunisia: Population (UN estimate for 2021)	Christians	Chr%
12,019,000	22,800	0.2

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

Tunisia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	66	35
WWL 2021	67	26
WWL 2020	64	34
WWL 2019	63	37
WWL 2018	62	30

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

Tunisia: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Islamic oppression	Non-Christian religious leaders, One's own (extended) family, Political parties, Violent religious groups, Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs, Government officials

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

A journalist [who has investigated](#) the situation of Tunisian Christians in depth states: "Tunisian Christians face discrimination and targeting that is often obscure and hidden to the public eye. It affects their day-to-day lives. Because of their Christian identities, many experience job insecurity, abandonment from family, friends and even fiancés; they are victims of verbal, mental and physical abuse." (Hwang P, Underground - The plight of a religious minority living in a Muslim society, April 2016)

Due to the factors mentioned above, most Tunisian converts to Christianity cannot worship openly and choose to hide their faith. The hostility and pressure they face from society at large makes it dangerous for them to share their faith with their family members, relatives, neighbors, friends or colleagues. They also have to be careful when gathering for worship and fellowship due to the risks any possible exposure would entail, while being monitored by the Tunisian security services.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

Tunisia 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)

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

- Christian converts are ostracized and faced with opposition by their families, and threatened with divorce and loss of child custody (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian children are harassed because of their parents' faith (ICCPR Art. 18 and CRC Art. 14)
- Christians face restrictions in employment in the public sector and experience discrimination in the private sector (ICCPR Arts. 25 and 26, and ICESCR Art. 6)
- Christians face harassment and violence if they talk about their faith or engage in proselytization (ICCPR Arts. 18 and 19)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

During the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- A Tunisian Christian was physically injured after an angry mob attacked and smashed the interior of his house.
- A convert from Islam to Christianity was beaten up by her husband after he discovered her new faith.
- At least one Tunisian Christian was detained and interrogated about Christian activities.
- Several Christian graves were vandalized and damaged.
- Because of restrictions caused by the COVID-19 crisis, Tunisian Christians experienced higher levels of family pressure, especially those living isolated with Muslim family members.

Specific examples of positive developments

- A bookshop in the center of the capital, Tunis, is able to sell Christian materials besides other more general literature.
- Several Christmas- and Easter programs were filmed and broadcast inside the country with some Tunisian Christians displayed openly.

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: who has investigated - <http://underground.priscillahwang.com/>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

WWL 2022: Keys to understanding / Tunisia

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International country report	AI 2021	https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/tunisia/	4 August 2021
BBC News country profile	BBC country profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14107241	4 August 2021
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2020	BTI 2020	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard-TUN.html	4 August 2021
CIA World Factbook	CIA Factbook	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/tunisia/	4 August 2021
Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2020	EIU 2020	https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf	4 August 2021
FFP's Fragile States Index 2021	FSI 2021	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	4 August 2021
Freedom House's 2021 Democracy index (Tunisia is not included)	Freedom House/Democracy 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2021 Global Freedom index	Freedom House/Global Freedom 2021	https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-world/2021	4 August 2021
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2020 report	Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020	https://freedomhouse.org/country/tunisia/freedom-net/2020	4 August 2021
Garda World country report	Garda World	https://www.garda.com/crisis24/country-reports/tunisia	4 August 2021
Human Rights Watch World Report 2021	HRW 2021	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/tunisia	4 August 2021
Internet World Stats 2021	IWS 2021	https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm#tn	4 August 2021
Middle East Concern Country profile	MEC country profile	https://meconcern.org/countries/tunisia/	4 August 2021
RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Index	World Press Freedom 2020	https://rsf.org/en/tunisia	4 August 2021
Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index	CPI 2020	https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/tunisia#	4 August 2021
UNDP's Global Human Development Indicators	HDI 2020	http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/TUN	4 August 2021
US State Department's 2020 International Religious Freedom country reports	IRFR 2020	https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/tunisia/	4 August 2021
USCIRF 2021 country reports (Tunisia is not included)	USCIRF 2021	https://www.uscirf.gov/countries	
World Bank country report	World Bank	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia	4 August 2021

Recent history

For centuries, Tunisia has had a strategic position in the Mediterranean region. Its original capital, Carthage, was once the arch-enemy of ancient Rome, until it was completely destroyed at the end of the [Punic Wars](#) in 146 BC (Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed 29 July 2021). The Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs and the Ottomans all included Tunisia as a province in their respective empires, until it became a French protectorate in 1883. Tunisia gained independence from France in 1956. The first president, Habib Bourguiba, introduced secular influences such as the emancipation of women (BBC Country profile). In 1987, President Bourguiba was replaced by President Ben Ali, who ruled Tunisia until he was ousted from power through the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.

In 2011, an interim government took over and a new constitution was approved in January 2014; presidential and parliamentary elections followed in December 2014. A coalition of secularist and Islamist parties emerged from the elections, but the new government struggled to deal with

both security and economic challenges. However, even more concerning was the [infighting](#) within the political parties (The Washington Institute, 6 November 2018), resulting in October 2019 with the election of a total outsider as president. While not giving clarity on many issues, newly elected President Kais Saied vowed to combat corruption and poverty. Saied is a law professor and known to be socially conservative, although he also [promised](#) to advance women's rights (Al-Monitor, 23 October 2019).

Parliamentary elections also took place in October 2019, with the Islamist Ennahda party winning most seats in parliament (52 out of the 217). Together with three other Islamic parties, the Islamists occupy 81 of the 217 seats in the parliament. Since then, three different governments have been formed. The last cabinet, which was led by Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, mainly consisted of technocrats ([Africa News, 25 August 2020](#)). The rapid changes in government have led to political instability, but have served to increase the power and position of the president.

In July 2021, President Saied arbitrarily used that position and emergency powers in the Constitution to sack Prime Minister Mechichi and suspend parliament after violent protests had erupted against the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the dire economic situation ([BBC News, 27 July 2021](#)). While the Ennahda party accused Saied of staging a coup, the Tunisian populace responded with indifference or even with joy, tired of a decade of political incompetence ([The Guardian, 27 July 2021](#)). Although no full crackdown has taken place, several political opponents and media figures who publicly criticized the president have since been briefly arrested, including a TV host in October 2021 ([CPJ, 7 October 2021](#)). Despite this, local media have remained free to operate.

In December 2021, President Saied announced that a constitutional referendum would take place on 25 July 2022, followed by parliamentary elections at the end of 2022 ([The Guardian, 14 December 2021](#)). However, Saied had previously stated that he intended to relinquish his emergency powers within 30 days; a promise he did not keep ([Newlinesmag, 28 July 2021](#)).

Political and legal landscape

Tunisia has a unitary semi-presidential system; this means it has only a House of Representatives as the legislative part of the government, a president as Head of State and a prime minister as head of government.

Tunisia is considered by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2020) to be a flawed democracy (in a ranking ranging from: "full democracy", "flawed democracy", "hybrid regime" and "authoritarian state"). Nonetheless, Tunisia still has a more democratic and legitimate government than any other country in the region. Despite that, FFP's Fragile State Index (FSI 2021) has Tunisia's cohesion indicators scoring high and reflects how the ruling elite has not yet managed to build trust among the general population. The 27% difference in turnout between the 2014 parliamentary elections (69%) and the 2019 parliamentary elections (42%) would seem to prove this point. In this sense, Tunisia is still struggling with its revolution of 2011. Hence, political indicators show that state legitimacy remains contested even though other indicators, most notably human rights, show signs of improvement.

The key challenge for the government is the necessary revitalization of the economy, especially in the light of the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, although no major attacks have recently taken place, Islamic militant groups in the region remain a threat ([International Crisis Group/ICG, 4 June 2021](#)). If the government succeeds in keeping the latter at bay, while improving the economy and decreasing unemployment structurally, Tunisia could be regarded as the most successful country to emerge from the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. However, the seizure of power by President Saied in July 2021 could easily tarnish that image. Although Saied has announced a constitutional referendum followed by parliamentary elections by the end of 2022, much remains unclear and uncertain.

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country profile):

- "Tunisia's constitution of January 2014 established Islam as the State religion and stipulates that the president must be a Muslim. It upholds the principle of non-discrimination. The constitution obligates the State to guarantee freedom of conscience and religion and to protect the exercise of religious practices, provided such practices are consistent with public order. In order to uphold values of moderation and tolerance, accusations of apostasy by one Muslim against another are prohibited. Proselytism and blasphemy are effectively prohibited. ... Civil personal status laws are codified, though judicial authorities have regularly also drawn on Islamic law in personal status matters. However, legal changes announced by President Essebsi in September 2017 strengthen the civil codes, for example by allowing civil marriage between Tunisian women and foreign men, including non-Muslims."

Although the 1973 ministerial decree prohibiting the marriage of a Tunisian Muslim woman to a non-Muslim has been abolished, the Personal Status Code still mentions as an impediment in Article 5 the marriage between a non-Muslim male and a Muslim female. In practice, Tunisian women still struggle to marry a (foreign) non-Muslim man, both due to social and local government opposition ([Al-Araby, 25 September 2018](#)). In addition, Tunisia was widely praised for withdrawing all of its reservations to the CEDAW Convention in 2014, which had previously given Sharia precedence in areas of conflict with the Convention ([FIDH, 2014](#)). Despite this positive step, legal inequalities and de facto discrimination against women persist. While the country has a relatively high female parliamentary representation, [reports highlight](#) the lack of employment opportunities for women and ongoing societal discriminatory norms (World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2020).

Existing legislation on domestic violence is insufficient; whilst a 2017 law on violence against women was viewed as a landmark step, it did not comprehensively address domestic violence ([Human Rights Watch, 2017](#)). Marriage and divorce are governed under the Personal Status Code (2012) and afford men and women equal rights in most respects. However, only men are recognized as the head of the household or family (Article 23) and men retain guardianship of children following a divorce. In light of this, as well as the stigma surrounding divorce, many women choose to stay in abusive marriages ([OECD, 2019](#)). These legal inequalities can all be weaponized for the purpose of religious persecution.

Christianity is regarded as a foreign religion by the government and there is no formal recognition of indigenous church communities. Tunisia's Christians from a Muslim background remain socially marginalized and are kept under surveillance by the security services.

Religious landscape

Tunisia: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	22,800	0.2
Muslim	11,959,000	99.5
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	92	0.0
Ethno-religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	1,900	0.0
Bahai	2,400	0.0
Atheist	3,900	0.0
Agnostic	28,100	0.2
Other	190	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

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

According to World Christian Database 2021 estimates, 99.5% of Tunisians are Muslims, the majority being adherents of Sunni Islam, with most following the [Maliki tradition](#) (Global Security, accessed 29 July 2021). This is one of the largest groups within the Sunni tradition. A major center of Maliki teaching from the 9th to 11th centuries was in the Mosque of Uqba in Tunisia. There are also small Shia and very small Bahai and Jewish minorities in Tunisia.

Despite the French legacy of *laïcité* (French: secularism) among the urban and educated elite, Islam is very influential and the Constitution recognizes Islam as state religion. Christianity and Judaism are the most significant minority religions, although the number of agnostics/atheists is greater than both, with more than 45% of the 18-29 years old claiming to be 'non-religious' ([Arab Barometer, 15 February 2021](#)). The number of Christians with a Muslim background are growing in number in Tunisia. This gradual growth of the Church has become noticeable since the 1990s.

According to Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 28 October 2020):

- "The government subsidizes mosques and pays the salaries of imams. Local religious committees and imams must be approved by the religious affairs directorate. The president

appoints the grand mufti of the state. The government allows the Jewish community to worship freely and pays the salary of the grand rabbi. It also provides some security for all synagogues and partially subsidizes some restoration and maintenance costs."

According to Middle East Concern (MEC country profile):

- "Both expatriate and local Christian communities enjoy relative freedom in Tunisia, provided that they avoid activities that could be construed as proselytism. A potential source of threat is from Salafist organizations, though recent attacks have principally been on cultural and economic targets rather than against non-Islamic religious groups. The most significant challenge for local Christians is the family and societal pressure that is often faced by those who choose to leave Islam, though this only takes violent forms in extreme cases."

Within this context, both male and female converts face significant pressure if their faith becomes known. Women face the prospect of forced marriage and house arrest, whereas men may be subjected to physical attack, death threats and social isolation.

Economic landscape

According to the CIA Factbook and World Bank:

- **GPD per capita (PPP):** \$10,756 (2019 est.)
- **Unemployment:** 16.7% (2020), with youth unemployment being twice as high at 35.8% (2019)
- **Percentage of population below national poverty line:** 15.2% (2015 est.)
- **Economy:** "Real GDP contracted by 8.8% in 2020 as sharp declines in domestic and external demand followed the pandemic. With a 9.3% contraction, manufacturing, a mainstay of the Tunisian economy, was deeply impacted. An 80% decline in passenger arrivals also caused a downturn in tourism and transport. Notably, business pulse surveys indicate that almost a quarter of formal firms (23.6%), mainly in the services sector, were either temporarily or permanently closed by the end of 2020."
- **Economic growth:** "Growth in Tunisia is temporarily expected to accelerate to 4% in 2021 as the pandemic's effects on exports begin to abate and domestic demand begins to recover. The uptick is, however, not large enough to return output to pre-pandemic levels of 2019."
- **Outlook:** "As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches into 2021 and in a context of heightened socio-political unrest, Tunisia's growth and fiscal outlook is weaker than before. The recovery will require more stability and a joint national effort to steer the economy to the right path."
- **Additional risks:** "These estimates are presented with significant downside risks. The pace of the recovery will depend on the extent of the pandemic in 2021, vaccine rollout in Tunisia and key trading partners as well as measures to mitigate the pandemic's impact on households and firms."

Other sources report:

- The World Bank's [World by Income and Region report](#) (accessed 29 July 2021) puts the Tunisian economy in the lower middle income category .
- FSI 2020 shows that while "Human Flight and Brain Drain" and "Economic inequality" kept decreasing (although remaining at quite a high score), the "Economy" indicator worsened significantly, in line with negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis.
- The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021) writes: "The July power grab by the president, Kais Saied, will lead to a constitutional referendum on shifting the political system from a parliamentary to presidential model, ultimately centralizing power around Mr Saied. Tunisia urgently needs external financing to avoid a sovereign default. In the short term it will rely on money printing and Gulf support; an IMF deal, linked with a plan for subsidy reform, will be unavoidable in 2022. This will contribute to ongoing high levels of social unrest."

Despite Tunisia's successful transition from a one-party dictatorship to a multiparty democracy, its economy continued to struggle, with unemployment remaining steadily around 15% and youth unemployment being more than twice as high. Obviously, it did not help that Tunisia has had 13 governments in 9 years, with three new governments since the October 2019 parliamentary elections ([Carnegie Endowment, 28 March 2019](#)). The COVID-19 crisis is now causing the economical situation to deteriorate even further, especially since tourism has declined as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. More and more Tunisians are even joining the Sub-Saharan migrants in seeking asylum in Europe ([Reuters, 12 January 2021](#)). It still has to be seen if President Saied will be able to improve the stability of the government and the economy following his seizure of power in July 2021. According to the World Bank, the "economic outlook remains highly uncertain. The economic recovery is less robust than previously expected given the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2021 and the heightened political uncertainty." ([World Bank, 7 October 2021](#))

In June 2020, the World Bank approved a 175 million USD relief package to help Tunisia "respond to the COVID-19 crisis", with the approval of another 100 million USD in support for the vaccine rollout in March 2021 ([World Bank, 15 June 2020; 26 March 2021](#)). However, it is likely that Tunisia's economy will continue to struggle - especially since tourism, a key sector of the economy, has been severely hit by the COVID-19 restrictions, including recurring lockdowns ([Africa News, 12 July 2021](#)). This increases the lack of economic opportunities available to the younger generation, which increases Tunisia's brain drain and remains a cause for social unrest. Tragically, the [World Bank](#) states (accessed 29 July 2021): "Tunisia is one of the few countries in the world where a higher level of education decreases employability, in particular for women."

Women are, in general, the most economically vulnerable in Tunisia, due to patrilineal inheritance practices ([OECD, 2019](#)) and limited work opportunities ([Georgetown 2019/20, p.15](#)). Female converts may become destitute if forced out of the home upon discovery of their conversion. Male Christians can face pressure in their workplace or lose employment due to their faith; as the primary breadwinner this serves to destabilize their wider dependent families. Like women, male converts may also be denied their due inheritance. Christians are also kept

out of positions in the government and army. The coming years are likely to become even more difficult for Christians due to the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

Social and cultural landscape

According to the CIA Factbook:

- **Main ethnic groups:** The majority of the Tunisian population (98%) are from Arab decent, with others having European (1%) or Jewish (1%) ancestry
- **Main languages:** The official language is Arabic, with French being widely spoken too. Tamazight, the official Berber language, is spoken as well
- **Population:** Tunisia has a population of around 11.800.000 people (July 2020 est.), with a growth rate of 0.75% (2021 est.)
- **Urban population:** In 2021, 69.9% of the population lived in urban areas, while the annual urbanization rate stands at 1.34%
- **Literacy rate:** 81.8% of the population can read and write; with a difference between men (89.6%) and women (74.2%) (2015)
- **Youth population:** The younger generation - up to 24 years of age - makes up 38% of the population, making it a country with a young population in need of (economic) opportunities.
- **Life expectancy:** 76.3 years on average; women (78.1 years), men (74.6 years)
- **Education:** Tunisia's citizens enjoy 15 years of schooling on average (2016)

According to the UN Global Human Development Indicators (HDI 2020):

- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Tunisia ranks #95 out 189 countries. The combined ratio of life expectancy, education and per capita income gives a high score of 0.740, making it one of the higher scoring countries in the wider region.
- **Gender inequality:** With a Gender Development Index (GDI) score of 0.900, women are disadvantaged in comparison to men. The GDI measures the differences in life expectancy, years of education and GNI per capita per gender.

Tunisian society is mainly conservative and Muslim, although there are differences between the (rural) south and (urban) north. Due to Tunisia being a hub of Arab secular government there is a strong liberal urban youth culture. Tunisian Christians, almost all of them from a Muslim background, remain side-lined and are discriminated against by family and society. Once their conversion becomes known, they face pressure to recant their faith and are often threatened with divorce or with forced marriage to marry a Muslim. Converts from Islam to Christianity are also likely to be excluded from family inheritance and lose custody rights.

Other reports:

- **Women:** In September 2017, Tunisia [overturned](#) the law that prohibited Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (BBC News, 15 September 2017). For converts from Islam to Christianity this was a particularly significant step. However, social opposition [prevents](#) implementation of the law in practice (The New Arab, 8 August 2018). In November 2018, the government proposed an amendment of the Personal Status Code, which would lead

to gender equality regarding inheritance rights. However, the proposal [ignited a huge debate](#) as conservative Muslims regard it as being contrary to the Quran and Islamic law (Al-Monitor, 7 December 2018). President Saied is known to be an opponent of equal inheritance for women. According to BTI 2020, there is educational gender balance in Tunisia with more than 90% of both sexes being literate and more women than men entering higher education. However, women remain significantly under-represented in the workforce, particularly in higher positions, with a 23.8% labor force participation (HDI 2020). This is an indication of the societal conservative views on marriage and motherhood. Violence within the domestic sphere rose during the COVID-19 pandemic; the Ministry of Women, Family, Childhood and Seniors reported a seven-fold increase of domestic violence reports during the national lockdown. A study published in October 2020 reported that psychological violence was the most frequent use of abuse ([Sediri et al, 17 October 2020](#)).

- **Conservative Islam:** In April 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief [reported](#) on Tunisia (World Watch Monitor, 23 April 2018). He concluded that "old laws and societal pressure pose the greatest challenges to religious freedom in Tunisia; a number of old laws, such as 'public morality concepts' and 'public order provisions', are used to enforce restrictions on, for example, food consumption during Ramadan." According to Humanists International's [Freedom of Thought Report](#) (updated 25 September 2020): "Islamic religious education is mandatory in state schools. However, the courses on Islam are approximately only one hour per week and the religious curriculum for secondary school students also includes the history of Judaism and Christianity. The state allows other religious groups to educate in private schools."

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2021):

- **Internet usage:** 68.4% penetration (December 2020)
- **Facebook usage:** 68.4% penetration (December 2020)

According to World Bank:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 126.3 per 100 people

According to Freedom House/Internet Freedom 2020:

- Tunisia is rated as "partly free".
- Key internet controls include "technical attacks against government critics or human rights organizations" and "the arrest and detention of journalist and bloggers".
- "Censorship remains uncommon in Tunisia, with no instances of politically motivated blocking during the reporting period. Popular social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available"
- "However, individuals risk prosecution in response to content published online that is critical of security forces or the government, and some users have experienced harassment in response to their online activity."

Most North African countries, including Tunisia, are making rapid technological development. The majority of the population in Tunisia has Internet access, although many (only) via their mobile phones.

Although the freedom of the press has significantly increased after the Arab Spring revolution, legal guarantees are still lacking, leaving uncertainty for journalists, bloggers and others. Reporters without Borders (RSF) ranks Tunisia #73 (World Press Freedom 2020). According to RSF: "Freedom of the press and the freedom to inform are the most important achievements of Tunisia's 2011 revolution. But these freedoms have become more of a political issue since the 2019 general elections. Far-right politicians no longer hesitate to openly target journalists and press freedom defenders, and the overall climate for the media and journalists has worsened significantly. Hate speech is directed against the Independent High Authority for Broadcast Communication (HAICA) by far-right parliamentarians, while violence against journalists and media outlets is increasing."

Gender

Reliable data on the gender gap in relation to technology access is lacking. According to a [2017 study by Middle East Media](#) (accessed 4 August 2021), there is a small gap in respect to smart phone ownership; 69% of men owned one compared to 61% of women.

Christians

Christians in Tunisia, especially converts from a Muslim background, have to be careful when posting on social media. Many Christians in Tunisia use a pseudonym when posting Christian material. Those who are too overtly active on social media risk being tracked down by the authorities or by Islamic radicals. However, with the rise of Internet access and social media, many converts to Christianity can now find fellowship online, even if they are alone and isolated (for example due to COVID-19 restrictions).

Security situation

Over the last decade, thousands of Tunisians joined the Islamic State group (IS) and other Islamic militant groups. Many of them have returned from Syria/Iraq or have joined IS cells or other groups closer to home. The lawlessness in neighboring Libya creates opportunities for them to maintain an active presence.

The last major attack dates back to 2015 when Islamic militants linked to IS [killed](#) at least 60 tourists and civilians in two attacks in and around Tunis (BBC News, 27 June 2015). The security situation has improved since then, but the security services [remain targets for attacks](#), with suicide bombers killing police officers in June 2019 and March 2020 ([New York Times, 6 March 2020](#)) while a national guard was killed by a knife attack in September 2020 ([France24, 6 September 2020](#)). However, "Salafist-jihadist ideology has faded from view in the country, including among the most vulnerable sectors of the population, who tend to identify more with gang culture than with martyrdom." ([ICG, 4 June 2021](#)).

Militants seem to mainly target the security services, so Tunisian Christians who keep a low profile are not likely to be attacked by violent Islamic groups. Nonetheless, the presence of such individuals remains a threat and forces Tunisian Christians to be careful in their activities and on social media.

Trends analysis

1) Tunisian democracy is under threat

Tunisia is a country that is more advanced than most northern African countries in terms of socio-economic development, civil liberties and democratic governance. The country has the potential to act as a model for other Arab countries due to its peaceful and consensus-driven transition to democracy. However, President Saied's power grab in July 2021 has put the young democracy at risk of becoming a dictatorship again. The Tunisian democracy was already in a fragile state due to high unemployment rates and difficulties in implementing economic reforms necessary for economic growth. The current political turmoil, combined with the COVID-19 crisis is likely to lead to a further deterioration in the situation. In short, it looks likely that Tunisia will continue to look politically fragile in the near future.

2) Islamist and liberal ideals continue to fight for influence in politics and society

Although the political situation in Tunisia has stabilized to a degree since 2011, this does not mean that the pressure on Christians has decreased or will do in the future. There is a battle going on in both Tunisian society and at the political level between (hardline) Islamists and moderate liberals. It was hoped that the parliamentary and presidential elections in October 2019 would be instrumental in determining Tunisia's future direction, but neither the Islamists nor the liberals gained a clear majority in the parliament. President Kais Saied, who seized power in July 2021, has no clear political profile. It seems likely that Tunisia will continue without a clear direction and with both sides compromising to meet half way.

3) Society at large remains conservative

It is unlikely that the situation for Christians in the country will improve in the coming years, as Tunisia's Islamic society remains mostly conservative and there is no indication that a majority of the population want to improve matters concerning Freedom of Religion and Belief.

External Links - Keys to understanding

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- Recent history: infighting - <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/infighting-in-nidaa-tounes-a-danger-to-tunisi-as-democracy>
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- Political and legal landscape: Human Rights Watch, 2017 - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/27/tunisia-landmark-step-shield-women-violence>
- Political and legal landscape: OECD, 2019 - <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TN.pdf%C2%A0%C2%A0https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/tunisia#d91ede>
- Religious landscape description: Maliki tradition - <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-maliki.htm>
- Religious landscape description: Arab Barometer, 15 February 2021 - <https://www.arabbarometer.org/media-news/les-tunisiens-sont-de-moins-en-moins-religieux-en-particulier-les-plus-jeunes/>
- Religious landscape description: Freedom of Thought Report - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/tunisia/>
- Economic landscape: World by Income and Region report - <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- Economic landscape: Carnegie Endowment, 28 March 2019 - <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/28/tunisia-s-political-system-from-stagnation-to-competition-pub-78717>
- Economic landscape: Reuters, 12 January 2021 - <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-europe-migrants-idUSKBN29H202>
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WWL 2022: Church information / Tunisia

Christian origins

Tunisia has a very rich Christian history. The first reports on Christianity in Tunisia concerned the interrogation and martyrdom in 203 AD of two Christian women, Felicitas and Perpetua, in the city of Carthage. In that same city, three very influential Church Fathers lived, worked and died, namely Tertullian (160-230 AD), Cyprian (210-258 AD) and Augustine (354-430 AD).

The early church of Tunis was at times severely persecuted by Rome, especially under Emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284–305 AD. It was one of the places where the Donatist controversy erupted in the 4th century concerning the appointment of leaders who had previously betrayed their Christian faith during persecution. It seems that the Amazigh ('Berber') Christians were, generally speaking, less forgiving than the urbanized Romans in Tunisia.

In 439 AD Carthage was conquered by Germanic Vandals. The Vandals tried to convert the urban Christians of Africa to their Arian version of Christianity. The Vandals sent the Catholic clergy into exile and expropriated their churches, and at times had Catholic leaders killed. In 534 AD the Byzantine Empire - representatives of Rome and of 'non-heretical' Christian faith - captured Tunisia again.

The Byzantines rebuilt fortifications and border defences and entered into treaties with the Imazigen ('Berbers). Nevertheless, for many decades security and prosperity were precarious and were never fully restored. Direct Byzantine rule did not extend far beyond the coastal cities. In 698 AD, Arab armies defeated the Byzantine forces at the Battle of Carthage and destroyed it. As in other countries in North Africa, the arrival of Islam significantly affected Church development, but Christianity managed to survive in Tunisia until the 11th century.

Christianity did not succeed in getting firmly established again until the 19th century when many French and other expatriate Christians came to the country under the political protection of France. The Roman Catholic witness grew considerably and an archbishop of Carthage was installed in 1884. Various other Christian organizations also began work: Anglicans in 1829, the North African Mission in 1881, the Seventh-day Adventist in 1905, Methodists in 1908, and in 1911 Pentecostals from the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee). After Tunisia's independence in 1956, the public life of the Church became more restricted; expatriates could worship without much difficulty but Tunisians converting from Islam to the Christian faith faced great opposition.

(For further details, see: Ross R K, Tadros M and Johnson T M (eds.), *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity. Christianity in North Africa and West Africa*, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pp.45-51)

Church spectrum today

Tunisia: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	220	1.0
Catholic	18,600	81.6
Protestant	1,000	4.4
Independent	2,600	11.4
Unaffiliated	300	1.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	22,720	99.6
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	900	3.9
Renewalist movement	2,400	10.5

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

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest officially recognized domination among the expatriate Christians in Tunisia. The Russian Orthodox and the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as the French Protestant and the Anglican church are also officially recognized by the government. All denominations have functioning churches in the capital Tunis and are mainly serving expatriate Christians residing in the country.

Tunisian Christians from a Muslim background are not officially recognized and do not have officially recognized church buildings.

WWL 2022: Persecution Dynamics / Tunisia

Reporting period

1 October 2020 - 30 September 2021

Position on the World Watch List

Tunisia: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2022	66	35
WWL 2021	67	26
WWL 2020	64	34
WWL 2019	63	37
WWL 2018	62	30

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2018-2022 reporting periods

The main reason for the one-point drop in score in WWL 2022 was that the violence score fell from 7.4 points in WWL 2021 to 6.5 in WWL 2022. This was due mainly to less church buildings and properties of Christians being attacked, as well as a reduction in the number of Christians being detained. The average pressure on Christians remained very high (12.0), mainly because of the lack of religious freedom for Christians who converted from Islam to Christianity.

Persecution engines

Tunisia: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Strong
Religious nationalism	RN	Not at all
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Not at all
Communist and post - Communist oppression	CPCO	Not at all
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Not at all
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Not at all

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Islamic oppression (Strong)

This persecution engine operates at different levels: At the family level, converts from Islam to Christianity are often opposed by family members in their decision to convert. There are cases of converts being locked up in their houses by their own families. At the social level, Islamic militants spread fear throughout the country. At the political level, Islamist political parties are still influential. The links between some Islamist movements and organized crime should not be underestimated. They create unrest in Tunisian society and contribute to the increase of the already high levels of fear among Christians.

Clan oppression (Weak)

Tribal aspects of society, especially outside major cities, particularly affect converts from Islam to Christianity. Turning away from Islam is not only seen as religious betrayal, but also as a betrayal of the (extended) family. Nevertheless, tribalism is less strong than in neighboring countries due to a government campaign in the 1950s and 1960s directly aimed at combatting its influence.

Drivers of persecution

Tunisia: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	STRONG			WEAK					
Government officials	Medium								
Ethnic group leaders				Weak					
Non-Christian religious leaders	Strong								
Violent religious groups	Medium								
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Medium								
One's own (extended) family	Strong			Weak					
Political parties	Medium								

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Islamic oppression

- **Extended family (Strong):** The main driver of persecution for Christian Tunisians who have converted from Islam is their own (extended) family. They will put pressure on the convert to recant his or her new faith, or even abuse the convert. Spouses will be put under pressure to divorce the convert and any children can be taken away.
- **Non-Christian religious leaders (Strong):** Despite the country's reputation as being the most celebrated success story of the Arab Spring uprisings, radical Islamic teaching is widespread.
- **Ordinary citizens (Medium):** The local neighborhood is also a source of persecution for converts. This is particularly the case outside the major urban centers. Neighbors will often,

for instance, exclude converts from social gatherings and are likely to cause converts to lose their jobs.

- **Violent religious groups (Medium):** The threat of activities by militant Islamic groups affects all categories of Christian communities in the country. Radical groups remain a significant threat, with thousands of Tunisians having joined radical Islamic groups (including IS) in past years.
- **Government officials (Medium):** The government and state apparatus can also be regarded as drivers of persecution since they deny registration and official recognition to congregations of Christians with a Muslim background.
- **Ethnic group leaders (Medium):** Family heads and other important members of the family put pressure on converts from Islam to Christianity to recant their faith.

Drivers of Clan oppression

- **Extended family (Weak):** The (extended) family is the main driver. As the regional expert, Katia Boissevain, observed: "When a conversion is announced, or discovered, families feel they have been cheated and abandoned Stepping aside and choosing the Christian religion is not only a break with the social body, but also a break with the social rhythm (which is defined by Islamic traditions). Becoming Christian is interpreted by the others as a choice formulated against everything for which they have been raised" (in: *Algeria and Tunisia, Christianity in North Africa and West Asia, Edinburgh Companion to Global Christianity, Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p.47*).
- **Ethnic group leaders (Weak):** Family heads and other important members of the family put pressure on converts to return to Islam, in order to restore the family honor. Especially in rural areas, society encourages the upholding of traditional values and customs that make it difficult for converts to turn away from Islam.

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Converts from Islam to Christianity have most to fear from their own family members and society. This is especially true in the south of the country, where the Islamic population is more conservative. Urban areas, and especially the capital Tunis itself, offer possibilities for converts to escape family pressure and live their faith in the anonymity of the big city.

Violent Islamic militants are active in the border areas to the south, in particular. They will target any Christian, whether foreign or national, if the opportunity arises.

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians: Expatriate Christians experience a relative amount of freedom, although public evangelism is not tolerated. Foreign Christians worshipping at the few international churches hardly encounter any problems.

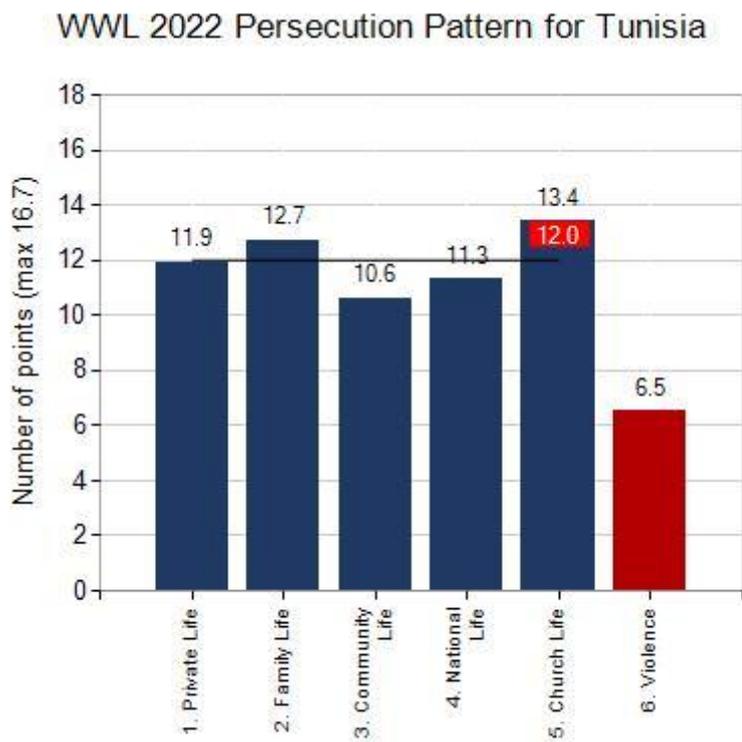
Historical Christian communities: This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by WWL Methodology.

Converts to Christianity: Converts with a Muslim background face various forms of persecution, e.g. from their family members. However, they (and others) are more or less free to seek and

receive information about the Christian faith, particularly content posted online.

Non-traditional Christian communities: This category does not exist in Tunisia as defined by WWL Methodology.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2022 Persecution pattern for Tunisia shows:

- The average pressure on Christians is at a very high level (12.0 points), remaining at the same level as in WWL 2021.
- Although all *spheres of life* show (very) high levels of pressure, it is highest in *Church* and *Family life*. This reflects the difficulties converts from Islam to Christianity face, both within their own families, as well as in the public sphere, e.g. if they want to be baptized or register churches.
- The score for violence went down from 7.4 points in WWL 2021 to 6.5 in WWL 2022. The main reason for this fall was a decrease in reported violence, including less Christians being detained and no reports of attacks on house-churches, although more Christians became victim of domestic violence.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2021 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the “WWL Scoring example” in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.00 points)

Although conversion to Christianity is not prohibited by law, converts from Islam experience pressure from their families when their conversion is known at the private level. There are notable differences between rural areas and the country's capital, Tunis, where the situation is comparatively better.

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.00 points)

The fact that many Tunisian Christians feel it is safer to use a pseudonym when posting Christian messages on social media is an indication of the pressure they are facing.

Block 1.5: It has been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols. (3.00 points)

Wearing and displaying a cross can lead to a variety of reactions. On top of the pressure from family, including the risk of discovery of their new faith in case of converts, there is also a (limited) risk of societal and governmental (i.e. police) harassment. Several incidents have been reported in recent years. There is no apparent risk for expatriate Christians, however.

Block 1.7: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members. (3.00 points)

Most converts (especially young people) face some sort of opposition or rejection because of changing their faith. Especially for young converts, it is risky to be seen reading the Bible and difficult to find a place for prayer by themselves, let alone speaking about their faith with family members.

Block 1 - additional information

Especially young and recent converts from Islam to Christianity experience high levels of mostly family pressure, with (young) women generally facing higher risks than men. It is often difficult for them to pray and worship privately at home, while many prefer to read their Bibles online rather than owning a physical copy. At the same time, due to social stigma, it is often difficult for them to connect and share their faith with other Christians. Risks and pressures generally become less over time as converts find ways to rebuild relationships and receive support from other Christians, although for some, relief only arrives after they have been ostracized by their families. It is likely that a significant number of converts keep their faith a secret.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.6: Christian couples have been hindered in adopting children or serving as foster parents because of their faith. (4.00 points)

Only Muslims can adopt a child in Tunisia, with even expatriate Christians only being able to adopt in exceptional cases. No case of a successful adoption by expatriate Christians has been reported during the WWL 2022 reporting period.

Block 2.5: Burials of Christians have been hindered or coercively performed with non-Christian rites. (3.25 points)

Funerals often happen the same day and a burial is considered a core family issue. Hence, even when a Tunisian Christian is known to have converted to Christianity, they are buried with Islamic rites. In addition, there is no Christian cemetery for Tunisian Christians. In the recent past, known Tunisian Christians have been refused a place at a cemetery, forcing them to be buried elsewhere.

Block 2.12: Christian spouses of non-Christians have been excluded from the right or opportunity to claim custody of the children in divorce cases. (3.25 points)

Due to their conversion, several converts have lost custody of their children. More often, converts accept certain levels of pressure in order to avoid a custody conflict over the children, which they are most likely to lose.

Block 2.2: Registering the birth, wedding, death, etc. of Christians has been hindered or made impossible. (3.00 points)

Christian marriages often take place with Islamic rites, although exemptions are sometimes made by certain registrars. According to the law, a Tunisian Christian woman can marry a (foreign) Christian man. In practice, this is often still blocked. Registering a Christian name for a child of Tunisian Christians is often hindered or refused.

Block 2 - additional information

It is difficult for Tunisian Christians to establish Christian family life in a clearly Islamic society. Baptism is the clearest sign of one's conversion to Christianity and hence a sensitive issue in Tunisian society. Public baptisms do sometimes happen in the capital Tunis and other urban areas, but would be hindered in most parts of the country. If not the immediate family, at least the wider family is Islamic, making it hard to raise a child in a Christian way, especially since Islamic religious education is mandatory in the schools. Although the curriculum is described as moderate and respectful to Christianity, children are taught that Christians are in error. Although the threat of divorce or disinheritance occurs more often than actually takes place, Tunisian Christians are regularly confronted with such issues in the family context.

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (3.50 points)

Monitoring happens frequently and Tunisian Christians are aware that their messages and calls are being intercepted.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

Police officers regularly question Tunisian Christians about their activities and even a simple request for a new passport can lead to detailed interrogation.

Block 3.7: Christians have been pressured by their community to renounce their faith. (3.25 points)

Converts receive threats from their families or the society around them when their conversion is known. Especially in rural parts of the country young female converts are scared of being forced to marry a Muslim. There are also cases known of converts being expelled from their university, or who are not able to go to school because they have been turned out of their homes. Sometimes customers are told not to buy from shops run by a Christian. Hence, community pressure to recant their new faith is high for Tunisian Christians.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.00 points)

Employment has been a major struggle for most Tunisian Christians. As converts, they either lose their jobs or cannot get hired because they lose all social connections (since family and friends will no longer help them find employment). Tunisian Christians therefore tend to seek employment with foreign institutions to avoid such discrimination.

Block 3 - additional information

Levels of community pressure vary, with pressure generally being higher in the rural south of the country than in the urban areas, including the capital Tunis. Harassment can be avoided, but when Tunisian Christians are, for example, publicly active on social media, harassment is unavoidable. Especially during times of Islamic religious celebrations, like the month of Ramadan, pressure is felt most keenly.

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.12: Christians, churches or Christian organizations have been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols. (3.50 points)

Christians try to avoid drawing unwanted attention, especially from radical Islamic elements within society. Hence, only recognized (foreign) churches publicly display Christian symbols.

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (3.25 points)

Sharia law is not the "principal source of legislation" as in many other Arab countries, but Islam is still the state religion and the state is the guardian of religion. Hence, this means that other faiths (and their adherents) do not have the same status as Islam and Muslims.

Block 4.8: Christians have been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public. (3.00 points)

Blasphemy remains illegal and Christians have to speak out carefully, especially when it comes to criticizing Islam and proselytizing, which also applies to the expatriate Christian community. Nonetheless, there is generally more freedom of expression than in neighboring countries.

Block 4.10: Media reporting has been incorrect or biased against Christians. (3.00 points)

Media (newspapers and TV shows) have been spreading incorrect information about Christians and drawing a false picture of the Christian community. Christians are accused of converting for financial gain due to rich foreign Christians promising vulnerable Tunisians wealth and the possibility to migrate to a Western country. Christians are also accused of influencing under-age youth to become interested in the Christian faith.

Block 4 - additional information

When dealing with the authorities, Christians are usually in a disadvantaged position. Underlining their vulnerable position is the fact that Christian converts are not likely to be treated equally in court, especially in cases involving family law. They are also vulnerable to abuse, as their families can in some cases act against them with impunity, especially in rural areas.

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)

Tunisian converts cannot register their churches and no new church has been granted official registration since Tunisia's independence in 1956. This stands in stark contrast to the law that regulates mosques. Registered churches are allowed to operate freely but face practical difficulties, particularly relating to their property-upkeep, hiring staff and obtaining permission to publish and distribute Christian texts in Arabic.

Block 5.3: Christian communities have been hindered in building or renovating church buildings or in claiming historical religious premises and places of worship which had been taken from them earlier. (3.75 points)

Building new church buildings is almost impossible in Tunisia, both for the expatriate as well as the Tunisian Christian (convert) community. Until now, Tunisian Christians make use of unknown rented properties or house-churches, fearing that a visible church building will also lead to increased social hostility.

Block 5.5: Churches have been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings. (3.75 points)

Public outside activities, even if performed by expatriate churches like the Roman Catholic Church, are discouraged by the government and generally no permission will be given under the pretext of keeping public order. Processions that once took place publicly, are now celebrated in a less visible way, e.g. in the courtyard of a church.

Block 5.13: Churches have been hindered in importing Christian materials from abroad. (3.75 points)

With the exception of limited amounts of foreign-language, Christian material for the expatriate churches, it is not allowed to bring Christian materials (in Arabic) into the country. If found, these materials, including Bibles, will be confiscated.

Block 5 - additional information

Church life is severely hindered in Tunisia, especially for Tunisian (convert) Christians. Although the Constitution of Tunisia currently respects freedom of religion and conversion from Islam is not prohibited, in practice representatives of the government often act very differently.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*
- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).
- In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.
- Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.

3. For further discussion (with a focus on the complexity of assessing the numbers of Christians killed for their faith) please see World Watch Monitor's article dated 13 November 2013 available at:

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2013/11/number-of-christian-martyrs-continues-to-cause-debate/>.

4. The use of symbolic numbers: In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWR chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.

5. The symbol "x" in the table: This denotes a known number which cannot be published due to security concerns.

Tunisia: Violence Block question		WWL 2022	WWL 2021
6.1	How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2	How many churches or Christian buildings (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	4	5
6.3	How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	2	17
6.4	How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	4	5
6.5	How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	2	2
6.6	How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10*
6.7	How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	5	5

6.8	How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	53	12
6.9	How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	11	17
6.10	How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	1	2
6.11	How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	17	10*
6.12	How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	4	4

For the WWL 2022 reporting period:

- **Christians attacked:** Several Christians have been affected due to incidents involving (physical) abuse, forced marriage, rape and sexual harassment. In addition, several Christians had to relocate inside the country after facing pressure (from their families).
- **Christians arrested:** At least one convert has been detained and interrogated about Christian activities. During interrogation, Christians are often accused of proselytization and of having links with foreign organizations.
- **Christian buildings attacked:** At least three times Christian graves have been vandalized and desecrated.
- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Several converts have been attacked inside their houses, often by family members. In another case, a shop-owner had his shop damaged by the local community.

5 Year trends

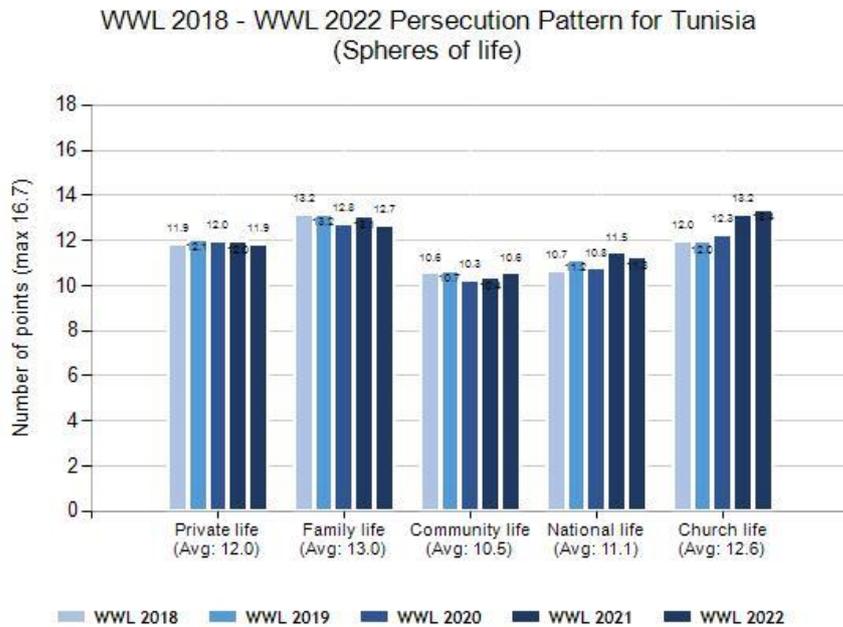
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

Tunisia: WWL 2018 - WWL 2022 Persecution Pattern history	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2022	12.0
2021	12.0
2020	11.6
2019	11.8
2018	11.7

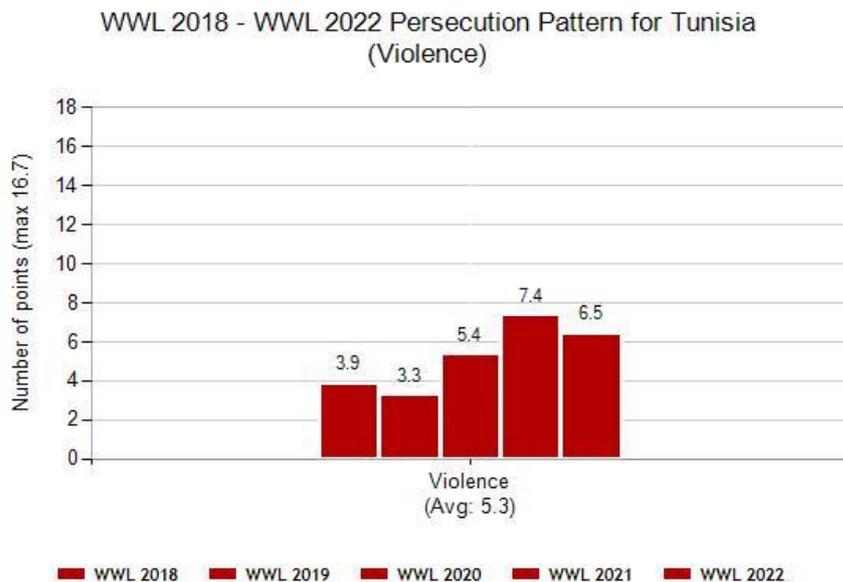
The average pressure on Christians has more or less stabilized within the range of 11.6 - 12.0 points. This is a very high level of pressure and reflects the fact that in the years following the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 the situation for Christians has not improved.

5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



The levels of pressure in *Private, Family, Community* and *National life* have fluctuated slightly but remained more or less stable over the last five reporting periods. The *Church sphere of life* is different in that it shows a definite trend of increasing pressure, in line with the political situation becoming more tense.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians



Over the first two reporting periods, the scores for violent incidents remained more or less stable under 4.0 points (a fairly high level). However, more incidents were reported for the last three reporting periods, causing a rise in score to a high level in WWL 2020 and very high levels in WWL 2021 (7.4 points) and WWL 2022 (6.5 points).

Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	Denied inheritance or possessions; Discrimination/harassment via education
Political and Legal	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites; Denied custody of children; Forced divorce; Forced marriage; Travel bans/restrictions on movement
Security	Abduction; Forced out of home – expulsion; Incarceration by family (house arrest); Violence – physical; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	Denied access to social community/networks; Violence – psychological; Violence – Verbal
Technological	-

Christian women and girls in Tunisia are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and domestic violence. On Georgetown’s [‘Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022’](#), Tunisia ranked 117th out of 170 countries. [Reports](#) highlight the societal discriminatory norms and lack of employment opportunities that women face (World Bank Blogs, 23 December 2020). The culture is not generally respectful of women in practice, nor does it recognize women as leaders. The free movement of women and girls is also restricted. This gap in gender equality is also exploited as a means of religious persecution.

As conversion from Islam is forbidden, converts from Islam face the greatest breadth of persecution if their faith is discovered. Women are more at risk in the traditional family context (since men have more freedom to express their own opinion). They may be physically beaten, expelled from their home, put under house arrest, threatened with death and raped. If already married, she will likely be divorced, have her children taken away and have her financial support withdrawn. Some Christian women have been separated from their children for prolonged periods due to disputes related to their new Christian faith. Single female converts on the other hand may be forced into a marriage with a Muslim man. A country expert comments: “Girls can be locked up in the house, stopped from going to school, stopped from pursuing a career, forced to marry a cousin or family member or make her marry any Muslim to protect her identity.” This is particularly common in rural areas.

The main source of persecution for women in Tunisia comes from the dominating male in the family: For a single female that would be the father, the brother or any other family member who follows in rank after that (uncle etc.); for a married woman that would be her husband or even fiancé. A country expert summarizes as follows: “Women cannot be independent; they have to stay with their family and be subjected to all the abuse the family will give them.” Female

converts, especially in rural areas, have little chance of accessing either Christian community or Christian materials.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	Discrimination/harassment via education; Economic harassment via business/job/work access
Political and Legal	-
Security	Forced out of home – expulsion; Violence – physical
Social and Cultural	Violence – psychological
Technological	-

New converts to Christianity – both male and female – are by far the most vulnerable of Christians in Tunisia. Convert Christian men face intimidation, beatings and death threats. They bring shame upon their families by leaving Islam and are therefore can be ostracized. Pressured by their families, Muslim wives may leave a Christian convert, and he may be denied inheritance or even access to his possessions. However, the severity of backlash following conversión depends on his social position and his political standing within his community. While Christian men may have been expelled from their home when the family first learnt about their conversion, many have found that their families will quietly accept the conversion at a later point in time. Others however have been forced to permanently relocate, particularly away from rural areas.

Male converts also face loss of jobs and promotion and physical violence. When a man is persecuted, his family becomes vulnerable and lacks protection. The church, too, suffers. A country expert comments: “A man’s responsibility is to hold the family together. There is a lot of pressure as the man is the one [also] providing for the family.”

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2020):

- **Bahai community:** Adherents of Bahai reported difficulties in practicing their belief as they are not officially recognized and cannot have their own place of worship. Although they have had some constructive dialogues with government officials in the recent past, "Baha'i leaders reported harassment by security force personnel during the year, including while preparing administrative documents at police stations". The report further notes: "On 21 February 2020, an administrative court ruled in favor of allowing the Baha'i Faith to establish an association. Baha'i Faith members reported that the General Prosecutor then presented an appeal to the court referencing a nonpublic fatwa issued by the Grand Mufti in 2016, which stated that Baha'i Faith members were apostates and infidels and therefore

should not be permitted to practice their faith. The case remained ongoing at year's end" (p.8).

- **Jewish community:** No such difficulties were reported by the Jewish community: "Jewish groups said they continued to worship freely, and the government continued to provide security for synagogues and partially subsidized restoration and maintenance costs. Government employees maintained the Jewish cemetery in Tunis. ... In accordance with government permits, the Jewish community operated private religious schools, and Jewish children were allowed to split their academic day between public schools and private religious schools or attend either type of school full-time" (p.10).
- **Atheists:** "Some atheists reported receiving family and societal pressure to return to Islam or conceal their atheism, including, for instance, by fasting during Ramadan and abstaining from criticizing Islam" (p.11). Although Tunisia is one of the most liberal societies in the wider region, the Freedom of Thought Report lists several recent incidents regarding allegedly blasphemous posts, including the sentencing of Emna Chargui to 6 months in prison for "sharing a Facebook post that imitated the rhyme and format of some verses of the Quran to urge people to follow COVID-19 hygiene rules" ([Humanist International, 28 October 2020](#)).
- **Shiite Muslims:** No issues regarding the Sunni-Shia divide were reported in the WWL 2022 reporting period, although Shiites are generally discriminated against and public figures have spoken out against Shia Islam [in the past](#) (Al-Monitor, 16 September 2012).

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Islamic oppression

Society and culture, particularly in rural areas, remains opposed to Christian faith and activity and this has not been influenced by the political changes since 2011 so far. Tunisia's Constitution may seem a positive step forward, but the wording is general enough to make restrictive interpretations possible. Interpretation will strongly depend on the kind of government that is in power and its attitude towards religious minorities. If the hard-liners gain more influence in the country this could make life more difficult for Christians. In addition, although a new constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections have been announced, it is unclear what President Saied's plans are for the future of Tunisia including the Freedom of Religion and Belief. Saied is known to be socially conservative, making it unlikely that Tunisian Christians will receive more freedom in the short term.

Clan oppression

The positive developments regarding women's rights and a more positive approach towards religious minorities among the moderate liberals could create a backlash among more conservative elements within society, who want their traditional Islamic customs and practices upheld.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 - <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>
- Gender-specific religious persecution Female description: R - <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/status-women-tunisian-society-endangered>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: Humanist International, 28 October 2020 - <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/africa-northern-africa/tunisia/>
- Persecution of other religious minorities: in the past - <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2012/al-monitor/shiites-in-tunis.html>

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on World Watch Research's Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom) and on the World Watch Monitor website:

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Tunisia>
- <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/countries/Tunisia>
- [North Africa – Freedom of religion since the Arab Spring – 2016](#)

External Links - Further useful reports

- Further useful reports: North Africa – Freedom of religion since the Arab Spring – 2016 - <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/North-Africa-Freedom-of-religion-since-the-Arab-Spring-WWR.pdf>